

All the Ghosts are Screaming

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All the Ghosts are Screaming

by olivemartini

Summary

Harry had been told he had a bit of a saving people thing.

He hadn't paid much attention to it before, because he didn't see it as a bad thing. So what if he sometimes put himself in danger to save other people? So what if he would take a bullet for almost all of his friends?

It wasn't something he thought he had to fix, until the day he's sitting beside Ginny in court watching Malfoy get put on trial, hearing the Wizengamot say that he had to stay on house arrest with an acceptable citizen, and no one speaks up, which meant that Malfoy was going to Azkaban.

Which is around the time that Harry stands up without really deciding to and offers up a room at Grimmauld Place.

So yeah. Maybe he does have a bit of a saving people thing.

All characters belong to JK Rowling

Chapter 1

Harry

He's been told that he has a bit of a saving people thing.

It wasn't an issue, really, other than the fact that Voldemort sometimes used it to his advantage, and Harry never thought it was something he needed to fix. After the war ended, he didn't really think he would ever be in a position where he needed to save someone again- there would be no bad guy to kidnap the people he loves, no evil monster lurking in the shadows to drag away innocent bystanders.

It would just... be. Still and peaceful and as ordinary as Harry could force his life into becoming, and he wouldn't have to save anyone until he was ready.

He really, really meant that.

"This is horrible," Ginny whispered beside him. They're sitting at the very back of the court room, watching the proceedings happening in the front. "This isn't even a fair trial."

"What did you expect?" Harry didn't like it either, knowing what he does about the man on trial. The Draco in school was proud, and he would have never stayed silent under the scrutiny of the hundreds of faces staring down at him. Post-war Draco hadn't even spoken, just slumped in the chair, his long fingers picking at the rusted chains that were spilling from the sides of the chair. (The chains had not bound him to the chair, just clinked a bit. Ginny had said this was a good sign.)

"They want someone to blame."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" They'd broken up over two months ago, after two weeks of heated love that felt stilted and *wrong*, until the night where she had cried and explained how she loves him, but the things they went through must have shaped them so they don't fit together anymore. About how the year apart meant that maybe they shouldn't have tried to pick up where they left off. And also the being in love with Luna thing. "They're blaming everyone but themselves."

He still loves her just as much as he did before, but now its in a different way. He loves her but beyond that he knows her, so he knows that the way she bites down on her lip means that she's angry and stopping herself from showing it. "It's going to work out. Draco will pull through."

He covered his hand with hers, and they watched together, waiting as round after round of witnesses and statements rolled through the courtroom. It would have been easy to knock them all apart, after all the people speaking in his favor -Harry had said how he was a massive git but not a criminal, Hermione gave some argument based in the muggle justice system how he shouldn't be tried based on the sins of the father, and Luna, Dean, and Ollivander had all gotten on the stand to speak about how he risked his life to bring extra food to them down into the dungeons. But Draco didn't show up to fight.

He didn't bring a lawyer. He didn't speak up in his own defense. He just sat there, pale skin turned sickly under the shine of the lights, waiting as his sentenced got handed down to him. It always hurts to see what the war turned them all into, but this was by far the worst.

"Do you have any last comments, Mr. Malfoy?" Kingsley was presiding over this as a special favor to Harry. Ron thinks he's crazy, but he hadn't seen what Harry had seen- the guilt that builds in the shadows under Draco's eyes, a hand shaking as he was forced to torture or be tortured, a boy that wanted his father's love but only got pain. "Nothing to add to the court?"

Speak up, Harry wanted to shout down at him. Beside him, Ginny leaned forward, clearly waiting to see what would come next. *Come on, Malfoy, show them what a harmless guilt you are.*

"Then we proceed with the sentencing." Kingsley stood, his voice magically magnified to project across the court, and dozens of cameras flashed at the same time. The images would find their way to the front page of the Daily Prophet tomorrow. (Which Dean had taken over as editor, so it actually reports the facts independent of the ministry.) "I'm sentencing you to probation, on the condition that you can stay with someone who is in good standing with the wizarding community. Could you give the court the name of some such person?"

A pause, long and silent, and then Draco's voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. "No." One syllable, but it was damnation. "There's no one."

There was another silence, and then Kingsley sat down again. "Then you leave me no choice but to sentence you to Azkaban for the full sentencing period."

At least there are no dementors there anymore, Harry was thinking, resigned to a lost cause, but then he looks down one last time and sees Draco, this pitiful, broken thing compared against the shadow of what he used to be, and he found himself standing, his hand slipping out of Ginny's fingers.

"He can name me, Minister." There's a surprised bark of laughter from his right, and he knew that Ginny was grinning, the smile she always had on her face when one of them did something stupid. Those same reporters are now taking pictures of him, and forget Malfoy, forget Kingsley, this was going to be the headlining news for the entire week. "I'll take responsibility for him." *Maybe I do have a bit of a saving people thing.*

Draco

Things were bad.

They were bad, but at least Draco was prepared for them. He had cleaned his house, boxed up all his belongings, put all his heirlooms in his Gringotts safe. He'd written letters, and set up a trust fund for Teddy, and arranged for someone to care for his mother, when it came to that. It would be okay.

It's not like there are dementors, He had told himself, sitting down in the middle of that stage when the whole thing started, already giving himself over to the idea that this wasn't going to have a happy ending. It was no less than he deserved. So he showed up to court when he should have ran instead, and he didn't speak up even when he had the chance to, and he was okay with how it was going to end.

But then he looked up and caught eyes with Harry freaking Potter of all people, who had given statements about how Draco didn't deserve to be punished for his parents mistakes, and then Harry Potter was standing up and telling the whole world that he would take Draco into his home.

(And like, not that Draco doesn't appreciate it, but does anyone seem to remember that he was a complete arse to him in school? They aren't friends. He's pretty sure he's described the two of them as archenemies once, like kids even have those.)

(though when he thinks about it, Harry had one of those. Freaking Dark Lord bullshit.)

So here he was, a free man, his wand returned to him and his arms free of chains, walking towards the ministry doors like nothing had happened. There were people staring, so he did the right Malfoy thing and tried to look the way he used to, with his head high and shoulders back and a look on his face like he knows that he's better than everyone, but it falls flat. He trails behind Harry instead, as he pushes past reporters and shouts hello's at people he must have known from school or auror camp.

They make it to the floo gates. Harry shifts on his feet and looks over at Ginny, who had helped them on their way here but now shrugs at him, like *this was your problem, now deal with it*. Harry must have agreed, because he grimaced and stuck out his hand to Draco.

"Come on." He shakes his arm when Draco doesn't grab on, like there was a way he hadn't seen it. "I'm not saying my address out loud when this many people are around, they'll be at my door in minutes."

Because he was living with a celebrity. Draco's first reaction was to be mean, to sneer at him and say that he would rather take the cell, thanks. He also wants to ask him why on earth he was doing this, when they pretty much tortured each other all through school. But that's not what he says. "I'm not quite sure I trust you." There's a flash of hurt across his face, a little shadow of pain that goes as fast as it came. "I've heard the stories of you getting stuck up chimneys."

"Oh, he hasn't done that since he was twelve." Ginny breaks in, snapping impatiently at the two of them, and Harry starts laughing the way he does when Ron makes a teasing comment at him. "And that was only one grate extra. Just go already, you two, I can't distract the press forever."

Harry arches an eyebrow, and refusing would not just be silly, it would also feel like Draco was admitting defeat. Everything between the two of them was still a constant competition, and he was determined to win at something.

He took his hand.

Harry

When the idea first came to him, he didn't really think it through at all. He had just seen someone who needed help, and thought of his big empty house stuffed full with Sirius' shadow, and thought that an extra person would help fill it up with something living. So he had stood, and then it was all happening, the age old saying that it only takes five seconds of courage to change your life.

And now Draco Malfoy was standing in his living room.

The stupid thing was, that as the two of them look around at his house, Harry is actually embarrassed. It's still the same furniture, so it's dark and gloomy, and Harry isn't always the best at housekeeping. He knows that it's nothing like what Draco had gotten to go home to every night.

"Well, this is home." Harry breaks the ice first, because he's a Gryffindor and bravery is kind of his thing. "My bedroom is on the first floor, but I can show you a couple and you pick where's best? Kreacher can take you around."

"You don't have to do this." It was really the first thing that Draco had said to him, besides the jibe he made in front of the floo gate, where the smile split his face apart and Harry could see the old Malfoy underneath. "Why are you doing this?"

"I don't know."

"I deserved it." Draco's hands were shaking. Harry knew the feeling, had been dealing with Ron's bouts of unexplained anger since the war ended, all the pain and terror and grief bursting out of all of them in unexplainable ways. Harry goes on walks in the middle of the night. Hermione cleans and writes petitions, depending on the mood. "I made my peace with that, okay, and I was ready, I was ready for it, to have some peace for once, and then you came along and did this, so I want to know why."

This was more like the Draco that Harry knew, the one who thought he deserved things and made his own demands. "Because I didn't think you deserved it." Harry would never think that Malfoy deserved a cold cell in Azkaban, not after all the blood that seemed to be coating his own hands. "And I don't think you should let yourself be locked up just because you've decided that you feel guilty, alright?"

He was tired, all of a sudden, the bone aching exhaustion that comes upon him sometimes. "Just pick a room, okay? I'll see you in the morning."

Harry walks away, up the creaking stairs and to his room, and he hopes that Draco really, really doesn't decide to murder him in his sleep.

It'd be just his luck.

Chapter 2

Draco

That first night, he didn't sleep at all, just laid under the stiff sheets and counted the cracks crossing the ceiling, listening to the creaking of the house and trying to convince himself that there were no monsters sleeping in the closet. He hadn't slept easy in ages, not since he was in Hogwarts with the sound of other people's breathing beside him, and in this new, strange place he was sharing with a boy (*man, really, they're adults now*) that should by all rights hate him.

He doesn't hate him, though.

Draco thinks it would be easier to deal with, if they could fall back into their pattern of mutual dislike. That would have been solid ground, a familiar pattern to fall back into and raw strength from. He does not know how to deal with this Harry, the Harry who shows him how to work the shower faucet (*because they're tricky in new places, trust me, I know*) and asks if there was a particular brand of orange juice he would prefer, who offers to clear out a space on the bookshelf for anything that Draco might want to read because he remembered from school that Draco liked books and *most of them are ones that Hermione brought over to clear space in her flat, anyways*.

He's hearing a lot of tidbits about Harry's school friends, about the Weasel and Weaselette (*who Harry is not dating, but Luna from the basement certainly is*), about Dean and Seamus and Neville, about George and Oliver Wood's performance in the last quidditch game. Draco wishes that he could return the favor, but he doesn't talk to any of his old school friends anymore.

He doubts Harry would want to hear about it anyways.

The silence in this house is stifling, Draco thinks, much like he does every morning, where he finally gives up on his scraps of shattered sleep and gets to his feet. The house is too dark and sullen to really be a home, even though Harry has tried. There are afhgans with crooked stitches thrown over the arms of the couch (Granger's work) and customized mugs piling up on the counter, chipped china stacked in the cupboards and photos stuck haphazardly to the walls. Harry isn't much for the domestic sort of things, having it just be him in here, so on the nights where Draco gives up on sleep entirely, he often finds himself puttering around the kitchen and putting things in order.

Kreacher had tried to shoo him out the first time, but he's not as capable as he once was, and after the third time Draco ignored him, the old house elf left him in peace. Now he spends the time between late at night and early morning with his arms soaking in suds as he washes dishes the muggle way, mopping the floor, dusting the picture frames. The scent of pine and lemon s constantly staining his hands, but the sharp scent doesn't bother him, just seems to bring him more into himself. And when the sun finally starts to peak in through the window, he starts to cook breakfast, whatever he thinks will work depending on his mood- scrambled eggs and toast, cinnamon rolls, bacon, omelets, fresh baked banana bread. Its waiting for Harry whenever he comes down the steps, ready to face a day full of whatever he does (*auror training*, Draco reminds himself), like a small piece of repayment for everything he has done for him.

"You don't have to do this every day, you know." Harry's voice startles him into dropping the pot of tea down into the sink. It cracks down the side and the liquid spreads over the counter. Draco stares down at it, dismayed, and it never occurs to him to use his wand to clean it up, not even

when the heat of it soaks through the towel he was using and burns his hand. It's only when Harry crosses the room to help him, mending the mess back together in seconds, that Draco calms.

"Maybe I wanted some quality cooking. Merlin knows it wasn't coming from you." If they were younger, stupider, and had not been forced to grow up so fast, this could have quickly turned to blows. It had always happened like that back in school, where in the beginning Harry would take offense at something that Draco had only meant as a joke, and he would not be able to find his way back from this latest fumble. Now, though, Harry only smiles over the rim of his cup of tea, looking a cross between pleased and confused.

"I only meant that if you didn't want to, you didn't have to. I'm not expecting you to do this stuff." This didn't keep him from scraping a bunch of eggs onto his plate, though he did look concerned about it. "But I can't hide that I'm glad you found a way to make Sirius' mother leave that wall. Tired of being screeched at in my own home."

Is this a home, Harry? Draco thought. Or is this just another piece of the war that you're too scared to let go of?

"How'd you do it, anyways?" At this point in the conversation, Harry was normally already puffing out a thank you and heading out the door. He was always in a rush, Harry was.

"A potion." It took him three tries, but he had finally found one that counteracted the sticking solution. He had scrubbed all night and scraped his knuckles raw, then repainted it the next night with Kreacher's help, but he got it done.

"Potions. Always were good at those." Harry stares at Draco, and Draco stares back, unsure of what to do or where to look. He's not sure about anything, anymore. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

"Yeah." Draco answers, but it only echoes back to him through the empty house. "Later."

Harry

"So how is it, living with him?" Ron was talking to him through a mouthful of food, poring over the papers on their desks. Auror training was hard, but the homework was harder. Harry would have thought that this would have come naturally to him, after everything, though he was eager to learn.

"Imagine its a downright nightmare."

The Weasleys had been in an uproar when they heard what Harry had done. Apparently Ginny had ducked into someone's office and made a firemessage as soon as she could, and by the time he got home, there were eight owls waiting in his bedroom.

They did have valid points, about death eaters and Hogwarts rivalries, about all the abuse Draco and his friends had put the Gryffindors through. But Harry couldn't make himself regret it, not when he was still having flashbacks of how Draco looked when he was being forced to use an unforgivable curse, or how small he seemed sitting in that chair.

"He's not bad." It wasn't bad at all, really. Sometimes, there were moments where Draco would make a joke and Harry would laugh without wondering whether it was an insult, or Harry would collapse onto the sofa and Draco would bring him a butterbeer without asking if he wanted it, and Harry would be shocked at how easy it was between them. He had come down in the middle of the night sometimes to find Draco already up, scrubbing at the floors or the dishes or the tables, the whole house washed in the scent of lemons and lavender, and instead of feeling the anxiety that comes from having a stranger in your home, all Harry felt was a strange sense of comfort, the feeling that he was not alone. "I barely even notice him most of the time."

"Still." Their time in the cubicle was winding down, when they would be forced to hand in their reports without anything to show for it. It was times like these where Harry misses Hermione the most, when he has to do homework on his own. "I still think you've lost your mind. Wars finally made you crack, mate."

It's a joke, but it isn't wrong. He'd caught Draco at his late night obsessions, but that's only because Harry has his own routine, where he wanders through the house with his wand stretched out in front of him, poking into each room and corner, checking the locks on every door and window. With Draco there, he sleeps a little easier, and the weight on his chest when he's caught off guard by something that reminds him of the war is a little less. He thinks it is improvement, even if they barely seem to be able to talk to each other, and even if they were once considered to be mortal enemies to each other.

(It is a mark of growing up, he thinks, that the two of them can look back and see how pure what they had really was, can see the simplicity that came from that one dimensional hatred, where there were no consequences to the actions. If things were better, they would have grown up and gotten over it in their own time, been able to forge a bond of friendship, but Voldemort washed the chance to that away.)

(Tom. Tom Riddle. That's what he keeps trying to call him in his head, to remind him that he was only a man, after all of it. It's not catching on.)

"I really don't mind him. It's kind of nice, actually." He would not be telling Ron about those morning breakfasts, or the nights spent around the television, or how Draco manages to make the tea just how Harry likes it. He does not tell him how it is only a week but that Draco already has become a permanent fixture in his life, something that is not exactly good but also not bad, either, and he thinks he might be sad if the court would suddenly wave away his probation and turn Draco loose.

"Telling you, mate." Ron has his opinions on this, everyone does, but he mostly keeps them quiet. "Bonkers."

Draco

Friends.

That's what he hears Harry call him, when he is on the phone with someone named Dudley. Actually, he calls them mates, as in, *sorry Dudley, but I can't talk to you for long tonight, my mate Malfoy has come over.*

And Draco knows that that was probably just an excuse to hang up on someone who talks too much. He knows that it probably didn't mean anything, a throw away comment that Harry used because he couldn't think of anything to really explain this whole situation. He knows this, but then he thinks of how they worked together to cook dinner last night, and how Harry brought home a new DVD series called Sherlock just because he thought Draco would like it, and how he knows exactly how much milk to put in his tea. And suddenly it doesn't seem too far fetched to think that he was friends with the great Harry Potter.

(His father would be devastated.)

(What's it matter? His father is rotting in a jail cell.)

(Shut up.)

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Harry hung the telephone back on its place on the wall. It had a curly wire that kept you standing right by it. Harry said that phones weren't all like that, now, but that he decided to get an old fashioned one because he thought that he would lose it, otherwise.

"Do I have something on my face?"

"No, it's just..." He uses the word just a lot now, *just* and *maybe* and *if you wouldn't mind*. He's not sure when that started. "Maybe we should call each other by our first names. Since we're living together and all."

"Me call you by your first name? And you call me Harry?" For a moment, Draco thinks he has made a terrible mistake, that he miscalculated all of it. But then Harry's face spits into a smile and he can feel the air being knocked back into his lungs. "Sure. Why not. Sounds like a plan, Draco."

"Alright, Harry." Draco smiles himself, and is surprised to find that it actually feels like it belongs there.

Friends. He could do that.

Chapter 3

Harry

Sometimes, if he isn't careful, he finds himself going down the black hole that was his memories from the war.

For the most part, Harry tries not to think about it, but then he turns the corner and the greenish light from the floo powder staining the fire grate reminds him of the flash of the killing curse, or he accidentally scratches at his skin and the sting reminds him of the prickle of his scar, which hadn't really pained him since the moment he got to watch Voldemort fall.

Or sometimes its just a feeling, an unsettling sense that *something was wrong*, brought on by nothing more than Draco moving a couch cushion or Kreacher not appearing right away. It sends him down the metaphorical rabbit hole, and the only way out is to go through his familiar routine of checking, checking, checking, poking his head into shadowed corners and closets and under the bed, watching from the corner of his eye for death eaters to leap out at him, even though he and Hermione had made sure that no one could make it into his house without suffering severe bodily harm.

(She is not so merciful anymore- there are spells that she doesn't feel the need to stop using, even though without the war there is no need for it, like she's building a wall around the people she loves brick by brick, curse by deadly curse.)

It wasn't a big deal, back when he was alone. He would justify it to himself, saying that everyone came out of the war with a few quirks and if this was all he had to do to get by, then maybe it wasn't that big of a deal. But that was before he had to peek behind the curtains with Draco watching him, and check the locks three times before he could come back into the sitting room and pretend like nothing was wrong.

Only he couldn't pretend like nothing was wrong, because Draco was watching him.

"I can make you a calming draught for that, you know." Draco makes the offer without looking at him, just staring at the wall, like that would make this moment of weakness easier to deal with. "Can have it ready by the time you go to sleep."

"Can't." Harry would kill for one, honestly, because then maybe he could sleep through the night or enjoy an evening without feeling like his skin was stretched too tight. "Addictive."

Draco quirked a smile, and it was a remnant of the boy that Harry used to know, the one who thought that even the ground he walked on was made of gold. "Not the way I make it."

Which is how they find themselves in the kitchen with supplies spread around them, Draco waving a knife in the air with one hand and his wand in the other, going on about how truly abhorrent Harry is at potions. The thing smells awful, and its filling his house with purple smoke, but he is also doubled over and laughing so hard a stitch has formed in his side, so he doesn't really care.

"I mean it, Potter." They generally call each other by their first names now, but sometimes when Draco really wants to tease him he slips back into old habits. "How did you ever pass potions?"

It should have been easy, this question. The correct response was to say something like *I didn't*, even though it were to be a lie. Or he could have just said about the brilliance of Hermione and the academic perks of being her friend. He doesn't say any of that.

Instead he thinks of his first potions class, of the terror that was Snape during his childhood mixed with the confusing pain of his death (*Nagini, kill, thump, thump, thump, so much blood, he didn't know a person had that much blood*), Slughorn and the bozoar and a memory tipped into a vial after having too much whiskey, the heat of the potions and the glare of Snape's eyes on his back, hating him because he hated his father, all because he loved his mother.

All of this, really, because Snape loved his mother.

"Hey." He'd been quiet, too long, and now Draco was staring at him like he was worried. His eyes held storms in them, a fight of who he is now and who he used to be and what he wants, all of it pulling him in a million different directions. "You alright?"

Do I look alright? Do alright people need a calming draught just to breathe?

"Yeah." He shakes himself, forces him to think of good memories, of quidditch, but even that is tainted, honestly, because it reminds him of the Fred who is dead and the maze which was the first time he saw death and Draco, too, stealing the snitch from right under his nose and Draco dressed as a dementor and Draco doubled over because George had just punched him in the stomach. "fine."

"I get it." And maybe he did. Harry could believe that, because if he was fine, he would not be waking up in the middle of the night to come down here and clean. Harry was messy, but he was not that messy. "Really."

He forces a tumbler full of the potion into Harry's hands. It is cold, and the color of lavender, so unlike the calming draughts that Ginny would sneak up to him at night during the first days after the war.

He wants to say thank you, but what he says instead is "cheers" and hopes it is enough.

Chapter 4

Harry

In the end, things really only start to fall into place because they start yelling about Dobby.

Harry's not sure who's fault it is. He had intended to let everything in the past stay in the past, to never bring up the times that Draco taunted him over his family or called Hermione a mudblood, or any other shitty thing, because he's sure that Draco would have plenty to throw back at him. But maybe that wasn't the best, because it all just sort of stayed boiling right under the surface, and then all it took was an offhand comment about comparing Kreacher to his own house elf to have Harry standing up and screaming.

"He told me he used to shut his ears in the oven." Harry said, gripping his spoon so tight that his knuckles were turning white, seething. Draco looked like he had just been slapped in the face he had been caught so off guard, and maybe he had, because he had spent all day preparing dinner and Harry just walked in here and ruined it. He knew that, knew that he was being an arse, that he was burning bridges more than he was mending them, but *cake all over the kitchen and scrubbing for hours to clean it up, you shall not hurt Harry Potter, wrestling with Draco for his wand while Dobby got them out, such a beautiful place to be with friends* and he just couldn't stop himself. "I used to have to stop him from punishing himself, yank the lamp out of his hands or force him away from the fire because it was so ingrained in him."

"That wasn't because of how we treated him." Draco said, desperately. "That's just a house elf, any house elf, even Kreacher, he does it too."

"I asked him if you would notice he was gone." Harry said, and now he really was angry, and he was upset all over again, because in the confusion of the war and all the other people that had died, he had sort of just locked this part of his pain up inside him, because despite all of McGonagall's talk that they died for the cause and not for him, Harry knew that this one, this one innocent being, died only because of him. He couldn't stand that, so it was much easier to blame Draco for his past mistakes. "He told me you wouldn't, because you encourage him to do extra punishments and wouldn't notice a few extra bandages."

"that wasn't me." Draco said, and now he was angry, too. Harry could almost cry at that, because it looked like they were finally going to stop walking on eggshells around each other. "That wasn't my father, I would never have told him that, I liked Dobby! He was my friend!"

"A friend you let slam his head in the oven twice a week?"

"I was a kid!" Draco yelled, and this was the whole heart of the matter, wasn't it, that they were both children made to grow up too fast, and then they ended up standing on different sides of the same awful divider? "What was I supposed to do, let him take it out on me?"

"I was a kid, too!" He's gotten tired of having people use that as an excuse for their mistakes, like Harry wasn't a kid that should have grown up to be awful, like he didn't wake up screaming because of what he was forced to do. Like he hadn't seen too much, too fast, and still made the right choices. "Only I was fighting for people like Dobby! I actually saw them as people worth fighting for? What did you fight for, Draco? Your own skin."

"It wasn't just me." Draco was up in an instant, now, hands shaking, and Harry is very, very grateful they had left their wands on the counter. "It wasn't just me and you know it, you said that you were there that night, it was do what they asked or watch my mother be tortured. Call yourself a savior, sure, but you've never had to choose between the people you love and the right thing. Because trust me, it gets a whole lot harder after she's been threatened by Greyback."

He was spitting, that's how mad he was, actually trembling. *We said we were friends*, Harry thought, watching Draco's fingers tremble against the table. *But we aren't, really. Maybe it's not possible, after everything we've been through.*

Draco was the first to move away, standing up so fast his chair falls to the floor with a bang, leaving Harry alone in the kitchen with Kreacher, feeling sickeningly like he had been the one to do something wrong.

Draco

He had been my friend.

That was the truth, about Dobby. In a house where his mother was always out entertaining and his father had little patience for him, Dobby was the one who had played with him when he was little, was the one who taught him to tie his shoes and ride a broom, the one that Draco went to when he had nightmares and he knew his father wouldn't approve of his crying. But then one day he came home and Dobby wasn't there, leaving Draco even more alone than he had been, and the only explanation he had been given was that he chose Potter over them.

It was only another reason to hate Harry.

But maybe the contest between them wasn't a contest at all, when Harry treated Dobby with kindness, when Dobby no longer had Lucius telling him to shut his ears in the oven. It didn't matter, then, that Dobby had once cared for Draco. *At some point, Harry, we all look out for ourselves and ourselves alone, no matter what we tell ourselves.*

When comparing the two of them, Draco couldn't see how different they were. They could have been friends, if only Draco hadn't somehow screwed it up that first day, if Harry had been put in any house than Gryffindor, if he hadn't thrown in his lot with Ron and Granger that first year. And maybe Draco really could have helped him, and then he would have had a reason not to turn towards the Dark side, would have had somewhere to turn instead of just being stuck there.

That's what drives him mad, the what ifs.

In the end, it doesn't matter how he got to where he did today. He can still look back on the years leading up and see all the things he did wrong, the times he made Granger cry, the times he insulted Ron's family, the times he was hoping that Harry would fail. They stack up to be a mountain of bad things, but they were things that he could have just apologized for when they got a little older, if only Voldemort wouldn't have come back into the mix.

A knock at the door makes him look up. It's Harry, leaning against the wall and wearing a sheepish look on his face. "I'm sorry." Harry speaks first. So far, it's always been Harry speaking first, like

he was determined to make the first move. "That was unfair of me. I shouldn't have said anything about it."

"You should have." Draco shrugged, picked at the loose thread on the coverlet. "You should bring up a lot of things. The things I said about you and Ron. The names I called Hermione. That time I got you detention with Umbridge and had you kicked off the quidditch team. The time Hermione had her teeth enlarged by a curse I aimed at you." And as an afterthought, he adds, "The hippogriff."

"You weren't hurt by him at all, you git." Harry sat down on the bed beside him. "Made me and Ron do your potions."

"I wasn't."

"He didn't end up being killed."

Draco isn't sure why the thought made him happy. "I really am sorry, for everything I did." He bites down on his lip hard enough to draw blood, and unconsciously moves his hand to cover the dark mark on his arm. "Every last, stupid thing."

"We were kids." Harry wasn't looking at him either. "Maybe its time to accept that that's all we were. Kids who didn't like each other because our parents didn't like each other, and who would have gotten over it if we had just been given time. We just needed to grow up first."

"Do you think we have?" Draco asked. "Grown up, I mean."

"I think we have." Harry threw himself backward with a sigh, making the mattress bounce. "All of us grew up too fast."

There's a long pause, with Draco picking at the skin around his nails and Harry just staring up at the ceiling, and then- "I could see into his mind, sometimes." There is no need to ask who he is referring to. "And I saw you, what he made you do. And I hated it, so when you say that I don't get it, or I don't understand that you didn't want to do it, or that the war was hard on you too... I know that you were just trying to make it through, and protect the people you care about. That's all any of us were doing."

"I didn't want to." Draco said, and his hands were shaking badly now, they always did when he thought of it, of the times he tortured other people and the occasional ones where he refused and the wand was turned on him instead, how the healer at Mungo's said that the nerve damage was permanent, not that Draco cared when he thought he would be seeing life through the bars on his cell door. "You have to believe that I didn't want to."

"I know." Harry sits up and puts his arm around him, an awkward attempt at comforting him that Draco really wished he hadn't made. "I know you didn't."

Harry

They are still in the room, but now they are mostly quiet, calmer, working their way through apologies. It's funnier than they should be, but when you peel away all the bigotry and what happened their sixth year, it really just was two kids being petty.

"Do you remember," Draco choked out, wheezing, the laugh still going on after they recounted stories of Hagrid's Care of Magical creatures class. "Those badges I made for the triwizard tournament? God, I spent ages working on finding the right spell, made them all myself, and you were so made at Ron that you barely even seemed to care."

"I cared," Harry admitted, remembering the words flashing around the potions classroom. "But they were funny."

Everything was funny, now, even the time that Ron cursed himself into belching up slugs, but it was also sort of sad, once they worked through their problems and got to the legacy of bigotry waiting underneath. "Do you remember when we met on the train?" Harry asked quietly. "With Crabbe and Goyle?"

"Yeah." Draco sobered up and stopped laughing. "Ron's rat bit one of them, didn't it?"

God, he did, Harry thought, and then that was another awful thing, how many times Peter was brought up in Ron and Harry's childhood. "And you offered to show me the right sort of wizards."

"I was a git." They'd lost track over how many times they've admitted that to each other over the past hour, but this time he said it fiercely. "You were right. You were the one who knew what he was doing. And I was the idiot that believed everything my father said."

"So let me show you now." Harry barely had any idea of what he was offering, but all he knew was that he had to offer, to help Draco pull himself out of his place he had found himself in.

"Introduce you to the right kind of people."

"Okay." Draco held out his hand, and for once, Harry actually shook it without feeling like one of them would try to kill the other in the process. "I'm in."

Chapter 5

Draco

He's taken wandering around the house when Harry isn't there.

Draco isn't sure why he does it, other than the fact that without school or a job or any responsibilities he's got hours worth of free time and nothing to fill it with, unless he actually wants to take Granger up on her offer of teaching him how to crochet. Kreacher had been the one to start it, showing him rooms that he couldn't get around to cleaning because of his knees or the places that he won't go anymore because they hold too many memories, and all of a sudden he was ripping down wallpaper in bathrooms and wiping away the dust that has piled up in the library, like he could scrub away the darkness if he only tried hard enough.

He finds remnants of the past whenever he least expects it. That's part of it, too, one of the reasons that he wants to take these walks through the house and stick his nose in places that Harry flat out refused to put foot in. He's gathered up knowledge like they're treasure- a baby photo of his aunt, a letter from his father tucked into a drawer- but it's not until he dares to pull himself up into the attic that he understands why Harry seems to want to fill this house up with noise so often.

It's to chase away the ghosts.

All Draco had done was move a box, and all of a sudden photos were pouring out, flooding the floor, a hundred of the same faces flashing up at him, waving, screaming. There is a much younger Professor Lupin with his arm wrapped around a clean shaven Sirius black, a man who looked like

Harry with his arm wrapped around someone who had Harry's eyes, Professor Moody when he still had both eyes. He thinks it is only the distant past, at first, but then he shifts through some more and finds other things- Nyphadora Tonks holding out her hand with the smallest engagement ring he had ever seen on her finger, Ginny and Hermione leaning in to each other to pose for the picture, the Weasley family gathered around the table as someone who must be their mother yells at them. There are people he doesn't recognize and people he does- Fred Weasley, George Weasley, Professors, Dumbledore, Hermione, and Harry, always Harry at the center of things, happy and laughing.

A lot of these people are dead, He thinks, and it is not for the first time that Draco begins to fully appreciate how young they all were, how much they had to lose just a year ago. All the things that they did lose. *Much too young to be soldiers.*

That's how Harry finds him, sitting in the center of a sea of photographs, looking at all these faces that he knows he once knew but can no longer recognize. Draco looks up at him like he is lost and Harry is his light house, hands full of memories, photographs full of the current dead and dying.

"they didn't know what was going to happen," He says finally, after Harry has sat down across from him and reached for photographs of his own, so close that his knees were pressed up against Draco's. They have gotten to a box that is just full of the twins- the twins together at dinner, the twins in their room, the twins holding out their hands to keep their picture from being taken, the twins playing exploding snap with Ron, the twins teaming up against Bill for a game of Exploding

Snap, all the tiny moments that piled up while they were living here. When they were together, and safe, and whole. "They didn't know how short it would all be."

"Ginny took most of these." Harry was crying, tears slipping down from his cheeks. The death of Fred had hit him the hardest. They were all hard, but it was especially awful to watch the shock waves that the grief sent through the Weasley family. "Her dad bought this muggle camera from a polaroid. Spent the whole summer snapping pictures."

"You all looked happy." Draco had always bought into his father's idea that he was the lucky one, that what it took to make a great man was a pocket full of gold and a big house, a beautiful wife and a respected place at the ministry. He had been groomed to follow in his father's footsteps and never even thought to question it, so it's always hard to see things like this and be reminded of just how wrong he was.

(that was the worst part of all this, watching his heroes fall. When his mother was not strong and dangerous as a knife, when his father was not always right, when his family tumbled off the pedestal that he had placed them upon and no one was there to help Draco back to his feet.)

"We were." Harry swallowed hard, and Draco reached out to touch him, but withdrew his hand at the last second. He was not sure that it would be welcomed, and if it was, he was never good at things like that, anyways.

They spend the rest of the night like that, shifting through the papers and filling in the holes that the other couldn't figure out. Harry tells him about the Weasley family, about the good times, and Draco explains what the Order's plans meant, what houses they were guarding and where they were infiltrating, who the names were referring to.

It's not until they find a black leather box that things get exciting, one with no visible way to open it and latin etched into the side, all of it with the look of something that had been carried around very often, with care. There were marks worn into the sides where someone had carried it, and nicks in the top from where it had been thrown around, but despite how long they sat up in that attic and tried, he and Harry couldn't find a way to open it.

"I know you're not going to like it," Harry said, tossing the thing over and over in his hands, raising it into the light to squint at it. "But I think we're going to need to call Hermione."

Draco agreed, because he was curious, and Harry called Hermione. Which meant that Ron came too. "You're absolutely certain there was no one else around it?" She demanded, circling the thing three times and tapping it with her wand. "No clue as to what could be in here?" They had already told her no three times.

"Could be anything." So far, all Ron did was smile adoringly at Hermione and eat the food that Draco had made them all for dinner. Three servings of it. As far as Draco could tell, Ron was just waiting for the moment when he had to jump in and act as a body guard. "Could be cursed."

"Knowing this house, it might be." Harry had warned Draco not to go prying into the cupboards and closets without Kreacher there, giving him horror stories of Boggarts and evil pixies and robes that try to strangle you. "What do you think we should do?"

"We could call the ministry. Have Kingsley send an auror to get it."

It was Ron who said it, and to everyone's surprise, it was Hermione that shut it down. "Then they'll take it from us, and we'll never get to know. This has been our fight before it was anyone else's, and this was found in your house, Harry. We have a right to know what hides inside." She yanked her hair up into a ponytail, viciously, and then rolled up her sleeves. "Shall we open it?"

Ron shrugged. Harry raised his glass in what Hermione took for agreement. And then finally it was only Draco, left with the three of them all staring at him, clearly waiting for him to be the one to ruin this. But he couldn't say no either, even when it was a clear possibility they could be unleashing something horrible onto each other. After sitting up in the attic, it felt like *his*, like it was theirs, something that just belonged to him and Harry.

"I'm in." He sets his butterbeer down on the table and joins Hermione with circling it, taking another turn at poking at it. "There's a book in the library that I think might help."

It took them three hours, but he and Hermione had finally stripped it of its enchantments, to where it looks like an ordinary suit case, just waiting to be opened.

"Are you ready?"

Hermione didn't look ready. She looked like she wanted to keep it closed, pale faced with a white knuckle grip on her wand.

"Ready as we'll ever be." Ron was taking the lead, seemingly thinking that if his girlfriend said it was ready to be opened, that should be the end of discussion.

"Alright." Hermione's hand was shaking a little, enough that Draco knew that she was afraid. (And when did that happen, that she stopped being Granger and started being Hermione?) "On three then."

"Wait. Let me." Draco stepped in front of her, eased her hands off the latch. She didn't argue too much, and when Ron stepped in front of her, Draco saw something in his eyes that felt like it was a flicker of gratitude. "Wands out?"

It was Hermione that had been steering this whole project, but it was Harry that Draco looked to. "Whenever you're ready." Harry said, and Draco didn't feel like anything to worry about, when he had Harry watching his back. "Just take your time."

"On three." Draco said, and he felt the tension in his arms building, the magic pooling in his wrists and his fingertips, that familiar feeling of when he was ready to take action. "On. Two." The last syllable seemed to stretch out, and when he finally did open it, it was with a loud bang and a puff of dust. "Three."

"You know what this means, don't you?"

There weren't times that Draco had thought that he belonged, that he was part of things, but as Hermione leaned into Ron's open arms and Harry turned to him, it was one of the rare moments of his life that Draco got to feel like he had become a central part of a team. This was a team, a team of three, and here he was, being pulled along for the ride.

He didn't know what it means. All he was looking at was blueprints and notes scrawled in the handwriting of Mad-Eye Moody, a fact that had sent Hermione into tears as soon as she realized it. They were names of death eaters, and suspected death eters, and werewolf dens, and terrorist cells in other countries just waiting to be unleashed.

And it felt bad. It felt like when the announcement came through the corridors that all students were to return to their houses and Draco had to wait to hear the news, when he sat outside the court room waiting for the verdict for his father, when he was meeting the Dark Lord for the first time. It was the feeling that came with all bad things, that animal instinct that served only to tell them when they should start running.

Hermione knew. And so did Ron. And even Harry, reaching out and gripping Ron's shoulder when Hermione left him to flip through the journals written in someone's spidery handwriting (Dumbledore's, he would learn later), seemed to know it. And really so did Draco, the truth settling somewhere in his stomach even before Hermione spoke.

"It's not over." This marked the beginning of something new, the first battle cry of the end, marking the moment where owls flitted from house to house and the call to arms was sent through all the old, weary soldiers, the ones with enough scars to last a lifetime but were no where near the end. "We've still got a long fight ahead of us."

Chapter 6

Harry

He knows he shouldn't have done it.

He had felt it when he dragged himself out of bed this morning, the affects of one too many sleepless nights finally creeping up on him, the ache in his muscles and the fog filling up his mind. He was so close to calling in sick, but that would have kept him stuck at home, and the fight seemed very important again, now that he had that box to think about, the one that he and Ron and Hermione (and Draco, Draco is a part of the three of them now, too, however reluctant they all are to admit it) still haven't told anyone about.

So he went to training.

And he when they told him it was time to practice fighting with real spells, with a trained healer standing on the sidelines, he didn't tell anyone that maybe it would be better if he sat this one out.

And when it was time for his turn, he stepped into the ring, faced his opponent, ignored the thumbs up that Ron gave him, didn't listen to all the safety warnings that Hermione had forced he and Ron to sit through when they first decided to choose this as their career plan. (*Because really, you think the two of you wouldn't have killed yourselves by the third year if you didn't have me with you?*) He just stood there, adjusted his grip on his wand, gave a nod to the instructor, and then waited for the spell to come at him.

Only when it came, he didn't block it. He didn't raise his wand to defend himself, or try to move out of the way. If Harry was being honest, he didn't really even see it, or if he did, he didn't register it, just saw a flash of light and then the shock wave that went through his chest, blasting him backwards into the wall.

He hadn't had time to prepare himself for the impact, so when he crumpled down to the floor, it was with every bone in his body screaming out to try and protect himself. But he still didn't, just fell, his arm folding awkwardly underneath him and his ribs bending, one of them snapping.

"Bloody hell." Ron's face swam above him, pale and freckled, red hair falling down over his face. "Don't move, mate."

Don't move, mate. Harry wished he could block everything out, the whispers and stares. He didn't want to imagine how fast the news must have spread, how the great Harry Potter had been bested in a duel by some random auror in training, how he must have been losing his touch. But it must have spread, because soon Hermione was there beside him, Ginny running hard at her heels, both of them shoving through the crowd to kneel on the ground beside him.

There were times, really, where he was fully struck by what it mean to have a friend like Hermione. This, as she let him pillow his head in her lap and ran her hands down his broken arm, smoothing his hair back from his forehead and wiping away blood he didn't even know was there, was one of them. "Don't you worry Harry." *She would have made a good healer,* he thought, but then threw the thought out the window, because she had tears welling up in her eyes even as he thought it, slipping down over her cheeks and splashing down onto his face. "You're going to be just fine."

"Does it hurt?" Ron asked, his voice louder. Ginny still hadn't said anything, just watched him with her jaw set and shoved people back when they tried to get closer to look at him. He was grateful for that, for her, for the three of them, trying to spare him from the impact of this.

"It must." Hermione answered, and then her wand was out, and her tears were still coming, and when she turned to look at Ron her voice was cracking, the words wobbling. "But it won't for long.

Just close your eyes, Harry, alright?"

He didn't want to, because that was the opposite of what his instincts were screaming for him to do when he was hurt in a strange place, but he trusted her. He could always trust Hermione so he closed his eyes, let himself sink farther down into her, and when she finally managed to calm her shaking hands, he didn't feel anything at all.

Draco

There's yelling.

There's yelling, coming from a lot of people, all of them right underneath him, which didn't make sense because Harry wasn't due home for another three hours and there was no way anyone can walk into the house without him being here. It would have been alarming, except for the fact that he could clearly pick out Hermione's voice rising up above the din, so it was mostly just annoying, considering that he had a pounding head ache and he really just wanted to sleep.

"Just shut it," He pleaded, wondering if he would be able to put a silencing spell on the door without getting up. But then there was a particularly large crash from downstairs, like someone had just thrown one of their dishes to the floor, and the yells picked up at a rapid pace with a lot more voices than he was expecting, so he decides to go investigate instead, and finds himself in a room of screaming Weasley's.

And Granger. She's there, too.

"What the bloody fuck," He said, louder than he intended, without thinking about the words that were coming out of his mouth, because, honestly, what the actual hell, he was only trying to sleep, this was his house, he had the right to take a nap if he wanted to, and why were they here, anyways? And then he panicked, because what right did he have to say that to him, he had no right, he shouldn't even have come down here, this was a private thing, Harry's thing, he should not be here, but- "is going on here?"

Harry was the only one to look at him, staring up at him with his busted lip and the plastic bracelet on his wrist that meant he had been to St. Mungo's, shadows deep under his eyes and clearly wishing that the ground would swallow him up. Everyone else froze, which gave Draco a good opportunity to take stock of the situation- Granger and Ginny and Ron clearly all taking turns arguing, Luna stretched out across the couch, Seamus (*who was here, for some reason*) glowering across the room at him, and George coming back from the kitchen with a glass of pumpkin juice in his hand.

It was Ginny who answered, glaring at Harry, like this, whatever this was, was all his fault. "Harry had a bit of an *incident* at training today." Her voice was dripping with thinly concealed anger.

"Seems as if he was so tired he couldn't even raise his wand to defend himself, and got himself thrown fifty feet into the air during a duel."

"You what?"

Draco staggered fully into the room, squinting into the light, and when he got closer Harry looked even worse.

"It wasn't that bad," Harry assured him, only he was wincing and didn't seem to be able to take deep breaths.

"Not that bad!" Ron threw himself back down onto the couch. "You could have died, mate."

"Do you know," Harry said, teeth gritted, eyes closed, maybe because of the pain, maybe hoping for patience. "how many times you've said those exact words to me?"

"But this time you could have died because of pure stubbornness!" Hermione said, and her hair was flying out around her like it had been electrified, she was so frazzled. "You could have died, and all because you hadn't been able to sleep and then thought it was a good idea to come to training!" She knelt down on the ground in front of him, took his hands in her own. "I know it's hard Harry." Draco wanted to look away, because this was such an obviously private moment, a moment between this family he would never be a part of. "We're all having trouble with it. You can't expect to just be fine. *None of us*, and I mean none of us, are fine, Harry. You need to learn to ask for help."

"I can ask for help!" Harry protests, pulling his hands out of hers. "Draco makes me a sleeping potion every night!"

Draco had thought that the yelling had been bad before, but its not until Harry mentioned the sleeping potion that all hell really broke loose.

Draco can see the reasoning behind it, honestly. Sleeping potions are very dangerous things to play with, normally, because they can ruin both your physical and mental health, make you completely dependent on them to function, ruin any chance at a normal sleeping schedule. There would be no moving forward if Harry was turning to a sleeping potion every night. But that only applied to the regular way to make it, not to how Draco makes it, which, if he was right, would have no ill side affects at all, short or long term.

And he was very rarely wrong about his potions.

Not that that seems to matter to any of them, he thinks, and then he doesn't really think anything at all, because Ron was on his feet and coming towards him, grabbing by the arm and hurling him backwards, back into the wall, where there would be no escape.

"You make him one of those every night, huh?" He asks, and there is something dangerous waiting here, in these hands and these eyes. Draco had never quite managed to notice how big Ron was back at Hogwarts, but that was back when he had Crabbe and Goyle guarding him every hour of the day and his father's reputation to hide behind. Now Ron had him pinned to the wall, towering over him, keeping him there with a forearm across his throat. There was no one to

protect him now. (No one but Harry, anyways, and he wasn't in any position to help.) "Trying to be helpful?"

"It's addictive!" Hermione shouted out, and her voice was on the verge of tears again. She always had been rather easy to make cry. Then she turned on him, and she did not seem weak anymore, she seemed terrifying. "How could you let him do this?"

After all he's done for you, Draco heard, and he knows then that that's going to be the line that follows him around the rest of his life, this guilt that comes with every heart beat, the debt that stacks up with each second that he stays here. He tries not to look at Harry, but then he does and the sight makes him want to sink to his knees and beg everyone to take him away, to send him to the ministry, to stick him in Azkaban for the rest of his life if that's what it takes to protect him. Because Draco will ruin him eventually. In the end, he ruins everything.

"It's not," He croaks out instead, looking past them all at Ginny, because Ginny was safe, Ginny was strong. "Not that way that I make it."

It seems to shock them all, even Ron. Confidence tends to do that. "That's impossible." Hermione says, faintly, but she looks interested too. "You would have had to find your way around a dozen principle laws, at least. It would be revolutionary."

She does not believe him, but she wants to. That was the problem with everyone in this room: they always wanted to see the best in people.

Draco shoves Ron away and stands straight, tries to make himself look what he believed a Malfoy should be, because this, at least, is something he knows. "Watch me."

Harry

Even back at Hogwarts, there were times when Harry had to admit that Draco was smart. He was very good at magic, especially transfiguration, and even as much as he despised Snape and the favoritism he showed Draco, even Harry could see that the praise wasn't always unjustified.

"Is he actually right?" He asks, watching as Draco talked in muttered voices with George and Hermione, going over notes and explaining steps, the smoke from the cauldron filling up the kitchen. Ron had left to report back to the auror department about Harry's condition, but other than that, no one seemed very concerned about the morning's incident anymore. This was clearly something important, something exciting, and George and Hermione and Draco were caught up in the craze of academic achievement that Harry had always associated with Hermione and her studying habits.

"I don't know." Luna was slumped over the table, watching it all with might be interest but could easily just her staring off into space. "I never was much good at potions."

"Yeah, well." Harry doesn't like to think about potions. It opens up a train of thought he would rather stay away from. "Me either."

But clearly Draco was. Harry liked to watch him do this, because it was one of the rare times that he looked like the boy he was before the war, the one who thought the ground that he walked on was made from gold. And even though Harry hadn't liked that Draco nearly as much as this was,

there was a certain lure too him, a charm, a confidence (a wholeness, an innocence, an arrogance) that was nice to see shining through.

He's beautiful, Harry thought, and even though he pushed the thought away as soon as he could, it lingered. It was the truth, the way he looked, with the sleeves of his shirt rolled back up above his elbows and his hair all in disarray, his bottom lip caught between his teeth as he leans over his notes.

Don't think like that, Harry reminds himself viciously, and when that doesn't work, he digs his thumbs into his ribs, hissing out in pain. Luna notices but doesn't comment, just reaches over to pull his hand away, gentle, always gentle.

"I don't believe it," George says finally. It had taken an hour for them to be convinced, but now it was the end, everyone staring down at the finished potion. And George seemed excited for the first time since Fred died, just an edge in his voice that meant he was caught up in the moment, happy to have been a part of something. "You actually did it, Malfoy." He reached out and clapped him on the shoulder, pulled him in for something that could only be described as a hug, and then let him go.

"You know what this means?"

"It's genius." Hermione said faintly, breathlessly, and then sunk down into the chair and pulled his notes towards her. "It's revolutionary. All the things this could be applied to... the medical advancements... Draco, do you know what you've found?"

"A non addictive sleeping potion." Draco said, smiling for the first time this whole afternoon, please, happy with himself. He was looking right at Harry, like he was searching for approval, and Harry could only hope he knew how much this moment meant for all of them, how proud he was to be able to call himself Draco's friend, as unthinkable as that might have been only a few years ago. "Told you I could do it."

He was standing right beside him, his hand resting on the back of Harry's chair, and even though it hurt to do it, he twisted around to grab onto him, holding him like an anchor. "I believed you." Then he raised his voice, because he was in pain, and he was tired, and he was just dying to get the chance to use this sleeping potion. "Now if you could all please get out of my house? I've got some sleep to catch up on."

Draco

He ushers them all out of the house, helping them collect coats and scarves, leading them all down the long hallway. He manages to get George to leave with a promise to stop in at the shop the next time he goes to Diagon alley, but by the time he turns back around, Hermione is gone.

He finds her in the kitchen, scribbling on a piece of parchment. "Our address," She says breathlessly, stuffing it into the palm of his hand. "If you have anything else like that- even if its theories, or just in the early stages- I'd love to work on it with you." Then, without thinking about it, she went on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, brushing past him to get out the door.

She paused, staring back at him. "It was good work Draco." There was too much of the past caught between them, but it seemed like this was the first step towards breaking it all apart. "I mean it."

"Thank you," He said. "I mean that, too."

Then the door closed, and it was only him alone in the hallway, back to him and Harry in this giant house. He found him in the living room, curled back in the same spot he had been when Draco first came down the steps.

"I didn't think I could make it up the stairs," He said, and he looked embarrassed about it, like being hurt and needing help was not acceptable for him. Or maybe it was just that he wasn't used to having someone besides Ron and Hermione to lean on. "Hurts too bad. And- I'm just so tired."

"Alright." Draco didn't think about what he was doing, just reached out to help him, letting him lean back into the cushions and then throwing one of Granger's blankets overtop him. "That's okay. A couch is as good a place as any."

He meant to go, but then there was a hand on his wrist and a noise of protest coming from Harry, so soft he wasn't even sure if he meant for Draco to hear. Knowing from how he gets when he has one of these potions, Harry probably wasn't thinking very clearly right now- that might have even been meant as a word. "Stay." Harry tugged him closer, tightened his grip, and it was only the thought that he wouldn't remember this that kept Draco in place. "Just stay."

"Alright." He perched on the edge of the couch, close but not close enough, but somehow it still felt like he was beginning to walk a dangerous line. "I'll stay, Harry."

Chapter 7

Draco

"Come on," Harry had said. He was tugging on Draco's hand, hair still messy from sleep and a smile playing over his face. "It'll be fun."

Draco didn't want to. He didn't want to because Harry was making him go outside, and to Diagon alley no less, where he would be recognized, where people would stare and mutter and snarl awful things behind their hands and maybe even send tripping spells at his feet, and he would be with Harry, and if Harry saw all that he would realize what an awful mistake he had made, what kind of person he had invited into his home- but Harry was smiling down at him and touching him and Draco is quickly losing his ability to say no to things when Harry is looking at him like that, so he throws the blanket off of him (*I don't sleep very well*, Hermione said when she gave it to him, thrusting a bundle of blue into his hands, *so I thought I'd make you one too*) and getting to his feet.

"Alright," He had said, even though the thought of stepping foot outside this house makes his stomach curl in on itself, and Harry's smile gets bigger. "I'll go, you bastard."

There was no bite in his words, and two hours later he found himself walking through the Leaky Cauldron, listening to Harry say hi to Old Tom, who despite everyone who had been lost in the past few years, was still puttering around in his bar and churning out pots of watery coffee. When they walk out into the alley, Draco has to squint against the sudden burst of sunlight, and crowds into Harry without noticing it.

"Alright?"

Draco knew, without Harry needing to really say it, that if Draco truly wasn't alright, they would turn around and apparate home and not mention it, and Harry would spend his day off like he had spent every other day off. But suddenly, Draco wanted to be able to walk through this alleyway and squeeze his way through the other shoppers without drawing second glances, wanted to be a free man who didn't feel like he needed to be in chains. And maybe the only way to do it is to face things like this head on.

And besides, Harry was with him. It's not like anything was going to happen when Harry was with him.

Draco takes a deep breath, forces himself to be the one and take the first step into the crowd, even if he does search behind him and keep his fingers touching Harry's wrist, like Harry was a life buoy and he would drown if he let go for even a second.

"Alright." And it was.

They go into the apothecary first. That was the whole point of the trip, because he and Hermione needed knew ingredients for their experiments, and when Draco had given Harry the list, he had looked faintly embarrassed and then confessed that he had no idea what to look for.

"You really like this stuff, huh?" Harry was sitting up on the counter, because the girl behind the counter was friends with him and decided she could take a break while he was in the shop (*not like anyone's going to try anything with you in here, eh, Harry?*) so it was just the two of them. Draco couldn't imagine Hogwarts Harry being the person to climb up on counters and pick up items that he had no intention of buying just to cringe at what was inside. School Harry had been much less imposing, but maybe this one had grown into his skin a bit more.

"I do." He had a full basket beside him, full of odd bits of this and that. "It was always... soothing I guess."

"And you were good at it." Harry offers, and his gaze was fixed on Draco now, the moment coming so sudden that Draco ducked around a set of shelves to break it. "You always did like being good at things."

"that was part of it." For a moment, Draco thought they were dancing along the edge of something dangerous and thought about playing along, of turning this moment into something completely different. And he could have, god knows he'd done it before, but his throat seemed to dry up and the words wouldn't come out. He holds up the basket to break the tension, instead, forcing a friendly smile on his face. "You want anything?"

Harry startled, jumping even more when the counter girl (Hannah?) came out of the back, the bell on the door tinkling. I was nice to know that Draco wasn't the only one feeling the tension in the air. "No." He scratched the back of his neck, ruffled his hair so it fell down over his scar. He was due for a hair cut soon. "Not from here."

They bounced from store to store, after that, from the book store to the deli to even ducking into Borgin and Burkes for some reason (*Draco had the sneaking suspicion that Harry was either trying to include his past interests or doing some detective work while Draco's back was turned*), until finally landing in the quidditch supply store.

"I want a new broom." Harry said, running his fingers down the handle of the one that the manager had left for them to suspect, eyes dancing. Draco figured this is what he must have looked like back in the apothecary shop. "Deserve it, after last year, huh?"

"Then buy it." Draco wasn't used to living with someone like Harry, a person who had felt what it was to need to conserve money. In Draco's house, if you saw something you wanted, you got it, no matter the cost. (Even if the cost wasn't monetary.) "Use some of your prophet money."

One of the trials after the war centered around the Prophet and all the false stories they had been printing. The result was as if they had turned the whole building upside down and shook it, until every corrupted editors and writers had fallen out, fired and without another job to turn to. And Harry got a lot of reparation money for the things they had printed about him in his fifth year.

Harry looked tempted for a moment, but then he put it back and looked around for the manager, who he either wanted to say good bye to or thank. He's always unfailingly polite to the people working. "Nah. Where would I fly it, anyways?" But then he was turning back to it again, so obviously wanting it. "Though I could go to the Weasley's. You could come to."

He made the offer in an off hand sort of way, but Draco still recoiled, drawing away from Harry as if the thought had burned him.. "No." He spit the word out and the panic rose up, because didn't Harry understand? "I killed their son." That was the awful truth of it, how when you are on the wrong side but still right enough to feel guilt, every horrible thing fell onto your shoulders. "I'm never going there."

Harry doesn't push, just looked sad, like he wanted to hold Draco but couldn't make himself reach out. "Alright."

But they both knew it wasn't.

"Listen." Harry was leaving him, leaving him at the door of the Weasley's shop, and Draco didn't know if it was payback for his comment or if this was Harry's sick idea of trying to fix things, but he was about ready to throw his dignity out the window and beg for Harry to stay, because this *can not* happen. "It's just going to be a minute."

"I'll come with you." Draco could not express how much he didn't want to go in there, all the rules he thought it would be breaking. It was different when he was with Harry. Harry was a shield, someone that stopped people from being reminded of what Draco had done. "I'll just wait outside."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Draco was about to ask why, when he realized that he knew. They had been here all day, and there were only two shops they hadn't gone to: the twins, and Ollivanders. of course Harry would want to see him, and of course Draco couldn't go.

"Right." His took his hand off Harry's arm, because he did not deserve to touch him. He could hear Harry calling after him, but he did not want to be more of a nuisance than he already had, so he turned and walked back through the door.

Draco had been in here exactly once, when he had bought the Peruvian instant darkness powder. Then, it was crowded and bursting at the seams with products, so bright that it almost hurt to look at. Now it was quiet, with gaping holes on the shelves and a witch with a pinched face behind the counter.

He wandered through the shelves, picking up one product and then putting it back. He's fine until he turns a corner and comes upon a bin of edible dark marks, all those skulls and snakes staring up at him.

"Don't you already have one of those?" He had been scared of George, but he shouldn't have. He should have been scared of everyone else, and of all the displays to have been caught in front of, Draco knew this was not a good one. "If you want another mark, we can give you one."

Draco didn't raise his wand. He didn't defend himself, just wondered what they were going to do, if they were going to burn something onto him and listen to him scream or just do it the muggle way.

At the very least, he wouldn't have it said that he started a fight in George's shop.

But it doesn't come to that.

"Oi." It was George, wearing his faded work robes of that awful magenta, looking like he hadn't come out of the back room in weeks. "What do you think you're doing?" His eyes dart from the kids to Draco to the bin of the dark marks and seems to understand immediately. "He's got a right to shop here as much as you do. If you don't like it, you can leave."

They scowl and then stomp their way out, slamming the door closed behind them. It left Draco and George looking at each other, the empty store around them making it even more awkward than it would have been otherwise.

"Thanks." It was the only thing Draco could think to say.

"We made those before the war. Kind of tacky now." George picks one up and throws it back into the bin. "Maybe it was then. Should get rid of them."

Draco pictured George dragging this back to alley, dumping them all out into a dumpster. It was a sad thought. "What do they taste like?"

George blinks. "Grape. Sometimes blueberry."

Draco rummages in his pocket and comes out with a galleon, because he wants candy, damn it. "I'll take three."

That's how they end up in the back with candy wrappers spread out around them, tongues stained black. "Got to admit," George said, licking the last of the candy off of a wrapper. "Much better idea than throwing them all out."

"No kidding." Draco reached out for another one, his twelfth. "I'm going to be sick."

"You can't." George propped himself on an elbow and looked over at him. "We promised to eat the whole thing."

"This was stupid."

"It was fun."

"Stupidly-,"

"Stupidly,"

"Fun." they finished the last word together and laughed, and Draco couldn't get over the surrealness of the conversation, how the two of them were sitting in the storage room of a Weasley's shop, working their way through candy dark marks.

"I didn't want to come back here, you know." George said, suddenly sober. "But Hermione sat me down and said that I was going to have to face up to it, sooner or later, so here I am."

"Granger's something." Draco didn't want to admit how much he owed to her, how much her instant forgiveness had helped him. there's something to it, mending the broken bridges of your past.

"Always seems to be right."

"She's annoying like that." George ran a hand along the side of his head, the one with the missing ear. He'd been careful to keep it facing away from Draco, but Draco had still seen it, the twisted skin and red scar tissue coming to a circular bump at the side of his head, so small you never would have guessed it used to be an ear. "But what I'm trying to get at, is that it helps, forcing yourself to do normal things."

Normally, Draco would have gotten angry when someone tries to give him advice. But this was coming from George, who was asking for calming draughts from Draco once a week because his hands shake too badly to handle a knife, and who clearly had done his fair share of hiding. Maybe it was time for Draco to come out into the open again.

"My normal sort of got smashed to pieces. Wouldn't know where to start."

"Start here. With me, hiding in the back." It was a large leap to make in one afternoon, but George seemed serious. "It'll do us both some good."

"I'll think about it," Draco said, but they both knew the answer was probably going to be no.

He leaves the shop before Harry shows up. Draco's got his wand held out in front of him, just in case, but the only figure is one that he recognizes, all the way down at the end of the street.

It's Harry, standing in front of the pet store and looking at all the owls. "You used to have an owl, didn't you?" It had never made sense to Draco for a boy who had no knowledge of their world to come to school with one of the best kind of owls. "That white one."

"Hedwig."

"What happened to it?"

"She died." Harry rocked back on his heels like the words had knocked him off balance. "Tried to take her with me when I was going from my aunt and uncles to a safe house. Got hit with a killing curse. Should have just let her loose."

Draco doesn't know what to say about that, so he doesn't address it. "Why don't you buy another one?"

They don't have an owl at the house, which for a wizard is like having their hands tied behind their back as far as communication goes. "Don't know. Probably should." And then he walked away, hands shoved deep into his pockets, leaving Draco to run after him.

(Draco sneaks out the next day to buy another owl, this one tiny and jet black, and has it sitting on the kitchen counter when Harry comes home. He'd never seen him get so happy so fast.)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for [suicide attempt](#)

Harry

Seamus... hurts himself.

It was Ginny who broke the news to them, bursting through the door of the boys locker room after training without waiting for one of them to answer her knock. Ron was already yelling and halfway through scolding her, but then they both saw her face and whatever they were going to say was replaced by that sick feeling in your stomach that comes when you know you were about to get bad news.

Ginny was crying.

Harry had rarely seen her cry, not since Dumbledore's funeral or the day of Bill's wedding. She hadn't really even cried at George's wedding, just stared at everyone with a set jaw and a face full of fury, but this time she had a quivering lip and tears slipping silently down her face.

"What's wrong?" Ron was on his feet in a moment, arms held out like he was trying to hug her, but Ginny just shrugged him off. "What happened?"

"It's Seamus." She let half a sob out and then swallowed the rest, turning to kick the locker door so hard Harry was surprised she didn't break anything. "He's at Mungo's. He..."

"What?" Ron was still looking for something to fight, an enemy to push his fear towards. Harry was just watching Ginny, the way she was crumbling. "Did someone hurt him?"

"He did it to himself." She said, and then the tears came for real, a torrent of them. "He did some damage Ron."

Harry doesn't remember listening to her. All he remembers is that one moment his picture of Seamus included the Seamus he knew from school, the happy one that was in love with Dean, and now there was this other Seamus in his head, the one that kissed Dean good bye on his way to work and then sat down to write a note, who locked himself in a bathroom, who got found by Luna three hours later covered in his own blood and crying about how he couldn't make himself cut deep enough, could she finish it, please.

Please, he had apparently sobbed, letting her pull him into her arms like he was still a little kid.
Please let it end.

Harry felt like he had been punched in the stomach, so he turned away, but he couldn't hide from it forever, because Ron was on his feet, one arm wrapped around his sister's shoulders. "I'm going home." He said, voice grim, but determined in the way it had been back when they were

preparing to do something dangerous, like he was checking things off of a to-do list. "Making her a strong cup of tea. You want to go keep Dean company in the hospital until Hermione gets there?"

No, he wanted to say, because he did not want that, he did not want to see Seamus like this, he did not want to sit in uncomfortable chairs and tell his friend meaningless platitudes, he did not have to be the one to deal with all of this.

But that's not what he says.

"Sure," He hears himself saying, reaching for his shirt to get dressed, inexplicably wishing Draco could come but realizing in the same moment that he wouldn't be welcome. This was not about Harry's comfort. "Of course I'll go."

Draco

Harry was late, which meant that Draco was waiting when he came home, settled into the corner of the couch with a book spread across his lap.

"I'm late. I know." Harry didn't give Draco time to respond, just yanked off his coat and threw it down on the chair with an anger that Draco hadn't seen since they were in school. "Something came up."

"Is everything-," He meant to ask if everything was okay, but doesn't, because the words aren't out of his mouth before Harry is leveling his stare at him.

"Everything's not okay, actually. You want to know why?" Draco didn't, really. He didn't want to know why Harry looked so pale, or why his eyes are red enough to make Draco think he had been crying, or what that stain on his shirtsleeve was. He didn't want to know why he was so late or why his hands or shaking or why he had slammed the door so hard when he came in. He just wanted things to be okay. "Seamus went and bloody tried to kill himself, that's why, ripped himself apart from wrist to elbow."

He seemed to be waiting for some sort of reaction on Draco's part, and Draco felt horribly like he was failing some sort of a test. He puts the book down and the gets to his feet, like he might actually be thinking about walking over and giving Harry a hug, of all the stupid ideas. But then Harry leaves the room entirely, and Draco follows.

Harry is kicking the chair. Repeatedly. And then he is sitting in it, hunched over with his elbows on his knees, hands yanking at his hair. And then he's staring up at Draco like he might find some comfort there, the face of someone who has reached their breaking point. "It never ends, does it?"

He sounds like he has been drained of every last drop of motivation, like finally after everything, Seamus will be the one who breaks him. "It just brings more pain."

"It'll stop." Draco says, wondering if this is helpful, wondering if he should leave Harry to work through this on his own. "We've just got a long way to go."

Harry stares at him for a moment and then he stands, and for half a moment Draco thinks he is leaving because what he said was wrong, was insensitive, and he's already halfway to apologizing when Harry re-enters the room while shrugging on his coat. "I need a drink." And just before Draco can start worrying that it had been him that drove him away from his own home, Harry turns around one last time, raising an eyebrow with something that might have been impatience. "You coming?"

Draco doesn't hesitate.

Harry

Draco does not really fit with the people here, but since Harry had started dragging him along to everything as his plus one, no one thought to argue, just ordered another round of drinks and said it was on the two of them.

"You didn't tell me it was going to be everybody." Draco said, but doesn't argue, just throws his coat over the chair and rolls his sleeves up to the elbow in the way that he can't know Harry likes. "It's not really my place."

"You're fine," Harry tells him back, and he is. Truthfully, Harry didn't know that everyone would be here, but maybe they should have. This is what they always did after the war, through the reports and the trials and the rebuilding and the grief, find a bar and drink until they can't stand on their own. Maybe it was a bad way of dealing with things, but it was the only times he could remember being happy in that time right after the year, and they deserved a chance to be young and dumb, just for a few months of their life.

It's all of them. Ron and Hermione are at a booth sharing a plate of fries that neither of them are eating, and Ginny and Luna are slow dancing in the corner to the song on the radio, never mind the reporter snapping pictures of them. Neville had found his way to the bar, and George was right beside Draco, where he had already seemed to be halfway down the road to being a drunken mess. Padma and her sister are there, too, the space beside them reminding them all of Lavender, who should have been here with them but still won't leave her house because of the scarring. And that's just the ones close enough for Harry to see.

"I heard." George says, being the first one to break the silence about why they had gathered here. "Bloody mess."

He seems to regret his use of the word bloody as soon as he said it, and they both kick Draco under the table when he snorts into his drink. "I went to see them." Draco perked up at that, staring over at Harry, because Harry had not told him that. Harry knew he should have, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about it, with the way that Dean was crying and Seamus was not waking up, how big that cut went along his arm. "It was awful."

"How's Dean?" This was from Neville, who came arm in arm with Hannah Abbott. Harry could see Hermione and Ron behind him, coming over to join the group.

"Bad." Harry didn't want to think about that. "I probably wasn't helping. Got better once Hermione got there."

Hermione was good at things like that, the comfort, the bedside manners. He's not sure how she does it.

"I can't still can't believe he would do that." Hermione said, coming up behind them all. Her voice was quivering, a sure sign that tears were about to follow if someone didn't intervene. No one did.

"Yes, you can." George's voice cut through them all, through the noise and the music and the hiss of the drinks coming from behind the bar. "None of are even surprised."

We aren't, Harry thought, looking around at all of them. How many times have they gathered here after a report or funeral that dredged up something awful? the worst stops being surprising and starts being something that you have learned to live with, after a while. *We aren't surprised at all.*

Draco

They are very much about to be drunk.

Draco's not sure why no one has threatened to throw him out yet, but he thinks it's because that Harry is right beside him and George has taken him under his wing, like a sort of substitute sibling when his own aren't within arms length. Whatever the reason, he's grateful, to have been included in this and not been left waiting home alone for Harry to come back, but he cannot stand the knowledge that when the lines were drawn he had found himself standing on the wrong side, the guilt of it all clawing at him, choking him.

This was my fault, he thinks, when Hermione succumbs to something between a laugh and a sob while leaning on Draco's shoulder. *I do not deserve this*, when Harry gets drunk enough that he actually drags Draco onto the dance floor. *You should not let me be one of you*, he knows, but that does not stop him from accepting the shot that George shoves into his hand, draining the silver liquid in one go and ignoring the burn as it goes down.

Only Ron seems to think that maybe Draco does not belong, but he is also tied to doing whatever it is that Hermione wants, so he does not mention it. Still, Draco can feel his eyes tracking him throughout the whole night, only letting his guard down when they all tumble down to sit at a table together, trying to sober up before they have to stumble home.

It's Hermione that breaks the silence that had settled around all of them, downing her beer in one go and then slamming the bottle back onto the table. "I just can't stand it," She said, voice too loud, cheeks flushed, seeming not to care that everyone was staring at her. "Why is there nothing to help us? no medication, no therapy, no anything?" She stares at all of them for agreement and is only met with blank faces. "Don't tell me you don't have that sort of thing. Even muggles have it."

Ron reached out for her, but she batted him away. Draco had seen her like this before, when she was in the library and searching through the shelves for that one book, not letting anyone distract her until the problem was solved. (They hung out a bit, their third year, back when she was on the outs with Ron and Harry and Draco took a moment to realize how close to each other's level

of intelligence they really are. That was the year she slapped him. He tries not to think about that.)

"But we're not muggles, love," Ron said gently, like they had this conversation before. And maybe they had, just different versions of it, about animal welfare and muggle relations and house elf rights.

"We don't have any of that."

"Well, we should. I bet I could do it. It'd just take a little applied science and potions." And then suddenly Hermione is turning to him and reaching across the table to grab at his arm, like he hadn't called her mudblood and spat in her face and watched as his aunt tortured her for information she would never give. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Later, Draco would look back on this moment and be grateful for it. At the moment, he was only mortified that she would even think to ask, horrified at all the faces that had suddenly swiveled to look at him. He didn't know what to say.

But then he thought of Harry and his sleeping draughts. Of George and the empty spaces on the shelves. Of Seamus' ripped up arm, of Luna's nightmares, his own incessant cleaning of a house that was not his to care for. He thought about all of that was sort of his fault, in a warped sense of the world, and maybe it was time he try to make up for it.

And he found himself saying yes.

Harry

They take the night bus home, because they are afraid to apparate, and find themselves stumbling through the front door at three in the morning. He's tripping over his own two feet, and he hears Draco knock over that stupid umbrella stand he couldn't bring himself to even move, and then a pair of hands was covering his. helping him peel of his jacket.

"Let me." Harry couldn't really see him, but the whisper came from close by. He thought about reaching out, but then the hands were gone and so was his jacket, and he knew that Draco had stepped away, leaving as fast as he came.

"I could have done it."

"No, you couldn't have." Draco was snickering at him, but it was different from the way Harry expected it to sound. It wasn't taunting anymore, just fond, like Draco couldn't believe he got to be friends with someone who acted like this. "You're actually pretty drunk."

And maybe he was. Harry's been told that he never knows he's drunk until he's really drunk.

(Hermione calls it social drinking, says its a bad thing. Ron calls it a good time.)

"Good." Is he slurring? He's not. Maybe Draco's the one who can't tell when people are drunk. "I wanted to be."

Silence, a beat too long, because even though they were just happy, Harry went and brought the bad thing back to the front of their minds. He didn't want to do that, because that meant thinking

about Dean and Seamus, of Dean holding Seamus' limp hand, the way he let his thumb trace over the freckles on Seamus' knuckles without looking. He didn't have to look to know where they were.

It makes a lump form in his throat but he swallows it down, blinks just in case there were tears. He does not cry. He will not cry over this, when Seamus is not dead, when Seamus is going to be perfectly fine as soon as the potions kick in.

(He will not be fine, he was never fine, will never be fine, none of them ever were or will be fine. He does not know what okay is supposed to feel like.)

"I'm sorry about your friend." Draco's voice cuts through the silence, and it is obvious that he is fumbling, trying to make this better. "It's shitty."

Harry sort of liked that, even though he knew that Draco was probably wracking his brains to come up with something better. No blame, no demands, no nothing. For once, here was someone who was not turning to Harry to fix it, and just wanting to see if he was okay.

"yeah," Harry clears his throat to make his voice work and claps Draco on the shoulder, trying to make this feel like it was a conversation between two mates, boys who are just friends and don't want to be anything less. It hasn't felt like that in a while. "Shitty."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the notes. Even if I do not respond right away, just know that I am reading them and appreciating them the moment they come in.

Harry

They're good together, Hermione and Draco.

It took a while, but he'd finally gotten used to coming home from training and seeing the two of them crowded around the kitchen table, a cauldron steaming on the counter behind them and a spreadsheet tacked up to the walls. Even if she isn't here when he gets home, she comes later that night after she had a chance to talk to Ron, bursting through the door with a bundle of papers clutched in her arm and Harry would fall asleep to the sound of their murmured voices, knowing that he would find them both curled up on opposite sides of the couch when he came home.

It's good work, they're doing. Notable work. It had started out just being for Seamus, but then they really got to talking and decided to make a whole range, start the wizarding mental health program from the ground up. Hermione brings the muggle therapy practices and Draco brings the wizarding solutions, and the two of them sort of meet in the middle to form some groundbreaking health care.

It's gotten a bit of attention, both from the Daily Prophet and academic circles.

Draco's let Hermione handle most of the public speaking.

"How's it going?" Harry almost feels like he's interrupting something by walking into his own kitchen. Hermione certainly thinks so, but Draco doesn't. Draco actually gets up to greet him, and Harry can't help but track his movements across the room, the way his hair curls at the edges from the heat of the fire and his shirt is sticking to his shoulder blades, the fabric so light it is almost see through.

"We're almost done." Draco leans across him to grab at a glass of pumpkin juice on the counter. Harry's starting to pay more attention to moments like this, and he hates himself for it, because that is not what Draco is here for. "Should have the calming draught ready for full scale usage by next week. All we need now is an equation to help tailor it to different levels of need, height and body weight and age, that sort of thing."

"Children shouldn't use this stuff at all." Hermione said, measuring the bit of frog bile she was pouring into the beaker. "Developing brains, and all."

"I used it. Dad had Dobby give it to me every night." Draco says the comment in an off hand sort of way, then reddens under Hermione's stare. "What?" Defensive. Even though Harry knows Draco means no harm to Hermione, old habits make him want to step in between them, lest wands be drawn. It seems that nothing can override old instincts, no matter how different you feel about someone. "I turned out just fine."

"Yeah." Harry didn't think he did, though. It made the nights more explainable, how Draco would stay up at all hours, or Harry would come down the steps with an entire project completed overnight, like he had worked straight through until the morning. Maybe it wasn't just the war that kept Draco on his feet. "We know you did."

Chapter 10

Draco

She's waiting for him in the alley bar.

Draco isn't really sure what the name of it is, only that the doorway is in the very back of Knockturn alley. You have to fight through street vendors to even get near it, and then you have to know exactly where the doorway is at to find it, considering how dark it is back there. It is where you go when you don't want people to know what you are doing, or who you are meeting.

It is the perfect place for them.

She's tucked in a back corner, a hood drawn up around her face so all he can see of her is the dark hair spilling out of it and the pale hands peeking out from lace sleeves. Her nails are long and painted blood red, as much for a weapon as for beauty. Every inch of her is poised to run, and he can tell that she sat on the side that she did so she can keep an eye on the shop at all times.

It makes him uncomfortable, that she saw him before Draco saw her.

"Pansy." She does not stand when he greets her, so he takes the cue from her and sits without another word. The chair screeches on the stone floor when he pulls it back, and when he looks at the table, it is clear that they are not here for a social visit. "Beautiful as always."

She scoffs at him. Draco doesn't get to use the word often, but she embodied it at that moment, the way the sound came from the back of her throat and landed on the table between them, dripping with derision. It should have bothered him, but he also thinks that sharp edges will be easier to deal with today than sharp words. Anger was always easier to take than hurt.

"Save it." She looks him up and down, and like always, Draco wonders what she sees there. This is not like school, when she would hang onto every word he said just because his father made money and his mother came from the right family. She did not have to be nice in order to get help with homework, or make sure that she smiled for pictures that might end up in the prophet. Despite being friends for as long as he can remember (*even longer than Crabbe and Goyle, but then the fire for one and Azkaban for another, wait, don't think like that, stop it*), this might be the first time they were ever real with each other. "Heard you've been running around with Potter."

He winces, tightens his fingers around a cup with no tea in it just to have something to hold. He knows Pansy did not miss the movement. "I have."

"And Granger."

He doesn't flinch this time, because he knows that this is the price he must pay if he wants to become friends with her again. But he won't apologize for this, either. "Her too." Then, thinking it might be better to be completely honest, he admits to the rest of it. "We're friends, actually. I'm running around with a lot of people we wouldn't have talked to, back at Hogwarts."

"A friend of mudbloods and traitors now, are we?" He must have made a face, or flinched, or something, because she laughed, the sound loud enough to draw stares from the table around them. It wasn't a good idea, to draw stares in a place like this. "Relax." She slumps in her chair,

and he can't help but notice how pretty she was, even though he hadn't thought about her like that for a while.

(He's not sure he ever thought about her like that. Maybe, he just thought of it as an inevitable thing, that they would get together in the end. Start dating after Hogwarts, get engaged, have kids to carry on the family legacy. Even if it wouldn't have been love, they would have been happy. Happier than they deserved.)

"We were wrong about that stuff." This was a crucial tipping point for the afternoon, deciding if he would stay or leave. He would not, could not, stay with her if she continued to preach the old ways. If she was still full of hate. He knows now that there is too much pain in this world to add more on purpose, just because you are afraid or like others to be small just so you can be big. He won't be part of that anymore. "It didn't make sense, what our parents were telling us."

"I know." She raised her cup of tea to her lips, but he could tell she wasn't drinking. Draco had heard that a lot of the Slytherins couldn't dare go out in public anymore, what with their parents faces plastered all over the papers and their names being shouted from every news station. *It wasn't us*, he wanted to scream at them all, when he got a tripping jinx shot at him or when his fresh bought groceries were spoiled when he got home. *You can't blame us for what our parents did, it's not fair, it's not fair, didn't you just fight for freedom?* "Too little, too late, right?"

The rim was lined with dark lipstick when she brought it away from her mouth, and she frowned at it, wiping it away with a napkin before he could stare at it for too long. It made him smile. That had always bothered her back in school, too.

"Maybe not." Some things are always going to be the same. Pansy's always going to wear dark lipstick, and she's always going to dress like she's ready for a photo shoot at any moment. He's always going to love her, both as an old friend and as someone he thought he could love, once, if things were different. They're both going to be tainted by things that weren't their choice, and they would always occupy places in the wizarding world that people like Harry would never considered stepping foot in. But maybe some things, the important things, could change. And that's what matters now. "Maybe we've got enough time."

He reached across the table to take her hand, and she doesn't swat him away like he thought she would. Instead, she smiles, and there are tears filling her eyes, ones that she wiped away before they could spill down her cheeks. Pansy always had hated for people to see her cry.

"I hope so." Pansy stood and threw a pile of galleons down on the table, extravagantly over tipping. "Merlin do I hope so."

Chapter 11

Draco

Harry's late again.

And even though it's irrational, even though it's not even that unusual, even though Harry doesn't need to tell Draco where he's at or when he won't be home at his usual time, it still makes a bubble of panic rise in his chest, so big that he can't really take a full breath. It's silly, but at the same time it's not, because the last time Harry didn't come home on time, something was very wrong, someone was hurt, and they all had to face something they didn't want to. Draco didn't want to have a moment like that again, where you know something is wrong and you have to wait for someone to tell you what it is, which one of your friends are in trouble.

Only, when the door opens, Draco knows that he shouldn't have bothered to worry, because Harry was late for a very different reason.

He's drunk.

Like, actually drunk, drunker than Draco had ever seen him, and Draco doesn't really know what to do with that, because the only person he's ever seen get trashed was Pansy off of peach schnapps, and that was really only the one time.

"What the bloody hell happened to you?" He's staring down at him, sprawled out on the hallway floor. His hair is a mess, and the smell of what he'd been drinking was clinging to him, like he'd dumped the contents of the whole bar all over him. He's also got his coat half on and half off, like he couldn't quite remember how to do it.

"Went to a bar." Harry tilted his head and smiled at him, like there was nothing strange about this. Like they always have drunken conversations on the hallway floor after midnight. "Had a few drinks."

"How many is a few?" If Draco was worried that he was nagging, he shouldn't have. Harry just smiles again, and then he laughs, and then he stares over at the umbrella stand, which was also tipped over and on the floor, umbrellas spread out all around it.

(He seriously doesn't get why they have it there. It's a nuisance. Neither of them even use umbrellas. Draco uses a spell to keep dry, and Harry- well, Harry can't be bothered with any of it, so he sort of just walks through the rain and lets Hermione dry him off.)

"Only a few." Harry shrugs. "I only fell because of that thing."

It's only then that Draco notices the blood on the inside of his arm, seeping from his shoulder on down. And then he sighs, because really, nothing good ever happens when Harry comes home late.

"Come on," He holds his hands out to him, but Harry just takes them and hangs on, making no move to get up. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Stupid," Draco murmurs. Harry's shirt is unbuttoned and halfway off, and Draco has one hand poking at the edges of the wound to see how deep it goes and the other laying on the inside of his arm. He's worried that he might be hurting him, but either Harry has an unhealthily high pain tolerance or the alcohol is keeping him from feeling it. "What made you think it was a good idea to apparate?"

"Wanted to get home to you." He was sobering up and maybe starting to feel everything a little bit more. Draco had forced him choke down a cup full of coffee before they did anything else, still on the floor of the hallway, because he didn't think he could handle this version of Harry without any warning. "Knew you would be worried about me. It was faster. Fastest. Whatever."

"Yeah, well." Draco doesn't know what to say to that, because it seems to be implying that they have a sort of relationship they don't, the kind where they keep tabs on each other and shape their schedules around each other, and in general just be better friends than they really were. It wasn't fair, to be confronted with this when he knew that Harry didn't mean it. "I'd rather be worrying than have you hurt yourself."

He dabs a wash rag into the water basin. Draco has to clean Harry's whole arm to see where the cut starts, and he's starting to think it might have been easier to say the hell with it and dump dittany all over him, just to get it over with, because being this close to him is infuriating. He tries not to think about it, and watches the water instead, watching how the water runs pink after it hits his skin.

"Ron did this once." The thought seems to calm Harry, and he looks down at his shoulder with something like curiosity. He even makes a move to touch it, so Draco forces his hand back down to his side. "Was a lot worse though."

"What'd you do?"

"Hermione dumped some potion on it. Kept his arm in a sling for a while." Harry was still staring at his arm, but he was also looking at something else, something far away that only he could see. Draco's noticed that that happens sometimes. "But we just kept on hunting."

Draco does not need to ask what they were hunting. The whole world knows what the three of them were off doing. "Bet he's got a wicked scar."

"Yeah." The corner of Harry's mouth twitches in an attempt of a smile, but he's also still looking at that other place, the far away place. "Way cooler than mine."

"Hey," Draco leans closer to him, uses his free hand to smooth Harry's wild hair back, and really, really hopes that he doesn't remember any of this in the morning, because Draco is sitting way closer to him than is strictly necessary. "It's over, alright? You won." He does not say we. Draco is careful to never say we.

"No." Harry says, and Draco wonders if this is what made him drink so much tonight, the memories hiding in that faraway place. "It's never over."

He thinks Harry is just going to get his bearings and go to bed, so he leaves him to his own devices and heads back into the sitting room, where he could watch the steps in case Harry needs help walking up them. It's a mistake, though, because Harry comes out with two glasses and a bottle of firewhiskey, the good stuff that you only buy if you're going to give it to someone as a gift.

"You want one?"

He's already pouring, and Draco wants to say no, because he is tired and Harry has already had too much to drink and is only now starting to sober up, and also because lines and blurring and he feels like they are constantly in danger of diving into uncharted waters, ones that they won't ever be able to come back from.

"Come on."

It's unfair, the way Harry is looking down at him, how intimate this feels, with the blanket piled in his lap and the lighting low and the way Harry is smiling at him, like he knows, has always known, that Draco is unable to say no to him. That he knows he will not stop Harry from getting what it wants, when it matters.

"Don't make me drink alone."

Harry shakes the drink at him a little, and Draco cannot stop himself, just reaches out to take it from him, like it is not his own decision to make.

An hour later, Draco is a lot more drunk and Harry is a lot more sober, and they are both sitting in the claw-footed bathtub that Draco had thought was so cool, both fully clothed but soaking wet.

He can't remember how they got here, but somewhere in the back of his mind he knows that this is a bad idea and that he should be getting out of it while he still can. What will they do when its time to get out? Or if they fall asleep and then wake up the next morning in freezing cold water, wondering how the hell they thought this was a good idea? Or when they had to sit across from each other at the breakfast table the next morning and pretend that everything is the same?

He doesn't know, but he doesn't move, either, because Harry has enchanted the bubbles to float and Draco is morphing them into different shapes at Harry's request, because they're grown men who like to do things like this. (*They're only eighteen. Is eighteen grown? It feels like it.*) They're also so close together that they're knees are pressed up against each other, and sometimes Harry will catch at his arm like he wants to say something important, but never does.

"What are we doing?" Draco doesn't know what he is asking, exactly. If he means this moment, as in why are they pretending this is something mates would do if they were sober, or on a larger scale, as in why he was even here in the house at all, or in general, as in, what are they thinking about these feelings growing up between them like flowers that are only going to be choked out by weeds, because he knows that Harry is feeling them too.

"I don't know." Harry is blindingly innocent at times like this, the embodiment of everything that is good. He is not someone who is prepared to expect disaster at every turn, even after everything he has seen. "Do we have to know?"

Draco liked the sound of that, the not knowing, even if it sort of terrified him.

"No." He laid his arm out flat along the edge of the tub, and after a moment Harry copied him, their hands lying close enough so their fingers touched, but just barely. "We don't."

They moved from the bathtub to the bathroom floor, leaning against each other to stay upright, Harry's head on Draco's shoulder.

"I really don't think I want to be an auror anymore."

His words break up the silence, and Draco understands what all the drinking was about, the clinginess, the not wanting to be alone. It had nothing to do with him at all.

(But it did. It had everything to do with him, with the both of them, and he knows it.)

"Then don't." The answer seemed so simple when he said it like that, even though he knew it was anything but. Harry was not a boy who was raised to stop fighting. He lived his life as a soldier for a war he didn't know existed from the very moment he was born.

"I don't know how to be anything else."

"Then don't be anything." *Don't you think you've given enough? Isn't it time that you got a chance to rest, to figure out what life is when there are no wolves snapping at your heels and keeping you running?* "Just be Harry."

"I don't know who that is."

The confessions you make when you are drunk are always the sort of things you would never say while sober. That's the whole entire purpose of drinking, to find the truth behind the lies you tell yourself.

"I do." It's only because he was certain Harry wouldn't remember that grabbed hold of his hand and pressed a kiss to the back of his knuckles, still wondering that he got the chance to do this. He does not feel like he deserves it, still. "I'll help you find him."

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoy all your comments. Please keep them coming if you like the story.

Chapter 12

Draco

Draco wakes up the next morning on the floor beneath the couch, wearing clothes that aren't his. He has a fuzzy memory of stumbling out of the bathroom into Harry's room, and Harry saying something about never getting to have the cheesy, traditional kind of sleepover, and then the two of them trying to figure out how to have a movie night when Harry is too drunk to read any of the buttons and Draco had never even seen a DVD player before.

It was a good night, even if he's sure that it will come back to bite them in a way he can't figure out. But he's okay with that, because Harry is... Harry is somewhere, and Draco is here, and he's got all day to deal with this. He would start by cleaning up the bathroom, and then to the bedroom, and then he would sit and think up a plan of action to explain why he felt the need to climb into the bathtub with Harry (and which one of them started that? the two of them, honestly).

It was a good plan, one that made some semblance of control sink into his bones. It would have worked, too, if he hadn't rounded the corner into the kitchen for a cup of coffee and found Harry at the kitchen table, staring down at the Daily Prophet like it might hold some answers.

"Hey." Draco stops short, wanting to turn around until he has a moment to collect himself, but then thinks that it would make things even more awkward than he was already making them. The only thing for it was to pretend like nothing was wrong. "You hungry?"

Harry finally looks up from the paper. He is clearly exhausted, but he still manages to smile at the offer. "I could eat." Harry, at least, does not seem to think there was anything strange about what they did last night. Maybe Draco was the only one. Maybe this is what mates did, when they had normal childhoods.

(Normal childhoods. Right. Cause Harry definitely had a normal childhood.)

Draco just nods, and then crosses the room to get to the counter, yanking out bowls and ingredients. It would be easier to make it with magic, but Draco had found that doing it the muggle way was a different sort of soothing, almost like potions. Plus, it tasted better.

Still, it was different when it was just Draco, where he could make as many mistakes as he wanted without anyone watching, and he could take up the whole kitchen, and didn't feel strange about turning on the radio to Celestina Warbeck. When Harry was here, it was like he was always watching. Draco felt his eyes on him, like a tickle right between his shoulder blades.

He doesn't ask him why he was here. Clearly, the conversation of last night had not been drunken nonsense, but something that he had been mulling over for a while. And Draco had meant it, when he told him that maybe it was time he learned what it was like to be just Harry. He wasn't about to chase him out of his own kitchen, in case that stopped it from happening.

They stand in silence until Draco is satisfied that the pancakes are done, and he doles them out onto plates, sitting down across the table from him. He's almost nervous, sitting there, and he can tell that Harry is too.

"I sent my resignation out with morning post." Harry talks around a mouthful of food, hiding behind the paper, like that could make this less important, less life altering. "Should have got it by now." Draco didn't really know what to do with that, but the sick part of him in the back of his head that wanted to keep Harry all to himself made his breathing catch. *Home. Safe. Mine.* But that's wasn't right. Harry would never be safe, this place would not be a home no matter how much Draco cleaned it, and Harry would never belong to him. Would never want to belong to him.

"Good." It was a lame response. Everything Draco says is a lame response, with all these revelations Harry keeps dumping on him. "Have another pancake."

Harry

He doesn't feel guilty about it, exactly.

Really. The thought of not wanting to be an auror occurred to him a while ago, before Draco even came to stay, on one of the nights where he was creeping through his own home, looking for break ins that weren't possible. He had checked the locks three times, had Kreacher sense out any intruders twice and couldn't stomach the thought of asking again. And he realized that if this kept going, he was going to turn into the person Mad-Eye Moody was before the second war, the kind that everyone thought was crazy because he could not live without the fight.

Harry didn't want that. He wanted to find some peace, if just for a little while.

The thing he does feel guilty about is leaving Ron behind. He had told sent him an owl last night before the drinking started, telling him he wouldn't be into work tomorrow. Then he asked if he would meet for lunch, because he wanted to talk about some things. But it turns out that Draco took care of all the talking and working through things, and all that was left for Harry to confess it.

Ron's not late. He hasn't been late to anything since the war ended, because Hermione had once been inconsolable when he didn't come home on time. She had thought that he had been taken, murdered, right at the end of things. Ron didn't blame her, so now he's punctual.

For once, Harry hates him. There's half a moment as Ron says hi and unwinds the scarf from his neck that Harry wants to flee. Just turn and run when Ron has his back turned to place his order. But he doesn't.

"So what's up?" Ron looks concerned. They've all learned to be gentle with one another, but Ron is still more likely to throw a punch for you than be a shoulder to cry on.

(Honestly, Ronald, you're a *wizard*, Hermione had told him, the last time she was mending his broken nose. It'd go better for you if you'd remember your wand.)

It's the concern that guts Harry. They had been in this together, from the very beginning, when they sat down together in the same train compartment. They started this long ride together, and now Harry was trying to get off early. But he had to. "I've got something to tell you." Ron's got his eyebrows raised, and Harry knows that whatever he thinks he will hear next, it will not be this. "I quit the auror program."

The reaction is not as loud as Harry had been expecting. He counts it as a good sign that Ron leans across the table to whisper-yell into his face instead of flipping the table. Maybe it was the shock.

"What?" A blink, and then a smile, like he was half hoping that Harry was joking. "Why?"

"I don't know." He raises his hands, realizes that might draw attention, and then lies them flat on the table. "I never got the chance to choose, you know? None of us did. We just got thrust into the fight."

Ron didn't get it. He was all anger, now. This was the only thing he knew. "So?"

"So, maybe I don't want to fight."

"What do you want to do instead?"

Ron isn't angry. He looks resigned, a bit, like he knew that this was only a matter of time. It validates Harry's decision like nothing else could, that Ron did not seem to think that this was a bad idea. "Nothing. I don't want to be anything right now. I spent so long being the chosen one, that I never got to figure out what I would have wanted to do, given the choice. It was fight or die." He swallowed, hard, because this was bringing up memories that he would rather not think about. About a basilisk, about Quirrel's screams, about the first time he ever crucio'd someone. He was a warrior, and he was a good one, but now the fight was done. "I just want to rest."

"I get that." They're food has gone cold. neither of them has eaten, and it is already time for Ron to start heading back to the office. "I do, Harry. And I'm glad that you're trying to make yourself happy." A pause. "But I'm not quitting. This really is what I want to do."

Harry knew that. But he had to ask, to put the option out there. "Don't you ever get tired of the fight?"

Ron laughs, shakes his head, and then makes a fist, and his own set of scarred knuckles shines up at Harry, bright under the lighting of the diner. *I will not resist.*

"It's all I've ever known." That was true, too. Harry had dragged him along, and sometimes he thinks that ruined him. "I'll keep going until the end."

Draco

Harry had come back from his meeting with Ron with a smile on his face. Draco took it as a good sign.

"Everything go okay?" He cannot help the concern that wells up in him, because he knows how much of this decision relied on Ron's approval.

"It went fantastic. So great, in fact," Harry's grabs him by the arms, spins him around, and then let go just as fast. "I'm buying us dinner. Leaky Cauldron, the good stuff. I'll be ready in fifteen."

Draco felt one side of his mouth quirk up in a smile. "Fancy."

Harry's laugh floats down the hallway, and Draco knows in that moment that this is it for him, he will spend the rest of his life trying to find a place as happy as he is with Harry. "Only the best for you."

It does end up being mildly... special.

Not special in the sense of linen tablecloths and fine china, but maybe in the idea that no one is bothering them, and they are tucked into a corner booth where its quiet, and the two of them have gotten to enjoy a meal in peace, for once, with the two of them stealing forks full of food off each other's plate. If Draco didn't know better, he could almost believe that Harry meant this as a date.

But he does know better, so it is just two mates hanging out in a bar.

(Or, a guy and his court ordered mentor-like person, if he's getting technical.)

Harry reaches across the table and covers Draco's hand with his own. It stops Draco in his tracks like a deer in the headlights, and he waits for Harry to make the next move, wide eyed and barely breathing, because it's really getting hard to think that Harry doesn't have feeling for him.

"Thank you." Harry's eyes are earnest, searching Draco's face for something. "I wanted you to know how much I mean that."

"Its no problem." Draco is trying to be nonchalant. He does not know why. Maybe its a defense mechanism. "You mean a lot to me." Stupid.

It's a stupid thing to say, but Harry's voice gets even softer, if that was possible. "You mean a lot to me, too."

"I would hope so." Beneath the table, Draco digs his nails into his thigh, tries to push through the ache that had suddenly sprung into his chest. "I don't climb into bath tubs with just any man, you know."

It was, admittedly, a very unsubtle way of feeling out where they stand from last night, but it works. The tension (and the look in Harry's eyes, whatever it meant) disappears, and suddenly Harry is laughing harder than Draco had ever heard him, and Draco can't help it, he starts laughing, too. "That was so bloody weird." Harry agrees, finally, and the moment should be over but he is still staring at Draco with that fond expression and he still has his hand on Draco's arm. "Drunk people, huh?"

Draco smiles, relieved, and then pulls his hand away, trying hard to chase off the feeling that he was missing something. "Drunk people."

Harry

He's gone for all of three minutes.

It's all Harry's fault, really. He left his scarf at the table, and when Draco told him to go back and get it, that he'd be fine waiting outside in the alley, he believed him. And then when he came back out,

Draco was gone, but there was the unmistakable sound of a fight coming from around the corner.

There's three of them, and then there's Draco. It's not even a fight, really, just a beat down, with two of the boys holding him in place and the other just wailing on him, sending punch after punch.

There's blood streaming from Draco's nose, and a cut above his eyes, and more dribbling from lip. His coat is gone and shirt sleeve is ripped, and when they finally give him a break, Draco coughs and splutters through the pain until he can breathe again.

"What's the matter?" The one asks, grabbing Draco by the hair and wrenching his head up, forcing him to look at him. Draco spits in his face, and the guy backhands him, making him fall to the ground. "No daddy here to save you now. Where's your daddy, huh Draco? Tell us where he went."

Harry doesn't know if Draco was going to keep fighting, or if he was really going to give in, stay on the ground. He doesn't find out, just runs down the alleyway until he gets to them, wand held out and ready to fight.

"Get away from him." His voice is steady, but more frantic than Harry had ever heard it. He wasn't even this panicked facing down Voldemort. (Tom Riddle.) (Damn it.) (He was just a man, treat him like one.) "You've got three seconds."

"Oh yeah?" The one who was doing the punching turned around to face him, obviously expecting someone who was more easily scared. "And who's going to make us?"

There's not many occasions in which Harry is grateful that he is who he is. This time, though, he illuminates his wand so they could see his face, and smiles when their eyes dart up to see his scar. "Harry bloody Potter, that's who," He says, and steps forward to give Draco a hand up, wishing he had come up with something better. "And you're messing with my friend."

"Your friends a death eater?" Harry recognized the voice. It was someone from Hogwarts, someone he probably ate lunch with, played a game of pick up quidditch with. That's the worst thing about all this hate, how it divides them. "Thought better of you, Potter. Thought you fought against people like him."

"You're wrong." He says, not knowing what he is saying, just that Draco is bleeding and hurt and scared and Harry did not stop it. "I fought for my friends. For the people I loved. And now he's one of them. So you should get going."

It works, finally. Two on three are odds they are not willing to face, especially if one of those two had killed the dark lord less than six months ago. "Fine." The guy spits at Harry's feet. He's just glad it isn't his face. "But next time it's a duel."

Harry snorts. "Looking forward to it."

They leave, and Draco makes a sound that Harry takes for a sob but is actually just a laugh. He's in hysterics, right there in this dirty alley with his broken nose, and Harry doesn't really know what to do with that, so he crouches on the ground beside him to get a better look at his face.

He clicks his tongue, because that's what Hermione always did when they were hurt, and then uses the end of his shirt sleeve to clear away some of the blood. "It's alright, Draco." He wraps an arm around his shoulder and then pulls him to his feet. "We'll get you sorted out."

Draco

Getting beat up sucks.

It's happening more and more often, lately, but none as bad as this one. It took Harry a half hour to patch him up, but even that wasn't as bad as the idea that Harry had seen that, had had to rescue him from that, like some sort of damsel in distress. And even worse was the fact that Draco hadn't even fought.

(That, he thinks, is the biggest difference between him and Harry. Harry would never stop fighting.)

"Maybe I should be an auror, after all." Harry's laugh is a little dry for it to be funny, but Draco still snaps his head up when he says it. "Was good at it."

He was. He'd be a great one. "Don't become one of my account."

He's only half joking, but Harry isn't when he reaches out and cups Draco's face in his hand, his thumb brushing over where Draco's lip had split. "Who's going to look out for you if I don't?"

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Draco knows that he doesn't mean him, specifically. He means anyone who ever had been discriminated against, who had felt what it was like to be dragged to the end of a dark alley and not know if you are coming out again. The common people. Still, it makes him angry and sad all at once. "I don't deserve it."

Harry's voice is only a whisper. "You do."

Draco throws his hand off, steps away, and maybe they are not talking about protection anymore but he still does not stop. "I don't. You'll realize it one day."

"Damn it." Harry's curse is hissed under his breath, but his next words are loud. "I don't care, alright! I don't care about your dad, I don't care that you fought against me, I don't care that you used to hate me and that I used to hate you because we were absolute cocks to each other in school, okay? None of that matters to me." He takes a step closer. "The only thing that matters to me is this. You. Us."

there is no us, Draco wants to sneer, but he is learning not to be cruel all the time.

"I know! You said!" He yells instead, throwing his hands in the air, because it is all so unfair, all the time. "You're trying to save me because you don't think I deserve it. But guess what, Potter? Obviously, some people don't agree with you."

"Then to Hell with them." Harry stares at him for a long time, and then rounds the table, getting so close to Draco that he half expects another punch. "This isn't about saving you, you git. This is about being your friend. Because I care about you, not because I want to wash away your past sins or make you the new wizarding saint, or whatever the hell you think is going on, alright? This is just you and me."

Draco is still breathing hard and ready for another fight, but really, he's in too much pain to stay angry. "Two mates against the world, just looking out for each other?"

When Harry turns to look back at him, Draco gets the sense that he has said something wrong, though he can't imagine what. "Sure," Harry says, and Draco chalks the flat tone up to being just the aftermath of the fight. "Something like that."

Chapter 13

Harry

Percy's got a project.

He tells it to them over a drink at the Hog's Head, standing in front of the room with his eyes shining, glistening over with tears. *Glistening with the ghosts of his pasts*, Rita had wrote once, and now looking at Percy he had an idea of what that was supposed to look like.

"This was a horrible, horrible thing. The war." Percy swallowed hard, and Harry drank the rest of his beer just to give himself something to do. Beside him, Draco's hand found his way onto Harry's leg underneath the table, forcing it to stay still and then let go. "But it was history in the making. And someone has to tell it, to make sure the people who come after us know how it started, so they can see the next Voldemort for what he is- just a man."

The sentence was almost a mirror image of the thing that Harry had been trying to convince himself of since the final battle. How in the end Tom Riddle was only Tom, and when he died he did not go out in a blaze of glory or for a cause, he only fell hard and final on the cold ground, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Like he really was only a man.

"There were a lot of people who did good things during that time. And there were people who did bad things. When he first rose to power and seemed to have been defeated, we tried to shove all the memories under the rug, and none of us knew anything about it. But this time we're not making mistakes. There were heroes in this war, some of them in this very room." He raises his glass in a semblance of a toast, and the people around Harry were nodding. George pounded his glass down on the wooden table, and there was a answering cheer as they looked around at each other.

Everyone in this room had fought, everyone was forced to grieve. "We should know their names."

Harry knew that all of them had gotten a little obsessed with something after the war. For Percy, it was recollection, of hearing all the stories and getting them down as fast as he could, the right way, with the biases. He didn't want anyone who died for the cause to be given over to oblivion, their names erased and with no one to remember them. And he didn't want anyone to forget the sins of those who fought on the wrong side.

"I don't want another group of kids to grow up like we did." The moment, with Percy standing in front of them, reminds Harry fiercely of the time when Hermione stood in front of them all and tried to start Dumbledore's Army. It makes a lump rise in his throat and he swallows it down.

"We don't need another fight like this. So please, help me?"

There is silence, where Percy looks unsure for the first time during this whole speech. And then, just as Harry knew he would be, he makes himself be the first one to stand.

His chair scrapes on the stone, making everyone wince, but he worms his way through the jumble of legs and chairs and tables to the front of the room. Percy smiles and claps him on the back, like he had done something special. Harry smiles back. "Where do I sign?" In the end, his name is first on the list.

Draco's is second.

It starts immediately.

Percy has schedule drawn up for them, and they all take slots. Harry, Ron, and Hermione would have to do an interview together. "We can just have you meet at the burrow." He looks excited, but also pale and drawn. "It'll be a long night."

Harry doesn't want to talk about it. If he talks about it, he might have to talk about how it started, with his parents. He'll take about basilisk fang in his arm and the burn of phoenix tears, about a man who lived as a rat for thirteen years and was killed by a molten hand because he made the mistake of mercy, about Dobby, about Sirius disappearing into a veil, about what happened in that forest. He doesn't want to think about it, so he pushes the prospect of the interview away and lets it form a knot in his stomach, and when Draco asks him if he's alright he always says yes, no matter how tense and defensive it may sound.

He goes to meet Ron at a muggle pub. They always meet at muggle places now, both so they are not recognized and because Ron has developed a taste for everything fried. It works, to be able to sit and pretend to be normal.

"I still can't believe we're doing this," Harry says, talking about the next day, how they will let everyone pry into to what they never talked about.

"It's important. Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Fred- they deserve to be remembered, don't you think?" Then, as an afterthought, "so do we, for that matter."

"Still, it seems..." Private? Special? Wrong, to talk about what they have kept close to their chest for so long? "Odd."

"Maybe." Ron shrugs, drains the rest of his beer. "But if it keeps my kids from being taught about goblin wars in history class, then so be it."

Harry laughs. Somehow, maybe because it was so boring, history class and Professor Binns came out of the war unscathed, with nothing to taint those dull afternoon classes. "He'll still make them fall asleep."

Ron smiles, tugs on his jacket, and lays a heavy hand on Harry's shoulders. "And so it goes."

Draco

He's at the Burrow.

Draco had sworn that no matter how close he got with Harry, no matter how much Hermione seemed to like him, even if he was friends with George, he would not set foot here. He did not want to picture the place where Ron had grown up, did not want to be able to feel the holes that Fred Weasley's death had left in this house. But when Harry tells him that that's where he's doing the interview, and asks if Draco would like to come along, just for support, he couldn't find it in himself to say no.

So now he's here, drinking lukewarm tea from a chipped mug and listening as the story spins out. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were squeezed onto the couch, Percy sitting across from them. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley (*call us Molly and Arthur, dear, no need for formalities*) were watching it all, just like he was.

There was a lot to talk about. Draco wasn't aware that there was so much. About the first year, and starting the fight. About their second year and the chamber of secrets, how Hermione figured it out and Ron stole Lockheart's memory and Harry almost died, but they destroyed the first Horcrux. About third year and wormtail, fourth year and the first time that death came to them, the start of the war. And then fifth year, about battle plans and dreams and scars on the backs of their hands that won't go away, a night at the ministry they won't ever forget, about veils and duels and lying brains that break your bones.

It had been eight hours already, and they were only on the sixth year.

It was draining work, but none of them showed signs of stopping. Harry was tracing the words writing across the back of his palm, and Ron's voice was hoarse from all the talking, and Hermione had cried so much it seemed like she was out of tears, but here they were, warriors to the end.

It was Draco who broke first, leaving through the back door as quietly as he could muttering about fresh air, all because he could not take this year. This year meant cursed necklaces and poisoned mead and a boy shouting a curse in the bathroom and then blood, so much of it, about a night in the astronomy tower and a body crumpling on the castle grounds like a little rag doll. He could not take that, and because he is a coward instead of a soldier, he leaves.

But then he wishes that he had stayed inside, because now he was face to face with Molly, who was staring out at her backyard with tears slipping down her face, just the barest twitch of a smile on her lips.

He does not ask her if she is alright. He does not have the words to fix this for her, but Molly speaks anyways.

"I brought them up the best as I could. Tried to raise good children that would become even better people, even in the middle of a war I tried. And then Harry ended the war and I thought they could all be safe. I was wrong." She breaks down crying, and then takes a few gulps of air before calming down again. "I tried to raise children but ended up with warriors instead. I never could quite figure out how that happened."

Draco wants to tell her that she didn't do anything wrong. that the fact that they were ready to fight showed that she did everything right, that her children were brave and good and kind, and every other thing that a mother dreams of. But she knew this already. That was not what her tears were for, but he did not have the words to fix that, so he puts a hand on her shoulder and lets her lean on him for support until her sobs were done.

And when they were ready, they went to face the story inside together.

Harry

He knows he shouldn't be listening.

Percy had come a two hours ago, walking through the house with the same authority that he used to have when he was a prefect. He had a bag slung over his back and a binder tuck under his arm, ink stains already splattered on his fingers. and then he and Draco disappeared up into the library.

Harry knew that if Draco wanted him to know what was being said, they would have done it in the kitchen of the living room. Still, that doesn't stop him from pausing outside the door when he goes to bed, watching them both from the doorframe.

Neither Percy or Draco sees him. Harry knows he should walk away, but he can't, not when Draco's shoulders are hunched in like that and there are tears streaming down both his and Percy's cheeks.

He wants to storm in and tell them both that the interview is over, because he does not want to see Draco in pain, but that is not his choice to make.

"If you could tell people one thing," Percy says, and Harry gets the feeling that its almost over anyways. "One thing about what you've told me here today, what would it be?"

There was a muggle tape recorder between them and a quill floating in the air above, taking down every word, every stuttering breath. "I know what I did was wrong." His voice was thick with the tears when he spoke. "But you have to understand that I never intended to do any of that. I never got a choice, and then all of a sudden it was kill or be killed." A pause.

"And I chose myself." The breath that Draco takes is more like a shudder. "I just wanted to survive."

Chapter 14

Draco

The last time he saw his mother was during the war.

He had been fighting, spells flying all around him, people running, sobbing, screaming, the walls collapsing all around them and the dust from all the chaos filling his mouth and coating his teeth. Draco had just given in to the thought that *this is it, I am going to die here, a traitor to everything I ever thought was right* when she came out of the dust, an avenging angel that sent everyone blasting away from him with only one spell.

Draco had always thought his father was the strong one, but he was wrong, because in that moment Narcissa Malfoy was a woman made of fire, and he collapsed into her, letting himself be weak for a second. She held him like he was a little kid again, using her thumbs to wipe away the tears he didn't know he was crying and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "We have to go," She had told him, eyes wide with fear. "We have to leave before its over."

He had thought that this meant that they were losing. That they were running from the ministry, and from the Order, and from Harry. That someday, he would be pretending to be someone else in a house equally as nice as the one as he was in, a comfortable but paranoid life, and in the middle of Sunday dinner the Ron, Hermione, and Harry would beat down his door.

It wasn't until later that he realized it was the Dark Lord they were afraid of.

Draco followed her. And then, when his mother insisted that they all turn themselves in, consequences be damned and his father fought against her, he followed her then, too, all the way to the ministry, where he handed over his wand and sat in the interrogation room, waiting for someone to take him to Azkaban.

In the end, though, his father was the only one who got sent to Azkaban. His mother was given a heavy fine and had to do community service, try to pay reparation to the families who lost loved ones. Draco got probation.

He hasn't seen his mother since.

It's Harry that talks him into it. "If I had a mother," He had said, eyes intense and voice quiet. "Nothing would stop me from seeing her."

Draco had wanted to scream at him. To say that he was wrong, that he couldn't keep saying things like this and thinking it was fair. That this time, he didn't know what it was like. But Draco still found himself visiting her anyways.

She lives in a flat in Paris, renting from some muggle woman who was trying to be a painter but wasn't quite making it there. The whole thing smells like paint fumes and scented candles, and the steps are so twisted and narrow that he isn't sure how she makes it up them, but its still a nice place, just as comfortable and expensive looking as the manor.

She had a certain way of life, his mother, and she wasn't going to let a little thing like a war standing in the way of how she wants to live.

"Draco." His mother breathes out his name, and then she is hugging him, crushing him. The guilt threatens to swallow him when he thinks of all the letters he did not answer, but even now this is too much, too soon. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Me too." Because he was. He loved this woman, even if she was wrong, even if she only did the right thing because of the need for the family name to survive. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

She does not tell him that it is alright, or that she forgives him. He doubts very much that either of these things were true. She does, however, move aside and let him come in, to this house with its too many candles and strange paintings. Draco lets her give him the tour, looking at the picture frames showing the image of a family he cannot remember ever being and the misshapen pottery on the mantle.

"Do you like it?" Her voice has a forced brightness about it, and he does not know if it is because of him or if she simply does not have the same energy that she used to. "I took up pottery. Abigail talked me into it."

Abigail was the girl downstairs, the one with paint stuck under her nails and colored scarfs hanging from a rack in her kitchen. He had to walk through her flat to get to his mother's.

His mother, though, was not someone he knew. The woman he remembered would not be seen taking a pottery class, and would not display them out where anyone can see them. It was strange to know how fast things can change.

They have tea.

She cooks for herself now. It seems like she's spent these past six months trying to find things to create, and she's been going to cooking classes, so he gets fed little cakes and tiny sandwiches and the tea has a taste that he cannot put his finger on, which makes him think it was from leaves that she grew herself.

It goes good, for as much as they don't talk about the things they know they must talk about. They talk about other things instead, like Draco's newfound success in potions (*I read it in the paper, I'm so proud of you*) and the herbs growing on the windowsill (*yes, well, I'm trying my hand at gardening, and those seemed easiest*). But in the end, the conversation turns to his father, as he knew it would have to.

"Have you been to see him?" She takes a sip of her tea, purses her lips and levels her stare at him. Draco hates that, how she can stay so calm and he himself be so upset. "I assume you haven't."

"No." Draco did not want to see his father, and he certainly didn't want to see him in chains, dirty and defeated. He did not want to have to lay eyes on him, because then he would be forced to deal with the question of how one man could be so wrong.

"Haven't had the time?" Her voice is high, purposefully light. The game of politeness.

"It's been crazy." He was stumbling over excuses, like he was five years old again and she was asking why he hadn't returned the fire message from the overly nosy neighbor next door. "With the potions project... and Weasley's collection... and Harry, of course, I had to get used to that."

"Your own father," she said, leaning back and folding her hands together. There was ice in her voice and he stares at her hands instead of her face, looking at the perfectly manicured nails. "And you won't even see him."

And you, mother? Where have you been? Sitting in this apartment, pretending nothing ever happened?

"What do you want me to do?" He shouldn't have asked that. Shouldn't have taken the blame onto himself, like he had done something wrong. What Draco should have done was demand why he would want to see a man like that, who led his only son down all the wrong paths. Why he should care about the man who ruined him.

"Help him." She was still strong, but he was stronger. That's what Draco realized, sitting there, as she reached across the table to clutch at his hands. There were tears in her eyes, and he couldn't tell if they were real or a charade to make him play by her rules. "You've got powerful friends now.

Use them."

He does not want to be the kind of person who makes friends only to collect favors, but Draco does not bother explaining that to her. It is not the world she lives in.

"I'll ask," He promises her, pulling away from her. "But I can't make any promises."

If Draco has learned one thing, it is that promises are rarely kept.

Harry

When he gets back from coffee with Hermione, he finds Draco standing in the kitchen, holding a mug of tea in his hand and staring out the window.

"Hey." He keeps his voice neutral on purpose, when really he wants to demand to know how the afternoon meant. "Did you get to see your mom?"

Harry knows that the situation was complicated, so he wasn't expecting Draco to come home and be happy about it. But he didn't expect Draco to turn and put his fist through the wall, either, or immediately cry out and double over after he makes contact, clutching at his hand.

"Holy fuck," Draco swears, because Draco likes to say the f-word *a lot* when something surprises him, then shakes his hand out, laughing. "I didn't think it'd be a solid wall."

"What did you think would happen?" Harry's already getting a wash rag out and wrapping ice cubes up in it, because in his head he is still that muggle boy licking his wounds on his own, and it never occurs him to use magic. Draco could probably get rid of the pain in a moment, but he is too nice to turn down Harry's help, so he just stares at his hand in dismay and then accepts the makeshift ice pack.

"I thought it was plaster. that my hand would go right through it," He winces, curses again, and then throws the rag in the sink, keeping one ice cube to run over his knuckles. "And then I could just repair it."

"Ah." Harry jumps up onto the counter, and Draco leans into him. He almost doesn't notice when his hand goes up into Draco's hair, carding through it. Even when he does notice, he doesn't stop. "So I take it things didn't go as well as you were hoping?"

"They did." Draco's voice was very surly. "And then she asked if I had been to see my father."

He hadn't. Harry knew he hadn't. Or maybe (and it was horrible that this was the first time that Harry had this thought) he had been going to see him and just not telling anyone, because who would give up on their father, no matter how horrible?

"And?"

"And she asked me to help him." Draco was biting his nails, which was a bad sign. "Asked to get you to help him."

Draco doesn't say anything, because now he is thinking of that night in the graveyard, when all the masks stared down at him and Lucius fell at Voldemort's feet.

Draco is still talking. "But you can't help me, can you?" The words cut Harry apart, because he never wants that to be the case, that Draco is hurting and Harry be left helpless. "You wouldn't do a damn thing about it, even if you could."

"He tried to kill me." Harry tries to make his voice as gentle as he can, but he falters on the last word. He does not know how to make Draco understand the hate that was in his father without being cruel, or to tell him that he could not excuse that, even for him. "He might have been a good person, but he was wrong."

"He was my dad." Draco said, miserably, ripping at his nails now, and his hands were bleeding. Harry wanted to tell him sorry, sorry that life was like this, sorry his mother asked this of them, sorry that Draco's father did what he did, just sorry, sorry for so many things that weren't his fault and that he could never fix. He wanted to fix them, but couldn't, just pulled Draco to him. "He was my father."

There wasn't much that could be said after that. They stay like that for a few minutes, then Draco pulls away, tears still staining his face and eyes red, his voice scratchy from the crying. Harry can still feel the tears on his shirt drying.

"Whatever, right?" Draco laughed, but it sounded wrong, because nothing about this could be less funny. "He did what he did, and now there's nothing that anyone can say about it."

"He tried to kill me." Harry says again, dumbstruck, because this, this conversation right now, what Draco must be feeling, that was so much worse than anything that Harry had to deal with when it came to his parents. When they're dead and you never knew them, they can never disappoint. "I'm sorry, Draco."

He reaches out to him, to try and pull him back, but Draco just barks out a laugh that he cuts off before it really gets started. "Merlin, Harry." Draco smiles at him, tired but almost fond in a way. "I know. It's okay."

Harry just nods, because there is nothing he can say to that. And what would he say anyways? Another rendition of how this is not Draco's fault, how Harry doesn't blame him, how they are friends?

Because they aren't friends, not really. This is not how you feel about a friend, this is not what you do to comfort a friend when they are hurting and you are hopeless to help them. They stopped being just friends a long time ago, but none of that will help them with this.

Chapter 15

Harry

He hears screaming.

It only takes a second to realize that the sound he was hearing belonged to Hermione, and that shouldn't be happening, it shouldn't even be possible for her to be attacked *here*, in this home with all its many defensive spells. He is out of his seat and hurtling down the stairs, barreling into the kitchen with his wand out, only to see Draco hugging Hermione so tightly that he actually spins her around the kitchen.

(Like, spins. The kind from a muggle movie, where he takes her by the waist and her feet actually lift the ground because they are that level of happy.)

Harry stops short and collapses into the wall, weak at the knees, because the rush of adrenaline he had gotten when he thought something was wrong seems to be leaving him just as fast.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"We did it!" Hermione turns to him, then, and her embrace hits him the chest with enough force to knock the wind out of them. "We made it!"

Harry didn't know what they *did*, exactly. Draco and Hermione's work had left practical and turned to theoretical almost immediately. It turns out that there was almost nothing hard about copying muggle medications for mental diseases, and the only reason the wizarding world did not have them was that no one had ever tried. Now, though, they were working on things that the ministry was handing down to them, a very experimental study that involves changing conditions right at the source, even if its in the DNA, like a sort of biological polyjuice potion.

"You did it?" Harry faltered, and then he looked over at Draco, who just looked mildly exciting, considering they just made history. "You found the correction for that genome, or whatever?"

They had found the cause of squibs, a chromosomal disorder stuck deep within the DNA, and now Draco and Hermione found the way to fix it. "Sort of." Hermione was talking rapid fire again, the way she would when they were studying and she knew too much and tried to say it all in one breath. "It's very experimental, and it'll need to be tested, which Merlin even knows how we can ethically do that, it's all up to chance, and we don't know any of the symptoms, of course, so there's really nothing, but.."

Draco put a hand on her shoulder, drawing her close to him, but Hermione just shook him off and went back to her notes.

"What's that mean?"

Harry was desperate to know. It was Hermione's idea in the first place, but it really all came back to Dumbledore, who had to hide his sister because her magic wouldn't flow in the right way. And that had seemed something to do with the brain to Harry, and he had asked Hermione if she could find a way to fix it.

And since Hermione was Hermione, who never let anyone be discriminated against or withdrew a helping hand to someone in need, she said she'd try her best.

For the first time in this discussion, Draco smiled. "It means we found a bridge, Harry." Then he laughs, clear and wild, and spins Harry around the room like he had done Hermione, because Hermione is apparently done celebrating. "And that's enough."

Draco

They have to celebrate. That's decided from basically the moment that Harry bursts into the kitchen, because it had been a long few weeks neither Draco or Hermione thought they would ever make a breakthrough, and here it was, puzzle solved.

(At least, they think its solved. Draco supposes that they won't really know, until there's someone to test it.)

Either way, it is further than any other healer or potions master had come before, if they had even tried to look, and Harry had deemed it worthy of a celebration. Ron had agreed, so now everyone was in Ron and Hermione's flat, with more people arriving every minute.

Draco watches from the corner. Dean and Seamus are here, curled up together on the love seat, with

Seamus not quite willing to leave the protection of Dean's side. Ginny has set up camp beside Hermione, and Luna is off in the corner, apparently inspecting thin air. He recognizes other Gryffindors, and a few Ravenclaws who manage to be polite to him simply because they want to hear about the research. And Neville. He always can find Neville.

They are all Hermione's friends. The thought saddens him, because he was instrumental to the process, it had really been his idea that had started it all, and now there was no one here to clap for him, except for Harry.

(Though Harry was very important. Maybe the most important.)

He's almost getting full on melancholy when someone claps a hand down on his shoulder, the sudden contact making him jump. "Whoa, hey. Didn't mean to scare you." Someone looms ahead of him, and they grin, all teeth. It takes him a second to recognize George Weasley, who looks so much happier than he had the last time Draco saw him. "Just wanted to say congratulations."

"Thanks." Draco felt himself smile. "though you really should be telling that to Hermione."

"Nonsense. She has enough admirers." George holds up a bottle of wine and waves it in the air. "where do you think I should put this?"

This is domestic. And familiar. Draco had played the host plenty of times before. "Kitchen, probably. Want me to show you?"

"Nah, I know the way." Draco has just enough time to be disappointed before he pulls a bag out of the pocket of his trench coat. "But come anyways. You can help me dump my canary creams in with all Hermione's fancy cookies."

She would hate that, Draco knows, but everyone else would find it funny. So he goes.

Draco does not know how things got so bad, so fast.

It was a good party. The party wasn't for him, and no one was ever going to pull him onto a table and demand a speech like they did for Hermione, but he was having fun, stuck between George and Luna, listening them to them carry on with their off key renditions of Celestina Warbeck songs. He feels like he is part of the group, and for once, Draco feels like he is finally at a place where he is willing to put the past behind them.

And then Ron gets angry.

Draco had noticed that he was a barely contained time bomb, ready to fight at the slightest provocation, but it still stung, because all he had done was make the mistake of taking his guard down, of trying to belong. Draco made a joke, and Hermione was laughing, and then Draco was leaning over her, about to start a story that began with *remember when* about one of their rare good moments from Hogwarts, but then Ron was between them, shoving him away from Hermione, spitting in his face.

The room gets quiet, and Draco does not move, just stares down at the way that Ron's hand was fisted in his shirt, wondering why he keeps finding himself in this position. *This is what it felt like*, He thought, in a dull, detached sort of way. *All those people who you pushed around, this is what it felt like.*

Behind him, George makes a move to get to his feet, but Ginny holds him back with just a touch to the arm. Maybe they thought that this was something they shouldn't get in the middle of.

Draco really disagreed. He wanted anyone, even if it was someone that would never speak to him again, to rise to their feet and stand up for him, because this is not fair, this is not right, he did not do anything wrong this time. He's trying, damn it.

"We're not friends," Ron spits, and the words are worse than if he had punched them. His voice is quiet, a terribly controlled silence, but everyone could hear. "Look around you. None of these people are your friends."

He would not be saying this if things were normally, if he was sober, if there weren't this many people demanding his attention. It was stressful for him, and it had finally boiled over. Draco wanted it to stop, but Draco cannot speak, cannot move to defend himself or walk away, because he was caught off guard and was just *so, so stupid*.

"They may have forgotten, they may have forgiven you just because Harry has, but I didn't, okay, I remember all the things you said, all the things you did to us back in school, and I remember when you stood there and let innocent people get killed. So don't act like your friends, and don't you touch her." Draco can hear a sound that might have been a disagreement from Hermione, but Draco cannot focus, because everyone is staring at him, and no one is rising to his defense.

"Ron-"

It sounded pathetic, even to himself. A pathetic word from a pathetic boy who cannot control his own life. And Ron knows it, can see how pathetic he is, like a worm about to be crushed.

"Get out my house." The words are much louder, and Draco flinches away.

When he steps back, everyone is staring. No one is going to save him. And he is not willing to fight back, so he turns, ignoring Hermione's cries and wrenches the door open, slams it behind him.

After that, it is easy, to stumble down the steps and out the door, into the cold night air and collapse against the brick for a moment before pushing away, down the street, towards the emptiness and the quiet and home, where no one would be able to make him feel like that again.

Harry

He needs to stop leaving Draco alone.

That's the first thought he has, when he returns from the bathroom and finds everyone staring at Ron and Hermione, who were having a screaming match in the middle of the living room. He hears enough to know it is about Draco and that Draco has left, so he doesn't bother to wait for an explanation from Ron, just grabs his coat and leaves, chasing down that figure in the darkness he was hoping was Draco.

"Hey." When he gets closer, there is no mistaking him for anyone else. "Wait a minute, will you."

He grabs him by the elbow and yanks him backward, the motion too hard, and it wrenches Draco around to face him. "What?"

Draco spits the word at him. And why shouldn't he? It was Harry's best friend who threw him out, after all. "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be." Draco stared at the sky, and Harry knew that the shaky way he was breathing meant he was trying not to cry. "He doesn't have to forgive me. I did awful things."

"But you did good things, too." Harry didn't know why this was so important to him. Maybe he just wants these two people to be as important to each other as they are to him. "You're good."

"Not good enough. And you shouldn't..." A deep breath, one that was meant to force calm. "You shouldn't be here, you should go inside." It doesn't look like he really means that. "They'll miss you."

"I don't care what they think. I don't care about him." It was true, suddenly, and Harry knew it, that he could turn his back on the rest of them if they didn't want Draco, he would be willing to make that trade. He was also standing close to him now, so close, close enough to be dangerous, but Harry cannot make himself step away. "I want this." A pause, where he got even closer, his hands on Draco's shoulders and his fingers twisting into the fabric of this shirt that was too thin for the cold weather. "I want you."

Draco closes his eyes like it pains him, and then bows his head so his forehead is pressed against Harry's. "We can't."

"We can." Harry says. "We can do anything we want, and damn the rest of them."

The exclamation felt so good, so perfect, that he realizes that it must be true and closes those last few inches until they are kissing. It's really not even that, just a ghost of a touch against his skin, but it could be, it could be more, until Draco shoves them apart and starts to shake his head.

"No," He steps away, and the moment vanishes into awkwardness and unease, the two of them staring at each other uncertainly. "We can't."

He shakes his head one last time, then apparates leaving Harry to turn back to the party alone.

Chapter 16

Draco

The silence between them is stifling.

Not that Draco thought that he and Hermione would be able to meet at their usual time and pretend that things are normal, after what Ron had said to him and Draco left her crying in the middle of her own apartment, but he didn't really expect it to bother him all that much. A part of him really had fooled himself into thinking that this was just a sort of academic arrangement, that it would all evaporate once they had figured out how to make the potions work. Like this was a sort of *we're the only two people who can do it, so let's call a truce while we work*, and that the minute they were finished all the school yard taunting he had done would rise up between them.

Clearly, like so many other things, he was wrong, because now he couldn't stand the way that they were talking strictly only about the potion gurgling in front of them (*though it was a less like talking and more like mildly panicked screaming, because neither of them could figure out why it was brown and overflowing the onto the table*) and pretending not to look at each other out of the corner of their eyes. It seemed that somewhere along the line of hard work and late nights, they had become friends.

And maybe that was inevitable, when all the random scraps of information they tell each other about their lives and their hopes start to pile up, or when he throws a blanket over her when she falls asleep on the couch, or when he finds out her favorite food and makes sure the kitchen is always stocked with it. And he's glad of it, really, but it does make things supremely awkward, because if he's not mistaken he has now become the best friend the boyfriend doesn't like.

Draco decides to be the brave one. "Listen." He takes a deep breath, and then a shaky one, and then vanishes the potion with one jerky motion of the hand. Hermione makes a small noise of protest in the back of her throat, but Draco was always much faster to recognize a lost cause than Hermione.

Sometimes, there really is nothing left to do but start over. "About last night."

"I wanted to talk to you, too." She streamrolls ahead, everything coming out in a rush. "Ron had no right, absolutely none, and I tried to talk to him, but he just can't seem to see sense, you know how stubborn he is-,"

"Hermione-,"

"And I told him that we were friends and behavior like that would not be tolerated in the future, I have no idea what came over him-,"

"Hermione-,"

"It was inexcusable, and I just want to say that I, for one, am sorry that you were treated like that when you were a guest in my house."

"Hermione." He reached out and caught her hands in his own, stopping them from flying around her head along with her words. "It's fine. What he did, is fine. I wanted you to know that." "It's not." She was breathing heavily again, angry as she always is at any hint of injustice. "Completely-,"

"Don't. He loves you." He squeezed her hands, and she laughed shakily, her eyes brimming over with tears. She was always extraordinarily easy to make cry, but he no longer saw it as a weakness. "He loves you, and I stood by while you were hurt when I could have stopped it, and I was cruel even when it was simpler to be kind. I'd hate me, too."

"He doesn't hate you." It was a pathetic and see flimsy excuse, and she began to falter as soon as the words left her mouth. "He's only stubborn. He'll come around."

"I would act the same way." Ron, at least, was someone he could understand. Hatred, anger, pain these are languages that he knows well. "If someone hurt somebody I love like I did to you."

"We were children." She wiped at her eyes, and then smiled, wickedly, in a way that was shockingly similar to Pansy. "And who have you loved, anyways, Draco?" She laughed when he reddened. "Don't be shy, who's the lucky girl?"

"Boys." He didn't really mean to say it, except that forgiveness was a bitter pill to swallow and sharing his secrets was his only way of repaying it, of showing that he trusted her, too. "One boy, actually."

Draco had surprised her. "Oh?" And then, when there was an exceptionally loud burst of Harry's laughter from the doorway, accompanied by Seamus' Irish accent (*they were hanging out together for the first time since the incident*), something in her face softened and the confusion cleared. She always had seen more than he wanted to show, had always known more than any one person should be able to figure out, and some flicker of the truth must have spread across his face. "Oh, Draco." She felt bad for him.

(That's fine. She's not wrong. Draco feels bad for himself all the time. It really is a hopeless situation.)

"I know." He makes himself smile, and then squeezes her hand, once, twice. There's a lump in his throat and he swallows it down, because this is another one of those times that makes him acutely ashamed of his past actions, when he realized that they could have been this good of friends from the very beginning. Maybe, with someone as brave and good as her in his corner, the story wouldn't have ended up the same. "So I know. I would have reacted the same way."

She makes another tiny noise like that pained her, and then she set out to smooth his hair down in a way that he had seen her do to Harry. Draco shakes her off, and sets about cutting up the goose liver for the new potion.

"Don't worry about me." His smile feels a little crooked. "We'll just get the potions done, yeah?"

Her answering smile is just as wobbly, but when she takes the knife from his trembling fingers, her hands are steady.

Chapter End Notes

short chapter, but that's all I had in me today.

I really do appreciate all your comments, and even though I haven't replied to them yet, I

will. I just didn't feel like talking today, even just through a screen.

Hope you like this! Please share the story if you can, and comment to tell me how I'm doing!

Chapter 17

Harry

Two months ago, he had told Kingsley about the box that he and Draco had found.

About the pictures on the floor, and the effort it took to open it, how Hermione thought they deserved a chance to look at it before the ministry took it away. About the journal inside, the maps, the notes, the letters between Mad-Eye and Dumbledore. How despite everything they went through, it seemed like it still might not be over.

Kingsley had sifted through all of it, the expression on his face never changing. Harry wanted to ask what he was thinking but bit down on his lip instead, hard enough that he knew there would be a mark left behind. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. "So?"

Kingsley didn't answer right away, just reached up and fiddled with the gold hoop earring he always wore. Harry tried to tell himself that was a sign of a leader who thinks before he speaks rather than a

nervous tick. "Might be nothing."

"But it might be something." Harry didn't want it to be anything, because *this*, those names staring up at him and the people Mad-Eye had said they killed, those were still his responsibility, his fight.

"It might be" Kingsley snaps the leather journal he was leafing through shut, and shoved it all into his desk drawer, like he was putting away meddlesome paperwork. "Just let me deal with it."

"But-,"

"Potter." He was the kind of man who inspires confidence, and Kingsley is able to stop any protests with only a few words and a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let me handle it. I'll let you know if I turn anything up. But until then?" He's ushering Harry out of the office, and Harry could imagine him locking the door behind him, opening that drawer back up, and combing through it, because they both knew that even though people called Mad-Eye crazy, he knew a threat when he saw one.

"Don't tell anyone."

That was two months ago, and Harry had tricked himself into thinking that maybe it wasn't a real problem, that the fight was actually over.

He thought that, but now he's having an Order meeting in his kitchen.

He really thought that this part of his life was done and over with, but apparently not, because here he was, calling for quiet in his own house with the remnants of the Order and Dumbledore's Army staring back at him.

Dumbledore's Army, he thinks, in those few seconds between being a friend and becoming a leader again, looking at them all gathered here like some sorry class reunion. *What a sorry bunch we make.*

In the end, it is Ginny that gets all of their attention, standing up on a chair and whistling. She stumbles on the way back down, and there are snickers, but it stops as soon as he stands.

Once before, he had stood in front of a crowded room and told them that they were going to look for something, not knowing that he was commanding them all to go to war, to fight for him, to die for him. Now, he has learned, and knows exactly what it means when he asks for their help.

"Mad-Eye left us a job to do." He had decided on absolute honesty, because Dumbledore had always been caught up in a web of lies and half truths, and Harry didn't want to be that kind of leader. "We- Draco, Hermione, Ron and I- found a journal up in the attic, telling us about the people he suspects that were still out there, hiding, biding their time. Ones that might not have been supporters of Voldemort, but who were just waiting to ride the tide of his defeat to their own power, like he did with Grindewald."

There's a noticeable flinch when he said Voldemort's name, but he ignores it, and moves to the blank wall instead, rolling down the spreadsheet that Draco had spent last night painstakingly creating. It listed the names and locations of suspects, their crimes, what they might be planning to do.

Wizarding terrorists, hate crimes waiting to happen. "Kingsley came to me last night, which is why I asked you all here." He felt nervous, more than he ever had before, because it was one thing to ask them to fight when they are young and think that war brings glory, but it is another when they have felt the truth of it. "These are the most credible threats."

"And what's that got to do with us?" George called out from the back of the group, his voice tight and angry. Harry tried not to flinch at the tone of his words- this was not an easy situation, and ever since the loss of his ear and the absence of Fred to hide behind, George hasn't done well in crowds of people. The anger, he reminded himself, wasn't directed at him. "The ministry can't handle it?"

"The ministry is.. inadequate for this particular situation." Harry knew he had to choose his words carefully, unless Kingsley came after him for revealing secret information. "There's still some concern of corruption, and this is sensitive information. We have to handle it independently, like we did before."

There were only blank stares. "And why should we?" It was George again, sullen, angry, hurting. "How much more do they expect us to give?" He shook his head, then stood up so fast his chair fell to the floor. "No. I'm sorry, Harry, but I'm done." And then he walked out.

Harry didn't really know what to do with that, because one of the constants of his life is that when it is time to fight, there have always been people willing to stand beside him, even when he wasn't asking them to. And now that he was asking them to, he was getting no volunteers, no one to stand beside him, only Ron and Hermione standing silently behind him, like guards.

(And Draco, who was across the room, hidden in the back, but Harry was trying not to look at him because it was more distracting than anything else.)

"Look," He said, weakly, and words were not enough to explain why they should let themselves be drawn back into this. "You don't have to. I get that, that you've given enough. But someone

has to do this, and I'm going to try, even if I have to do it alone." The only response was a tilt of the head from Ginny, a silent agreement passing across the room that told him he didn't even have to ask. As for the rest, they still looked uncertain. "I'd like some help."

It was Percy who ended up breaking the silence, leading the rest to the cause. "I'll fight." He shoved his glasses up his nose, a gesture born from nerves. "Was late to the last fight. Might as well make up for it now."

Harry swallowed hard, then nodded, grasping onto Percy's hand when it was offered. "Good," He said, talking around the emotions welling up in his throat. "We'll need you."

He ends up alone with Seamus, staring at the Black family tree. Seamus was tracing all the burn marks, and Harry could not stop staring at the mark that used to bear his godfather's face. He didn't know why the thing was still up.

(Probably Kreacher.)

"You don't have to do this, you know." Harry knows he should have left it alone, but when he saw Seamus in the back, pale faced and looking like he was facing the worst thing imaginable, he had felt the guilt ball up in his stomach. "You've done enough."

"And what, just sit and watch all the others fight?" He laughed, a sharp and biting sound that cut through the air. "I don't think so."

"But-,"

"But I tried to off myself once and everyone's afraid I'll do it again?" There was no laugh now, just tense anger falling off the sharp line of his shoulders. "Don't worry, Harry. I can fight just as well as I could before."

"That's not..." He sighed and scrubbed at his face, tired, wishing they had all left him alone. That's all he ever wanted, was to be left alone. "That's not what I meant, Seamus."

"I know." He didn't look the same, but there were flashes of the old Seamus shining through at odd moments, like when instead of a hug he turned and punched Harry as hard as he could in the arm, like that meant everything was forgiven. Harry thinks he is still expecting to see all the old versions of his friends when he looks at them, never mind that those people left him long ago. "It's alright, Harry."

They move away from the tapestry without talking about it, like they didn't want to see the reminder of it anymore. "Besides," Seamus grins, then, and an image of him smiling through a mouthful of blood flashes in Harry's mind, the memories rising up at the worst times. "I've got some people to pay back, don't I?"

Revenge. They all have their things they hang onto in order to get themselves through the day, and it seems that Seamus has found his.

When the house clears, it is only him and Draco, alone.

They're cleaning up the kitchen, throwing away bottles and evaporating the leftover food. Harry can tell that Draco is following behind him and cleaning the spots he missed, even though it really didn't make a difference. It was still the cleanest house to have ever existed.

"You really think this will keep going?" Draco asks. His voice was so quiet that Harry barely heard him, but he felt it, too, the need to talk about important things in hushed voices, like it might make them less real. "More fighting?"

"I think we have to try." Harry said, and it was ridiculous that they were talking about battle plans while he was holding a wash rag in his hand. "We can't just give in."

"You could." Draco didn't need to talk loud, now, because he was close enough that Harry was reminded of that almost kiss in front of Hermione's apartment. *We can't*, Draco had said, tearing himself away, and then Harry was left staring at empty air. "You could let someone else handle it, for once. Give them a turn to be a hero."

Harry wanted to. He had wanted to feel what it was like to live a normal life, where the nightmares weren't visiting him every night and he wouldn't be wishing that all his friends would come home safely from a mission he had sent them on. "I can't just walk away." Draco's hands had found his way to the pockets of Harry's hoodie, and Harry didn't know what to do with that. He wanted to push him away, like Draco had pushed him away. "That's not who I am."

Draco smiled, then, a beautiful and wistful expression on his face. "I know." His hands reached out to smooth down Harry's hair, trying to tame the wild tangle that it always forms, and then it fell away, disappearing. "I'm going to help you this time."

Harry didn't want that. He wanted Draco safe, at home, where Harry didn't have to worry. But there was no cause for that kind of treatment, when Draco was insisting that they were nothing more than flatmates. "Okay." He grabbed onto his hand, but Draco just shook his head. *No*, he had said and must have meant it. *We can't*

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco

Winter is sliding into spring, a quarter of his probation sentence done, and Draco had found himself completely and hopelessly in love with Harry.

He probably had been at least interested in home for a long time, back before the war, but then it was always kept out of reach, some fantasy to visit late at night, one where they got along and Harry had never turned down his handshake that first year, where Draco had friends and Harry liked him and everything was going to turn out okay. It wasn't a real thing, nothing that would ever be possible, but that's why he thought it was okay to like him. As long as it could never be real, Draco would be safe.

Except now, it could be real. Now he cooks him breakfast in the morning and they eat it together, now sometimes they fall asleep on the couch together and wake up curled around each other, now Draco is around to hear him wake up from a nightmare at night and talk to his cousin Dudley on the phone. He watches him check in on George and on Seamus, sees him wrap Hermione and Ginny and Luna in a hug with the protectiveness of a brother. He's up and close and personal now, and even though the flawed parts of him might be enough to make others turn away, it just makes Draco want him more.

(Like, the cracks are only places for the good things to shine through, testaments to all he had done and will still to do to protect the people he loves, to preserve what is right.)

"What?" Harry was leaning over the kitchen table, wax paper spread out in front of him. He was marking off names with a grease pencil and rubbing them away, creating a plan of attack to show to Kingsley the next day. It seems that even when he tries to walk away from the fight, the fight just wouldn't let him go. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Draco had been staring at him for too long. He hadn't meant to, but Harry wasn't looking, and watching him was much more interesting than penciling in information about death eaters that he only met once, at some benefit when he was eleven.

"I don't see how this helps." He shoved the journal away, where he had scrawled meaningless details he had picked up from one party or another- who they had an affair with, where their summer vacation homes were, which ministry official they had reportedly bribed, what they had sold to Borgin and Burkes. It was tedious work, but it seems that when Draco stopped to think about it, he had gathered more tidbits of gossip than he thought. "What's it matter who some guy cheats on his wife with?"

Harry smiled at him, shaking his head so his hair falls out of his face. He's always having a constant battle with his hair now, trying to keep it out of his way but also wanting it long enough to cover his scar. Fashion verses function, the eternal battle. "If you're getting tired, you can get a break." He was a natural leader, but Draco had noticed that he was more content to take all the responsibility on himself than the parcel out jobs to anyone else. "That doesn't have to be done tonight."

"Only if you do." He wasn't walking away and leaving Harry in here to puzzle out the problems alone. Hermione had specifically told him not to, that it would go faster if Harry had someone to bounce ideas off of, even if that someone was about as helpful as brick wall. *(It doesn't matter if you know what he's talking about, anyways, he doesn't take anyone's suggestions even when they're good.)* "You can't possibly still be thinking straight."

"That doesn't have to be done tonight, but this does." Harry straightens up, and his back pops when he does, proof to how long he had been sitting like that. "I need to keep working."

"No." Draco crossed the room and pulled his work away from him, and Harry made a half hearting grabbing motion, but let it slide away. If he had really wanted to stop it, he could have. "It doesn't. The world won't stop turning just because you took a break for an hour."

"But-,"

"You deserve a break." It felt like they were married. This is what it feels like all the time, like they are married and in love and do everything that couples do, except for kiss and admit that they're a couple. It's quite frustrating. "Come hang out with me, just long enough to have dinner."

He felt like a house wife, tearing his busy husband away from his work just so they could spend time together before the kids got home from their mothers. It's a bad analogy, one that would get him a lecture from Ginny about sexism and gender roles, but its the one that he keeps coming back to.

"Come on." Draco shoves Harry's coat at him, and then vanished the papers for good measure. They're just on top of a set of cupboards, but Harry clearly doesn't have the motivation to go look for them. "For me?"

Harry wavers, and Draco can see when he makes the decision. "Alright." he grabs the coat and shrugs it on, then wraps his own scarf around Draco's neck, ignoring the flinch when Harry reaches toward him. "But only because you asked nicely."

Chapter End Notes

filler chapter, we're getting to some action next update
(which should be in like an hour or later tonight)

Chapter 19

Harry

He's at the pub with Dudley (*a gay sports bar, because as Dudley said, there'll be something for you and something for me and no evil wizards likely to look for you there*) to celebrate his birthday when their relatively easy friendship comes screeching to a halt.

See, the thing is, Harry still isn't really sure if he wants to be friends with Dudley, because there are a lot of memories from when they were kids that he doesn't want to think about. Like getting his head shoved into a toilet, like the whole class turning on him in dodgeball and ending up with a broken nose, all the times that Dudley's friends pinned Harry's arms behind his back and let him get used as a punching bag. He's learning that the bullying aspect of their relationship wasn't as strange as he had thought (turns out a lot of siblings were cruel to each other when they were younger and grew up to be just fine), but he still can't forget all the things he watched and didn't stop- getting thrown into the cupboard, being hit with Aunt Marge's cane so hard his knuckles bled, being starved, being left alone for as long as he could remember.

So he was tentative, the day he went back to walk down Privet Drive for the last time and ran into him. He hadn't known what to say, but thankfully Dudley didn't either.

"Hello." He was thinner, but still very large, more like a walrus instead of a whale. "You lived, then?"

Harry snorted. "Yeah, Dudley." He rocked back on his heels and stared up at the room that used to be his. You could still see where they fastened the bars on back when he was twelve, but it didn't look like something to be afraid of anymore. "I lived. The bad guy died. Life goes on."

Dudley nodded, long and slow, like he was trying to give them both as much time as possible to chicken out of this conversation. "Cool."

They did end up talking, grabbing food in the local diner, which Dudley paid for. Harry let him, because a part of him thought he was owed that much, one shitty diner burger and fries after everything this family put him through. But then they were walking out into the sidewalk to their separate cars, and it hit Harry that after eighteen long years, this might be the last time they would see each other, and Harry realized that maybe he didn't want that. Maybe he wanted something like a real family, even if its just the one person.

"Hey." He took out a dollar bill because it was the only paper he had and scrawled his phone number on it. "This is my number. Call me, and we'll get together sometime, alright? I want to keep in touch."

Harry hadn't thought he was going to, but then one week later, they were meeting up at one of those Japanese places where they cook the food in front of you, at a private table that Harry paid extra for just so they could talk freely about all the wizard stuff. Dudley actually seemed interested and it was the first time that Harry realized that even though Uncle Vernon was afraid and Aunt Petunia was jealous, maybe Dudley was just a little bit excited about having a wizard in the family, even if he never thought he could show it.

That starts a trend. They go out, hitting every restaurant in town, never going to the same one twice. They go to a place where they serve salads so big he has trouble fitting them on the table,

to a burger joint with a hamburger the size of his head, to a place twenty minutes outside of the city where they serve the hottest wings on earth, even to a tea shop that Dudley said Aunt Petunia was forcing him to test out before their cousin's bridal shower. After a few weeks, Harry finds he's actually looking forward to their meetings each week. It's like they're actually on their way to becoming friends, or turning into the family they should have been all along.

(And that pisses him off, what they could have been if Uncle Vernon hadn't been such an arse.)

"So I was thinking," Dudley started, and Harry groaned. Whenever Dudley started to think, they always found themselves in trouble. "No, really, I was thinking that you should come to my birthday dinner with mum and dad this Thursday."

Harry laughed, but then realized he wasn't kidding. "What? Come on, Dudley, they hate me."

"No, they hated magic. And they hated your dad." Dudley tilted his beer bottle towards him, pausing to wave at some guy across the bar that might have been checking Harry out but certainly wouldn't anymore. "But they tolerated you."

"Gee, Dud." Stupid. "Way to make a guy feel special."

"Listen, I know it's not your idea of a fun evening, but I think we need to move past this. They're willing to try if you are." Dudley acted like it was that simple. Maybe in his world it is. Like, okay, here's my check list: get into college, get a good summer job, find a girl that puts up with me and is hot at the same time, did all that, now we're going to create warm fuzzy feelings between my parents and the kid they repeatedly abused. Sounds like a plan. "You can even bring Draco, if you want. I want to meet him."

Harry almost choked on his drink, but since Dudley was rummaging in his pocket to pay the bartender, he missed the look on his face. "Really? You want me to not only bring a wizard as my date, but a male wizard?"

"They won't care that you're gay." Dudley almost looked offended. "Really now, what did you think? We aren't bigots, Harry." The irony of it almost hurts.

Draco

When Harry asks him to go to dinner with his muggle relatives, Draco had said yes, fully expecting him to cancel at the last minute. But as it turned out, Harry stuck to his commitment, even if he gets considerably jumpier as the week goes on, prone to becoming pale at odd moments and become so startled that he drops whatever he's holding.

It's a strange look on him, to see him afraid, and for the first time Draco is able to really get an idea of how horrible it must have been for him to grow up the way he did. They must have been really bad, if he was more scared to sit through a dinner than he was to fight death eaters.

"You don't have to do this." Draco said, after the third time that Harry tried to tie his tie but couldn't because his hands were shaking so bad. Draco stood up to do it for him, so he can see the way that it pains Harry to think about backing down. "You don't owe them anything. And I'm not going to think anything less of you for it."

He finishes the tie, and then works at the cuffs of his shirt, buttoning up the cufflinks that he had bought him for Christmas, then steps back.

"I promised Dudley. It's his birthday, and he wants me there." His voice was trembling, and his eyes were darting around the room, and Draco wanted more than ever to tell him no, that this is one thing that he will not watch him torture himself over. "It's only one night."

Draco stays quiet, but even as he goes up to get ready to leave, he can't help but think that this is going to end very badly.

Harry

The restaurant is incredibly fancy, just like he knew it would be, and Harry is terribly glad that he brought Draco with him, because he's completely out of his element.

Draco, though? He seems to stand straighter the minute he walks in, as if picking up on the fact that tonight Harry was going to be following his lead. People moved aside for him, and since Draco was holding Harry by the hand, he didn't have to fight through the crowd of people around the hostess who were vying for a table. "Hi." He leans over the podium and smiles, charming and in control. The hostess, like she recognizes that this is the kind of person who can actually afford to eat here, turns away from the others trying to get a table that wouldn't be there and smiles at him. "I think our party already went back. Table for Dursley? Or maybe it's under Potter?"

"Vernon?" She's got very white teeth, which makes the lipstick stain stand out that much more. Harry can't seem to stop looking at it, but Draco doesn't seem to notice.

Draco looks back for confirmation, and Harry nods mutely. "That's the one."

He keeps up a steady stream of chatter on the way to the back of the room, and Harry takes a moment to gather his bearings. This is nothing that he hadn't done before. He held his tongue and played his part for seventeen years, he could last one evening for Dursley's sake. And this time, Draco was with him. He would have someone in his corner.

"Hello." Draco smiled, winningly, giving no sign that he had heard anything bad about the Dursley's. Dudley stands up first, and after exchanging a look, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon follow suit to shake Draco's hand. "You must be the Dursleys. I'm Draco."

(Harry can practically *feel* them calculating the price tag on Draco's suit, and for once, even though it doesn't matter and Harry doesn't care about the suit outside of the context of how good Draco looks in it, he's horribly glad that it cost much more than either of them would dare spend.)

"I'm Dudley. Heard so much about you." Harry winces, but other than a slight smile in his direction, Draco doesn't comment. "And this is my mother, Petunia, and my father, Vernon."

Harry stays silent through the introductions, watching. Aunt Petunia is in a garishly green dress dotted with pink flowers, her neck just as long and bony as ever, but her hands looked worn

down, the skin pale and ripped raw. Uncle Vernon was just as gruff as ever, dressed to impress, like he could bully his way through dinner just like he did every other aspect of his life.

"And you, boy?" *Boy*. The word still stings. Even now he doesn't deserve a name. "Seems like you're doing well for yourself."

A compliment. Harry didn't know how to respond to that- if he should play it down and have Vernon say that he was avoiding conversation, or agree and immediately be turned down. He had forgotten how every word with them was like walking through a minefield, not knowing which step was going to blow up in his face.

"He's working on a presentation with the ministry. All about the war heroes." Draco sounded proud, but Harry was still tense, waiting, waiting, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"And Draco's a potion master. Making very large advancements in their medicine, from what Harry tells me." Dudley nudged Harry under the table and winked, and Harry finally, finally relaxed, thinking that maybe they were going to make it through tonight. "Getting a lot of recognition."

"Oh?" Aunt Petunia's beady eyes were focused in on him, but for once, Harry was glad that she knew something about the wizarding community. She could pepper Draco with questions (*they would never be rude to a guest like Draco, he looked too much like power for them to let their hate get the best of them*) and act as translator for Vernon, and hopefully they would walk away from tonight thinking it hadn't gone that bad. "In what area?"

This is fine, Harry thought, relaxing just enough to contribute to the conversation, sharing a few war stories just to impress Vernon and teasing Dudley about his new girlfriend, even agreeing to come back to the house for some dessert pudding. Maybe, after everything, he had it in him to forgive them. He knew it would be better to walk away, but the part of him that was still that little boy locked in the cupboard wanted this so, so badly. *This is fine*.

The calm lasts until they are back at the house, working their way through dessert. The house was a bit dingier than Harry could remember it being, but he supposes they should just be lucky that it survived the war without it being blown up.

"Well." Uncle Vernon slapped his hand across his knee. "I got to say, boy, I wasn't sure about you coming tonight, or about meeting another one of those wizard folks,-" A brief pause, in which they all remembered Dudley's pig tail and the blasted apart fireplace. "But it seems that you turned out okay, in spite of everything."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Draco's smile seemed to become fixed to his face. Harry felt like he had been slapped, even though he really should have been expecting this all along.

"I mean to say," Vernon went on, like he knew he had made a mistake and was going to fix it.

"We must have done something right, raising you, if you turned out to be some sort of war hero."

Draco's hand found its way into Harry's leg, fingers pressing down into his thigh, keeping him still.

"Dad." Dudley looked pained. "Don't."

"Well, we did!" Even Aunt Petunia looked afraid, now. "We fed him, and we clothed him, and we brought him up as one of our own-,"

Harry couldn't take it anymore. It felt like that night with Aunt Marge, where it became one thing too many. And he wasn't going to pretend that this hurt more than he thought it would, because after all those nights with Dudley and how well dinner had went, he had actually convinced himself that they might start to like him. He was wrong.

"How you raised me?" His voice was low, but everyone could hear it. "You didn't raise me. Him," He jerked his head towards Dudley, who was clinging to his wine glass and looking like he wanted to sink through the floor. "Him you raised. He's the one you fed. He's the one you bought all the presents for, and threw birthdays for, and gave him a real bedroom. The one you cared for. He was your son. And what was I?" No answer.

He wanted an answer, and he was going to get one. "What was I, Vernon?" If he was younger, this level of anger would send his magic spiraling out of control, but as it was he could just feel himself shaking with the injustice of it all. "Say what I was." Nothing. "I was the *thing* that showed up on your doorstep that you wanted to send out with the week's garbage, wasn't I? A stain on your perfect family image. I wasn't the one you raised. I was the one you starved. I was the one you hated. I was the one you locked in the closet and lied to, for years." No one moved. Only Draco tried to make it better, reaching out to grab at Harry's hand, but he flung him off. "Tell me if I'm wrong."

Mechanically, Harry sat down the wine glass. "You want to know something? After all these years, all the horrible things I've seen, all the people I watched die, I still find myself thinking that what happened in this house was what ruined me." He was saying everything he had never had been able to say before, but suddenly, he didn't want to be there anymore, so he left, yanking on his jacket and turning to go.

"Wait just one minute!"

Uncle Vernon seized him by the wrist, and Harry was done, was going to turn and hit him and never stop, but he didn't have to, because Draco was there, the threat clear even without the wand. Vernon let go and Draco moved between them.

"Don't touch him. You don't deserve to lay a hand on him, you understand?" He was speaking softly, but in the way that made it clear he was used to being listened to. "You said he was a war hero, but he's not, he was the war. He saved this whole damn world ten times over, and not even one of your filthy fingers should come close to him again or I'll personally see to it that you lose a hand."

Draco lets him go. Uncle Vernon staggers back, leaving Aunt Petunia and Dudley staring at him. Harry thinks he would rather die than deal with the fall out of this.

"Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Dursley." Draco said, back to perfectly polite, buttoning up his coat and smoothing out the wrinkles. "It was lovely."

The looks on their faces almost made it all worth it.

Draco

He could hear Harry talking on the phone, carrying on a conversation with Dudley.

"Listen, no, I'm sorry." Pause. "I should never have come, I knew I was going to lose my cool, it was my bad." Pause. "I just feel horrible, I *ruined* your birthday."

A long pause, and then Harry made a sound that Draco thought was a sob but was actually just a strangled laugh.

"She did what?" Uncontrollable laughter. "Lucky bastard. Should tell her it's your birthday every night."

Probably the girlfriend. Do guys always discuss their girlfriends? Draco wouldn't know.

"I mean, yeah, we can get together and celebrate, just let me get a piece of paper. You want to go where?" The sounds of him rummaging through drawers for a pen. "You know that's a strip club?"

Pause, more laughter, this time muffled. "Does Alice know you're going there?"

They really are friends, now. "Okay. And I'm sorry, again, about today, I didn't mean..." Longer pause, a sniff. "Yeah. You too, Dudley."

There was a bang, and then something smacked against the wall. Probably the pad of paper he had been writing on, but maybe the phone. Draco didn't want to go find out yet.

People suck, he thought, straining to hear when Harry was approaching him. *But no one can hurt you quite like family.*

Draco gives him an hour or so, long enough for him to get a shower and settle down in the living room and listening to Lee and George's nightly radio show.

(Lee's nightly radio show. George is a very sporadic guest.)

"I didn't know." Draco stayed by the doorway, letting Harry decide if he wanted to talk or not. Company wasn't always helpful. "How bad it was."

"I didn't tell you." Harry accepted the gift of hot chocolate, and Draco took that as an invitation to sit down beside him. "I didn't tell a lot of people, outside the Weasley's and Hermione. McGonagall, once."

Draco nodded, letting the information wash over him. He didn't want to pry, but part of him thought that Harry needed to talk about it. Or maybe that was just the selfish part of himself that wanted to compare scars. "How old were you the first time?"

"Five." Harry took a drink and held it in his mouth, even though Draco had warned him it was still much too hot for that. "I had drawn a picture of a magician. You know, the muggle kind- big wand with the sparks that flew out, pointy hat, the long beard. They locked me in the closet for a week, only let me eat once a day. Like they could starve the magic out of me."

It was a wonder that they hadn't killed him. Draco wants to say something, but sorry doesn't quite cut it when you learn something like that.

(He has a horrible flash of back in their first year, when he mocked Harry about not being welcome at home for the holidays, but he had never suspected it to be really true, just thought of it as a stupid thing to say to get under his skin.)

"I meant what I said, back at the house. About how you saved all of us, and how he doesn't deserve to even come near you." Draco felt like it was important for Harry to know how much better than them they were, how he rose above all that to become something better, something good and brave who fought for everyone, even if they don't deserve saving. "You did more when you were eleven than those two have done with their whole miserable suburban lives."

Harry choked out a laugh, and then leaned against Draco, laying in his lap. Draco didn't say anything else -he really didn't have any other comforts tucked up his sleeve, if he was being honestso he stuck with running his hands through Harry's hair until he was sure he had fallen asleep.

Chapter 20

Draco

He wants to tell him not to do it.

When Harry first mentioned that he was going to throw himself back into his *fight the bad guys* routine, Draco didn't think it would bother him this much. He had just shrugged his shoulders and asked if he would be home for dinner, because in his head, he was thinking that going out to play the hero was just something that Harry *did*. He could no more stop putting himself in dangerous situations in the name of doing the right thing than he could rip out his own DNA.

(Though after that disaster of the dinner with the Dursley's, Draco's pretty sure he would if he could.)

Turns out, though, that Draco did mind, enough that when the people from the old DA start showing up in his living room (Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Dean ushered in through the door, *how are you, can I take your coats, try not to let him die tonight*), he has to bite his lip to keep his concerns to himself. In theory, it wasn't anything that Harry hadn't done a million times before, but in practice this was him going to face down some pretty bloodthirsty people with no back up and no official training. They were still just all kids, vigilantes trying to take down people who weren't going to pull their punches.

"You're cool if Luna crashes here with you, right?" Ginny shouts the question at him from out in the hallway, poking her head around the doorway, and Draco jumps. He'd been too busy watching Harry to notice.

"Yeah." Not that it sounded like it was actually a question. He's pretty sure that if he said no Ginny would give him a black eye and Luna would end up waiting out the night here, anyways. "That's fine. Company'll be nice."

And it will be. He knows from the war that he doesn't take well to being left behind, and when Harry had shrugged off his half-hearted offer of help, Draco had resigned himself to one long, lonely night pacing the hallways for Harry's return.

"I told you it would be fine." Harry comes up from behind him out of no where, and Draco leans into the hand he had placed on his shoulder. "Draco will keep an eye on her."

"I'd rather keep an eye on you." He'd promised himself he wouldn't do it, because Harry does not owe him anything, he does not belong to him, and anyways, saving the day is as much a part of Harry as his lightning bolt scar. Self sacrificing tendencies are just one of those things you have to put up with if you plan on caring for him. "Can't you let someone else do it?"

He doesn't say *haven't you done enough*, which is what he'd been thinking since Harry first announced that he was going to be going after these people. Finish what Dumbledore had started, and all that.

"I'm going to be fine." Harry's got his hand wrapped around Draco's neck, the two of them face to face with only inches between them. He thinks of how it mirrors the good bye scene Hermione and Ron had gone through only a few minutes earlier and steps away. "It's not like the last time."

"It's worse." Draco tugged on his hands, trying to keep Harry's attention focused on him. "This time they've got nothing to lose."

And they don't. None of you-know-who's old supporters do, they're just on the run from the ministry and trying to regain some of the power they used to have. For them, they're only choices are to keep running and hope to find someone who lets them claw their way back into power, or go to Azkaban. Draco's got a feeling they would rather it be the first choice, and they wouldn't mind murdering a few kids to do it.

"I'm going to be fine." Harry's eyes search across his face, and Draco looks away, not wanting to him to see how worried he is. "I promise."

Don't make promises you can't keep, he thinks, and then decides he'll take what reassurance he can get.

"It's a bunch of Durmstrang rebels," Ginny said, smiling softly at Draco. She's probably had to be the girl left behind one too many times, and knows exactly how this feels. "We'll be back by midnight."

Back by midnight.

What a bunch of bloody liars.

Draco believes them at first, because Luna had told him that Ginny was very prompt and that these things normally go very quickly, so he sits beside her and listens to her drone on about the changes she's making to the quibbler (*which, without her father's influence, is not the load of horseshit it used to be*), staring at the clock the whole time. He watches the minute hand, and then the hour, as it gets closer and closer to twelve o'clock.

And then twelve comes, and Harry does not. One comes, and Harry does not. One thirty, and Luna is beginning to look alarmed at the ferocity he was showing while pacing around the room.

"They're going to be back, you know." Luna is entirely calm. Draco is started to get the smallest of suspicions that it was him that needed the company, not her, and Ginny had known it. He hated when people try to be nice to him. "Things come up."

"Things?" He rounded on her, intending to bully her over something that wasn't her fault like he used to, but then he takes in her trusting face and wide eyes and can't bring himself to do it, which is a shame. It would have made him feel better. "What things, exactly?"

Luna shrugs. "People don't always like to cooperate when they're being arrested for murder." Which, okay, fair, but not a good enough explanation, because Draco was still concocting images of Harry bleeding out on the ground somewhere and Draco never getting the chance to tell him good bye, or sorry, or how grateful he was that Harry stood up that day at the ministry. But then Luna yanks him away from his worry entirely by suggesting they make a cake.

"Why the bloody hell would we make a cake?"

He stares at her. For the most part, Draco has become used to the idea that Luna does not see things the way that everyone else does, but he didn't see how cooking would improve the situation.

"Ginny's always hungry after these sorts of things." She waved her hand in the air, like these sorts of things were as complicated and worrisome as a two a day quidditch practice. "I think it's a chocolate sort of night."

Draco stops to stare at her, and then realizes that maybe he doesn't want to turn her loose in his spotless kitchen. And also that maybe he doesn't want to just keep sitting in here all by himself.

"Yeah, alright." He heaves himself off the couch. "But I pick the frosting."

When Harry does finally stumble in the door, Draco's so caught up in fighting with Luna over the frosting that he doesn't notice it at first. But then Luna disappears, letting go of the frosting tube so quickly he accidentally smears bright blue icing on his cheek, and Draco realizes that they aren't alone anymore.

Harry is waiting at the doorway, smiling and sheepish. "Sorry." He holds out his arms, like he knows that Draco is just dying to hug him. "Took longer than expected."

Draco's angry, and a little miffed, but that doesn't stop him from running across the room to get to him. "What happened?" He was running his hands over his face and arms, finding the place where he was hurt, because he had to be hurt, right, to be back this late? "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Harry pushed up his sleeve to show a burn on the inside of his arm. "Just a scratch."

It's looking to be a nice reunion, but then a kick to the shins from Ginny sends Harry stumbling backwards, cursing. "Speak for yourself." She's got blood all over her, soaking into her clothes, and grass and twigs strewn through her hair. "I was the one that about got bloody murdered."

Bloody murdered is an apt description. She's got a gash across her stomach, and it takes Luna three waves of her wand to have it knit back together. It's seamless, without even a shimmer of a scar left behind, and the sight of it all makes the scars on Draco's chest ache.

"Don't play that card." Harry says, swatting at her, even though Draco can't help but notice how careful he is around her, helping her sit and bringing her a glass of water before she can try and get it herself. "We both know it was your turn to chase after the runner."

Draco wonders if that's really how it played out, with each of them taking a tally of who it was that went into the dangerous situation first. Like they were taking turns at chancing death, and it would be the luck of the draw that decides which one of them falls.

He doesn't really want to know.

Ginny and Luna leave eventually, having eaten much of Draco's cake and stole a pair of Harry's coats to wear home. Draco follows them to the doorway because Harry still hasn't learned common manners, and when it closes behind them, he slumps against the door, holding his head in his hands.

(His fingers come away blue, which, yeah, the frosting was still all over his face. Nice friends, letting him know, especially considering Ginny went crazy with her polaroid.)

Harry's waiting for him in the living room. He looks lost, standing there, like he can't quite figure out what he's doing or why he would be standing there, still preparing for the next threat. Adrenaline highs can do that to you.

"You alright?" Draco wanted to go to him, but he also knew that company might not be welcome, so he hung back.

"Yeah." Harry smiled, even though his eyes were still darting around the room. Draco had the feeling that this would be one of the nights where he woke up to the sound of footsteps creaking on twisted floorboards, where he would pretend not to know that Harry was up and about, checking the locks and the shadowed corners for intruders. "I'm sorry I made you worry."

"Don't think about me." Draco dug his fingers into the blanket on the couch, burying them down to the knuckles. It's easier to have conversations like this when there's something to hold onto. "You do whatever you have to."

"Always do."

Harry still looked lost, and now he looked a little bitter about the whole thing, so Draco thought it would be okay to circle the couch and come up to him. He hesitates before getting closer, but then he reaches out and grabs Harry's hand, swinging his arm back and forth between them.

It draws Harry back to the moment, a little. He still looks lost, but there's something clearer about his expression when he raises his free hand to brush against Draco's cheek, right over where the frosting was.

He's probably just smearing it around, Draco thinks, biting down on his lip. This is not helping anything.

(Shit, it's not. He's the one who threw the fit about not being anything more than roommates, and here he is, acting like a right arse by getting all up in his face.)

"I'm going to come back home, you know." Harry whispers, and Draco wants to back up. He also wants to invest in some of those light balls that Hermione has at her place, because candlelight is so not helping. "Who's going to take care of you if I'm not here?"

You don't even take care of me now, Draco thinks, but that's a lie, so he amends it to I don't belong to you, which, depending on what way you look at it, is also a lie.

"Probably Luna." *Stop talking. Step away. Talk about the damn cake, at least kill the mood, will you?* "She'll adopt me, stick me in with the gnargles."

Harry laughs, ducking his head down to hide his expression, burying his face in Draco's shoulder. Draco stiffens and tries to stand as still as he can, digs his fingers into the back of Harry's sweater

until he straightens up again. When he does, his face is a lot calmer, like the chaos of the battle had finally been knocked out of him.

"Yeah." He's letting go, stepping away, and Draco wants to pull him back. *Kiss him, you idiot, weren't you just thinking about all the things you would never get to say if he didn't come home,* but no, this was not a decision to make at four in the morning. This time, there was no drinks to hide behind, no potion to blame it on, no friends to tear them apart. Here, now, it was only the two of them and whatever actions they took would have very lasting impressions. "Probably would."

Harry is still waiting. Draco is still hoping that he'll be the first to walk away, so that for once, Draco doesn't have to look like a coward.

(He isn't.)

(Draco always the one who leaves. He doesn't see why that should change anytime soon.)

Chapter 21

Draco

Harry's out saving the world, and this time Draco can't quite stomach the thought of spending all night alone in this flat, wondering what might be happening and having no way to help, so he leaves, promising himself that he had a life before he got caught up in all of Harry's heroics, and he had a right to have a life now. He had made no promise to stay her and wait like the worried wife, so he could leave, damn it, go off and find his own fun since Harry wouldn't let him help, claiming that it was too dangerous, and he had all the people he needed.

It was a load of bullshit.

Draco wasn't helping because he wasn't capable, he wasn't helping because they all still saw him as a liability, even Harry. They can't expect him to turn on his past loyalties, even though he's tried to explain to them all that there had been no loyalty about it. just a scared little kid who was in way over his head.

"I just don't feel comfortable putting you in that situation." Harry says, looking like he is trying to avoid the situation blowing up in both of their faces. And really, Draco knows he doesn't have any right to be angry, because this is just one of those disappointments that came from finding himself on the wrong side. His choices (or lack of them) were going to haunt him for the rest of his life. "What if it's someone you know?"

Draco wants to protest, but he hears the rest of it. *What are you going to do when you come face to face with someone that you used to be friends with as a child, or had a wand pointed at you by a*

family friend? Are you really going to kill them? Are you really going to bring them in? You aren't ready to do whatever's necessary to win, but they are. And so are we.

So he didn't argue after his original offer was shot down, even if his good bye tonight was a little colder than normal, just a press of his fingers into Harry's wrist before he walks out the door for good, something that he hoped Harry was able to take as an apology and a warning at the same time, a silent plea for him to come back home to him.

Still, that doesn't mean he isn't angry, or that he's fine just sitting on the steps and watching the hallway for Harry to come back home like he had the past three times Harry went to some meeting (*meeting, bull shit, you don't come back from meetings and return covered in blood*) or sat to stake out a house. He didn't know where he was going or how long he would be there, if it was dangerous or just routine, if he was alone or the rest of the order was at his back. Draco was just so damn tired of being kept out of the loop.

"Give me a nightingale." Draco slides into the bar, keeping his collar thrown up around his face. He had been intending to go to the Leaky Cauldron like every other sad wizard does, but ducked into this muggle bar at the last instant, picking a drink off the menu at random. "Make it quick."

"So demanding." The voice, recognizable in a place where Draco thought he would be able to avoid people he knew, made Draco jump. Behind him, George is grinning, and he leans around

Draco to whisper his own order to the bartender, who smiles at him before asking if she should make him more than one, or if he was going to take it slow tonight.

"Just one, darling." George clamps his hand down on Draco's shoulder, and even though Draco is almost entirely sure it is meant to be friendly, it still feels like a threat. Like he has no choice but to stay here. "I've got to let my friend here catch up."

The word friend shocks Draco, but he tries not to show it. The situation definitely feels grumpy now.

"What are you doing here?"

George snorts into his drink, drains it in one go, and then takes Draco's when the girl puts it down in front of him. "Oh come. You didn't want that." George grins, and with the dim lighting, you almost can't tell that anything was missing, like he had shown up perfectly whole. "It was terrible."

"Didn't stop you from drinking it." Draco was grumpy. He had come here to be alone and surly, and here was George, walking over like they were best friends and had every right to sit here, pestering him, and drinking Draco's drinks.

"I'm used to it. This is my usual place." He wasn't lying. All the muggles here seemed to know him, from the waiter with the flashy jacket to the bartender, and even a pack of grouchy looking old men by the front door. "You, however, don't belong here."

Draco knew he didn't. Everyone else was in jeans and worn down t-shirts, and Draco had shown up like he was going to a five star restaurant. He couldn't look more like a man who had just stumbled in here on a whim, desperate to run from something.

"I'm trying something out." Draco ordered himself another drink, and took it before George could get his hands on it. "It was working, before you came here."

"Drowning your worries in booze until Harry dear comes back home?" George waves his hand for another, and this time, the girl just leaves the bottle. It seems to suit him better. "Trust me, it won't work. Nothing will take the edge off the wondering."

"How do you know about that?" Draco was pissed, now, because it felt like George knew something he shouldn't, and he was also feeling like he was poking fun about Draco's feelings for Harry. That would start a whole new round of problems, if everyone and their mother knew that he was in love with the world's savior.

"Harry swung by the shop today. Told me all about it. Offered to take me into the fold, if I was up for it." George dug his nails into a chip in the wood. "Told him he could bugger off. No way was I going to get into that again."

Draco should have probably know to let it go, that George was working through some things, but talking to Harry's friends was like picking your way through a minefield- most places were perfectly safe, but one wrong step and you find your world in pieces.

"Why not?"

"What do you mean why not?" He gestures wildly at the side of his head with the bottle, at the shiny mess of tissue where an ear used to be. "I lost my ear. I lost my *brother*. What more do you

want from me?" And of course it would be about Fred, everything that has happened with George over the past year has been about Fred.

"You don't have to stop just because he's not here."

He meant that to be comforting.

(Actually, scratch that, he didn't mean it to be comforting, he was just thinking about the flames and Goyle, and Snape being dead and hailed as a hero without one word to the people like Draco who would actually mourn him, and his father in Azkaban who would be horrified to see how his son turned out, about how he could not stop just because they are gone, and then that fell out of his mouth.)

"you think I'm a coward," George's voice was soft and quiet, and Draco was forcibly reminded that he was Ron's brother, because it seemed like all the Weasley boys would like to punch their feelings instead of working through them. Draco would admire it, if it didn't keep meaning that he found himself thrown up against the wall with their fists inches from his face, hands raised in surrender and trying to fix whatever he had broken. "That I should never have walked away."

"I don't think anything." There was a crowd around them, all these muggles watching with worried faces, and all of them on George's side. "Really, man. Whatever's going on with you, it's cool with me."

George snarls at him, face twisted in a way that makes Draco think he's about to cry, and then shoves away, stalking out the door. Draco pauses long enough to throw money on the bar and then chases after him, ignoring the people who tells him he should let it go.

It doesn't take long to find George, who didn't get very far. He had only turned the corner, and now he was hunched over beneath a streetlight, hands on his knees. He looked like he was about to be sick.

"Are you having a panic attack?" A stupid question, because he was, and even stupider because even though Hermione was forcing them all to read up on their particular traumas, knowing the lingo and knowing how to help aren't the same things.

George doesn't answer, just wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and stood up. "I was going to kick your ass."

"You wouldn't have."

(Lie. It's easier to feel confident when they're ten feet apart, but back there, with the tension running high and no one moving to stop it, he was so, so dead.)

"I've punched you before." George's mouth twitched into a smile as he said it, and Draco had an uncomfortable flash of him curled on the ground, trying to protect himself, George and Harry's fists flying. It had hurt quite a lot.

"I deserved it."

"Yeah." George said, smiling, and there was forgiveness in that syllable, enough so that when he sank down to sit on the curb, Draco thought it was safe to come and sit beside him. "You really were a prat."

Draco choked on a laugh, feeling better than he had all night. "I meant it, though. About not thinking anything about you not fighting." He was wading back into dangerous territory, because apparently Draco doesn't have any self preservation skills. "You've done enough."

George sighed, flopped back onto the sidewalk so he was laying flat on his back. "Try telling that to Harry."

"Trust me," He says, thinking of going back, of getting the first aid supplies ready and staring from the clock to the door and back again, forcing himself to stay awake until Harry comes home. "I'm doing my best."

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

sorry I went away for a while, but I'm back. Please comment if you enjoy

Harry

He wakes to screams.

For a moment, Harry can't figure out where they are coming from. He knows this house is safe Hermione had ensured it, and his countless checking of every lock and corner and crevice meant that there was no way someone could sneak in unnoticed. There was no Voldemort to chase after him, no dementors leeching away his happiness, no vengeful death eaters lurking in the shadows to pay him back for what he had done to his master.

Still, that doesn't stop him from throwing back the covers and grabbing at his wand in a matter of seconds, sprinting down the corridor towards Draco's room, towards the screams, ready to fight off whatever might be hurting him.

Only there's nothing there.

There's only Draco, sitting up with the sheets pooled around his hips and his hands pulling on his hair, bent over at the waist, taking in breaths that were so ragged that they sounded like it hurt, tears streaming down his face as he tries to calm himself down. And now there was Harry, who had thrown the door open so hard it actually cracked the wall behind him, standing there just staring at Draco, with wand clutched in his hand and a curse at his lips.

"What?" Draco was on the defensive in a way that he hadn't been for a long time, maybe since the first night he came here, but Harry supposes being caught in a moment so vulnerable would cause anyone to throw their walls back up. Still, he doesn't want it to turn into a fight, not when things were just seeming to settle into solid ground.

"Nothing." Harry realizes he is still pointing his wand and lowers his arm. It takes a noticeable effort to slide his wand back into his pocket and stop looking into the corners for an invisible enemy, an extreme force of will to remind himself that everything is okay, that they are safe, that Draco is here and whole, even if he isn't completely happy. "I just-,"

Just what? Just heard your screams and thought I'd come running to save you like Prince Charming, and then you would throw yourself into my arms and we'd live happily ever after? Just stand here and stare at you forever because I don't have the words to make you feel better?

"Just wanted to check on me." Draco manages a smile, even if it doesn't sit right on his face. It makes something in Harry's chest twist, like someone had reached their hand inside him and squeezed. "I get it." They're still just staring at each other. "But I'm fine."

"Are you really?"

Harry would not walk away from this one. Not this time. He'd let Draco push him away every other time, every time Harry tried to show him how he felt or tried to save him or even just tried to kiss him, just the one time so he knew what it felt like, but he could not, he *would* not, turn his back on this time.

"Of course not." Draco sounded like a bit of his old self again, exasperated in the way he is every time Harry says something he thinks is stupid. "But there's nothing you can do about it, is there?"

Harry still doesn't move, just stands there, thinking of all the nights they've had before this, where they both lie awake in the separate rooms and stare at the ceiling, thinking of the ghosts that still must be haunting them. Where they Draco cleans until his skin is rubbed raw from the bleach and Harry climbs through every corner of the house. How they sleep and face their ghosts alone, all those heroes and martyrs and old friends that only show up in their dreams, and a part of them is selfish enough to like it, even though it would be better for everyone involved if they would learn to let go.

"Don't be stupid." Harry crosses the room, the floorboards creaking under his bare feet. He wants Draco to give him a sign if this is okay or not, if he should keep going or turn away, but he gets nothing, just Draco's eyes roaming every line of Harry's face, maybe trying to find some sort of signal himself. "There's always something."

"Harry-,"

Draco swallows his protest, and Harry pulls back the covers, climbs underneath them, right beside them. He tells himself that this is the right thing and not a huge mistake, that one of them will have to make the first move if either of them want any peace. Tells himself that between the two of them, he has always been the brave one, and this is what brave people do: crawl under the covers with a man that he loves, a man that he thinks loves him back but will never admit it, and waits for him to walk away.

"Shut up." Harry punches at the pillow just to give himself something to do and then lays down, staring at the ceiling, wondering if it was worth it if he was just going to be doing the same damn thing, waiting, watching the whole night instead of sleeping. "Just sleep, Draco."

He feels him watching in the darkness, and part of him wants to reach up and touch his face, to slide his hand up his arm and trace the veins that stand out against the skin. To pull him down to him, trace along the edges of the dark mark, tell Draco that he loves him and not have it be refuted on the sole basis of what they used to be to each other.

"I never sleep," Draco says, but there is no longer any frantic breathing, and in the end, he does lay back down beside him, even if Harry is sure that neither of them get much sleep.

The next night, Draco makes himself a sleeping draught.

Harry tries not to think that it's anything to do with him.

They're still not sleeping, either of them.

Harry keeps going around the house, even though it was a habit that he thought he had been able to stop ages ago. He peeks behind curtains, moves chairs around the room to see if anything is hiding behind them. He pulls on doorknobs and rummages through cupboards, shoves the clothes to either side of the closet so he can see all the way to the back. Harry manages to stop short of poking his way through Draco's room, contenting himself with pressing his ear to the heavy oak door and seeing if he can hear anything.

(He doesn't ask Kreacher to check up on him, no matter what Draco might have suggested the next morning.)

He knows Draco isn't sleeping either. Things keep showing up cleaner than ever, and Harry stumbles down to the kitchen in the morning to find a full breakfast waiting for him, even if there is no Draco in sight. His hands are always raw and chapped, too, even when Hermione started leaving some of her lotion for him to try.

"This isn't working." Harry tells him one night, when the two of them find themselves in the kitchen at the same time. Harry had been triple checking the locks on the front door, and Draco was scrubbing the floors by hand. He couldn't tell which one of them was more embarrassed to be caught. "Not for either of us."

"That's what sleeping draughts are for." Draco was talking from his place on the ground, then realized how it must have looked, so he got up, knees groaning and soap suds dripping off his hands. "That's all I was waiting for."

Right, Harry thinks, looking at the bucket and the collection of sponges on the counter. Like you weren't going to bottle it up to use tomorrow and just keep going, from the floor to the windows to the kitchen sink, and then to the bathroom, all of which is practically spotless because I know for a fact that you cleaned the whole downstairs the night before.

"Whatever." Harry's annoyed, suddenly, because if it wasn't for Draco and his stubborn idea that he could do everything on his own, Harry wouldn't have to do this. Instead, he could just wake up and turn his head to the side and reassure himself that Draco was still there, still alright, still breathing, how neither of them were about to be murdered by death eaters. He could just check the room, then, not the whole house, and when Draco started with his compulsive cleaning, Harry would be able to bring him back to bed. It would work out better for both of them.

"Harry." Harry doesn't turn around, and then there is a hand on his arm, so light he could ignore it but so pleading that he doesn't. "Wait."

Harry does wait. And he turns around, finding him face to face with a steaming goblet full of Draco's potion.

Part of him, the nasty part, wants to say no. That if Draco doesn't want his help, Harry won't be taking anything from him. But he can't quite bring himself to do it.

He takes the goblet, forces himself to try and show a bit of gratitude. "Thanks."

Draco isn't fooled, but that doesn't stop him from tapping the rim of his own cup against Harry's, quirked an eyebrow together. "Cheers."

They drink it together, but when Harry goes back to bed, Draco stays.

There's screaming again, but this time, Harry stays in bed.

He counts the cracks in the ceiling, discovers that there's fifty-seven of them, and then counts them again. And again. He keeps trying to tell himself everything is fine, that no one is attacking anyone, that there is nothing hiding in his closet or under the bed, that if anything, he needs to call Hermione like she had told him to, anything to stop this before it starts, because *Draco is fine, you are fine, stop being an idiot.*

Only everything must not have been fine, because the door creaks open a second later. Harry almost hexes the person standing in the doorway before the brain catches up with his panic and he realizes that it was Draco he was about to send to St. Mungo's.

"Draco?" He sits up and blinks against the blurry image in front of him, groping in the darkness for his glasses. "What's wrong?"

"Don't say anything." Even though Harry had heard it every day, he still wasn't used to this pleading tone in Draco's voice, how he asks instead of demands, and asks it in a way that made it clear he was expecting to be turned away each time. "Please don't say anything."

"Okay." Harry didn't understand what he was supposed to do. He didn't know how to help anyone, anymore. "What do you want?"

"Can I just stay here?" He looked so small, hunched in on himself when he should be filling up the room. "Just for tonight."

"Yeah." Harry scrambles for the lamp and then winces at the sudden light, trying to clear a space beside him. It was an incredibly small bed. "Anything."

Anything. It was such a small word, but it meant so much. Draco didn't seem to have time for second thoughts tonight, just walked to the edge of the bed, hesitating before going any further.

"It's alright Draco." Harry reaches up and pulls Draco's hand away, the one he had been using to claw at his arm. "It's going to be okay."

"It won't," Draco says, shoulders shuddering, but he still gets into the head, falling into it more than climbing, like it had taken all his strength just to get this far. He buries himself in the covers and turns away from Harry, leaving him to decide how to do this.

You said you were the brave one, Harry thinks, reaching his arm around Draco and hoping he won't be turned away this time. *You said you'd be the one to make this easier for him.*

He's not sure that it's going to let them sleep easier, but it has to be better to count each other's breaths than counts in the ceiling. Harry just hopes that Draco feels the same way.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

comments appreciated guys

Harry

They're both staring down at the owl.

It's a tight scroll, the ministry signature embossed across the seal in wax so golden it almost seems to shimmer. Neither of them make a move to break it open, too afraid of what might be hiding inside- a death notice, an arrest warrant, a call to arms, or maybe even worse, a notice that Draco was somehow forgiven and would be free to leave any moment he so chooses. In Harry's experience, the ministry rarely brings good news.

"Do you want to open it?" Draco's voice is hushed. They've both gotten quiet since the whole *sleeping in the same bed* thing started, like now they didn't need to worry about drawing attention to each other. Whenever Draco wanted noticing, Harry was already looking.

"No." Harry holds the scroll out to him, the owl hooting balefully at the window, waiting for one of them to sign the scrap of paper saying that it was received and understood. "It's addressed to you."

Harry wanted to know what was inside as badly as he needed to keep breathing, but he also didn't have a clue what it might contain, and as he watched the emotions flicked across Draco's face, he realized that maybe he didn't want to.

"What?" Draco through the parchment down to the table in disgust and Harry ripped it up. "What's wrong?"

"They've cleared the manor." Draco's hands are shaking again. Harry had thought it was getting better. "All evidence has been removed, everything dangerous taken out, and the property is returned to the only next of kin with a clear name." His tone made it clear what he thought about all of this, dripping in derision. "*Me.*"

Harry didn't know what was upsetting him so much, if it was the manor and the memories it held, of the fact that the ministry had the audacity to claim it as their own in the sake of justice, or maybe it was the fact that they considered him with the best reputation.

"That's a good thing, right?" He felt like he was treading into unknown waters, where he won't know how deep it goes until he takes the step off solid ground and falls down into the deep. He never had learned to swim. "To have your home back?"

Draco looked at him like he was stupid, then threw that scrap of parchment into the fire, not relaxing until he sees the corners curl and blacken. "You can't go home again, Harry." He passed behind him and clapped a hand down on his shoulder in a way that might have considered

friendly, had they not been half asleep with their arms wrapped around each other only hours before. "Not even sure I'd want to."

Draco

Can't go home again Harry, Draco had said, leaving the room like he was leaving real life behind, like walking away from a problem was the same thing as solving it.

He had thought that burning up the letter and pushing it to the back of his mind was the best option, because then, at least, he would never have to stop foot in it again. But then the owls kept coming, one the next morning and that night and the next and the next and the next, and finally one demanding his presence in the legal department of the ministry.

"They can't make you go," Hermione tells him, when they've traded out their musty old potion books for fashion magazines, poring over dresses for her to wear to a formal. "If you wait another thirty days, it'll be turned over to the state and they'll sell it to collect money for some charity or another."

"Another thirty days of owls?" Draco had snorted out, feigning horror, but that wasn't really what was bothering. He didn't like the thought of strangers combing through his home, and even if it was mostly bad, he didn't want the Malfoy Manor's history to be boiled down to this: raffled off in some auction just to be torn down, destroyed for its minerals and marble and turned into scrap, just a blank stretch of land on the face of the earth, all because the last Malfoy was a coward. Horrible things had happened there, but it deserved better than that.

He doesn't ever really make a decision. Just one day he gets up before Harry does and gets dressed, telling himself that he was just going for a walk. And then he turned towards the town, and then he was in London, and then he was flooing his way into the public entrance of the ministry, turning his wand over to a witch that didn't recognize him and following the map to where they said legal was, collar turned up to hide his face.

"Hey." There's a witch behind the desk in bright purple robes, so he chooses to go up to her for help, figuring anyone that dresses like that can't be too painful, but then she turns to face him and he sees it's Lavender, who supposedly hadn't been out of the house since the war, sitting there scars and all.

"Draco." She taps her feather on the window between them. He knows it's hers because it's bright yellow and has a puff ball on the top of it. "What can I do for you?"

He cannot stop staring at her, and then immediately feels horrible about it, so he looks at his shoes instead. Greyback had mauled her pretty bad. "The ministry sent me letters." He rummages in his pocket for one of them. "About the manor."

She clicks her tongue and reads over the parchment, and it makes Draco feel like a prat, because what kind of person has a manor? But she doesn't seem to care. "Yeah, we've got that." Lavender didn't get up, just wheeled her chair across the room and rummaged through cabinets

until she came up with an envelope. "Here's the key. And you've just got to sign here, and it's yours."

Draco fumbled for the pen, and she smiled at him, as bright as he could remember her being at Hogwarts, if a little less giddy. "Right. Thanks." He'd done what he came for, technically, but it doesn't seem like enough. "How have you been?"

"good." Considering that they've never had a nice word to say about each other, she seemed surprisingly ready to talk. Maybe it was depressing, hiding here down in the dark all day, just waiting for someone to claim dead people's possessions. "Heard you're living with Harry."

She waggles her eyebrows at him, and despite himself, Draco could feel himself getting flustered. "Not like that." *What was it like, then? You sleep in the same bed.* "Court ordered babysitting, basically. Kept me out of jail."

He tries to shrug like that doesn't mean anything, but she smiles like she knows better. And maybe she does. Lavender did always have an annoying habit of knowing everything about everybody. "That's not what I've heard." She gives him one last tired smile and raps her quill against the glass one last time. "See you around, Draco."

"Yeah." Part of him wants to invite her to him and Harry's, just to catch up, but a bigger part tells him that maybe he should take this one in baby steps. "I'll see you."

Harry

They had made it all through dinner without Harry asking him what was wrong. And when Draco had finally told him the truth, he had to admit, the last thing he thought he would be hearing is that he wanted Harry to go into the manor with him.

"I know you don't want to." Draco said, everything coming out in a rush, looking like he might throw up that meat loaf he had painstakingly cooked. "But I can't do it alone, and I just need to this, Harry, I need to-,"

And Harry, not thinking about what he was agreeing to, not thinking about anything but making Draco feel better, said yes.

Which is all well and good in theory, but its quite another thing to stand beside Draco and try to be strong for him when he pushes open heavy oak doors that make you want to puke. Harry could remember every awful moment he had been inside this house- Bellatrix's breath sour on his face, Ron pounding on the dungeon door, Hermione's screams, and Dobby afterwards, a chandelier crashing, *what a beautiful place to be with friends-* stop.

"Jesus." Draco pushed the door the rest of the way open and then just stood in the middle of the room, in the middle of all the debris and clutter. "They sure didn't bother with a clean up crew, did they?"

They hadn't. It looked like they had torn through every inch of this place to try and find whatever darkness might be hiding, ripping off the wall paper and tearing the chandelier down (for the second time, not that they knew it). There were spiderwebs spreading through the hallways like lace curtains, dust and grime gathering on the floor, rats scurrying in the corner.

"My father," Draco started, and Harry had heard those words so many times he could hear them in his sleep, a sneer on his face and a threat in his tone. "Would have rather died than let this happen."

Harry snorts. "Oh, come on." He picks up half a marble bust, the nose shattered off and the rest of it laying on the floor. "This still sort of looks like him, don't you think?"

"That wasn't him, you prat." Draco shoves his shoulder into Harry, but at least now he smiles. "That was some old greek dude."

He stands in the middle of the wreckage a moment longer and then kicks out at the chandelier, which doesn't move it an inch but must have hurt him. "Come on." He reaches out to Harry, leading him forward. This was his home, after all. "We've got a lot of ground to cover."

They head down to the basement, because apparently they had a secret hide away down there, and Draco wants to make sure someone trustworthy witnesses that he's going to turn everything in, no matter how many galleons it was worth.

"Nope." Draco slammed the door closed again, wiping the dust off on his pants. "The bastards got everything, Harry, we can-," He paused, noticing that Harry was no longer listening, was no longer even in the same room. "Harry?"

"I always wondered." Harry said, his words sounding a little strangled. "Why someone would build a house equipped with a dungeon."

They were back in that same room, and now Harry couldn't block it out- Ron's fist into the metal door, the blood trailing down Hermione's arms, Luna closing Dobby's eyes for the last time. It was too much, too soon, and he feels his throat close up with the sudden panic of needing to *get out*, but then there is a hand on his arm, drawing him back.

"Harry."

Draco's eyes are sad, and Harry didn't want that, that was the exact opposite of what he wanted. "I mean," He forces a laugh. "What kind of pretentious asshole builds a house like this and thinks, yes, I'm going to need to hold some prisoners captive for a bit, better build an old fashioned dungeon?"

"It was a very old house." Apparently they were playing their game of pretending that everything was fine. "Maybe that was the fashion back then."

"The fashion?"

"Yeah, you know, like..." He was casting around for words, for any distraction. "Like the pointlessness of your uncle's fake fireplace? Like that kind of thing."

Harry snorted, and maybe the reminder of his uncle and the memories in this room cancelled each other out, because suddenly he felt better. Two negatives making a positive.

"It's ugly, whatever it was." He reaches out a hand to Draco and is relieved when he took it. "Let's get out of here."

Draco

Maybe he hadn't thought this through.

It would have been one thing to come here on his own, put things back in order, try to get it ready to be habitable again. It was quite another to bring Harry here, Harry who had almost died here, who was held captive and listened to his best friend be tortured, who escaped with seconds to spare, which Draco paid the price for. There was enough bad memories without making Harry want to punch him with every turn of the house.

"you need to go anywhere else?" Harry appeared at his shoulder like he was popping out of thin air, his voice so loud Draco half expected the dust to fall from the ceiling. Nothing happens, except some rats scurry away from them, and Draco feels sick.

"No." He hears himself say it but doesn't not remember deciding to. The roaring in his ears was too loud. "I just need some air."

He pushes away from him and out what used to be a window but was now just a crumbling hole in the wall. He trips over a chunk of marble but keeps going, out into the damp grass that had grown into tangles up to his knees, sinking down into the ground, tilting his head back to stare up at the sky.

"When's it going to get better?" He's not sure who he's yelling at. Draco never had believed in God, but you had to blame *something* when your life has this level of shit in it, and he seems like a good a person as any. "Huh? When are you ever going to let me have some peace?"

He reaches out beside him and finds a chunk of stone, and then a crystal, pieces of his house that they had blown to kingdom come, and its the first time that he realizes it was not their investigation that made his house look the way it does. It was people, people who were hurting and angry and afraid, who stayed after their shift and blasted this place apart piece by piece and watched it all rain down into ruins.

It was a house, he though savagely. A really good house. The hell did it ever do to you?

He wants to stay out here forever, keep cursing at the stars, maybe burn the whole thing down and himself with it. Burn the whole world down just to prove that he could. But he doesn't, because Harry is still there, walking across the lawn like he hadn't noticed Draco's tantrum and sitting down beside him, never mind that the ground was so wet it would soak through his jeans.

"We could fix it back up." Harry's tapping his wand against his knee, and Draco has to put his hand on his wrist to stop him from burning a hole through his jeans. "I'm good at fixing things."

"I thought I would want to." That was the other thing that was bothering, the sense of wrong that came from walking through the house, how every part of him was screaming at him just to board it all up and throw away the key. "But I don't."

"Course you don't, it's got rats in it." Harry still wasn't hearing him. He liked to fix things, Harry did, and this was the biggest project he could possibly undertake. "But we can fix that, too."

"No, I mean." Draco's crying and laughing at the same time, leaning into Harry for support, and even with everything, he still has time to wonder how they aren't dating yet. "I don't *want* to. Like, I can imagine nothing more likely to make me want to stab my eye balls out."

"Oh."

Yeah. Oh. "I thought I'd walk in here and fix it up and when the year ended, I'd come back here with mother and everything would be the same. But it's not the same. Nothing is. Not you, not my family, not this house. And definitely not me."

They're both quiet for a moment.

"Moving on isn't so bad. But hanging on isn't completely terrible, either." Harry stood up, and they faced that crumbling place together, a house that he can no longer call his home. "We don't have to decide now."

"I want to burn it down." Draco decides, and he feels better with a plan. "Build something else in his place. Somewhere he never touched."

"Or we could keep it. Just needs a little TLC." Harry grins down at him, making Draco notice for the first time that he was officially the shorter one. "But whatever we -you- decide, I'll be there every step of the way. You won't be doing it alone."

"Together, huh?" They've still got their hands linked together. "I like the sound of that."

"Yeah." Harry squeezes his hand, and they are off, picking their way through the tall grass, going home, even though suddenly, Draco wanted to stay. To show him the balcony that let him look out over the old wood, to take him out to the old fountain, show him the tree house that Dobby had magicked together for his sixth birthday. The good things, but there would be time for that later.

Chapter 24

Harry

He can't say no.

He's tried to think of ways to say no without losing face ever since he got the owl. And the owl after that. And the owl after that one, all of them formally requesting his presence at the ministry event that was going to be celebrating the official start of Kingsley's time in office and where they would be honoring some of the people who made this new era possible. Harry knew that other people would be invited (Ron and Hermione, Dean and Seamus, Ginny and Luna and Neville, just among his friends) but that still didn't make the idea of voluntarily putting himself in the spotlight any easier.

"What's the big deal?" Draco was leaning over his shoulder, reading through the tenth owl they had sent him, this one even more desperate than the last and written in red ink so vivid that Harry thought it was likely to combust. "It's just a party. I used to go to those all the time."

Draco's finding it easier to talk about what used to be ever since they had gone to the manor, like now that he had seen his past in ruins he had no problem with moving forward. Like maybe he was finally going to stop punishing himself.

"The big deal is that they're going to ask me to talk." Harry buried his hands in his hair, because there would be no good way to get out of this. Part of him must have thought that he could just ignore it and it would go away, the way he used to ignore the invites to go to Hogsmeade from giggling groups of girls back at Hogwarts. This time, though, he would have to give them an answer, and now that there was nothing to fight against, Harry was finding that he had trouble telling people no. "And I'm going to have to stand in front of everyone and say thank you when they present me with some award, even though they never wanted to help me back when I needed it. And I'll have to talk to people I've never met, and fend off reporters, and -Merlin, I'm going to have to dress up, aren't I?"

(It's black tie. Of course he's going to have to dress up, which means that he was going to have to go shopping, because there was no way that those dress robes from fourth year still fit him, and God knows running away from the worst wizard in history didn't leave you time for dressing up.)

"I'm pretty sure I have something you can wear." Draco sat down across from him and started slurping up his cereal. Ever since they started sleeping in the same bed, Draco hadn't woken up in the middle of the night and been forced to fill up the empty hours, which means there is no home cooked breakfast waiting when Harry comes down the stairs. He thinks it's a fair trade. "You're running out of excuses, Potter."

Draco was laughing at him in the way he does when he thinks Harry is being silly, his mouth twisting up into a smirk. Harry doesn't know how to explain the real problem with being the center of attention- that how sometimes it winds you down, picks off pieces of you, takes away all your edges until you have nothing to protect yourself and there is no tough skin to hide behind, only you and the ugly truth of the public opinion. And there's also the other part, about how going there and smiling and accepting their thanks would seem like he was more important than the others who had risked life and limb to fight beside him, to fight for him, and he couldn't

stomach it, not when the only thing Harry can really think he is being congratulated on is the fact that he had been lucky enough to stay alive, even though he had tried to die.

(Here's the thing, the little thought in his head that he isn't telling anyone, certainly not Hermione: He should have protected them all. That's what he was trying to do, by walking into that forest. He should have protected them, or he should have died with them, and he didn't quite manage to do either, so what kind of a hero does that make him?)

"They want to know if I have a plus one." Harry reads over the letter for the third time, already ripping off a piece of parchment to send a RSVP. "Who do they think I'm taking? Everyone knows that Ginny and I broke up."

They did. It was front page news as soon as it happened. Even the Quibbler covered it, which was sort of endearing more than annoying, because Luna had written it in her *HERE'S WHAT MY FRIENDS HAVE BEEN DOING LATELY* column, and Harry didn't have it in him to be mad at her.

"You could take me." There's forced casualness in his voice, and even though they've gotten past the point where they pretend around each other, Draco is avoiding Harry's eyes. "I'd be able to help."

Like that's the reason that Harry would want to take him. Because he'd be able to help.

"Yeah." Harry had to clear his throat twice before he could get the word out, because this is raising more questions than it is answers, like if it's a date and whether Draco wanted it to be a date, if this was part of their attempt to keep moving forward, if Harry should be expecting things to change if they go public like this. "Yeah, I'd like that a lot."

Draco smiles, even though he still is not looking his way. "You would?"

Harry doesn't know what to do with him when he is like this, so he just smiles, too, and goes to the cupboard to make his own bowl of cereal, wondering what in the world he was going to wear.

He makes it until thirty minutes before the party before he starts to freak out.

Harry's wearing an old suit of Draco's, because apparently it's in fashion to wear muggle formal wear to things now (*or at least, if it's not in fashion, it will be after they see the two of us wearing it, and it'll be easier to take you shopping at a muggle place, anyways*) and it feels like the collar is strangling him. He tugs at it, hearing Hermione's voice in his head telling him to leave it alone, and looks at his reflection in the glassware cupboard, nervously trying to flatten his hair, even though Ginny had reassured him at this point in his life, it keeps him from looking less like he's trying too hard and more bad boy chic.

He doesn't know what that means, but if Ginny says he looks fine than he probably does, so he spends the rest of the time pacing the living room floor, and it's only the thought of how excited this had made Draco that keeps him from going to the bottom of the steps and cancelling on him, saying screw it and locking the door and throwing himself down on the couch, and he won't ever

make the mistake of giving into the pressure again, even if they send so many owls the letters fill up the whole house.

"Draco?" He swings himself around on the bannister, even though the wood was creaking in protest. Harry spends half his time seeing how far he can go before this old house breaks, just so he has an excuse to fix it up. So far, no luck. Wizards make things for keeps, apparently. "You almost ready? We're going to be late."

Not really, but Hermione wanted pictures, and she also wanted Draco's opinion on her dress before she throws herself at the mercy of the mob. Ron's written and said that she had spent all day getting ready, with that hair sleeking potion and doing her nails. It seems that childhood taunts had made her unwilling to go if she looked anything less than perfect.

"We're not going to be late," Draco says, and there's creaking of the steps behind him. Harry knows without turning around that Draco is rolling his eyes and putting the finishing touches on his hair at the same time, like there's a string twisting the two of them together so Harry knows exactly what's happening with him at all times. "You can't rush beauty."

Harry's already forming a response, the words right on the tip of his tongue, but then he turns around and forgets anything he might have said, because even though he knew that he found Draco attractive, this was the first time that he was caught off guard enough to allow himself to look without feeling guilty.

"You look..." He's in a new suit, too, this one grey. He's in incredibly muted colors, with his pale skin and light hair and the dark grey of his suit, like he wanted to melt into the background while giving Harry all the room to shine, but there was nothing that would let him fall out of sight when he's walking around looking like this. "Amazing."

"Thanks." Draco scratches at his collar, but other than that, there's no sign that he was flustered at all. "You do too." He didn't. Harry didn't look bad, but he didn't look great, not the way Draco did, like he was going to be the only thing in the room worth looking at. "Except for the tie, you.."

Harry fumbled at it for a moment, and then Draco was there, pushing his hands away and putting everything back in place, smoothing out the wrinkles and folding the collar just the way that Draco liked it. "Better?"

He's only two inches away. Two inches, and Harry could change everything, but he won't, because he does not want Draco to push him away again. "Better."

The party was almost as awful as Harry had thought it would be.

There's a bunch of important people that Harry doesn't know the names of, and they all want to thank him for his service, his sacrifice, his bravery. It's a wave of introductions and stories and notvery-funny jokes that leaves his head spinning, and he finds himself turning to Draco for support more than he could imagine. Draco picks up the slack without missing a beat every time, asking about the person's relatives or saying the thank you that Harry was sure he was supposed to be the one giving, sending them away so eloquently that they didn't even know they were being dismissed, until every seemed to get over the shock of having THE BOY WHO LIVED in their presence and left him alone.

"Thanks." Harry's breathless with the effort of hanging on to the present. There were half moon circles where his nails had dug into the palms of his hands. It's amazing how even the simplest phrase can send him back- back to the smell of soil in his mouth, to a mother's whisper in his ear, the chill of the stone in his hands, Neville and his sword and Nagini's head, *thump*, the cry McGonagall made, but wait, no, that's not what he's here to think about tonight. "I didn't think it would be that bad."

"That?" Draco grins around the rim of his wine glass. He seems to be enjoying himself, and for the first time, Harry began to realize how odd it was for this boy to let himself be shut in the house the whole day. He was meant to bask in the limelight. "It was nothing. You should have seen me when father was pushing for a bit of legislation to go through- I'd charm them better than any spell could."

He's bragging. Preening, really, coming more alive with each person he talked to, falling back into himself with every person that stops looking at him as an extension of his father and starts to see him as his own person. If nothing else, Harry is glad he came just to have that happen.

"Still." Harry's not as good at this as him. He cannot smile for the cameras and make it look natural, he cannot force laughs, and he cannot remember names of people he does not plan on ever seeing again. "Let's find Ron and Hermione before they come back, alright?"

Draco pouts a bit, but then he sees the new wave of people coming and hastens to agree, cutting a line through the table until they find where Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasley's were sitting.

"Oh, good." Hermione's a bit pink in the face, a little breathless, and Harry has to wonder if she had remembered to take her calming draught before she came. Maybe Ron hadn't managed to talk her into. "They're about to start the presentation."

"Presentation?"

"Oh, you know." Ron leans around Hermione. He seems to have decided to ignore Draco altogether, which Harry is grateful for, because it might be the only good solution they could agree on. Clearly, they aren't ever going to become friends. "Where we all clap for Kingsley, and everyone thanks us and pretends that they were on our side the whole time."

Harry snorts. It's funny, but it's also not, because it's been hard to forget the days where everyone would sneer at him, where they all thought that he was crazy and heard voices just to cover up the truth, how so many of them hid while he was leading the fight.

"You just have to smile." There's a hand in his, peeling back his fingers, pads of his thumbs smoothing over where his nails had dug in, like Draco was trying to make his pain go away. "That's all you have to do."

He kept smiling.

He smiled when they said his name, and he smiled when he wove through the tables. He smiled when they reached out to touch him, their fingers brushing his robes, like they all wanted a piece of him, so they could go home and tell their neighbors and their kids and their relatives that they

had laid a hand on his skin, like they have a claim to him. He smiled when he shook hands with Kingsley, even though he didn't smile as his bravery was recounted and he was told he would be accepting this token of their gratitude on behalf of all those who had fought in the war, and he smiled all the way back to his seat.

"You did it." Draco had only stood up to let Harry back into his seat, but for a moment, Harry was overwhelmed with the feeling of gratitude for him. He could not have done this without him. "You're all done."

Harry pulled him into a hug, even though everyone was watching, even though he could hear the pops of cameras going in the sidelines, even though he was aware of the rumors it would start. He didn't care. He could pretend that it was a brotherly hug, even though it was nothing like the kind he would have with Ron. They would all just have to get over it.

It turns out to not be that bad of a night.

He spends a lot of it with Ron by the dessert table, piling their plates high with food, because, as Kingsley had said, they were saviors and could eat as much cake as they wanted, no matter how much it cost the ministry. He talks to Dean, giving a few exclusive comments for his article, and then he dances with Luna while Ginny went to talk to the manager of the Harpies, who she had said were *my favorite team ever, Harry, I have to get a good word in, take care of Luna, will you?*

Not that Luna needed taken care of, but it was sometimes better for her to stay with friends so she didn't wander off, so Harry sways back and forth with her in the middle of the dance floor until Draco shows up behind her, tapping her on the shoulder and looking more nervous than Harry had seen him in a while.

"Hey, Luna." He's shifting his weight from one foot to another, like all the confidence he gained had been swept away. "Mind if I cut in?"

"Oh, alright." She's smiling, like she knows something they don't. "I need to clear away from the gnargles, anyways."

Draco looks like he's going to laugh. He hasn't quite managed to the art of following a conversation with her yet, even though Harry knows he loves Luna just as much as he does, so he waits until Luna has turned her back to raise an eyebrow, and they both burst out laughing.

"I didn't need saving." Harry says, and they are revolving on the spot by now. "She's a much better dancer than I am. Wasn't stepping on my feet or anything."

"Oh, I." Draco drops his hands with a flutter and then steps away, smoothing invisible wrinkles out from his sleeve. "I wasn't trying to save you. I just wanted to dance, but."

Harry doesn't want to hear the rest of the sentence. "Don't be stupid." He grabs him by his expensive suit jacket and pulls him back. "But I should warn you. I'm a really bad dancer."

Draco gives a little huff of a laugh, but if he says anything else, it gets lost in the music. They stay together for one song and then another, long enough for Harry to learn exactly how much shorter Draco is than him (a fact he keeps forgetting) and memorize the scent of his cologne, the one he only wears when he is trying to impress. He catches sight of Seamus and Dean together across the room, curved around each other, and when they rotate to face each other again, Harry can see Seamus flashing a thumbs up. He's not sure if they approve of his choices, but they all seem glad that he's found a guy, even if that guy is a Slytherin. He only wished Draco would feel the same way.

"You really are good at this." Harry's whispering into his ear, afraid of someone overhearing but unwilling to let it go unsaid. "Making people see things your way. Making them see you."

"It's the only thing I'm good at." Draco says, his voice just a murmur. He's got his hands tucked underneath Harry's suit jacket, and now there is the only thin fabric of his dress shirt separating their skin. "I used to think that it was important."

"It was." Harry swallowed down the other things he wanted to say, about how glad he was that Draco was here, about how beautiful Draco was, about how he would take them home right this minute and just keep dancing, turning around in the living room. "Saved my life tonight."

"Not as important as you." Draco was looking up at him from beneath his eyelashes, and Harry had never noticed how long they were before. There were a lot of things he had never noticed, and all of them are suddenly information he can't believe that he had missed for so long. "They all love you."

"Not me. They love the boy who lived." Harry didn't want to think about that. Tonight was a good night. "They don't even know who I am."

"I do." Draco seems on the verge of something. "I know you. And-," He falters, and Harry can feel his fingers flutter, just a tiny shake against his shirt, like the beating of a butterfly. "You're important to me. You know that, right?"

Harry thinks this an apology. A way to say sorry. A way for Draco to say that he loves him without actually saying it, but Harry doesn't care. He can wait. In the meantime, he would take this.

"Yeah, Draco. I know." He presses a kiss down to the top of his head, and then steps away, because the song is ending and if they stay together for another, it would draw more stares than they were already getting. It's almost with an afterthought that Harry bends down and kisses him on the cheek, so close to the corner of his mouth that it is almost on his lips, like this is just another thing where he would press the boundaries until it breaks, ruin this, too, with his recklessness. Harry doesn't want that, but he wants more, and it's almost worth the risk.

Chapter 25

Draco

He's happy.

For a moment, Draco can't remember why, only that he had gotten the best night's sleep that he had had in ages and there was no panic lurking in the back of throat, only the sun streaming in through the open curtains and sending yellow light scattering over his skin. He rubs the sleep out of his eyes like he's smoothing wrinkles in an old shirt, and it's only when he stretches out an arm to where Harry would normally be (*Draco is always the first one awake*) and touches nothing but the fraying edges of the worn out sheets that he remembers- about the ball, Harry's hand in his as the cameras flashed, the look on Harry's face as he reached out to accept the award that he thinks he only got because he was lucky enough to survive, that dance with Harry's hands on him and his voice whispering in Draco's ear, promising things that he knew better than to believe were going to come true.

There's a knot forming in his stomach at the empty space that was supposed to hold Harry, but he swallows it down, forces himself to calm the anxiety that is beating in time with his pulse. *He woke up early*, he thinks, pushing away the covers and searching around for an old jumper to yank down over his arms. *That's all this is. Nothing more.*

People get up early all the time, but not Harry, and even though that's a little worrying, Draco is still happy as he gets a shower and cleans up the stray remnants of last night (*a shoe here, a stay tie hanging over the back of the chair, a stain from where Harry spilled his cologne*) before heading downstairs, which is when he hears Harry yelling and Dean trying to talk over him as he apologizes, which is when Draco starts to realize that there might be a reason Harry wasn't in bed and that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't that good of a day after all.

"What's the matter?" There's a paper spread out over the kitchen table and Harry leaning back against the counter, red in the face. Dean throws an exasperated look Draco's way, and instead of explaining, he shoves a paper into his chest and waits for him to read it.

"Oh." Draco's voice is small and stunned, and it takes a great deal of effort for him to push the pages away and pretend what he saw didn't matter. "Well.." He looks at Harry, trying to gauge how he is supposed to react to this, but Harry looks the other way. "At least we look good. Got my best angle."

Witch Weekly, which was a subsidy of the Daily Prophet, had apparently sent their own reporter to get the inside scoop of the ministry event last night, and they apparently decided to get the biggest scoop of a story they could and tell the whole wizarding world why the Great Harry Potter broke up with the *beautiful war hero known as Ginny Weasley*, aka, the fact that he doesn't like witches at all. The entire cover was just a collage of the two of them, all these different pictures smashed together, and even Draco had to admit that it looked convincing in a way that was more than a little embarrassing. There's the two of them walking in, the two of them sitting at a table holding hands, and the worst, biggest picture: the two of them on the dance floor, wrapped up in each other with no thought as to who was watching.

It was clear now how big of a mistake that was.

"I thought that with you in charge the Prophet would leave me alone." Harry's voice was dripping acid, and Draco calmed the panic squirming up in his stomach with the thought that it was not the idea that people think he is with Draco that had upset Harry, but rather the fact that people would consider his non-existent relationship with Draco was something newsworthy. "That you would report real stuff."

"The prophet does report real stuff, mate." Dean turned the paper around again, and then winced as the tiny, animated picture of Harry leaned in and kissed Draco on the cheek when he came up to talk to Draco and Hermione. That one was pretty hard to argue with, too. "This isn't the prophet. This is a glorified gossip column."

"A very popular gossip column," Draco said faintly, sinking into the chair and reading all that they reported on last night's event. He had been featured in this magazine before, but never like this. "With a ton of readers who now think we're together."

"You're telling me you're not?" Dean asked, which made things go from angry to awkward in less than a heartbeat. Harry just glowered at him, and Draco clawed at the dark mark hiding under his sleeve, wishing more than ever that he could just wash it away once and for all, even if he has to burn it away. Dean just looks from one to the other and raises his hands in surrender. "Okay. Whatever. None of my business. But listen, Harry. I can't stop them. I just wanted to give you a heads up."

"Can't you make them stop?" Harry looked tired, which was just so unfair, that he could have a night where he was allowed to be happy and have it turn into this, another reminder about how nothing in his life really belongs to him. "Tell them I'm off limits, or something?"

"You kidding?" Dean grins, and he runs a hand through his hair, sheepish but still just as arrogant as he was back in school. "I can't do that Harry. You're a gold mine. Those of us with a vault full of galleons have to make a living somehow, you know."

Draco wants to jump in, demand that he stop and pull the story before the papers go out, tell him that Harry had given enough and it would have been nice if people could go as far to keep their nose out of his business as a thank you, but it's not his friend and therefore not his place, so he stays silent.

"You think you would have gotten their facts right." Harry pushes himself off the counter and heads down the hallway to let Dean out, Draco trailing faintly behind him. "I'm bi, not gay."

"Right." The corner of Dean's mouth twitches up again, and for the first time, he looks a little sorry.

"I'll have a full retraction printed by tomorrow morning. Personal apology and all."

Harry claps him on the shoulder, and Dean leaves, which even though Draco was dying for that to happen, it was even worse when they were left alone.

The thing about the article is that it's showing the whole world a part of themselves that they haven't even sat down and talked about, only danced around, like it's a flame that's fun to chase

but would burn them if they got too close. Draco doesn't want to be the one to bring it up, but it seems like neither does Harry, so they just go about their day, and the whole time that article is in the back of Draco's mind, making him think that they really, really should talk.

And also that maybe they shouldn't talk, because if they start talking then they were going to come to an unavoidable conclusion: that maybe the Witch Weekly lady was right, and they're just pushing off the inevitable, and that everyone around them knows what they are both so desperately trying to get away with not talking about, because they're afraid that one of them will want to walk away. But at this point, where they dance with each other in front of everyone and share a bed and spend most of their time with each other, maybe it's more stupid than anything else to go on thinking that they don't have feelings for each other.

And then what, Draco? The voice pops up again, and Draco tries to quiet it, he really does try, he hates the voice and what it says and the things it makes him think about himself, and he hates it even more because when he takes a step back to look at things objectively, it's not like it's wrong. It's only telling the truth that everyone else is too polite to say. *You go on a date and everything's good for a day, or a week, or a month, but then you get in a fight and he remembers who you are, what you've done, and the next minute you find yourself in a cell in Azkaban and even worse than you started.*

You can't fool yourself that anyone would have cared about you if Harry doesn't.

Which is the truth, and also why he can't be the person to talk about it. He can't because he's afraid, and because even though he loves him, even though he's fairly sure Harry loves him back, Draco has to live with the fact that he is here and free all because of Harry, that this is a debt he will never be able to pay back, and that he should be on his knees groveling for his forgiveness, that he has no right to even exist. If he were to take a chance, it might be fine for a while, but a few mistakes down the road and this nice protection that Harry has given him will go up in smoke like it's not even there. He is free with Harry's blessing, and nothing more, and no matter what Draco had thought before or how much less threatening Azkaban is now that it lacks dementors, he cannot give up freedom now that he has a sense to know what it means.

So he reads the paper instead.

About how Harry and Ginny broke up, only to be replaced by Luna days later in the aftermath of the war. About the sentencing hearing and how Harry stood up, which started a whole other article speculating about whether they had been together before that, maybe even back at their Hogwarts days, and some kids he had never talked to wormed their way into a minute of fame to tell the press that it was definitely a possibility, which, hello, Harry almost killed him in their sixth year, and it wasn't even on accident. Then it goes on to talk about the places they had been sighted together and how last night was their first real public announcement, and by the end of it, Draco could almost be convinced of it himself.

He wants to be convinced of it.

He wants it to be real, wants it in a way that makes him ache, and just for a moment as he closes the paper, he thinks that Azkaban cannot be worse than this.

What's the point of playing it safe if you never learn what it feels like to burn, anyways?

They still sleep together.

Draco had been afraid they wouldn't, and since it is one of the days that they sleep in Harry's room, it is up to Draco to decide whether or not he will be brave enough to try. He knows that Harry will be kind about it, make an excuse about wanting to stay up late or having a head ache, but both of them will know, and Draco didn't want to face that. He stands outside his room for a while, long enough that the ticking of his clock is starting to drive him insane, but then he shifts his weight and the boards creak under his feet and he knows that it is pointless to keep waiting, since Harry knows he is there anyways.

"Hey." He knocks and then pushes the door the rest of the way open, hesitating in the doorway. "Do you still want to..."

He trails off, and Harry glares at him. His hair is even messier than usual. Draco, on the other hand, looks even more put together.

"Shut up." He throws the blankets in what was probably meant to be a sign of welcome but was really just angry looking. "Get over here."

Draco doesn't argue, just crosses the room and then crawls into bed, and then starts the routine of counting Harry's breaths until he can fall asleep. But that doesn't work, because Harry is angry and Draco can tell, so he punches the pillow flat and lays on his back to follow the cracks cutting apart the ceiling like a spiderweb, hoping that might work, too.

It doesn't.

There's a paper sitting on the nightstand, he notices. It's dark, but he can still make out the headline in glowing print and he knows that Harry must have been reading their article up until the moment that he heard Draco outside the door. "Is it because of me?"

He hadn't meant to talk about it. He didn't want to make things bad for either of them. He didn't want Azkaban, didn't want this final sign that he was never going to reach redemption. Draco's learned that if Harry gives up on you, then maybe you aren't worth saving.

"What?"

"The paper. They talked about you and Ginny all the time." Draco claws at the dark mark and then realizes that Harry might feel the motion, so he switches to twisting the sheets between his fingers instead. "Are you so upset this time because its me?"

Until the words were out, he didn't realize how much this mattered to him. How much it bothered him, that even after everything, all the things Harry said and did and all the times he protected him, a part of him still thought of him as that jerk from school who wasn't worth his time, a kid who got wrapped up in things that were way over his head without realizing it and was now just another person for him to reach out a helping hand to. That maybe, just maybe, even with everything, the thing that was keeping them apart was not how much Draco was afraid, but rather the fact deep down, Harry knows who Draco is and that he would never really want him. And if that's the truth, Draco can't even find it in himself to blame him for it.

"No." He can hear the rustling of blankets that meant Harry was jerking back awake, maybe propping himself up on an eyebrow and turning over to look at him, eyes squinting to make the

fuzzy outline of Draco's face a little clearer. Draco doesn't know for sure. He won't turn and face him. "No, of course that's not it. Of course it's nothing to do with you."

If this were different, hands would be reaching out to him, holding him, and maybe Draco would not be so afraid just to turn his head to the right and see if Harry is telling the truth. If things were different, they wouldn't need to be having this conversation.

"Then what?" There's heat in the back of his eyes, and hiding in his throat, and his fingers are trembling again, so he clutches the sheets tighter, half afraid he's going to rip the fabric. "Why are you so upset?"

"Because it was about me." Harry says, and then there are hands on him, one of Harry's hands on his shoulder and the other still on the bed for balance, and this time, Draco really does look at him. "Because we had this nice night, this great night, and it wasn't supposed to be about anything bigger than you and me dancing. And now it's been made into this huge thing, like it meant something it didn't, and it makes me feel like... like..." He falters, searches Draco's face, and Draco can see him swallow. "Like I was supposed to be doing something different. That we were doing something wrong."

"Do you think we are?"

"I didn't." Harry's eyes are wide. "I don't want to be. Do you think we are?"

"Sometimes." Draco broke eye contact and looked at his arm instead, went to trace all the freckles together. He liked doing that, when they were both drifting off to sleep. "But rarely."

"It looked like something it wasn't." Harry said, and it was with the tone of someone who was trying very hard to convince themselves that a lie was the truth. "That's all that was."

"It looked like something because it is something." This was a leap that Draco was not prepared to take- he had never been very good at not getting hurt in the landings. "And they just saw it before we did."

"We can't be something." It pains him to say it, Draco can tell, but that doesn't change the fact that it still stings, to be turned away even when you weren't offering anything. "You said that yourself."

"But I still want it." They are so close that they only have to speak in whispers, and Draco wonders who they were kidding, why they were pretending, how this was any better than just taking that chance and dealing with the fall out. If he were a braver person, he would lean in and kiss him. But he's not. He's the kind of person who looks to save himself before anyone else, who always has escape routes and back up plans, and he will not do something that has the potential to cause him so much pain. "Don't you?"

"Of course I do." His hands are in Draco's hair, now, and he is kind of on top of him now, and there is something digging into Draco's ribs but he doesn't complain, just takes what can be given to him, takes this one time, this one kiss, even if it breaks everything, even if it's the last time he ever got to touch Harry like this. When they break apart, it feels like falling, and there is nothing there to catch him, but there are worse ways to break. "You have to know that."

"I don't." Confessions come easier in darkness. "I've tried telling you, I don't."

"You have to," Harry repeats, a murmur on Draco's skin, and even though he knows this means nothing, that it is just a continuation from the strange feeling that had been left over from the night before, that in the morning there will be awkward silences and awkward grins and a promise to forget this even though they never will, he does not stop it, even when it might have been smarter (*safer*) to do so.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for all your comments!

This chapter goes out to melly_jelly.

Harry

There's a full scale fight going on in Diagon Alley and even though he was in the middle of a duel and curses were whizzing by so close to him he could feel the wind on his skin, all Harry can think about is that this really isn't what he wanted to happen when he was trying to gather enough nerve to tell Draco that it was over.

(Not over, over. He was going to make that clear before he even started talking. They could still live together, and be best friends, and act like they can't function if they don't walk around like they're attached to the hip, but there's certain things that they need to get rid of if they're ever going to manage to become something more. Things like the bed sharing, and the hugging, and the kissing without talking about it, and saying I love you and pretending they mean it platonically even though they both know the words are too heavy in their mouths to mean that little. It wouldn't turn into anything if they kept throwing road blocks up in their own way.)

In Harry's head, his thought process was simple. It wasn't that he didn't want to keep all of that, it was just that he was under the impression that maybe they would have a sturdier foundation if they threw away all their shaky beginnings and started building it all up from scratch. In his head, Draco would understand, and the two of them could shift their not-so-functional relationship into something better, and move past being just friends when they were both standing on solid ground, with Draco not having the knowledge that one word from Harry could send him back to Azkaban hanging over his head.

It was easier to think of saying something than actually forcing the words out, so even though Harry was trying to soften the blow with a night out and ice cream that he bought (*he always buys, because he likes to consider himself a gentleman, even though Draco always scrunches his nose up and gives him this look, like he knows exactly what he's trying to do and thinks it's completely stupid*), he couldn't quite make himself do it. Draco just looked so happy, and for once he wasn't checking over his shoulder for imaginary enemies every five seconds. There was ice cream stuck to the side of his cheek but Harry wasn't telling him, and when they left the store, Draco took Harry's hand in his like there was no question that that was where they belonged.

Like, after all this time, they had just become an extension of each other, and that hurts, hurts so bad that Harry forces the words up from behind the lump that was growing in his throat and tries to make the words crash through the barrier that had formed behind his teeth, but they don't come, not even close. "Draco." Draco turns to face him, and he is holding both hands now, tilting his head to look up at him because he is on the flat ground and Harry is still standing on the step above him. "Draco, I need to tell you something."

He's confused, but he does not look worried. There might have been a time where those words would have sent him into a panic, thinking that this was over and Harry was sending him away, but now their friendship was set in stone, up until the moment Harry says what he had brought him here to say and sends it all crumbling back into pieces. "What's that, Harry?"

Draco also looks beautiful. They are under a streetlight, and his hair, which has grown much to long to be as sleek and shiny as it was back in Hogwarts, falls over his face in a fuzzy halo. Harry resists the urge to push it away from his face and looks up at the sky instead, which is streaked with the last strands of a sunset.

(He's almost sorry that he had to say it in a place this lovely, but he has no other option. He could not do it at home, with all the memories, and he could not bring himself to taint any part of their life with his words. It had to be someplace different, somewhere that had the least chance of following them home.)

"I just..." He gives up on trying to be strong and reaches out to him, and Draco melts into his touch. It could be perfect, if Harry let it. It could be everything, if he would just give up on trying to do things the right way. If he would only stop trying to save him when he might not need saving.

Might not *want* saving. "We need to stop. To do something different."

He still isn't getting it. "What do you mean?" Draco starts to take a step back, falters, and then comes back towards Harry again, because he still cannot fathom the thought that Harry might be the one to hurt him, after all his worry about what strangers might be thinking. "I don't understand."

"I know." Harry takes a deep breath, shakes away the tension that had settled in his shoulders. "We just-,"

He intends to tell him that its over. That's what he had brought him there for, and that's what he was going to do, even if it killed him, just as soon as he gathered up the nerve, but then the street exploded in what he thought must have been half of George's stock of fireworks, and he found that he had run out of time.

Draco

It's like the war again, because spells are flying by him and it's scary and he could die at any moment, but it also isn't, because this time, finally, he is fighting on the right side of things, with Harry disappearing somewhere into the fray, swallowed up by the smoke and the flashes of lights, and George leaping out of the busted display window of his shop, sleeves pushed up to the elbows and robes billowing out behind him.

(It's a glorious entrance, wand spinning and red hair flashing through the smoke and landing in a crouch, a snarl in his voice and a smirk on his face, like he could not wait to tear someone to pieces.

It was almost terrifying to see him, and Draco was kind of jealous.)

"You alright mate?" George crosses the few steps to him like they're seeing each other from opposite ends up of a bar, nothing special, just two friends running into each other after a long

week of work. The glass crunches under his feet, and his eyes are darting around the street, and when he draws even to him, Draco can see that he is bleeding from his daredevil leap through the window.

"I'm fine. You?" He nods down at his arm, which is cut open and bleeding, dripping down his hand and catching at his wand.

"This?" George doesn't even look at it, just flashes a grin at him. "That's nothing mate. Wait and see what I do to them."

It's almost ferocious, the way he walks forward into the smoke. He cuts an impressive figure, and within a few seconds, it becomes clear that he is just as skilled at dueling as he is at charms. George can see his outline even when the fight swallows him up, the vibrant spiky hair and the too-long robes that whip around at his ankles, the snapping of his spells and the bark of his laughter. It's almost like they are watching him come back alive after months of being asleep, right there in Diagon Alley.

Only when he loses sight of both George and Harry does Draco shock himself into action, yanking off his jacket and walking forward. He can't see what he is fighting, but he knows where it is- he can follow the hazy outlines, throws back spells when one comes towards him, and within seconds, it is like he is doing nothing more complicated than following the steps of a dance he had been taught long ago and almost forgotten, stepping backward when they step towards him and pressing forward when they draw back, answering one curse with one hex, hoping beyond hope that Harry is not hurt, even though he lost sight of him long ago.

"Look at you." There's a voice behind him that sounds like gravel, and without turning around, Draco knows who it is, but he turns anyways. "Always were a hotshot."

There's Crabbe, standing in front of him. He had not seen him since the war, since that moment with the fire and Goyle's screams and the burns tearing at their hands like white hot needles. Draco hadn't thought he would see him again. He hadn't even wanted to. Last time he talked to Pansy, he heard that he was in Azkaban, anyways.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He cannot curse him. He knows that the moment he sees him, because the sight of him comes with so much guilt, the sense of knowing that even though they were bad people he had been the one who started them down that path, that the choices they made were in part because of him. He thinks about the first year on the train, about a rat's teeth sinking into knuckles, about sulking along the walls at parties while their collars strangled them, and about stupider things, about the blinding moments of pure friendship, like the time where Crabbe was naming girls and Draco named a guy and neither of them skipped a beat, or when his father first went to jail and Crabbe beat up a third year to make him feel better, which was misguided, but it helped, because all Draco needed was to see someone made smaller than he was feeling.

"You like to show off," Crabbe says, and there is no such hesitation in his movements, Draco can tell. He always was the brutal one, even if Draco planned it. He was the one who liked it just for the sake of hurting someone. Draco had his reasons, because he had been told to push others down in order to stay on top, but Crabbe never needed to ask why. "All flash and no power. But me?" He's advancing on him, a hand reaching out, and Draco will not raise a hand to defend himself. He has debts to pay, and this one, this one little shred of guilt, will be one that he can wash away. "I've got nothing else."

His hand is reaching out and grabbing Draco by the neck, and his wand is raising up, and Draco has just enough time to close his eyes and hope it does not hurt (*he is still a coward, even if he is trying to stop*) when another hand flashes out and hits Crabbe right in the head, sending Draco flying and Crabbe stumbling sideways.

Draco stares down at the now not-so-tough Crabbe, and then he stares up at Ron, who is panting and looking down at Crabbe with something like disgust.

"Jesus." Ron stares at him, and Draco repeats himself, once, twice. "Do you ever remember that you have a wand?"

There's a moment where they both stare at each other in disbelief, and then Ron laughs, then kicks out at Crabbe. "If I leave, can you handle this?" Draco doesn't answer and Ron nods, kicks him again, and then sends silver ropes flying with a wave of his wand, making it impossible for Crabbe to move. "Come on." He claps him on the back, and even though they are not friends, not even close,

Draco can feel the truce that came about in all this magic and dust. "We've got others to fight."

Don't we always, Draco thinks, but he moves forward without a protest, because somewhere in there is Harry, and he will not stop fighting when there is someone like that to follow.

Harry

"Didn't I tell you that I was done fighting?" George demands, but there's no bite behind the words.

They're all at St. Mungo's, each of them nursing their wounds and waving away any actual medical help. He hadn't wanted to come, and neither had anyone else, but Hermione had showed up when she saw the distress call and told the all that it was ministry protocol, and anyone who did not show up would be held in contempt of court, which Harry thought was a lie, but he can't ever tell anymore.

(Whenever he thinks that she's only bluffing, some small part of him that still remembers what it was like to be skinny and small and scared raises his head and reminds him of the time she kept a sadistic reporter in a jar just because she had crossed her, and then Harry decides to play it safe.)

"Sorry." Harry's got a cut over his eye, right through the eyebrow. The nurse could have healed it in a second, scar and all, but the stubborn part of him waited until he got home, where Luna could heal it from the safety of his bathroom. "We didn't know they were going to explode your shop."

"Yeah." George is clearly upset about that, but they won't talk about it now, not when there are so many other things that touches on. Like the idea that it was his home that they attacked, and that they were going after something that was just as much a part of Fred as it was a part of him. It had to hurt, to see the thing they created together torn down. "Not much point to it."

"Of course there's point." Draco is leaning back against the window. The only one of them seriously hurt enough to warrant a bed was Ginny, who had broken her ankle in three places from where she apparently vaulted herself off a roof and had to wait for a specialist.

"And what's that?" Ron wasn't as awful towards him as normal, but there was still a certain snap to his voice whenever he spoke to him.

"Fear. Terror. The idea that nothing is safe." Draco is staring at the ground, and he still looks beautiful, even if he's covered in dirt and grime and blood. Harry remembers what he was going to tell him and is hit with a wave of gratitude that he didn't, because he doesn't think he could bear leaving him behind, ever, and not having the right to demand to know if he was okay.

(There was a moment, where Harry was fighting and he saw Draco get knocked down to the dirt, just one heart stopping moment where he thought he might not be getting back up. And in that moment, he realized how pointless it all was, to throw away what they have today for a tomorrow that wasn't even theirs yet, to let something so perfect slip through his hands.)

(Besides, if the universe was ever going to send him a sign to tell him that he was making a momentous mistake, having a fight break out just before he could choke out the words was a pretty good one.)

"When nothing is sacred, no target too small, everything becomes a place of uncertainty." Draco is still talking, still staring out the window. "Everything is something they can destroy, even the things that don't seem to matter much, outside of what they mean to the people who care about it."

"We should have known." Ginny is white faced with the pain, and she has to speak through gritted teeth. Luna has not left her side since they got here, her hands fluttering from her shoulders to her hair to hovering over where the breaks were, but it wasn't enough. "We should have known the fight wouldn't end with him. There's always something left over."

How could we have known? Harry thinks, when they all nod, grim faced with their fear and the resignation of the battles yet to come. *We're kids playing at a war we don't know how to fight.*

"What's coming will come," He hears himself say, because he is the leader, always, always had that thrust upon him even when he did not want it, and he has to say something to ease the fear. "And we'll meet it when it does."

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

hello I have returned

Harry

Considering that Harry had lived in a dormitory with our other boys for most of his life, he had had his share of moments where he walked in on someone doing something they shouldn't, or that they didn't want others to know about. Like Neville writing in his diary that catalogues the well-being of his plants, or when he catches Ron reading the paperback romances that Hermione had originally bought for him as a joke birthday present or that one time when he walked in on Seamus and Dean kissing before they were ready for anyone to know about.

So he gets the protocol. About how sometimes people living together still want their space, and that the other person sometimes barges in on a private moment without meaning too. That there are things, sometimes not even bad things, just private things, that the other person does not shout to the world. How you have to fight past the embarrassment to make your excuses and exit the room, and a few hours later, you'll both be over it.

It's what Harry should be doing right now, only he couldn't figure out what Draco would be doing that he's embarrassed about.

"Hey." It was late, which meant that he was already asleep. Harry hadn't expected him to be awake- Harry had intended to stay the night at Ron's house after going out to the pub, afraid that he would be too drunk to apparate safely, but by the time the night was over, he found that he was still just as sober as he had been when the day began, so he came home, anyways. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"No, you didn't." Draco said, and then smoothed wrinkles out of the sheets instead of looking him in the eye, mostly because they both knew that he was lying. The only reason Draco had woken up was because Harry had tripped over a pile of books when he walked in and sent them all tumbling to the floor, him along with them. The noise had scared Draco so bad Harry just counted himself lucky he hadn't been hexed. "What are you doing home?"

"Wasn't as late a night as I was expecting." Harry tried to smile, but he couldn't, because something was definitely wrong. It sort of felt like how Harry would have expected the tension to be if he had ever caught someone cheating on him, which is a weird comparison, because there was neither any agreed upon romantic attachment or another person in the room. "Thought I'd come up here."

I meant to stay over but then I was stretched out on their couch with its lumpy cushions and realized that there was no way that I could fall asleep, not without the sound of your breathing to assure me that everything was okay, that we were safe. I thought that you felt the same way. I thought you'd be happy to have me back for the night. You told me that this helps you sleep, too, or was that just something to make me feel better?

"Yeah." Draco still wasn't moving over, not like he always did. He was just sitting there, staring.
"Good. Great."

It takes an embarrassingly long time for Harry to get it. Time where he thinks about how this was all about him, all from some fault he did not know he had, an offense that he had not meant. It takes him through changing his clothes and brushing his teeth and washing his hands twice just to feel the cold water run over his wrists until he turns back to the bed and realizes that something was different.

Draco was wearing a short sleeve shirt.

The fact alone shouldn't have meant anything. It's weird, now that Harry stops to think about it, that he had never seen his roommate in a short sleeve shirt before, now that it is approaching spring and the house gets unbearably stuffy. That he would choose to be completely covered when he wraps himself around Harry and gets buried underneath all the covers.

(This is one of those moments where he can hear Hermione's voice in his head, moaning on about *boys* and how *impossibly obtuse you are, Harry, I can't believe it and you've got the emotional range of a tablespoon, Harry, which is better than Ron but not by much.*)

It means that for the first time during their stay together, Harry can see the dark mark.

He tries to act like everything is normal. He climbs into bed, pulls up the covers, turns so he is laying with his head propped up on Draco's shoulder. Tries to pretend that he is not staring at the shadow of it against Draco's skin.

"I just." There's a frantic scramble where he tries to free himself from the covers and twists to grab the old jumped flung over the desk chair. It's one of Harry's, one Mrs. Weasley made him for the Christmas of his fourth year, the one with the dragon on it. The sleeves are fraying and the colors dull, but its gone through the wash so many times its worn and soft. It's too small on Harry's frame, but it hangs loose on Draco's whenever he wears is. Normally, Harry would love to see him wearing it (*Ginny always said that he had a thing about that, the people he care about being marked as his own, a possessive streak a mile wide, but he tries not to think about his ex-girlfriend in times like this*) but today he stops him.

Draco drops the shirt on the floor, makes a sound in the back of his throat that is only audible because of how close Harry is standing.

"I never wanted you to see it." He's not staring at Harry. He's looking at the ceiling, counting the cracks. "I tried to never let you remember that part of me."

"But I know that part already." Harry doesn't know how to make him understand, if he didn't already, about how none of that matters anymore. About how forgiveness comes easier for him than it does for other people and it comes free, without any thought of asking for repayment. "I don't want you to feel like you need to hide everything from me."

"I didn't want to hide all of it." Draco drops his eyes to Harry's face and manages a smile. "Just this one thing."

Harry steers him over the candlelight, pulls him down to sit on the bed. Draco follows like he had never thought he should protest, like any wish of Harry's is something he wants. There's not even an ounce of hesitation in him when Harry pulls his arm forward, the inside up to face him, like maybe he did want to show him this, after all. Like he's tired of hiding.

"He never wanted us to forget." Draco's voice is bitter, and underneath his hands, Harry can feel him tense. "That even if he was gone, even if we ran, tried to put it behind us, he would always be there. A part of us."

He's a part of all of us. Harry thinks, tracing the edges of the skull with his finger. *What would you say if I told you that I harbored part of his soul, took some of himself into me, was helping some parasitic piece of him live? That for years I could feel what he felt and see what he saw, that my destiny was waiting beneath the skin, right close to the heart, just because he was a coward trying to push away the inevitable?*

It's ugly. Harry wants to tell him that it isn't noticeable, that it was just another part of him, something that was beautiful, in the right light, but he couldn't.

He supposes it must have been pretty, once. That it looked a dignified amount of cruel, sitting there on his skin, black against the pale, when all the edges were defined and the glow of the snake eyes seemed to search you out in the darkness, but it seems that when the protean charm broke, so did the beauty. Now it's a smoky grey, and the edges blur, and it seems to pull and twist the skin in on itself, so the area around it puckers in a scar. And it's covered in scabs.

"You're hurting yourself." There's old marks and new ones, little rips across the dark mark. Harry runs his hands across it and then looks to face Draco.

"Not on purpose," Draco says, and then adds, "Not *for* that purpose."

"What do you mean?" Harry had known what it's like to hurt yourself because others hurt you, because here is pain in this world that you cannot fix and you want to control all of that, somehow. He'd seen that reflected at himself in the mirror and when Hermione works himself to death and when Ron gets so angry he punches a wall, seen it in all of them, raging at the injustices of life.

"I tried to get rid of it." Miserable, defeated, humiliated. "And then I just kept trying."

"I don't want you to hurt." Harry curls into Draco, into his shoulder, and then bends to press his lips on the cuts, like that might make it better. Like if he could want to fix this bad enough, everything would heal. "I don't want you to have to hide."

"I don't want that either." Draco says, and he is crying, sniffing through tears that are welling up over his eyes. "I just didn't want you to be reminded of what I had done every time you looked at me."

"You did nothing wrong." Harry says, slipping to kneel on the floor at Draco's feet. The words aren't true but the feeling behind it is. He does not know how to express that everything that happened was done for a need to survive, because he was a boy, because he got brought up on one side and Harry had been brought up on the other. That the things they both did were decisions born from circumstance. "You did what you had to. That's all any of us were doing."

"I don't want you to hate me."

Harry almost laughs. He remembered when they threw that word around like it meant nothing, like they knew the feeling that should have gone into it, but they hadn't. Being able to hate means being able to want to hurt, by looking at someone and only thinking that they were vile and disgusting and worthless, of wanting them to burn and being the one to light the match.

"I won't." He is still on the floor, still holding Draco's arms, still tracing the edges of the mark, like if he did it enough it would just wash away, slipping from the skin like water. "Never." "Promise?"

Promise that I won't hate you? That I forgive you and I love you and that there's never going to be a moment where I'll turn away from you? That's a done deal, Draco. I made that decision long before I caught sight of what was hiding on your arm.

"Promise."

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

okay guys, two things:

1. This is sort of a dull chapter, but I needed to set some things in motion for the rest of the story. Hope you forgive me.
2. There might be some sort of issue with the comments where sometimes the email notification doesn't come until a lot later than you've left it, and also that it isn't marking when I reply to them, so if you hear from me twice in a row or I reply with something that has nothing to do with what you had commented, just bear with me, I'm sure everything will be back in order soon.

Draco

They've reached a truce, he and the Weasley family.

Draco's not going to kid himself. Most of it is because of Harry and all he had gone through, Harry and how much they love him. They do not want to see him hurting, and for whatever reason, Draco's presence in his life has seemed to soothe the ache that was always waiting right underneath Harry's skin, shave away his broken edges until they were soft again. Even Ron has admitted how it was good for him, however reluctantly and however gruff his voice was when he said it. There was simply no denying it- Harry was eating again (*first because he felt bad when the food Draco cooked went untouched and now because he has remembered what it means to be hungry*), was sleeping, could even leave a window open a crack to let in fresh air without constantly having to watch for intruders.

But some of it- a small part of it, a part he doesn't want to examine too closely because he is half afraid that it might disappear, like the way a pot never boils when you watch it- is because of him. Because friendship with Hermione has turned into a truce with Ron, because a night spent drinking in the storage room of George's shop turned into a real sort of friendship, where they can sit through quidditch games together and be drinking buddies, because Bill has swallowed his resentment and Ginny has taken the knowledge of his friendship with Harry like she has so many other things that she found hard to swallow, with a blazing heart and straightened shoulders and the knowledge that should something go wrong, she would just hex him into oblivion.

It's comforting, even when it isn't.

It's comforting, and when Percy extends an invitation (*an invitation meant for Draco exclusively, independent of his friendship with Harry*) to his casual dinner party on fancy paper, Draco doesn't hesitate to accept. There had never been an ounce of judgement from Percy, no faltering offers of friendship. Maybe he understood what it was like to make the wrong choices. Or more likely, he harbored no resentment for the way Draco used to act, because he had always been so sure that he would rise up to be better, greater even than the Malfoys.

"You got one, too?" Harry's digging through old court records, trying to find some treasure mine buried in the minutes of trial proceedings. The slanted script always gives him a head ache, but even when Draco offers to help, Harry waves him away, claiming he wouldn't be able to spot what they were looking for. And maybe that was true, but it didn't change the fact that Harry found the work so tedious he would latch onto any excuse for a break that he could find. "Wonder what its about."

"I think its Sunday dinner. Just like normal." Draco had sat through a lot of Sunday dinners. Sometimes, he even goes over early so Harry can go out and play quidditch in the apple orchards with the other boys and he can help Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen. theory that the family would warm up to him faster if he was the one putting the food on the table. "Only this time Percy is running it."

"Good God." Harry had been nicer about Percy ever since he was the first one to volunteer to join him in restarting the fight against the remaining Dark Lord supporters, but that doesn't stop him from finding some of Percy's tendencies to be a control freak a bit annoying. Draco didn't mind, but then again, Draco hadn't spent summers sharing bathrooms and kitchen tables with him. He supposes you get the right to find someone annoying, when you spend all that time together. It doesn't mean you don't care. "We're going to have to figure out what fork to use, aren't we?"

There's sort of a disconnect sometimes, in the things that Harry knows and Draco doesn't, or vice versa. Like Draco, for example, wouldn't blink if he was sat at a table with a full set of silver ware and have to choose which piece went with which course. It was second nature to him. It's helpful, sometimes, but Draco would still trade it for everything that Harry knew.

"Don't worry." Harry wasn't worried. These people were his family. Draco was the one that got stuck on the outside looking in. "We'll figure it out together."

That was five hours ago. Now they were arm in arm on Percy's doorstep for the first time, Harry trying to smooth down his wind tussled hair and Draco balancing a bottle of wine as he rung the doorbell. It takes all of three seconds for the door to swing open, revealing a frazzled Percy, his glasses knocked askew.

"Come on in." He's more relaxed than Draoc had ever seen him, like here, at least, he wasn't going to put on a show when he didn't need to. "You can throw that where ever you want, coats can go on the coat rack, horrible hosting, I know, but mum always made this look easy and I'm afraid it really isn't."

"Do you need help?" Harry is shrugging off Draco's coat and yelling hello to the others at the same time, and it's one of those moments that make something inside Draco pull tight, because its a reminder of how *easy* this thing could be. How it would be like breathing, like knowing the lyrics to a song that you used to love but hadn't heard in news, like knowing all the steps on a path you've walked every day for a year. "I can do it."

"No, no." Percy waves him off with a chuckle, but Draco can see how he wavers. "Penny and I have got it. Go. Relax. Enjoy yourselves."

Draco's never quite sure if *enjoyment* is the right word.

Like, sure, its fun. Normally, the nights pass by without anything completely horrible happening, and if it did, he could always retreat to hide behind Harry, anyways. Still, he doesn't like the balancing act, where he's taking part in the conversation while still expecting it to be taken away. "Horrid, isn't it?" George had dressed up for the occasion, in a button down with actual cuffs on the sleeves. It's a change from the old jeans and wash worn t-shirt that he normally shows up in when dinner is at his parents house, but Draco supposes there are different rules when you go to Percy's.

"Having to sit here and pretend to be fine."

His voice is bitter, but he doesn't look like he's upset. Just separate somehow. Other. Not like the rest of his family, who have fallen into their places without question and picked up where they had left off the last time they had seen each other, pulling a board game off the shelves and sitting cross legged around the coffee table without Percy inviting them to do so.

(Maybe he can't do that anymore, Draco thinks, watching him settle back into the leather couch cushions and stare past the rim of his beer bottle. Maybe there's no way to find your place, when you only occupy one half of what it used to be. Maybe all the good parts, the parts that belong, got cut away with the part that left and now he's left with this.)

"It's not terrible." There's a particularly loud burst of laughter from the floor, and Draco watched as Ginny bent double over with laughter, leaning into Harry for support. Her hair is thrown over his shoulder, like their edges have blurred so they become one person instead of two. He's surprised to find that he wasn't jealous. "We just need time to ease our way into things."

It was the best description. Draco liked to think of when he was little and just started wading into the pool, how, even when all the other kids could jump off the edge into the deep end or dive head first into the lakes and ponds and rivers, he took his time, standing on the edge, whatever it might be. He would wait on that sand or stones or steps as the water lapped up over his ankles, his shins, his knees, because as small as he was, he could not stand the feeling of all that cold washing over him at once. He would have to wade in step by step, moment by moment, breath by breath, until he could no longer pinpoint which parts of him were water and which parts were skin.

These dinners were kind of like that.

Beside him, George snorts and then stands up, patting at the pocket of his jeans until he locates his cigarettes. He pauses long enough to bend down and tap his bottle against Draco's. "Cheers, mate." He's undoing his cuffs, and Draco knows that this is one of the times where he cannot take it. Where he has to leave. "But I was always able to dive right in."

Dinner is stifling. At the Burrow, dinner is bowls spilling over with food and old stains on tablecloths, elbows knocking into each other and extra servings you didn't want being heaped onto your plate without asking you first, Molly's admonishments and Arthur's questions and

Ginny's never ending laughter. It is always out in the garden, too, with umbrella charms cast over their heads when it was raining, because with all the extra guests, they no longer fit in the kitchen. It was not the kind of meal he had grown up with (*that was a long table with only three seats taken, his father at the head and his mother picking at her food, pinching off tiny portions, his hands tense at the thought of what might happen if he were to spill something, this was not a house meant for messes and mistakes*), but it was one that he had gotten used to.

This -here at Percy's, with his dull-colored decorations and fancy plates and girlfriend who was trying to hard to play the hostess- was something that clearly none of them were ready for. In a strange twist of events, it was Draco who was carrying on the conversation, peppering each guest in turn with small talk when the talking died down, complimenting Penelope on anything he could think of, even starting a debate on quidditch in the lag between dinner and dessert. Everyone shoots him grateful looks, especially when he pulls Percy away from the topic of the ministry and when the meal was done, Penelope took a break from clearing the table to stand beside him.

"Thank you so much." Now that it's just them, she has relaxed- her smile is not so wide and her voice is not so loud, like she has stopped using her stage persona. "I've only ever had the one sibling, and I'm still not used to all of them. And it isn't, well," She inclines her head towards Percy, who is desperately trying to interject himself in Bill and Charlie's conversation but is clearly failing, like every time he thinks of something clever to say, the topic has already moved on. "It's never been easy for him, and especially not after last year."

Last year. The war. The Battle. Draco's heard it called a lot of names, but it all boils down to the same thing, like they are stretching out their arms to the invisible carnage and saying: *look at us. Look at this past still written on our skin. this is the thing that ruined us.*

"It wasn't a problem. It'll get easier. First dinner party is always the hardest." He pats her on the shoulder, tries to toe the line between comforting and snobbish. Sometimes, he doesn't know when to stop. "You did fine."

He means to tell her other things -that her pork roast was cooked *just* the right amount, where it practically fell apart on her fork, that there was a place that rents out house elves, a full staff of them where she could pick one to hold on retainer for nights like this, that the wine didn't really match with what she was serving but that her choice in art work was impeccable, all these lessons he had learned without meaning too- but then Percy stood up, clearing his throat and tapping a fork against his glass, like this was some Jane Austen novel and he was their lead man.

"If I could have your attention." He says it like he's conducting an orchestra, but maybe that's what it took, to make a family of nine pay attention to you. And Luna. It was hard to grab Luna's attention.

"I didn't just call you here for a family get together. I call you here because I have an announcement."

Draco wonders how long he'd waited to have a moment like this, where everyone was hanging onto his last word, waiting to hear what wonderful thing he had done now. Too long, probably.

"You're all familiar with the archiving assignment I have undertaken. Many of you played instrumental roles in the process. And now it's completed." There's a cheer, led by Ginny, and instead of getting upset at being interrupted like Draco had expected, Percy just smiles, riding the wave and waiting until it died down again. "The ministry has elected to open the records up to the public. There's going to be a ceremony, and the people who shared their stories are to be

invited." He beams down at all of them. "Hermione will be opening the ceremony. I'll be there too, of course."

There's another cheer, this one led by Ron, who grabs Hermione by the waist and spins her around despite her protests. When he sets her down, they all converge on Percy, hugging him, burying him in the midst of family.

George isn't a part of it.

Neither is Penelope. She's standing on the sidelines with Draco, watching them all.

"This is all he ever wanted. To be loved by them like this." Penelope does not look like the epitome of grace now- there is a slouch to her shoulders and a stain on her skirt and a strand of hair coming loose, but now, Draco can see why Percy has been taken with her so long. "I just wish that they had figured out how to do it sooner."

Don't we all, Draco thinks. The one thing we're good at is loving too late.

It's fast, after that.

Bill leaves first, then Charlie, and then the rest of the kids leave at the same time, pulling on their jackets and saying their good-byes so fast it didn't hide how desperate they were to leave.

"Merlin." Ron shakes his head, squinting up at the streetlights the way he always does when they reach a muggle town. "I love Percy, but he can be a drag sometimes."

"I don't know." Hermione glanced over at him, but she hadn't need to- they always seem to know each other, like the way they were caught in the other's orbit means there was no possibility of falling out of step. "He wanted to make you guys proud."

"We are proud. We've always been proud." Ginny looks from her brother and Hermione, back to Harry. "He had to have known that, right?"

"Some people have a hard time believing what they can't touch. What they can't see." Luna talks a bit more like them, now, less likely she was caught in a dream and more like someone had finally forced her to wipe the stardust that had gathered in her eyes. It was sad, because now she had to see life the way it really was. "You can't do it all the time- even I have to wonder whether gnargles are around here."

"Well, there is very little evidence they exist, Luna," Hermione starts, and Draco gives her the benefit of the doubt by thinking she meant it to be comforting.

"Don't be silly." Luna fixes her with a glare. "There have been definite sightings in North America."

There's a shocked moment of silence, and then they burst out laughing, Ron first, and then all of them, right in the middle of the street where anyone could look down and see them. Ginny's laughing so hard there are tears in her eyes, then she's digging in her coat pocket, cursing under

her breath. "Damn it. Damn it all to Hell, Luna, I was going to do this later, do it right, but-," she sinks down to one knee, even though there was mud on the pavement and it was soaking through the legs of her jeans. "I'm never going to love you more than I do right this second, I think."

She's holding up a ring. It's small, and elegant, and simple, like it was built for Luna. "Luna Lovegood," She says, and her voice is shaking with the effort of keeping herself contained. "Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Luna stares down at her, as unbothered by this as she had been by every other thing. For a heart stopping moment, Draco thinks she might say no, but then her face cracks open in a smile and she sinks to her knees. "I suppose."

"She supposes." Ron says, his voice that tone of unfathomable disbelief he always uses when Luna says something that he doesn't understand. "You hear that everyone?" He has turned his face upward and screamed it to the skylights. "She supposes!"

"You ever think about that?" They are walking home, even though they could apparate, because this is one of those nights where you do not want to go home, that you want to prolong for as long as you can. "Marriage?"

"About as much as I think about the rest of the future." It's a cop out kind of answer, and Draco knows it, so he tries again. "I can never quite picture it. The future gets all fuzzy whenever I want to form a clear image, like maybe I'm still not used to the idea that I'm going to get to have it."

"But if you were." Harry insists. He is shorter than Draco now, because Draco is balancing on the curb like it is a tightrope, arms spread out in the air beside him. "What would it be like?"

"Terrifying, I think." Draco does think about it, about a house and kids but none of the details come in clear, other than the fact that he would have a broken down old shed for his potions supplies and one of his kids should be named after his father, to do right where he had done wrong like some twisted form of redemption that his own father would not try to reach for, and whenever he thinks of the person he is going to spend his life with they have started to have Harry's face, now, so different from the life he had thought of a few years ago, where he was thinking in terms of appearance and heirs and legacy. "To trust someone that much."

"Wouldn't it be worth it though?" Harry's voice is quieter than it should be, like the words were being knocked loose from somewhere in his chest. "To have someone that you love so much?"

Draco doesn't answer. He slips and stumbles but does not fall, because Harry is there, putting his hands on his waist and pulling him down to the solid ground at the same time he is pushing him upright, helping him standing again.

"I think so." Draco whispers, giving him an answer without saying anything at all, even though he thinks now would be a perfect time to say *I love you, I need you, please run away with me*. "I'm still figuring that part out."

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

If this chapter seems incomplete, it's because it's only one half of what I wanted to be writing, but there was no natural way to shift from Draco's POV to Harry, so we're just going to have to deal with a couple of short installments instead of one long big one.

Draco

It upsets him, that he's still good at this.

It's like that no matter how much you try to fight against it, some part of you grows up to be the person that your parents were. That no matter how much you want your life to be different, destiny has a way of binding you by the wrists and dragging you to your fate anyways, like it doesn't matter what choices you make or the things you try to feel. That even when you are working desperately towards becoming something more, you look in the mirror one day and find that the future you have been planning for is already here, and it looks nothing like you wanted it to.

Like one day, you get dressed up for a party that your friend invites you to and you happen to glance up in the mirror as you are doing up your tie and realize that somehow, despite your best efforts, you have turned into your father.

Draco wants to rip off the suit as soon as he notices, because he does not want to be the type of person who knows how to keep up appearances anymore, and he does not want to be the kind of guy who looks like he is always preparing for a photoshoot. He doesn't want to spend tonight at the ministry, either, because he will inevitably fall back into the steps of a conversation he had learned long ago, a lesson that was bought by his parents' money, back when everyone knew their names, even if this time, he would circle the room with Harry by his side. It is still too much of the same- the same place and the same people and the same conversation he had memorized back when he was a child and Draco himself, still the same.

"You look amazing." Harry meets his eyes in the mirror. "Truly." He bends in to press a kiss to a spot right below his ear, a spot that he had found last night and seemed overjoyed to have discovered. They still are not talking about it, when they do things like this, like they really have convinced themselves that this means they are only friends. Or maybe they shifted from friends to something more without Draco noticing, and he was the only one confused about the labels. "Amazing."

He hands out compliments like they don't cost him anything. At breakfast, out shopping, when they climb into bed. Harry loves easy. Draco wishes he could say the same.

"We don't have to go." Harry adds, after Draco had done nothing but stare at him for a few moments, long enough for Draco to redo Harry's tie and cufflinks, because after eighteen years of wearing nothing fancier than a sweater, he seems to have refused to learn how to put those on properly. "We could stay home. Hide."

It was tempting, except for the fact that Hermione was giving a speech and wanted Draco there to see it, and this was on personal invitation of Percy, who he was actually fond of, and George would be there, and Ginny said that these things were easier for George to take with Draco by his side.

(Draco's grown very fond of George. they're actually friends now, honest to god, the ones that sit in a pub and talk even when they don't feel like drinking themselves to death. Draco would like to think it's his natural charm, but more likely, George was just grateful for someone who had never known him as an attachment of Fred.)

And also, he was a Malfoy. And Malfoy's don't run away, no matter how much they may want to.

"Of course we're going." He makes himself smile, but Harry just rolls his eyes and ducks down for one more kiss. "It'll be fun."

You really were the perfect son, when you went to these. Draco thought sourly, even as he leans further into the arm that Harry had put around his shoulders to guide him through the crowd. They had said hi to everyone and dodged all the waitstaff that were attempting to be the one to serve The Boy Who Lived, and now Harry was dragging them both in a beeline towards Ron and Hermione. *The perfect heir, the perfect Malfoy, the creator of the perfect legacy. You could have been something great.*

He trips, just a little stumble over the edge of someone's dress robes, but Harry's arm was around him and he did not fall, just felt the tightening of Harry's fingers around his waist, a silent reminder that they were in this together.

"Draco!" Hermione wrapped him in a hug so tight that it knocked the air out of his lungs, and Draco found himself with a mouthful of bushy hair. He could see Ron from over her shoulder, shrugging at Harry exasperatedly while balancing a plate piled high with cookies. "I didn't think you were coming!"

"Of course I came!" Draco pried herself off with some difficulty and passed her onto Harry, who was a bit more practiced at suffering through her hugs. "You think I would miss this?"

Beside them, Ron shrugs. "She's been like this all day." He has his voice lowered to mutter in Draco's ear, apparently deciding that they've come to a momentary truce until Hermione gets a grip.

"I just hope she doesn't freak when she gets up there."

"You kidding? She'll be fine." He snags one of the cookies off the plate just to test the boundaries and then considers it a good sign when Ron keeps the plate within his reach. "We just have to hope that she doesn't sneak in something about spew."

Ron laughed, and then clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Don't give her any ideas."

Voldemort was great, Draco adds, slightly calmer, like this little piece of conversation was all it took to snap his skin back into place, to let him stop feel as if he was too big for his body. His father would not have been able to talk to people like that, as if they were friends. His father

would never have known how great they were because he was blinded by his own bigotry. *He was great and he did horrible things and he made people bow down to him because the only other option was to die and he never knew what it was to be loved, not really. Sometimes being great isn't the best thing, if the only memories you leave behind are scars.*

He's sitting between George and Harry, two tables away from Hermione, so when she gets called up to the podium by Kingsley, he has to bend around George to reach out a hand to her. She pauses just long enough to hold on, long enough for three squeezes, their little sign that everything will be okay, that they will figure everything out.

(It had started back with the potions, when Hermione would get frustrated with not knowing the answers that she seemed ready to throw it all out the window and let all her potions burn to nothing but a caustic heap. Draco hadn't known what to say, but he had known enough to do this. It's become their thing, ever since.)

"You're going to be great." Draco whispers, in the time it takes for those three pulses to travel from him to her, one, two three, and then she lets go, climbing the stairs to stand beside the minister with a sense of grace Draco thought would be hard to miss, even though he had missed it for seven long years. It's easy to see what you want, when you're blinded by hate.

He's not staring at her like everyone else is. They're all watching her with rapt attention, but Draco is looking around at everyone else, all the other tables, so he can tell her who laughed when she made that joke in the opening (*he helped her come up with it. It took them three hours. neither of them were that funny.*) and if anyone cried when she talked about those she had lost. She had been at his house (*Harry's house? He can probably say it's his house*) until after midnight last night, practicing the way she enunciated every word and the dramatic effect held in each phrase, making sure she knew when to pause for eye contact. They had even made up a bunch of signals for Draco to give her, should he be watching and see people looking confused, for her to know if she is too loud or too quiet, too fast or too slow.

He's listening, but he isn't watching, which is why he sees it before anyone else does.

How the entire catering company had seemed to melt away into the shadows when the speech started, but there was still one man dressed in their uniform edging towards the front of the crowd. How his wand was dangling from his fingers, even though they had been made to check their wands at the door for what they claimed to be security measures. How even as Hermione was still speaking and the crowd was still watching, the chandelier above her started to sway, just a bit, enough to send scattering of light reflecting off the crystals and dancing over the faces of those watching.

One of the beams of light catches Hermione across the eyes, bright enough that she loses her focus and half raises her hand to block it. It's the only reason that anyone notices it at all, and there is an awful sense of de ja vu, the way Draco can hear Ron screaming for Hermione to move out of the way and how the chandelier was falling, falling, falling down to her, and she would not get out of the way in time, and it was just like that night at the manor only there was no Dobby to save her now.

There as no one to save her, actually. Ron was too far away, and no one had their wands, and even Kingsley was not close enough to save her. Caught off guard, none of the others had even started to move yet.

But Draco had known. He had seen. And he had been the first to move, so by the time everyone else was just pushing back their chairs, he was lunging across those last few feet of space, shoving her so hard that he is half worried he might have hurt her, but he knew that it would not have hurt as bad as having an entire chandelier fall on top of you.

Ha, he thinks, even as he hears her scream. He has enough time to notice that she has cleared the wreckage and to curl up in a ball, enough time to cover his face with his arms and catch sight of George barreling towards him, leaping over Draco's fallen chair, but he was not fast enough. *Seems like I've done something great after all.*

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

To all those who left comments, I read them and I loved them and I will reply to them eventually, I just wasn't feeling up to it today.

Please keep them coming! I really do appreciate, and the more comments I get, the faster the updates.

Thank you for reading!

Harry

After fighting off monsters for the past seven years, Harry had learned to never stop watching over his shoulder, but that doesn't mean he always realizes what he's seeing.

Like, he got asked for his wand just like everyone else, and instead of thinking about how strange it was that they were claiming it was for security when it had never been done before, he only thought about how everyone else was handing it over without a problem (everyone except Draco, who hesitated just for a fraction of a second, so fast you could blink and miss it) and how his lingering unease must have just been a product of the war, another way that he was scarred, so he hands it over and tries to push away how naked and vulnerable it made him feel.

Or how when Hermione got called to give her speech, everyone sat in their seats and cheered for her, all of the ministry people with stiff smiles on their face and all of her friends genuinely happy, except for one man in the back dressed in black like the waitstaff but not, because his clothes did not have their insignia on it, and also that same man was the one who crept from the back of the room down the side and finally edged his way up to the podium, close enough where he might have been distracting if he was not the kind of person who people looked right past.

Or the fact that the chandelier was swaying, just a bit of a tilt, like it was caught in a soft wind, and for once, the only time it would have been helpful, he was not comparing it to a moment from the war, was not thinking of dungeon doors and Hermione's screams and *a beautiful place to die with friends*, he was thinking how it was sort of pretty, up until the moment where Hermione herself realized that it was happening, her expression changing from annoyed to panicked as she half raised her hand to block the light that had lit up across her face.

Harry sees it all, but he doesn't understand what it means, not like Draco, who is up and moving before anyone else puts together what is happening, screaming at Hermione to *move, get down, get out of the way* with such desperation that despite everything, Harry is struck by the thought that he really must love her, to yell like that. Their table is in the very front row, so other than having to duck around George's chair, there is nothing to block his path to the podium, so it's a straight path from them to Hermione.

They all watch it happening. He sees it like its in slow motion, like he's back in battle and his survival senses are trying to give him extra moments to figure out which way to dodge. This time, there is nothing to do, because he had been so confident in their own safety that he could not yet

figure out that something bad was about to happen, and anyways, what was he supposed to do without a wand? There was nothing for him to do, except for watch.

He can hear Ron yelling, screaming for people to move, to help. He can see George understand what was going to happen at the same time that Harry had, how he moves to his side for a wand that is not there. He can see Kingsley, running, his mouth half open in a yell, but he could also see that he would not get there in time.

He can also see Draco, running, leaping, closing that last gap to throw himself at Hermione. She is knocked to the side and rolls down the few steps to George and Harry's feet, and even though she is crying out in pain and clearly is having trouble breathing (they would find out later that she broke two ribs and bruised three more on her left side) he does not stop, just hurtles over her, trying to get to where Draco is lying in time.

There is not enough time. There's no time for anything, just for Draco to curl in on himself and throw his hands over his face, and Harry just barely catches a glimpse of how relieved he looks, how *proud* before he's covered up in the rubble.

Somewhere, someone is screaming, crying out for Draco to be alright. It's only later, when all the sounds come rushing back and he becomes aware of the stinging pain in his hands that Harry realizes it was him.

"Come on." He is digging through the rubble, pulling away twisted lengths of metal and sweeping away the scattered crystals. They crunch under his feet and grind into his skin when he drops to his knees, rip through his palms when he starts to dig through it all. For the first time in his life, he feels bad for the people who did not know what it is to be magic, who have to watch things like this happen and be helpless to stop them. "Come on, Draco, come on."

Because he was helpless. He was helpless before it started and he was helpless as he watched it fall and he was helpless now, moving this mess away from where he thought Draco had been buried, when for all Harry knew he was three feet to his right and Harry was only burying him deeper.

Someone falls to their knees beside him, and without looking he knows it is Ron, because he knows those hands, those scars and those freckles and the one mole where his palm meets wrist, and he is filled with an overwhelming wave of gratitude to him, knowing that he must have passed by Hermione to come stand beside him, to help Harry find the one he loves even though the woman that Ron loves had just been attacked.

"Come on, Draco," Harry says, and he is not sure what that means, if he is calling for him and really expecting an answer, if it is a plea or a prayer or something stuck between, if he actually thinks there is someone out there listening. "Be alright. Be alright."

In his head, Harry is thinking that all he needs is to find them, to clear the dust and debris off Draco's face and crush him to his chest, hold him and never let him go. But when he does find him, half pulling him out of the disaster before Ron grabs Harry underneath the arms and pulls him away, it does not help, because even though Harry had seen a lot of awful things, this might have to be the worst.

Penelope is trying to talk to him. Harry knows that, dimly, even recognizes her words, but he doesn't really listen. "This is a job for a healer, Harry," She is saying, and Percy has grabbed him by one arm and Ron by the other and they are pulling him away, but Harry isn't cooperating, because all he is looking at is Draco, with the blood snaking down from his temple and the dust on his face and his breathing so harsh and loud that it might be better if he could not hear the breath at all, because at least it would not sound like he was in so much pain. "Let me do my job."

He only stops fighting when George joins him. He can't say why, really, except for the fact that if there is one person in the world who knows what is like to lose someone that is so unbelievably vital to your own well-being, it is George. Harry can't imagine that he would ask him to step away if there was a way for Harry to help.

"She's going to take care of him." Percy tells him, his jaw set and his face smeared with blood. Later, Harry would learn that it was Percy's own. He can catch him with an elbow to the face when Percy first tried to pull Harry away. "She's the best at her job"

For the first time, Harry can truly appreciate Percy and what he can do. Despite all his pomp, he really is one of the rare people in life who are able to walk into an emergency and control a room, who can look at a situation and see what needs to be done. And he doesn't lie, and he doesn't have much patience for people he considers incompetent, so when he says that his girlfriend is the best at her job, it isn't empty flattery, it's the best words of comfort he can think of giving.

"Okay." Harry says, and sinks down to the ground. There is a hand on his shoulder and he knows without turning that it is Hermione, because he can recognize the weight of it from so many years of her holding him back and holding him up. He raises his own hand up to meet her, and cannot find the energy to ask if she was alright, even though he hopes that she is. "Okay."

"Hey." Ginny throws herself down on the ground beside him. They're back in some hallway in the ministry that Percy had led him to, promising to send someone when they have news. Draco was at St. Mungo's in a magic induced coma, and was not likely to wake up anytime soon, so no one thought that it was important for him to head over there right away. "Thought you might want this."

She's holding his wand out to him. Harry hadn't even thought to go after it. If someone wanted to hurt him, he would tear them apart with his bare hands, ruined as they were. "Yeah." The weight of it makes him feel better.

"We're going after them, if you want to come." She is dressed in what George had named her battle armor- combat boots and an old jacket with a patch over the elbow, fingerless leather dueling gloves and her hair pulled up in a tight ponytail. "The people who did this, I mean."

"You think we can get them?"

He wasn't interested in it, if they couldn't get them, if he couldn't make one of them hurt like they hurt Draco.

"I think so. We got the one who dropped the chandelier. He told us a lot." Ginny flexes her fingers, and for the first time, Harry notices the split skin on her knuckles. She is staring down at her hands, like even though she wasn't sorry, she couldn't quite believe that this was the person she had turned into. "I was very persuasive."

Harry thought about it, and then thought some more. He could stay here, sitting in this empty hallway, and then switch to sitting in some uncomfortable chair in a slightly cleaner hallway in St. Mungo's. Or he could go fight, make someone pay, make them hurt. He had his wand back, after all.

And he was done feeling helpless.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco

Once, when Draco was seven years old, when he was small and scrawny and still hadn't learned how to use the power sitting right beneath his skin, he had walked to the edge of his neighbors pond and walked right along the edge, toes skimming the surface of the mud and muck like it was some sort of game. His mother had told him not to go in it because it was dirty, and his father said that it was dangerous, just as derelict and infested as the neighbor's house was, but Draco had thought that it would be fun to go to a forbidden place just once. And it was fun, until he stepped forward onto the bank just a bit too far, entranced by the wave of the otherwise still water that was only the beckoning of a grindylow and toppled in.

He could not swim.

It was strange, in that moment, because he was thinking of all the things that he could do, all the people that his father had paid to teach him- the lineage of old houses, violin, calligraphy, dancing and yet now that he was in immediate danger, he could not figure out how to move his arms or kick out with his legs well enough to bring himself back to the surface. There was only darkness covering up all the light and weeds brushing at his heels and the desperation building up inside him, where he would kick up off the murky bottom of the pond and burst into the light just long enough for one life-giving breath of air before the depths pulled him back down under again.

Trying to wake up was something like that.

But he does wake up, eventually, after what must have been hours of drifting in and out of consciousness, where he would open his eyes only to be blinded by the light and taken aback by the fire in his lungs. His whole entire body ached, and even though each time there were voices he recognized demanding his attention (*Hermione, asking if he was okay, George holding tight to his hand, even a blurry figure that he thought might have been Pansy*), he found it easier to slip back inside himself instead, until he finally told himself that enough was enough and forced himself to keep his eyes open.

"Hey. Mate." There were hands on his shoulders, forcing him back down onto the pillows. "Take it slow, will you?"

For a moment, he does not understand why he is there, cannot remember why everything hurts, but then he does- *hands moving to wands that were not there, a flash of light spreading across her face as the chandelier sways, the man melting back into the background, the way he was the only one who understood in time to get to her*- and the panic makes him surge the person in front of them, grapple against their hands to grip onto their shoulders.

It was George who he found staring back at him, coaxing him to calm down, to lie back before he hurt himself. Not Harry. Draco would like to say that he didn't care who was sitting guard by his bedside, but judging by the disappointed feeling in his stomach, that was a lie. If he had been given time to think who would be the first person to meet him upon his return, he would have been expecting to see Harry. *Maybe he was here*, a voice in his head was saying, much more

reasonable now that it was clear that no one was in immediate danger. *It's been forever, you really would want him to sit here without eating or changing his clothes or running home for a nap? And don't you have more important things to worry about?*

"Where's Hermione?" Draco fell back onto the pillows, wincing as he did so. "Is she alright?"

"Penelope healed her in half a second after the commotion was over. She's just a little sore. You, on the other hand," George gestured over the length of Draco's body, and for the first time he really looked at himself, at the cuts and bruises and bandages. "Are going to be in here a while."

"Couldn't they fix these up?" Draco looked over his arms with some amount of concern, because if this was what he looked like after being in the hands of qualified healers for hours, how bad was he when he first came in? "It's like, first level healing."

"They got the bad things first. Put your body under a lot of stress to heal it, so they want to keep you under observation for a bit and let the rest heal naturally." Draco must have made a face, because George's hand is gripping tight to his, squeezing his fingers like he is keeping time with his pulse. It makes Draco look at him and see the worry in his eyes, the tightness in the skin around his mouth, like he is biting back the words of caution that he so desperately wants to say. "You were in bad shape, Draco."

It's the name that makes Draco sober up and pay attention. They had spent so long addressing each other only by hurled curses and insults and a snarled, twisted version of their last names (*Malfoy. Weasel.*) that the sound of his name being spoken with that amount of fondness still makes him pause, and right now it's long enough to realize that maybe, just maybe, watching one of his friends almost die was a pretty upsetting ordeal for George to have to go through. Enough that even though he had sworn off hospitals and guard duty for good, here he was, holding onto Draco's hand and monitoring everyone that comes through the door until he had woken up.

"Hey." Draco made sure his voice was gentler this time. Kinder. Less demanding. "I'm alright. I'm not going anywhere."

George stared at him for a long moment, then let go of him, stalking back to the wooden chair by the door and throwing himself into it. He was still in his clothes from the gala the night before (*was it the night before? he honestly doesn't know*) only now they are ripped and disheveled. That, combined with the ugly look on his face, was making him look like someone you would cross the street to avoid being near.

"Don't I know it." George's words were teasing but his eyes were still worried, darting around the room, and Draco wonders how many of them have fallen back into their war time habits where they checked in corners for monsters that were really only shadows and would not believe it when people promised that they were safe. "You're one tough bugger to kill, Malfoy."

Draco smiles. It's not the best welcoming crew he could imagine, but it was nice all the same.

He goes through round after round of visitors.

Mrs. Weasley shows up with homemade brownies and flowers, peppering him with anxious questions about what hurts and how well he thought he was healing and if the healers were

treating him alright, spending an unnecessary amount of time smoothing down the sheets and demanding that he let her comb his hair with a wet brush to make it lie flat. She's so unlike his own mother, but even that reminder of Narcissa makes a lump form in his throat, so instead of looking at her, he just stares at the wall as she prattles on about Percy and Penelope and how Kingsley responded spectacularly well to his first in-office crisis, occasionally holding a ball of yarn for her while she knits. By the time she leaves two hours later, she leaves a small blanket spread over his lap, because as she put it, he was bound to get chilly sitting by that window and she couldn't bear to leave him sitting there in those thin hospital pajamas.

Pansy comes, too, pushing through the door to his room with her high heels clicking, marching straight to the window and perching herself up on the sill like she does it every day and starts to read from those gossip rags that she used to love so much, keeping him updated on people that he used to be friends with. He used to follow this stuff avidly, too, would pore over it with her during their breakfast at Hogwarts, keeping up with who married who and what scandals were going on and what kind of competition they were facing this summer. Now, it's the sound of her voice that he likes, lulling him back into sleep as she chain smokes her filthy muggle cigarettes out the window.

"I don't think you're allowed to do that in here," He says, finally, when she's gone through half a pack and the butts are sure to be littering the ground outside, falling onto unsuspecting muggles. "Seems like a hazard."

He found it disgusting, actually. It smelled, and even if she thought to leave the window open, the smoke would stay. "That's funny, Draco." She stared at him over the top of her magazine, and he noticed for the first time how much heavier her make up had gotten. Still pretty, but now she was making it noticeable, like glittering with every twist and turn was her version of armor. "But I don't remember asking."

Penelope checks in on him personally, and Luna comes to show him the newest addition to the Quibbler (*she had taken over in the absence of her father, and due to some influence of both Hermione and Ginny, it was now something of an academic marvel, printing all kinds of things about new spells and medical advancements and reports on dangerous creatures that aren't actually that dangerous*), spreading the magazine out in front of him and asking for his advice on the formatting. "Hagrid's a respected breeder now? Of what?"

"Blast ended skrewts," She answered, looking up from drawing on his dark mark, so now that instead of a snake, it looked like it was spitting out mouthfuls of flower petals. "They've become quite popular over in Egypt."

Lee Jordan comes for an interview, which Draco says no to, and then stays to eat his way through the pile of chocolate frogs on Draco's bedside table. Dean and Seamus show up to pop in and wish him well, but leave too fast for a real conversation. Even Ginny drops in, holding a squawking Teddy on her hip and dropping him into Draco's arms the first chance she gets, claiming that she's too tired to do so for even another moment.

George comes, too, even though he doesn't talk, just sits in that same chair and stares, occasionally answering when Draco asks him a direct questions, but that's alright. Draco likes the quiet.

It's the third day before Hermione shows up, her hair pulled back into a braid that was already starting to fall out. She doesn't say anything, just edges into the room with her hand spread

across her ribs, and Draco was reminded of everyone's mentions of how sore she was. "Hey." He scoots back into the bed so he is resting against the headboard. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, Draco," She says, moving her hand from her ribs to cover her mouth and staring at him, eyes wide. He barely has time to think about how easily she cries before she is bursting out in tears, sinking down into the chair beside his bed and bawling into her hands, letting out hitching little gasps that reminded him of how much it must hurt her to breathe. "I'm sorry-" She shook her hands out in front of her like that might calm her down, wincing at the movement. "I promised I wouldn't do this, I told myself, I said, he doesn't need this, Hermione, you're just going in to have a nice visit, but-," She lets herself look at him again and bursts into tears, this time wheezing with the effort of continuing to take in deep breaths. "Oh, Draco."

He was stupid not to have expected this. "Hermione." He holds an arm out to her but she is too far away to give her a hug and he cannot bring himself to get up from the bed. It would just hurt too much, and he's pretty sure the effort would make her burst into tears again. "It's not your fault."

"How could it not be?" She wailed, and the volume makes him wince. "You only got hurt because I was too stupid to notice what was happening."

"Why would you have expected anything like that to happen?" Draco demanded, his own voice climbing and becoming increasingly higher pitched. "We were in the ministry of magic!"

"It's not like they've stopped bad things from happening before!" She shot back, and this was familiar, easy. "They're all terrible at their jobs, honestly."

Her comment was derisive, and funny, and then Draco was laughing and could not stop even though it hurt. After a moment of watching him, Hermione smiled, just a smallest twitch of the lips. "You are alright, aren't you?" She asked, when it was all over and he had calmed himself down. "I would feel terrible if you weren't alright."

"I'm fine." He wasn't. Everything hurt because they wouldn't heal him any further, and people kept dropping in even though he was tired and would rather sleep, which made him feel like an awful person, and all the potions he had to drink tasted awful. "Be better if Harry dropped in, though."

He still hadn't stopped to say hello. Every time he heard the door opened, he looks up expecting to see him and is disappointed all over again. At this rate, he better be coming up with a very good excuse as to why he hasn't been here yet.

"Harry's.." She hesitated, and he could tell she was deciding which side to go with- comforting Draco or keeping Harry's trust. "He's getting something done, Draco. Something we all should have taken care of, a long time ago."

"Something important?"

Hermione was watching him with sad eyes. "He thinks so."

"More important than me?"

"Oh, Draco. I don't think there's anything Harry finds more important than you, lately." Hermione stood up with another wince and gathered her bag over her shoulder, leaning down to give him a hug before she leaves. "I expect that's part of the reason he's doing it."

All in all, by the time the evening healer comes in to give him his late night potion that sends him off into a dreamless sleep, he's grateful.

When he wakes next, it is dark, but he is certain that there is someone watching him.

"Hello?" He fumbles for his wand on the bedside table and only succeeds in knocking it to the floor.

"Who's there?"

"Relax." The light flares on and Draco comes face to face with the last person he thought he would see sitting vigil at his bedside- Ron Weasley. "It's only me."

"That's supposed to put me at ease, is it?" Draco snaps, grudgingly accepting the helping hand pulling him into a sitting position. It's harder to start moving again after he had been asleep. "My knight in shining armor."

He's angrier than he would normally be. He and Ron have come to a sort of truce over the past few weeks, where Draco does not expect anything but civility from Ron and Ron restrains himself from doing anything that may be considered rude or threatening, but still, he cannot help himself. When Draco saw the shadow in the corner of the room, part of him was hoping that it was Harry, even as the other part prepared for an attack.

Ron didn't take the bait. He didn't answer at all, actually, just sat back down in the chair without another glance at Draco and kept staring at the door, Ron laid flat across his knees. He looks casual, but Draco had seen Harry sit that way often enough to know that it was a by-product of their auror training, where they could look unbothered but still be ready to send a curse at a moment's notice.

"What are you doing here, anyways?" Draco shifted himself out from under the street and let his legs hang off the edge of the bed. It hurt, but this was the only way to be able to look at Ron when he insisted on avoiding eye contact with him. "Didn't think they'd let a visitor in here, no matter how big of a war hero they are."

Ron squirmed after the use of the word war hero, but other than that, he made no sign that this was anything out of the ordinary. "I'm not visiting. I'm your guard." Draco wondered, briefly, if everyone else that was here earlier was only part of Harry's makeshift order, like if Harry can't be here to protect him himself, he would make sure someone was, but threw the thought away. "They don't know I'm here."

"Does anyone?" What he really means to ask is *does Harry*, and the question must have come through, because something in Ron's face softened.

"No." Ron makes hasty eye contact with him and then breaks it to go to the window, poking away the curtains to peer down at the street below. Not like he could see anything. "Well, Hermione does," He amends, shrugging. "but its self appointed guard duty."

Draco blinked. "Why?"

At some other time, he would like to think that he would be better at this. That he would be less trusting of a man that claimed to still hold all kinds of childhood grudges over both their heads, that he would have snappier retorts, more biting questions. That he would be able to demand for him to leave or else ask about Hermione, anything other than this passive acceptance that anyone who wants to wander in through this room was allowed to be here. But he wouldn't do any of that, he would just sit here and not wonder how strange it was that Ron would make himself Draco's self appointed guard after eighteen years worth of solid dislike and not even bother to try to turn him away. Draco was simply too tired for it, and in too much pain, and his nightly potion was still there fogging up the brain.

That doesn't need to happen, he distracts himself, watching as Ron jiggles the lock on the window and lets the curtains fall back into place. *If I was the one to make it, I would be able to take the grogginess out of it entirely. Too bad they won't allow that here.*

"What do you mean why?" Ron throws himself back into the chair and glares at him, stubborn as always. "Someone has to keep those people from coming to finish you off."

"I meant why you." Draco attempted to stand up, but couldn't, just fell back down to the mattress instead. "Why you would even agree. You hate me."

"I don't."

"You do."

"I don't." There was a desperate plea to Ron's voice, a underlying wish for Draco to understand. "I thought I did, but I don't. I know that now."

"What changed?" Draco did not want to hear this. Not when he was tired and wanting ten more hours of sleep, not when he was covered in bruises, not when he could not even hold his own if this turned into a shouting match.

"I watched you get buried under a pile of rubble and realized that despite how much of a gigantic arse you were in past, I wanted you to live." Ron looked down at his hands, and Draco imagined that they were still coated in the dust from when the ceiling collapsed and the chandelier toppled. Ginny had been the only one to think that he was strong enough to hear the account of what had happened, and it was Ginny who told them that even though Harry was the first to fall to his knees beside the pile and start rummaging for any sign of life, it was Ron who had been the one to pull him out of the dust. "And because you saved her."

"I didn't do it for you." Draco wasn't sure why his first reaction was always to go on the attack with some snide remark that wasn't even that hurtful. He would make all these jokes and drawl out all these insults and none of them were even funny. "I did it because she's my friend."

She's my friend. The words echo in the room between them and for the first time he might be getting why he and Ron were suddenly on speaking terms- the fact that Hermione cared about both of them and they both cared about her, and Ron was willing to put aside any past feud to make her happy.

"Exactly. You saved her *life*." Ron's voice cracks on the last word and Draco can see his eyes shining in the lamplight. "You saved her even when I couldn't."

Draco knows about debt. About a gratitude that you never want to feel, about an account of rights and wrongs that you can never even out. He didn't think he would ever have to face that same feeling coming from Ron.

"You don't owe me anything for that." It was an awkward sentence to force out. "I'd do it again."

"You don't understand," Ron said, raking his hands through his hair, yanking so hard Draco thought it was likely he would rip some out. "I'm supposed to protect her."

"Ron-," He wants to help him, but does not know how. Not that it mattered. Ron just kept talking.

"No, listen." He looks like he might start crying, like he's fully on the verge of toppling into a sea of panic. "We saved her from this troll, right? Me and Harry. But it didn't really count as us saving her because I was the one who made her cry and hide in the bathroom in the first place, so I got it into my head that I would have to make sure she didn't get hurt again, to make up for it? And I tried, I have, that's all I've ever wanted, to protect her and my family and Harry, but you can't do that, there's never enough of one person to protect everyone they care about, so I thought- somewhere along the line I started thinking that it didn't matter if I couldn't protect anyone else, even myself, as long as I managed to protect her. All I've ever tried to do my whole life was take care of her, but I can't even manage to do that." He's breathing hard. Draco half thinks he did start crying, the kind where your eyes are burning but there is not enough tears and there is no way to get any air into your lungs. "But you did. You saved her when I couldn't, and nothing else matters. So just let me do this for you, alright?"

It was forgiveness. That's what Draco was being offered in this moment, a promise that even after everything, all the horrible things he had said and the things he had done, Ron had finally gotten past it.

"I still think its creepy. You, lurking in the dark." Draco wanted to go back to sleep, but he couldn't bring himself to struggle back under the covers. "Just come visit during the day next time, okay?"

Ron didn't smile like Draco had wanted him to, just clenched his jaw and took up his position again, ready for whatever may come through the door.

By the time Harry shows up, exactly a week after Draco had been buried underneath the better half of the ceiling, Draco had half expected he was going to show up at all.

Draco's almost annoyed that he hadn't waited longer, because now that he got to lay eyes on him, with the fresh cuts and black eye and tousled hair and clothes that he obviously hadn't bothered to change for days, the speech that he had been about to give died in his throat. He's spent the better part of the past two days preparing it, but now its completely useless, because it is hard to

stay angry at someone when you are busy thanking God they were able to come back to you at all.

"Merlin, Harry." Draco feels something building in his throat and he is afraid it is tears, so he busies himself by clawing his way out of the blankets and lurching over to the doorway, moving from chair to chair for support. (He and George had positioned all the furniture so he can walk all the way around the room on his own.) "What took you so long?"

Draco sinks down to sit in one of the arm chairs that Molly had conjured with her wand the last time the Weasley's came to visit, and Harry just keeps staring at him, right until the moment where he drops to his knees in front of Draco and presses his lips down onto Draco's bandaged knuckles. It was scaring him, the way that Harry still wasn't speaking, so he's almost glad that when Harry finally talked. "We got them." There is no need to ask who *they* were, or ask for any further explanation of where all these fresh injuries had come from. "We got all of them. Every last one that hurt you."

There's a cut underneath Harry's right eye, and Draco's hands find their way to it, following the pathway of the wound with his thumb. In a few weeks, this would only be another scar, but in some way, Draco knows this one belongs to him. Is because of him. Is owed to him, somehow.

"Is it over?" Draco wants to fall into Harry, to hug him. "Is this it?"

He wants it to be over. He wants to be done feeling afraid. He wants to be done with hospitals and guard duty and feeling that each good bye you have with the people you love is your last one, done with the feeling that this world is a terrible place. He wants someone to tell him that he finally gets to be at peace.

"It's over." Harry said, and he raises his own hands to trace over Draco- at the bandages on his chest, the flowers that Luna had drew, the cuts curling up his neck and behind the back of his ear from the awkward way he had been laying on the ground. "It's really the end this time."

"You're done leaving me?" Over the past few days, Draco hadn't wanted to think too closely about what his continued absence meant, but the possibilities spun around his mind now- that he might not want Draco after all, that Harry was never going to be able to see him again, that something had happened to Harry, that while everyone was busy saving Draco Harry had went and got hurt saving someone else. "Because I don't want to wake up without you ever again."

"Done leaving," Harry promises, and this time Draco really does fall into him, pain in his ribs be damned, and when he kisses him, he is not thinking of all the reasons they shouldn't, he is only thinking of the reasons they should- about how all their good-byes seem like they are the last good byes, about how there is all kinds of pain in this world and they don't need to give more to themselves when it is not needed, about how he has sat here in this room alone and only thought of the what ifs, and Draco is so, so done with what ifs. He is done dancing around this thing between them, even if it means one of those terrible what-ifs come true. Draco has decided he needs to stop avoiding his chance at a happy ending when everyone in his life is so desperately trying to give him one.

Chapter 32

Draco

By the time the healers declare him fit to go home, Draco had had enough of St Mungo's. There was simply too many people there, all of them asking questions that he doesn't know how to answer, like how he's feeling after his near death experience and what its like to be a hero and what exactly he and Harry are, speaking in the terms of their relationship. He'd become good at ignoring whatever well-meaning nurse wandered in to look over his charts and make anxious small talk, but still, he was looking forward to finally being left alone.

Not that he was left alone when he got home, really, because even though they declared him fit to be discharged (the healers actual words were *we don't think you're in any immediate danger of dying, but try not to do anything taxing, will you? You were an extraordinarily difficult person to fix*) he was still having to ask for ridiculous amounts of help, starting from the moment where he almost fainted during his attempt to use floo powder and Hermione bullied him into taking the night bus instead, saying it just wouldn't do to be lost up a chimney in his state, and he couldn't even argue with her.

"You'll just have to take it easy for a few days, that's all," She had said, trying to help him down the stairs and heave his bag over her shoulder at the same time, all under the stunned gaze of Stan Shunpike, who seemed to be struck dumb by the idea of having not one but two mildly famous people on his bus at the same time. "Think of it as a bit of a vacation, and you'll be good as new in no time!"

Which was all good for Hermione to say, and easy to think of in theory, but it became quite a different matter when he had to spend all his hours sitting on the couch and watching the rest of the room revolve around him, never actually letting him join part in the real world, stating that *you have to rest, Draco, remember?*

So he rested. He let himself be buried by blankets and pillows that Hermione knitted him, and accepted the butterbeers Ron brought him without ever drinking them and listened as Luna continued to read out the different articles in the quibbler. He hobbled his way into George's shop and sat at the back counter as the day went on without him, met Pansy for lunch in the Leaky Cauldron, had Molly come and cook breakfast three days in a row, all of it under the watchful eye of Harry.

"I just don't want you to be hurt," He had said, the one time that Draco had gotten fed up with everyone's coddling and the feeling of being *stuck*, of suffocating, like if he didn't get out the four walls were going to implode on him, but of course he couldn't get out, he couldn't even walk on his own. "I know you're in pain."

(Draco had apologizing immediately. They are both being so careful with one another, each of them too afraid to be the first one to test the strength of this new thing between them, where they don't stop holding hands when their friends come over and stopped pretending that sleeping in the same bed was something that best friends do every night, and when one of them says that they're the most important thing in the world, the other doesn't question it. Loving each other - even if they hadn't said so in so many words, yet, still as cautious with this as they are with everything else- was no longer a thing they had to worry about. It just was.)

Still, it's almost a relief when Draco wakes up one morning to find a note stuck to the pillow beside him. It's in Harry's chicken scratch, the lines scribbled across the paper like he had already been walking away before the words were written down, telling him that he was going over to Hermione's to help her move a couch up the stairs (*says we can't use magic until it's actually in her apartment because of the muggles, completely mental*) and that he was to be back soon. The note ended with a little heart looped around the bottom corner.

Stupid, Draco thinks, tracing his thumb over the indent that the heart had made, wondering if Harry would find out if Draco were to shove this in the back of his sock drawer. *Both of you are so bloody stupid.*

He wants to stay in bed, maybe grab a few hours of sleep, but the sun was climbing in through the window and everything hurt too bad for that, anyways. Draco had never really had the occasion to wonder what it was like to live in constant pain before, but he knows now, like he's constantly working his way through the last shock waves of being cruciored, where you can still feel the ghost of the spell in your bones.

Every part of him is a mess of aching.

Draco doesn't bother with getting dressed, just pulls himself to his feet and lurches from the bed to the table to the doorway, out into the landing. It's hard to get down the stairs, but it gets easier with each step, like his limbs can only start to move once they have been reminded of what it means to be alive.

"Come on." He talks to himself a lot now, when he gets left alone in this big house. Sometimes he wonders if it's a bag thing, but Draco waves the worry away with the thought that there is always someone listening- Kreacher, the portraits, some random guest that he had not known was there. "Just one more. Just," Pain, so much of it, like every part of him was being stripped away and put back together again, "one," He places one foot in front of the other, looking at where he needs to be and not where he is going, which is why it doesn't really come as surprise when his foot slips and he is not strong enough to grab onto the railing for support, just tumbles, "More."

When he falls, he falls hard, and he does not bother to get back up, just throws his head back and laughs. He's still laughing by the time that Harry gets back, because even though he had hurt himself even more in the fall, part of him must have done this as some sick form of punishment, because he had known from the beginning that this was the only possible result.

"Jesus." Harry swears often, but he doesn't now, just drops the bag of yarn and books and cookies that he had been holding and sprints down the hallway to him, skidding the last three feet in his socks "What the hell happened, Draco?"

He's not good at being soft, Harry. He's more wildfire than candle light, all hurricane without the gentle rainfall. When he's being dramatic and melancholy, Draco likes to tell himself that it isn't a bad way to go out, being burned up by someone else's love for you.

"I wanted to come down here." It sounded stupid when he says it out loud. All bad decisions sound stupid when you spend the better part of the hour laying on the cold floor. "Thought I could do it."

"Did you?" Harry laughs, finding it funny now that it was clear that Draco had not hurt himself, and he seems to see Draco for the first time, and swears, softly, like it was more of an exhale than an exclamation. "Merlin, Draco." He lets go of him and Draco has to lean onto the wall for

support, hunching in on himself in order to hide, because he did not like the way that Harry was staring.

"Your chest."

"It's nothing." Draco crossed his arms over himself, trying to cover as much skin as he could. He knew what he looked like- had seen the bruises from the brief glances in the mirror, the scabs and the scraps and the bits of skin that he been ripped at awkward edges, how pale he was, the hollows underneath his ribs, the scars crossing his arms and stomach and curling over his shoulders- and knew that if he had the choice, Harry would not be seeing it. Now that he takes a moment to think about it, Draco thinks this is the first time that Harry had gotten the chance to look at him with enough light to really see, and even though Harry had known (must have known), you could not really prepare yourself for wreckage like this when a human being is concerned. "They said it would heal."

(Heal, but not disappear. The potions will knit you back together but the scars will still be there.)

(He doesn't care. / don't care.)

(You do.)

"Draco." Harry reaches out and pushes Draco's hands away, gentle enough that if he really wanted to, Draco could have kept them in place, but he doesn't, just lets them drift off to his sides. "God, Draco."

Harry's breath hitches like he had been caught off guard by the sight all over again, and Draco closes his eyes, tipping his head back to rest against the wall as Harry's hands trace over his cuts and bruises and torn up skin, because he did not want to look at Harry looking at him, not when its like this. "This," Harry says, a tremble in his voice, and his hands are following a specific set of scars now, old ones, ones that Draco had spent so many hours staring at that he could call up the image in his mind. "These are from me."

He might be crying. Draco doesn't look, just moves to catch at Harry's wrists and keep his hands in place, because he knew without being told that Harry was thinking of running away. It's what he always does, when he thinks that he has hurt someone.

"Merlin," Harry says again, like its all he can think to say, and he is so close that Draco can feel the word breathed out against his shoulder. Harry's hands are laying flat across his stomach now, fingers covering the silver scars that are crisscrossing over his chest, like he could make them melt away if he held on long enough, fingers almost disappearing in the dips between Draco's ribs. "Look what I did to you."

"To be fair," Draco said, trying to sound normal even though this was the closest they had been to each other since that night at the hospital, "I was actively trying to kill you."

"Yeah, well." Harry had moved on to other places, other scars, other stories with unhappier endings, his touch so hesitant that it was barely more than a brushing of his skin against Draco's. "You weren't very good at it."

"No." Draco said, and together they seem to come to the understanding that they have had enough of the past and to deal with the future instead, or maybe it had only occurred to Harry at that moment what a precarious position they are in, but whatever it was, Harry apparates them both the ten feet to the couch, catching Draco before he could stumble and meeting him halfway, moving down just as Draco was reaching up for him.

It's only after, when things have calmed down between them, that Draco finally looks down at himself, at the skin and the ruin painted upon it, all the ways that this life had left its mark on him. "There's so many." He twisted to look at the part of his back that was reflected in the mirror, forcing Harry to move with him. "I didn't realize there were so many."

"I wish I could take them away," Harry says, his hands still moving, like he is trying to map out an image of every mark in his head.

"They do look terrible." Not terrible as in ugly, exactly, but terrible as in they are speaking of a pain that Draco would rather forget, of a past that he cannot possibly hope to wipe away when it is written across his skin.

"That's not what I meant."

Draco pulled the blanket back overtop both of them, vanishing himself and his scars from view. "I know."

Chapter 33

Harry

He's got a thing for making dramatic proclamations.

Harry's really only aware of it because Hermione had pointed it out to him, once, back in their sixth year. She hadn't meant it to be one of those times where she says something very introspective and real, but it had been, because suddenly Harry was finding himself looking back on all the big moments of his life and couldn't help but agree that he had a flair for dramatics- his speeches to the DA and his one first declaration of love for Ginny, when he first told them about the prophecy and how he had told Dudley that he had almost died five times before he was even sixteen.

It's not really something that he'd grown out of.

"I really hate this house." Harry waves his spoon in the air to punctuate the importance of his words, splattering the newspaper Draco was reading with soup. "I think I'm going to move out."

There wasn't much that Harry could spout off that would make Draco turn away from the Quibbler before he was done searching for any mention of their names, but this was one of them. He looked less alarmed than Harry had thought he would. More exhausted than anything. "What?"

"I want to live somewhere else. Look at this place!" They hadn't even taken down the severed house elf heads lining the walls, despite Hermione's loud noises of disgust whenever she had to walk down the hallway to get to the bathroom. "Nobody can be happy when they live here."

"We're here." Draco said, a little bit of alarm creeping into his voice. "We're happy."

"Yes, but-," It still catches him off guard, sometimes, that this thing between them was new and breakable but definitely *there*, that he was able to reach across the table and squeeze Draco's hand without wondering how he would take it. "I meant longterm. This isn't a place to make a home, Draco."

Draco nodded once, twice, then folded up the paper. "Alright." He had a look on his face that Harry had come to associate with trying to get the proportions of a potion right. "Then let's find you a home."

Draco likes projects.

Harry had known that from the start, because back at Hogwarts there was never any shortage of them- Draco had always done the extra credit even when he didn't need it, he had never gotten less than an A on any essay, not to mention all the badges and the rude songs that he had made up just to spite Harry over the years. It's one thing to know that, though, and a completely different thing entirely to be a part of it.

They've got newspapers spread out across the living room floor, all of them opened to prospective houses. Draco's got ink smeared across his nose and Harry had ditched his sweater two hours ago, because even though Draco was trying hard to find something that suited him, try as he might Harry just couldn't picture himself in any of these houses.

"I'm sorry, Draco." He had just read out a description of ten different places- a house buried deep in the country side, a stately manor hidden on the outskirts of London, a flat in the complex beside Hogsmeade, different homes from wizarding suburbs. "I just don't know what I want."

He kept trying to think of what he wanted a home to be like, but try as he might, all he was able to think was the Burrow. It was the closest thing to a home he had ever known, besides Hogwarts, but all sentiment aside, Harry had to admit that if he was going to pick his ideal house, it would not look like that.

"Alright." Draco folded up the paper in the shape of an airplane and chucked it into the fire, as calm as he had been when they first started this, like Harry hadn't shut down every single one of his attempts to be helpful. "Then what is it that you don't want?"

"I don't want it to be like the Dursley's. Nothing like them. It was- there was never-," He squeezed his eyes shut and thought about shiny floor tiles and crystal glasses and blinding lights, expensive couches whose cushions don't seem very inviting and a cupboard, always coming back to the cupboard, the way the dust would fall into his eyes when people walked through the stairs and how since he never knew what time it was, he could trick himself into thinking that the hours were really days, months, years, life spinning out in front of him without him ever getting to live it. "It was like living in a glass house. Like if you talked too loud, you would break it."

"Like you were suffocating," Draco said, and it reminded Harry that they were building this home together. That Draco had his own things that he was trying to pull away from. "Like there was never a moment that they weren't watching."

"But I don't want this, either." Harry said, because even though they had done their best to make it seem like a place they could live in, it was just filled with too many memories. "I want somewhere that has more light."

"Light." Draco picked up his quill again and stared at the fire like he regretted throwing away his newspaper. "I can work with light."

"Tell me what you want," Draco says later, whispering the words right into his ear like its some sort of secret, and Harry can barely pay attention because of the way that his hands were moving, searching him out underneath the covers. "Tell me what you want and I can give it you."

A chair with the stuffing coming out of the cushions. Hermione's afghans stacked up in a basket we keep in the corner. A big front porch with rocking chairs, a garden off to the side that won't grow in rows no matter how hard we try to make it. Mismatched dishes in the sink and a kitchen table scorched from your constantly overflowing potions and fresh baked bread in the ovens, the radio always turned on low so we can dance when the mood strikes us and a big picture window

in our bedroom. And maybe a dog, too, an old dog with a bum leg that we get from a muggle shelter, the one that had been there so long that it had given up hope that anyone was going to love him, we can be the ones to rescue him, can't we? It'd be a good life, that.

"Nothing," is what he says, because all that would take too long and would kill the mood and maybe

Harry still doesn't think its going to happen, anyways. "Just you."

He's started walking through the house again.

See, the thing about moving on that Harry didn't know is that its sort of just another word for goodbye, where you have to loosen your grip on all those memories that you're afraid of forgetting in order to keep facing the future, in order to keep putting one foot in front of the other. And it should be easy, in theory, but that was before you take into account all the things that had happened in this miserable old building- how it was the only safe spot for them in the war, the party when Ron and Hermione were prefects, George and Fred together, where Remus and Tonks fell in love, where Sirius was.

Sometimes, if Harry is not careful, he can trick himself into thinking that he will turn a corner and see them watching him, waiting to see if he had lived up to the hero that they had taken him to be. Sometimes, he wants to rip this house down wall by wall and brick by brick in the hopes that one of them will get to go free. Sometimes, he thinks of standing in the doorway and screaming that he is sorry, just in case there is any chance that they would be able to hear.

He is not sure if he's ready to leave them all behind.

"You don't have to get rid of it."

Harry jumps at the sound of Draco's voice. He'd been caught in the middle of staring at the place where the portrait of Sirius' mother used to hang.

"And why wouldn't I get rid of it?"

"Because you're one of the lucky people who can afford to buy a house without selling the old one." Draco tilted his head, looking at the empty space, maybe thinking of how he should redo the wallpaper so you cannot even tell where the picture had been. "Too many memories here to just walk away."

"I don't want it."

The idea of keeping it was met with a revulsion so strong that if Harry had had any doubts about moving out before, he wouldn't have any now.

"Then donate it to the historical society, let it be turned into a museum for merlin's sakes." Draco clutched Harry's fingers in his own, like that would make him listen. "All I'm saying is that you don't owe this place, or anything in it, any more of you. You don't have to figure out anything now, and you don't have to do it alone, remember? I'm here, for good." He was here. Here, and

despite everything, not running away. Harry keeps expecting him to. "Don't let this war take another piece of you."

Harry wishes it were that easy.

Chapter 34

Harry

Draco gets pardoned.

Harry's not sure why it comes as a shock, really, especially considering how he and Hermione and George have been showing up at the ministry once a week lobbying for a change in his criminal status, but now that the proof of the change is staring up at him in black and white, Harry can't help but feel like the ground had fallen out from underneath him.

"It's over," Draco says, and he's got tears in his eyes, and Harry pulls himself out of his own head long enough to notice the tears in his boyfriend's eyes and the way that his hands are trembling, just a little, the most they have in days, and realizes how great this must be for him, to not be a marked man for the first time in five years. There's a difference between telling yourself that you are innocent every night before you go to sleep and having the government proclaim it to the whole world, as the Daily Prophet would surely say in tomorrow's paper. "It's all over."

Over is really a funny word for it. There's been a never ending series of moments where Harry thinks it is over only to find that he is wrong- killing Voldemort just to realize that his supporters are still out there, thinking that he is walking away from the auror department to let other people handle it and finding that box from Moody, a message from beyond the grave, leaving *that* behind only to be pulled back in when they drop a chandelier on his boyfriend's head during the attempted murder of his best friend.

It's all very confusing, this back and forth, but finally, Harry was having to come to terms that finally, after years of fighting, he was finally going to be at peace. The fighting was done and the funerals were over and even past sins were being forgiven, like that owl to Draco shoved.

What's a soldier without a war to fight in? It was something that Ron said in the first nights of the tentative peace after Voldemort had fallen, and Harry didn't have an answer. Didn't bother to answer, really, because beneath all the grief was the hum of victory and the idea that he was going to spend the rest of his life with his arms around Ginny, that mostly, everyone he loved had come through okay, even though they weren't okay at all.

That had been a bad feeling, waking up and realizing that it would never end, not for him.

This feeling was worse, because he knows that it makes him a terrible person, wishing that maybe this would have waited just a few more months.

"That's great!" Harry hears his own voice and wants to cringe, because it is much too cheery and much more robust than it should have been. He wants to cover it up by

holding Draco, wrapping him in a hug or kissing him on the cheek, some tactile symbol of how much he cares about him, but it seems like he is struck dumb by the news. Draco is too caught up in the idea of being free that he doesn't even notice. "We should celebrate!"

"Merlin, I've got to call Hermione." Draco's voice is faint, like he might pass out from excitement at any moment. "Think she'll mind if I just floo over?"

"When you have news like this?" His voice is still too forced, too wrong. "Not a chance."

"Hey." Draco's eyes fix on Harry for the first time since Draco's shout drew him into the kitchen,

and then he draws him into a kiss, because they're boyfriends and get to do stuff like that now just to prove to each other that they can. That they want to. That hopefully, they will *always* want to. "I know you did a lot to get me here. That a lot of people thought you were crazy for never giving up on me." He draws him even closer and makes Harry look into his eyes, like he would miss some of the seriousness of the moment if he was looking at the floor. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Harry felt miserable. "I didn't do anything that the ministry shouldn't have done ages ago."

"Still," Draco said, and he is happy again, like nothing was wrong between them. "Thank you."

He kisses him one more time and then leaves the room, presumably to call everyone that their floo network was connected to and shout the good news into their empty living rooms until he grows hoarse. Harry takes the time to sink down onto one of the kitchen chairs and catch his breath, head tucked between his knees, like he had just gotten the wind knocked out of him and needs a minute to curb the nausea.

Harry was happy for him. Honesty. The only troublesome bit was that the idea of Draco being on probation was the foundation of their relationship, where Harry always knew that he would be here, a permanent promise he could not default on. And maybe it was sort of screwed up in a way (*alright, definitely screwed up*) but beyond everything else, the fact that they were room mates was the one thing that would chain them together even when the world around them was trying to pull them apart.

But now it was all different. Now, they were both in transition, with Draco being a free man who doesn't need to report his whereabouts to the ministry and Harry looking to leave everything about the war behind, new career plan and new boyfriend and new house. It's not a bad thing, except for the fact that twenty minutes before, Harry didn't have to think about asking Draco if he was coming with him to the new house. There was never any need for discussion.

Now there was. Now, Draco was free to stay in this house or go buy himself a new one or go live with his mother or George or Luna, or even apparate to the other side of the world and never talk to any of them. Now, there was no safety net of the routine, no guarantees that Draco would want to go with him at all.

(And of course, that makes Harry consider the question of how much of this was by choice and how much was by obligation, like, yes, Harry, let's look at a house to build our future in that meets all these specifics and I'm not protesting, but I'm not protesting because you're the one who decides where we go and some little piece of paper the wizengamot judge filled out months ago insists that I have to follow, like it or not. Long distance dating gets harder when you're doing it from a cell in Azkaban, after all.)

"I just talked to Hermione. She said she and Ron can be at the Leaky Cauldron at eight, which gives you and I at least an hour to celebrate on our hour, time that I can spend thanking you properly for all the work that you did to get me-," Draco pauses right in the middle of his sentence and the smile slips off his face at the sight of Harry. He doesn't look upset, just confused, like he cannot imagine why Harry would not be jumping for joy and making his own round of announcements, though who Draco thought he would be calling when all that was available was the muggle phone, he wouldn't know. Maybe Dudley, but Harry never did tell him Draco was technically a criminal. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah." There's a voice in his head telling him that honesty is the best option. That communication is key in healthy relationships, and maybe they should sit down so Harry can talk about his feelings.

It sounds a bit like Hermione. But there's also a voice that sounds a bit like Seamus, of all people, echoing a sentiment from their sixth year, saying that now was not the time to worry about stupid things like that. "Everything's perfect."

Chapter 35

Draco

It's a strange thing, becoming okay again.

At the time, Draco hadn't noticed how much time and energy go into *not* being okay, where he puts all his energy into raging against monsters that only existed in his head and pushing past road blocks that were only in his way because he had been the one to place him there. For the past two years, right from the moment his father was sent to jail, all he had been thinking about was putting the pieces of his life back together, thinking only of what he had to do in order to get himself to the point where he could look in the mirror and feel like the person staring back at him actually seemed like they had turned out alright.

As a whole, the people who went through the war had spent a lot of time together trying to reach the point where Draco is currently at. The only thing was, no one ever thought to tell him how hard it would be, walking through life like you need someone's permission to be healthy and whole again, always waiting for the moment where the ground might be pulled out from under your feet.

(It's like, there were these holes, in his heart and his mind and his body, and Draco had spent these past months giving everything he had into filling them back up, and here he was, with all his metaphorical potholes patched over with brand new cement. In his head he knows it is a good thing, but it is also a strange thing, to have all this time, to keep expecting to fall back into old patterns and bad habits, to have to keep reminding himself it was okay to be okay.)

"You're happier, right?" Harry had asked him, one of those nights where he caught Draco staring at himself in the mirror, poking at a smattering of scars and pockmarks that trail down his side. "Now? With me?"

"This is the happiest I've ever been," Draco had said, and he didn't even have to lie, and his smile was not covering up any old ghosts when he turned back to him. He'd be fine, really. All he had to do was keep moving, keep busy, just enough that the past doesn't have the space to squeeze back into Draco's life.

It's this, more than anything else, that makes him volunteer when Ginny was complaining about the overwhelming amount of work that had to be done before the wedding.

"I mean, it's mental. Mental! Who thought up with this stuff?" They were at the Burrow, her combat boot covered feet thrown up on the coffee table and a steaming cup of tea in her hand. "You have to think about food, and the people, and the color scheme, and flowers, and where to put everyone, so I'm going to have to rent a place because I can't

have it here otherwise everyone will just compare it to Fleur and Bill's, and Merlin's beard, do you have any idea how much a wedding dress costs? And we have to buy two of them!"

"Well," Hermione said tentatively, reasonably. "It's your wedding, you don't have to have all that if you don't want it."

"Oh, I want it." Ginny's eyes widened in alarm. "It's just that it's all so bloody hard to wrap my head around."

Ginny was good at a lot of things. She was good at fighting, and at quidditch, and calming George down. She was good at healing, even if her spells hurt more than Luna's when they crept over your skin. She was a good cook and a good friend and good person, but she was not good at organizing an event like this. Lucky for her, Draco was.

"I could help." Both girls looked over at her. From her seat in the arm chair, Luna smiled vaguely, like she recognized that he had said something nice but wasn't following the conversation enough to know what. "I've had practice planning these type of things."

"Oh." Ginny looked surprised and for a moment he considers taking the offer back, but then she sort of just melts back into the cushions, a relieved smile on his face. "That'd be wonderful, Draco." She reaches out a hand for him and lays it on his arm for a moment. "Thank you."

He's very good at this stuff, Draco.

Harry?

Not so much.

"Come on." Draco reaches over and swats his hands away, folding the napkin up the right way.

"It's not that hard, Harry."

"I don't see why we're doing this." He was grumpy. He's always grumpy when the subject of the wedding came up, because whenever Draco talked to him about the wedding, that invariably meant that either he was going to pull Harry into some long chore of helping to prepare for it or that the girls were going to take over his living room for the night again. "It's not our wedding."

They both pause over the word "our" as soon as it leaves his mouth. Draco is the one to push past it.

"Doesn't matter." They were making models, seeing which one was right. As soon as Draco got good at it, he was sure that he could do this specific fold on all the napkins in one go. It was very difficult, though. And also sort of messy, seeing as how he had upended the towel drawer on the kitchen floor and sat down beside them to practice, determined not to stop until he got it right. "They asked us to do this."

"Only because you volunteered us!"

"Oh, like you have anything else to do." The words come out of his mouth before Draco really gets the chance to think about them. They were meant to be joking, but one look at Harry's face and Draco knows that he has crossed a line.

"I did just save the world again," Harry says, and even though he gives another jab of the wand and the napkin in front of his wiggles feeble into a tented position, his voice is icy. "Or maybe you didn't notice?"

"I noticed." Draco was horrified, wondering how he had spoken so blindly, without thinking about how his words might sound. "That's not what I meant."

"Just because I haven't been making some big scientific breakthrough every week-,"

"That's not what-,"

"I'm just taking some time," Harry says, and it's then that Draco understands that this is more about Harry's issue with himself than what Draco had said. "I only want to figure out what to do. I've never had a choice before."

"No one said that you couldn't do that." Draco scooted over to him so they were face to face, knees touching. "I never said that you were doing anything wrong. You're doing what you have to do, and no one could ever think that you need to give more." There's a pause where Harry looks at the wall instead of him, and Draco pulls him back round to face him. "You've done enough."

"I keep thinking that I shouldn't stop." Harry breathed the words out in one rush. "That I have to keep fighting."

"The bad guys are gone." Draco does not know how to tell him this, to express that the war is over, that there are no battles to be fought. He thinks that Harry knows this, but he still cannot shake the idea that there must be some dying light to rage against, some evil to resist. You cannot shake the war out of you when it has sunk its hooks in so deep.

"You got them."

"There are always more bad guys."

"Not this time," Draco said, holding him on this dingy kitchen floor, hoping he is telling the truth.

"It's over."

"I've thought that so many times." Harry was breaking underneath his hands, his composure crumbling, and for the first time since Harry had known him, he looked tired, tired and young and small. "So many times, I think its done, that I've won, that we can all rest and be safe and no one has to hurt anymore, but then I turn the corner and there's just another thing to fight. I am so tired of fighting."

"Then don't." Draco was almost in tears. "Next time, don't fight. Let someone else do it, anyone else, this isn't your job anymore, Harry!"

"Then who's going to?" His breathing was ragged, his eyes blurred with tears. "It's only ever been me. Me and this fight, it's all I've ever known, and if it's gone- if it's really, really gone Draco, for good- what am I then?" He spits the next word out. "Nothing. You can't be a hero when there are no bad guys to fight."

"You don't have to be anything. You don't have to be a hero. You just have to be Harry." Draco had told him this before, had spent nights sitting with his back to the head board and Harry's head in his lap, trying to convince him that it was okay to take this time to find himself, that it was alright if he spent the rest of his life doing nothing but trying to make himself happy, really, after all he had given and all he had lost. "That's enough for me."

Why can't it be enough for you, he thinks, but then Harry is heaving in a great shuddering breath and shaking out his hair, straightening back up with a watery smile. "This is stupid," he says, waving his hands around at the mess around them, perhaps talking about his break down or maybe just talking about his life in general. "I'm just tired."

"Then let's go to bed." Draco stands up and towels fall down around him as he moves, holding out a hand to Harry.

Harry stares up at him. "But you said- the towels?"

"Bed, Harry." He waves his hand at him again, insistent. "Things will look better in the morning." Draco keeps looking for a sign that another break down might be on the way, but for all intents and purposes, it was like Harry doesn't remember what he had said on the night of the napkins. Actually, he seems to go out of his way to avoid it, throwing himself into the wedding planning with a ferocity to rival Mrs. Weasley. It's intense enough that even Luna notices.

"It is very nice of him to do this. He always was such a nice friend." She is watching Harry help Ginny's measurements with a determined look on his face, laughing when she demands him to recheck it all for a third time, just in case. "But I didn't ever think that he was that into parties."

"To be fair, it isn't a party." If Draco was going to confide in anybody about the conversation, it would be Luna, but he didn't feel right about it. "It's a wedding."

"Is there much difference?" Luna didn't seem to be that bothered by the idea of the impending date, which was only weeks away, seeing as they both wanted it done before

she headed back to Hogwarts in the fall for a repeat of her final year. Technically, she had graduated, but McGonagall had declared the option for repeat years available for anyone who thought that the last year or two of their education was unsatisfactory for their needs. Unlike Ginny, who was becoming more frantic with each day, Luna simply stated what she wanted and then stuck with it, and Ginny inevitably agreed. "The clean up for both is extremely messy."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it, because really, sometimes conversations with her took more energy than he knew what to do with.

"Oi, Draco!" Ginny waved him over, and he came, dreading the new task that he and Hermione would be assigned with. Draco's sort of a bridesmaid, though he's hoping that Luna doesn't demand that he wears a dress. "What do you think of the new color scheme? Luna picked it."

It was blue and pink, both in terribly garish shades, and both would clash terribly with Ginny's hair. Across the room from them, Fleur was looking very cross, because she had been trying to pawn off some of the previously ruined and now repaired decorations that would have been used at the end of her own wedding reception, had it not been interrupted by the death eater take over of the ministry, and Luna had said that she would never have something so shiny at her own wedding, that it would attract too many magical bugs that no one in the room had heard of before.

"Don't worry." He could feel a head ache swelling up behind his temples. Now that his potions were winding down, he was desperately in need of a project, but he thinks he could have found an easier one. "I'll talk to her."

They get home late, after the color scheme had made its final change to colors that were less painful to the eyes, after they had convinced Luna to make an appointment to be fitted for an actual wedding dress, and after Ginny had picked a cake and charged Draco with the task of going to order it. *And God help you if there's a single frosted rose out of place*, she had said, which was much less frightening than he might have found it a few months ago but still worrisome.

"Merlin, can you believe all that?" Harry was yanking his jumped up over his head while walking at the same time, and he stumbled over the kitchen chair that he had left pushed out in the entrance that morning, then walking on like he hadn't. "Bloody hell, there's so much, and handwritten invitations, lord, I'll be stuffing all those into envelopes for hours while you write them, won't I?" His head pops into sight again and he smiles. "Good thing I like you so much."

Draco isn't sure why it hits him at that moment, really, but as he's looking at him, it occurs to him that he really had meant what he had said the other night. This, even if Harry really had moved on from being a hero, was enough for him. Even if the rest of the world stopped loving the great Harry Potter, Draco never would.

"I love you." There is a lump in his throat and he talks around it. "So much. And I don't- it doesn't matter to me, what you decide to do, even if what you decide to spend your life doing is something that no one else thinks is important, I'll think it's important, as long as it makes you happy. And even on the days where you think you're nothing, I'm going to be able to tell you different, because you're everything to me."

"Draco." Harry looked sad, and a bit embarrassed. "Draco, don't."

"No, let me say it." Draco takes a deep breath and rushes through it, not sure what he is saying and only that he needs to say *something*, to make some fumbling attempt at getting his point across. "You say that you need to figure out who you are, and what you want, and you keep telling me that you've got no idea what to do with your life, so I'm going to tell you, Harry, I'm going to tell you what we're going to do, okay?"

Harry just laughs, and Draco kisses him quiet.

"We're going to get that house you keep talking about, the one with all the light. And you're going to move there. And you're going to play in a quidditch league with Ron on the weekends because you keep saying that flying is the only other you're good at but refuse to go pro, and you can keep dragging Hermione out of the office for lunch because she never knows when to take a break, and then you can work in George's shop or help Luna with the quibbler or even just sit in the house and cut up ingredients for my potions all day, anything Harry, just something, something even if it is not enough, because you'll get there one day, alright?" Draco wanted this to sound true. To make his words make everything okay. To make Harry stop looking for a lightning strike of a revelation and give himself time to rest. "You just have to give it time. We had years to figure out what we want to do with ourselves. You've only had a few months. It's going to take a little bit."

Harry nods, slowly. "You'll be with me?"

Draco lets out a breath. "If you want me to."

"I do."

"Then I will. Every single day, from now until forever." It's a big promise, and in his head Draco is thinking about a future that he was not sure he was being promised, where they both live in this house full of light and he is the one to come home to Harry, where Draco works in an office attached to the side of his house and Harry sort of just has his hobbies but that's alright, because he has done enough, given enough of himself for a million life times over, and in his head, when this summer ends it is he and Harry who will be standing underneath the altar that George is building, not Luna and Ginny. It's a selfish thing to want, but Draco can't help it. "You've got me."

"Promise?"

Draco's not sure why that's still a question. If he was going to walk away, he would have done it by now.

"Promise."

Chapter 36

Draco

It took a while, but they finally found that place that Harry wanted, the one full of light.

It's not a house, technically. It's a cottage, halfway between Luna's rebuilt house and the Burrow, perched right in the middle of the sea of grain and corn. If you stand out on the porch, you can look out and see everything, practically- Luna's out to the left and the Burrow to the right and that apple orchard where the Weasley's play quidditch, not to mention the whole muggle town, and even though Draco thought it was nice mostly because of how pretty it was, he also knew that it would make Harry feel better, having the higher ground. No one can sneak up on you when all you have to do is look out the window and see everything around you in one glance.

"What do you think?" Draco asks because he has to, but he can already tell from the look on Harry's face that he had done good. It had been Draco who was scouring the ads in the paper every morning, Draco who finally broke down and enlisted the help of a realtor, and Draco who came to look at this place first, walking through the empty rooms as dust motes circled around in a stream of sunlight and thought *yes, this, this is the one*. He couldn't help but be proud of himself.

"I think I love it." Harry breathes out, running his fingers over the smooth oak mantle above the fireplace before pushing away and circling through the rest of the rooms- the dining room with the big overhead skylight, the two bedrooms upstairs, the winding stair case and the tiny kitchen, finally pushing through the screen door and standing out on the porch, facing towards the Burrow with a big grin on his face.

Draco gives him a moment, and then follows. He doesn't have to say anything, because the screen doors squeals and squeaks, announcing his presence. It was the only door, at the moment. Draco had thought that would make Harry feel better, the knowledge that someone could not sneak in without some real effort.

"There are more buildings that come with the property, if you want to look at them." Draco waves his hand to encompass the area behind them, towards the cellar and the shed and greenhouse, apparently everything that one could need for proper country life. It isn't really his style, but Draco could get used to it. Was already getting used to it, if he was being honest. "Or we could just let them go, tear them down, it doesn't matter once we buy them."

He does not think twice about the we. If this is where Harry wanted, it was where Draco would go.

"I don't have to look, I already know its perfect," Harry says, and it could have been perfect for Draco, too, if he would have just stopped talking. "Of course, you have to look

at places, too. We need to find someplace that you want to be at," and suddenly, Draco could not breathe, because the idea of going somewhere that Harry was not was not in the plans.

But plans change.

Draco should be used to that by now.

"Right," He says, and the smile does not even slip from his face, that is how good he has become at pretending. "Of course."

The words follow him through the afternoon and most of the night, until Harry was gone to bed to catch up on missed sleep and Draco finds himself alone in front of the fire place, watching the flames leap and whither, wishing he wasn't so much of a coward, wishing he could go up and crawl into bed beside him without second guessing his place there, just this once.

There was a picture of the two of them on the mantle, arms wrapped around each other, right in between all the other pictures of people that Harry had deemed important- of Harry and Ron and Hermione, family pictures of the Weasley's, his mother, his father, Remus and Tonks, a bunch of baby Teddy, even some of a man that Draco now knows to be Sirius Black, back when he was young and the dementors had not yet found their way to him. Back before he was ruined.

That was his picture. And over there, on the bookshelf, were his books. And on the table beside him was his favorite mug, and a blanket Hermione had knitted him was thrown over the chair, and there, even, back by the hallway was an old sweater thrown over a pair of shoes that he had abandoned. Pieces of him were everywhere. He belonged here. He lived here. This, here, with Harry, was his home.

He didn't mean it like you're thinking, Draco thinks, trying to calm himself down, thinking that he really should just go up and lay down with Harry just so he could quiet the doubt creeping up inside him. *How could he? You're together, always, he said so.*

It makes sense, what he's telling himself, but so does the doubt.

They go back to the cottage the next day, this time with an agent, who has them talk about it one last time to make sure that they are certain that this is the place for them *(she's a little miffed, Draco thinks, that she has two extremely wealthy clients right in front*

of her and this is what they end up buying) and shows them where to sign. Quill in hand, Harry looks happier than he had in a while, like he is finally being freed.

"There." He dots his initials down on the very last line and smiles up at Draco, ignoring the realtor and her attempts to dissuade him one more time, show him a few of the mansions and town houses, still not getting this man and his sentiment. "All good, yeah?"

All good, is what Draco wants to say, but the words cannot quite clear his throat because they do not seem all that true, because to really be all good he would have to ask Harry the question that has been burning up, he would have to know for sure that he had a place here.

"Perfect, Harry." Draco reaches out to take his hand and Harry lets him, stands up to meet him for a kiss, the first kiss in this new house, realtor be damned. "Absolutely perfect."

They spend a lot of time in the house that day, combing through it, checking what needs to be done and what can stay, deciding how many of their things from Grimmauld Place should come with them.

"None." Harry decides it for the both of them, looking around the empty rooms and shaking dust off the abandoned curtains. "It's going to be a new start, Draco. An entirely new home."

Draco agrees, but really, as much as he hated it in the beginning, he would miss Grimmauld Place. It's a dreary old thing, but he could not hate it, not when it was the only thing that had spared him from a prison cell, and not when it was where he and Harry found their way to each other. He knows that you have to move on to move forward, but he does not want to scrub it out of their lives just yet, just when things were going so good.

The two of them take a tour together, and Harry babbles on, about letting Draco choose the art work to go on the walls through the hallways, and how they could put picture frames up on the wall along the stairs. He talks about expanding the dining room so all the Weasley's can fit, because now that he has a real home he wants to have them over, and goes out into the greenhouse with the broken roof and rotting support beams, talks about planning to mend it, says that he might take up gardening.

The entire house is a project, something to keep Harry's mind of things, keep him moving forward while he figures all the unanswered aspects of his life out. Draco tries not to worry about that, about what happens when he runs out of things to fix.

"And here," Harry swings the door to the shed open, which is magically enhanced on the inside to be as large as a full scale garage. "Can be a potions workshop for you, once we fix it up. Put in some shelves, a fireplace, a work table, some cupboards, a presto-" He moves his hand in a sweeping motion and the picture comes, unbidden, of Draco out in this shed during the day and Harry out fixing something in the house, the two of them coming back to meet together for dinner, maybe popping over to the Weasley's just for a moment, and then spending quiet nights at home over and over and over again. "It's a space fit for a king. Or a potions master, whichever."

He is smiling at him, softly, sweetly, like he is so desperately trying to make this work, to keep Draco happy. It chases the doubt around and around in his yet, makes it clear out to make more room for the good stuff.

And yet.

"I love it." Draco squared his shoulders back and made a show of inspecting things, making plans, giving Harry murmured compliments about the shed while he makes plans of his own. "Truly, Harry, I do."

The papers are still piled up on the bedside table, which is really what gives Draco the idea.

He calls Angie, the realtor, who is a squib but does have a knack for getting extraordinary deals on magical homes. She picks up on the first ring.

"Hello?" She's in a bad mood, he can tell from the biting in her voice.

"Angie?" Nothing from the other line. "It's me, Draco."

He keeps his eye on the door while he speaks, straining his ears to make sure the water from the shower was still running. It would not do to have Harry bursting in during this particular conversation. "No, the cottage was fine. This isn't about Harry." It feels like betrayal, what he's doing. Draco isn't sure how to think of it. It wasn't good, but it was necessary, in a way. "This is about me. I need a house, too, as it happens. Forgot to mention it earlier."

He can feel the stunned silence coming from the other end of the line and it hurts, because she, too, had assumed that he and Harry were a package deal. He doesn't have the heart to tell her that there have been all kinds of such disappointments today.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy." He didn't like to hear that name. It made him feel like something he wasn't, something he never wanted to be. "I'm sure we can find just the thing we're looking for."

"I'm sure you do," Draco murmurs, and hangs up just as soon as Harry pops his head in through the door, a towel wrapped around his waist, and when Harry asks who he was talking to, he barely feels guilty when he tells him that Angie had called just to make sure that all the paperwork had been sent over to the ministry.

It wasn't final, after all. It's not like he was planning to move out right this very moment.

It's only preemptive. Draco thinks, watching Harry dress, still trying to figure it out, because while Harry hadn't ever done anything to suggest that he was unwelcome to come with him to his new home, he really hadn't done anything to suggest that he was, either. *Just in case.*

Chapter 37

Harry

The cottage is what people might call a fixer-upper.

He knows this because it is exactly what Hermione had called it, smiling around at the little house with the look on her face that normally comes right before she hands he and Ron study schedules, trailing her hands through the dust on the counter tops. "It's a bit of a fixer upper Harry," She had said, Ron nodding along with her in approval, a habit both he and Harry had picked up from ministry dinners. "But with a little work, this sure is going to be something."

A little work didn't cover it. Harry had *plans* for this house, plans so big that they should be written out in capital letters, and it's going to take a while to get them done, because he plans to do them the right way, the muggle way.

(Draco had rolled his eyes, but after Harry had pointed out that he does all his cleaning the muggle way, he had shut up.)

"I just think it'll take you forever." Draco had said, following him through the door while levitating all the tools that Harry would be using with one sweep of a wand. "Why even bother?"

"Because then it'll be mine," Harry says, because he had liked the idea of knowing the placement of every grain of sanded down wood and the work that went into every inch of the carpeting, but then he amended his answer, reaching out to hold Draco's hand, who rolled his eyes. "Ours."

"Alright." Draco rolled his eyes, but Harry knew he won, because Draco always caves when Harry starts to talk like that. He tries not to abuse the power too much but he wanted -needed- this project, just to give him a little more time to figure things out. He always had thought best when he was doing mundane work like that. "Anything you want, Harry."

Of course, the fact that it was Harry's project made it Draco's project, too, handing him tools as he hammered nail after nail into the steps and swiping paint along Harry's cheek when he didn't think he was being given enough attention, and also being all around bossy, which Harry was expecting. They spent a lot of afternoons here, Draco popping in around noon, insisting that he had just come to bring him lunch and then staying until dusk, where they could sit with their legs dangling off the tootall porch and watching the sun set down over the fields.

This could be every day for the rest of my life, Harry would think, every single night, taking Draco's hand in his and pressing a kiss to his knuckles each time he thought it, like he was

sealing the promise. It was the first time he was thinking of the future and not feeling afraid. *I could feel this happy, every night, each night, as long as I live.*

It was a nice thought, a good thought. And a strange one, considering that for the past seven years before hand, he had always been one step away from dying. And for the past three years, he thought that death and murder were the only paths his life could travel down, and somehow, no matter which one of them lived, he would end when the fight was done.

(That's the thing, isn't it, about neither can live while the other survives- it sort of goes the other way, too, like they only exist for each other, because of each other, because what is hero without a villain to fight against?)

(Harry knows the answer now: nothing. Just a person. The only problem is he didn't know how to be that, not quite yet. He's hoping this house will help him figure it out.)

Today was one of those days, where Draco brings lunch and critiques Harry's work while he eats in a way that should be nagging but was mostly just fond, and then he just stuck around, maybe because today Harry was clearing out the shed that Draco was going to use for his potions and he wanted to make sure it was done right. And it was. Harry had made sure of that, scrubbing it from top to bottom before he did anything else, repainting the outside and putting shelves up on the inside, even climbing up on the roof to patch up the chimney. And when it was over, they weren't quite ready to leave, yet, so Draco somehow managed to make a meal out of the remnants of their lunch and they headed out to the decaying greenhouse for a picnic.

"It's sort of beautiful like this," Draco said, waving his wand lazily to gesture at the greenhouse. Bubbles streamed out of the tip and Harry caught them on his hands, watching as the burst. "All broken down."

Beautiful disasters. Draco likes those, Harry is learning. He just hopes that has nothing to do with how much Draco seems to love him.

"We could leave it like this, if you want." Harry wouldn't mind. He had always loved when things were a little more chaotic, probably because so much of his early life at the Dursley's had been constrained and stifled. He likes to color outside the lines sometimes, just to remind himself he can. Plus, the only real problem was the holes in the roof, and they could get Hermione to lay down a spell that fixes that. "One less thing for me to do."

"Seems a bit impractical though," Draco mused, maybe to be difficult or maybe because he was actually considering it. "A broken down greenhouse."

"Neither of us are much for gardening though," Harry pointed out, and yet he didn't like the idea of this falling into disarray. It would be a nice gathering area, though, if he brought out some nice metal tables, maybe put in a pool. Aunt Petunia would have killed for a party space like that, if it had been a little neater.

"We could be," Draco said, rolling onto his stomach. "Here."

Here. Here was different from their other lives, like no matter what else they were, all the things they thought they had to be, it evaporated the moment they stepped foot in this little house and all its sprawling grounds. It was like other people, when they settled down here.

Harry reached out to lace his fingers through Draco's and then gave up, rolling closer instead, the top of his head nudging his shoulder. "It could be a good life for us here." He was whispering, maybe because he was too afraid to say something like that out loud. Like all of this could still break at any moment. "Don't you think?"

"Tiny house, big yard, overgrown garden." Draco's voice was just as quiet and dripping with warmth. Harry reached out and took his wrist, kept time with his pulse, feeling hot fast it beat.

Normally, that annoys Draco, but today he allowed it. "It could be a really nice life, Harry."

"Anywhere could be a good life." Harry wanted to stress this point, make sure that he understood that this, the two of them, was it for him, that there was no turning back, and that when he said I love you, he meant it. "Anywhere, as long as I'm with you."

Draco smiled, ducking his head into Harry's shoulder. "Thanks, Harry." He still sounded soft, still sounded warm, but he does not return the sentiment. Harry doesn't let it bother him. He would keep saying things like that for as long as it took.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

we're almost at the end folks

Draco

They are almost at the end.

Draco can feel it, how things are changing, like a sort of electricity pumped in the air. He had settled into the idea of a routine, and a lot of that routine is tied up in the idea that things will not change- it is burrowed into the bones of Grimmauld Place, wrapped around the idea that there is Luna and Ginny before they become *Luna-and-Ginny*, the promise of forever that Harry had handed him, all of which is now looking so unsteady, like one strong push might send it all tumbling down.

He tries not to freak out about it. No one else is, and he keeps trying to tell himself that change is inevitable and not always for the better, that this is the only way that you can move on to your bigger and better things that everyone keeps telling you to reach for it, but it had been so long since Draco had a place that he considered safe that he cannot consider giving this up, even if the walls in his house are eternally moldy and the stairs creak and he is caught in a never ending cycle of wedding planning. He would take it, just so things could stay the same, because if things were the same, Draco would not have to worry about unpleasant surprises.

"Hey." Harry bends down to press a kiss to the cheek before straightening up to check his reflection in the mirror. "You alright?"

Sort of, except that you told me that I should look at places to live, too, and I did, Harry, how bout that, found myself a nice place in the middle of muggle London with black iron gates that are spelled to not open to strangers and a big garden out back, only I really don't want to go there, so please, whatever you are going to do, I think you should say it now before I up and run away, but you won't, because you don't know anything about this, because despite everything, I still have inherited my mother's knack for keeping secrets and my father's ability to reason any amount of subterfuge, even when I know its going to hurt.

"Perfect." Because he was, perfect. He had a boyfriend that he loved, and who loves him. He was planning a wedding for two friends who he cares deeply about, who have forgiven him for all past transgressions. And he was at perfect liberty to do whatever he liked, thanks to the ministry pardoning him. "Are we about ready to go?"

"Almost." Harry knew something was wrong, Draco could tell, but he wasn't going to say anything. It was hard to see the truth when the lie was so much easier to deal with, so much more agreeable for your current situation. "I just have to grab the present."

The present was for Luna and Ginny's bachelorette parties, which was actually just one party for both of them. Harry had rented out the Leaky Cauldron for them and stuffed it full of balloons, then packed the place with a hundred of their closest friends.

And the Weird Sisters.

That part, Draco had to admit, was more extra than even he was willing to go, despite how good of a party planner he considered himself to be.

"Harry, you arse!" Ginny found them both as soon as they walked through the door, crushing the present between the three of them when she hurtled towards them, throwing an arm around both of their necks and pulling them down to her height. Draco caught an elbow in the neck, but he was pretty sure it was on accident. "I can't believe you got the Weird Sisters to play at my party!"

"It's Luna's party, too," trilled Hermione from somewhere near Draco's elbow, and he turned to find her sitting down at a booth already with a large plate of cheesy fries in front of her, rather giggly and pink in the face. Ron rolled his eyes at Draco, then shrugged. Hermione's an incredible lightweight. And lately, always incredibly hungry.

Ginny ignored her, which Draco thought was best.

"Called in a favor," Harry said, grinning. "Thought you might like it."

Draco snorted. Called in a favor, more like, called them up and told them who was speaking and then found the Weird Sisters had mysteriously cleared their schedule for the next month and a half, at your service Mr. Potter, anything you like. They could have played during Molly's Sunday night dinner, for all they cared.

"Still, thank you. And you," She turned on Draco, narrowing her eyes, and he had the strangest suspicion that she *knew* somehow, about the house and the doubts and how he stays up late at night trying to memorize what it feels like to have Harry lying beside him, just in case. "Do try to have fun tonight, won't you? Luna's worried about you."

Draco squirmed uncomfortably, because if Ginny had an idea about how anxious he's been the past few weeks, then Luna knew for sure, would have been able to tell what was wrong with just one look at him.

"I'll be fine." He tries to smile convincingly, but then he looks over and finds that Harry has disappeared from his side, swallowed up by the crowd that was Dean and Seamus and Neville. Draco would not be welcome there, even if they all smiled and made polite

small talk. There is a difference between forgiveness and belonging, he's finding, and it's more of a chasm than a fine line.

Ginny reached over, squeezed his elbow. "He loves you." Her words are insistent, hitting him like a stunning spell to the chest. "Trust me. I know what it looks like."

He finds his way to the bar, expecting to find old, gap-toothed Tom, but finds George Weasley instead, throwing drinks to the people who come to him without waiting for a request and scowling down at the table top when he is left alone again, like he is reading some particularly offensive word that a previous patron had carved into it. Draco checks, but nothing is there.

"Oh. It's you." George looks surprised for a moment, but then his expression sours. "You want anything?"

"Thought you were just throwing things out there?" He had been, like crazy, throwing bottles into hands and pouring liquid into giant margarita glasses without checking the labels, and even when it had to be a downright disgusting combination, no one complained, just coughed and spluttered and drank it all the same.

"Well, normally, but seeing as it's you, I'll make an exception. So I'll repeat myself." He was blunt, tonight. Draco supposes it must be hard for everyone else, to have gone from a friendly and cheerful George to this, but not for Draco, because to him this was the Weasley he had always known- a little sharp, a little brusque, the kind of intelligent that was just a shade shy of cruel. "What do you want?"

"Just a beer, thanks," Draco said, settling down onto a stool, wondering why they had stuck him back here, of all people, and then realizing that it might have been the kindest place for him. George had told him once that every conversation was just a reminder of the lines that never would be said, where people automatically look to his left for the echo of his jokes only to find empty air, that he can't take it. He might have had an easier time back here, where he is away from the jumbled mass of limbs and people only wanting the person he used to be, safe from small talk and idle hands.

"So boring," George griped, but he passed the bottle along all the same, even attempting a grin.

Draco doesn't want to ask. He wants to sit and sulk, take part in enough small talk to pass the night away without seeming like an arse, maybe search out Hermione later and then duck in to pass on another round of congratulations with Luna, then go home, claiming a

migraine. It's a plausible excuse and a doable plan, and none of it involves sitting here and playing therapist to George, but he was his friend, and that comes with a certain amount of responsibility.

"You alright, mate? You seem.." He paused, because there's no way to give an accurate description without being offensive. "Down."

"Yeah, I'm fine." George says, and Draco can see the moment where he changes his mind and decides to tell the truth, an actual ripple across his face. "No, I'm not. I'm shit, actually."

He swears, a long string of it just to make himself feel better, and the people closest to them stare, a huddle of Ravenclaws that Draco can only vaguely remember.

"Want to talk about it?"

"It's just that he's not here." Draco didn't need to ask who he was. "He's not here, and he would have loved this, to be with her, to see her. She's got this line of dances, like the father daughter dance, only one with each of us brothers, and there's- there's only five dances. There should be six."

He is gripping onto the tabletop so hard that Draco is half afraid that he is going to rip a piece off.

"It's like he's being forgotten by everyone but me."

"That's not true," Draco starts, but George cuts him off just as fast.

"I know it isn't true. But it's not fair, because it's like when he died, he ripped away a part of me that I'm never going to get back, this whole huge chunk of my life that I'm never going to be able to fill, no matter how much I try to love the people I have left, or how much I invent, or work, or sleep, or drink." He looks on the verge of panic, like he's going to run away, and Draco knows that it is only love for his sister keeping George in place. "I know they all loved him, that they're all trying to fill up the parts of themselves that belonged to him. It's just the part of me that belonged to Fred is so much bigger for me than any of them."

It was the first time that Draco had heard him say Fred's name out loud. Draco wonders if it's the first time he'd said it at all.

"It just sucks," George says finally, looking around the room. "Doing everything alone when I thought we were going to do it together."

"You aren't alone." Draco sucks at this, at grief, at comfort. He wants Hermione to be here. She pops up every other time someone needs her, but tonight she is too tipsy for that. "You've got all of us."

"And what a treasure it us, to be around you wankers," George says, but he is smiling now, no matter how bitter it might look. "Now drink up, Malfoy. No one said that we had to do this sober."

Draco drinks, and so does George, but he does not think there is enough butterbeer and firewhiskey in the world to make Fred's absence easier to bear. It's strange, how much heavier a person can be when they aren't there at all.

He tries to find his way back to Harry and comes face to face with Lavender instead.

"Do you know," She says, bubbly, pleasantly, like she hadn't ever sobbed from the witness stand while talking about a man that Draco used to eat dinner with, like those scars crossing her body were not in some part done by his hand. "That you're the first person not to stare at my scars?"

The fact that she points them out makes him want to look at them just as a reflex, but he forces himself to look at her face instead, at the eyes, which are just as the same as they were in school. *I've got my own scars*, he thinks of saying, *and yours aren't so different*, or maybe *I live with Harry, he's griped enough about the stares that I've learned not to do it*, but what comes out of his mouth is, "Well, I have seen you before."

She stares at him for a moment, like she can take the measure of him just by looking at him, and Draco squirms.

"Yes. You did." She brushed past him and grabbed a drink from George before turning back, something blue and sparkly. "How's the house hunting coming?"

"House hunting?" He stumbles over the words, breath knocked out of him, and Draco has to fight the urge to vomit, because Luna's perceptions were one thing, but having Lavender Brown just *knowing* was a bit uncanny. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on. You know the department I work in. And I'm sure you remember me from school." She walks away, and Draco trails after her like he's on some sort of leash, sliding into the booth beside her. She has chosen the darkest corner of the room for them to sit in. "I was horribly nosy."

Draco stays quiet, watching her arms instead of her face, at those shining, silver marks. He'd heard they took weeks to heal, the skin trying to peel away from the bone, a side affect of the fact that Greyback wasn't changed but still infected. She was healed now, but the pain must have been terrible.

"So, the whole *you and Harry* thing isn't working?" She puts air quotes around the "you and Harry" bit. "I heard that you are in love."

"It is," Draco says, too insistent. "We are."

"Then why are you leaving?"

Her eyes are kind, and he is the person that she sought out just because he did not stare at her scars, and this girl who used to turn heads every where she went has now chosen to hide herself in the darkest place she can find, so Draco finds himself telling her, about everything, how he doesn't belong and how he is forever indebted to Harry and the offhand comments that Harry makes, how he is not sure where the limits are or what lines he is crossing or if he is expected to go. "And I'm terrified," He ends with, cursing himself from saying so much to this girl he barely even knows, but at least she is not thinking about the stares or her skin or the war, just him and his troubles. "Terrified that he doesn't want me, still, that I read this all wrong, and I can't even ask him, because I'm scared the answer is no."

"So it's better to run away?"

"It's better to be the one who leaves." The words are ringing hollow, but they are true, he knows it.

"Leave before you can get left."

"It's not my place," She says, just like every other person who gives advice without being asked. "But he loves you. I know he loves you, because I've watched him, watched the people that he cares about, and he looks at them all the same way, like he would burn away anything in his path to get to you. And when a man loves you like that, he's not going to want to leave you behind for anything in the world." Lavender reaches across the table, and she is so much smarter than he remembers from Hogwarts. "There's nothing for you to be afraid of."

"But there's so much left to lose, when you know what its like for someone to love you like that." Draco said, the words cracking in his mouth, blistering his tongue as he says them. "It'll burn you up."

"Trust me." Her left hand reaches up her right arm and traces the scars wrapping around her, like she had them memorized them. "There are worse ways to go."

It's another hour before he finds his way back to Harry.

"Dance with me." He drags Draco to him, out onto the dance floor.

"It's not a slow song." Draco laughs, but he still wants to sit down, because this night has been exhausting. "And you said you hate any other type."

"It sounds like a slow song to me." It wasn't a slow song. It was heavy metal. Ginny was three feet away from them and actually head banging, with Luna swaying beside her, a vaguely bemused expression on her face. "I don't know what you're listening to."

He loves me, Draco thinks, and here the two of them are, slow dancing in this room, and it's like the rest of the building is falling away, burning away, Luna and Ginny and the rest disappearing because they just don't matter, really, only the two of them do.

"Are you alright?" Harry looks concerned. "Or, I mean, are we alright? Because Luna said that you seem sad, and I've learned that Luna is normally right about things."

Draco thinks about the house in London, about the worry that's made a home in his stomach. He thinks about how he is afraid to leave what he is comfortable with, how Grimmauld Place was not a home but it feels like *theirs*, like they both have an equal share. He thinks about how worried he is that he will always be in Harry's debt, no matter how much they love each other, because you cannot be saved by someone and not feel a bit like you must make it up to them in any way you can, and how much he does not want that hanging over his head for the rest of his life.

But he also thinks about Lavender, about their scars, her insistence that theirs is a burning love, that there are worse ways to go than out in a flash of fire and maybe how it is worth it, that they'll get past those things, because they love each other and maybe its stronger than this mess that the world has left them in.

(Maybe. Most likely. But that had not mattered the night before, when he packed all his clothes with a wave of his wand and got ready to sneak out of the house without warning just because it would hurt less, but he could only get halfway down the stairs before he turned around and crawled back into bed, shoulders heaving with silent sobs, hot tears streaming down his face and dripping down into the sheets.)

"Of course I am." He knots his fingers in the fabric of Harry's shirt. "We're golden."

Chapter 39

Harry

When he was younger, locked in that cupboard under the stairs and wondering if he would ever get out, thinking only of the footsteps creaking over his head and the spiders trembling on the ceiling. He had no way to track time other than the hunger pains roaring in his stomach, and he was hungry all the time back then, so when the Dursleys had all left for some family outing and Harry was left in there, alone in the dark (*this was, of course, before they added the lightbulb*), it was like the concept of time didn't exist at all.

Like there was no time, just this, this yellowed, lumpy mattress and his too big jeans and the door with the splinters from the time he had lost his head and tried to claw his way out into the hallway (*his fingers had bled for months after*), like he was existing in a black hole, someplace where no one would hear his screams, where if he had died like Vernon kept asking him to do, no one would ever even know he existed.

(*Like Schrodinger's Cat*, Hermione had told him, once, in their sixth year, when she finally asked the questions about his life in the muggle world that she and Ron had been dying to know and he had told her, the worry and the fear and the never ending pain bleeding out of him in one long rush of an explanation, *like you exist and you don't at the same time, because until that door opened, there was nothing but your own mind to decide, no sensory input to remind you that you are alive*, and he had stared at her, dumbstruck, before saying *yes, yes, that was it* so glad that it had been put into words that made some sort of sense.)

That was bad, but it was okay, because he always knew that the door would eventually open, if just to feed him or let him go to the bathroom, because whatever else the Dursley's were, they were not people who would chance staining their reputation with a murder investigation.

This was different.

This, this damp, rot filled cellar, was unfamiliar, and he did not know where it began or ended, because he was rooted to the spot right in the middle of this little underground box, unable or unwilling to move those three feet to where he could search and see if there was something he could use to pry the door open again. This time, he had no way to track the time at all, was just stuck hyperventilating in the oppressive heat of summer, left with the knowledge that no one was going to be coming to open that door, because who would look for the Boy Who Lived in the cellar?

He had only wanted to see if there was anything down there. George, on a day where he came to help with some more difficult charms, had taken one look down into the cellar and told Harry not to worry about it, that he would clean this one up, maybe even fill it in and board it up if that was what he wanted. And Harry had said that's alright, no thank

you, that he could handle it, even though the little boy inside of him was screaming at him to let it be gone, to not go in there, that this was not something they wanted to do.

But that Harry, the scared little boy who waited in the dark for someone to show him the light again, was dead, had faced worse than a little darkness and four walls that seem to cave in on you a little bit more each time you took a breath, like you were running out of air, and he wanted to prove it, so he wrenched those doors open and climbed into the darkness and closed his eyes, took a deep breath of that stale, earthy air and ground his heels into the dirt floor, because he was fine with this, really, he was *fine*.

Only he wasn't, because when he went to walk back out into the sun, it turns out that the wood was so warped from water damage that it could not be opened from the inside.

This is stupid (breath, damn it, eight seconds in and hold it for four and then eight seconds out, knock the air back into your lungs if you have to) *you've had to deal with things so much worse than this, don't you remember those monster spiders in the forest from when you were twelve, you faced them* (not really, the car came and saved us) (shut up, not the point) *and anyways, this isn't so bad, look, if you sit its like the room gets bigger, pull your knees to your chest and bury your head between them and its like there is nothing happening at all, you are just sitting somewhere with your eyes closed* (you are sitting in a hole, you are in a hole and the dirt is being filled in on top of you, that's how this is getting smaller, that is why you are choking) *don't be stupid, don't be stupid, don't be stupid, calm down, won't you, won't you just calm down, someone will be here to let you out any moment, they always come to let you back out, they would not let you die* (no one is coming. no one even knows that they should be looking).

He is not sure how long he stares down there. Long enough that he is not the Boy Who Lived any longer, the one who faced down death eaters and vampires and who has everyone in the wizarding world ready to fall to their knees at the sound of his name, because he is just that good. He is only Harry, Harry who never got to hear his real last name unless it was being handled like it was something filthy, Harry whose hands were always chapped from the bleach he had to clean with and Harry who spent his life watching the world from underneath the cupboard, and that Harry is not gone, he was only buried out of necessity. He's back now, though, sobbing and hyperventilating in this little hole in the ground, screaming for help until his throat is ripped raw.

"Hello?" He pounds on the door overhead even though his arms are already covered in bruises, strains his ears to trick himself into thinking there is someone there. "Please! Let me out!" He throws his shoulder against the door and the wood shakes, throwing beams of light across the cellar floor, a taunting. "Help!"

Help does come, but not for a while longer (*a minute, an hour, an afternoon*) he cannot tell, and by that time he is pressed up against the back wall, fingers buried in his hair and tugging on the strands so hard he thought they might be ripped from his scalp. He has been worked into such a state that he almost doesn't notice when the darkness lifts,

other than that he can suddenly breathe a little easier, no longer crowded by the scent of the dust that must have been trapped in here for eons.

"Harry?" Steps thunder down to meet him, and Harry flinches at the sound, pulls away when hands come up to tug at his arms. "Are you hurt?" The voice is loud, insistent, and he wants it to go away, wants to hide back in the darkness. "Where are you hurt, Harry?"

It takes him another moment to realize that this was Draco, and the knowledge makes a sob fall out of his mouth. He falls into his arms and Draco holds him, bewildered. "What happened?" He did not get it, and Harry would not say. "I came to visit, and I saw your wand, but you weren't there, and"

I thought something had happened, was what he was not saying. I thought that you were gone.

"I'm fine." He is, sort of. He's gathering back control of himself, now that the danger is clear and the way out is open, and Harry is aware enough to be embarrassed of how Draco had found him, crying in the dark. "The door got stuck."

"The door?" Draco started, and then stopped, because he understood, and Harry hates that, the understanding in his eyes. "Oh, Harry."

"Don't." He wants to hide, but he also can't stand to be here any longer, so he stumbles to his feet, forces himself up to the surface, where he collapses down into the grass. It is warm against his skin. "Don't say anything." "It's alright."

"It's not." Harry turned to him, wanting him to make it better, knowing that he won't be able to.

"How could this still be thing that scares me?"

Because that's the worst thing about it, really, how after all he had done it was what the Dursleys had done to him that left the deepest scars, and Hermione could talk all she wants about childhood and formative years and repressed memories, Harry knows the truth: this is weakness, plain and simple, and all he ever wanted to be was strong.

"Because its scary." Draco sat down beside him, but doesn't touch him, and Harry is grateful. "Because Hermione is scared of failing a test and Ron is scared of spiders and I'm scared of heights and there's nothing any of us can do about it, it just is. It doesn't make you more or less than anyone else, it just makes you human."

We knew a man who wasn't human, Harry thought, and maybe that's why he liked Draco so much, because out of all the people in his life, he is the one who really knows what Voldemort was like, how his mind worked. Who became obsessed with conquering his own fear, thought that it meant that he was weak. Don't be like that man.

He could bring that up, now, if at any time, but he doesn't. "But you played quidditch."

"What?"

"You said you were afraid of heights, but you played quidditch." Harry didn't want to talk about

Voldemort or the cupboard under the stairs or that cellar. "Why?"

"My dad wanted me to," Draco said, shrugging, and Harry is reminded of another thing that Hermione said, about how all parents leave scars whether it's intentional or not. He hadn't bothered to ask what hers looked like, but now he wishes he had. "I'd do anything to make him proud."

They sit in silence for a moment more, and then Draco speaks again. "You don't have to hide it, you know. When you're afraid. At least not from me." Harry opened his mouth to speak but couldn't find what he wanted to say, only that he wanted to argue. "I know you've got this thing where you want to protect everyone you care about, but please, love, let me take some of the blame sometimes, okay? Believe it or not, I can be helpful."

The sentiment of it threatens to choke him, so he goes for a joke instead. "Love?"

Draco smiled, knocks his shoulder against Harry's before standing up. "Don't worry about this." He waves his hand at the cellar. Harry doesn't look at it. "I'll come fill it in tomorrow morning." *Stupid*, Harry thinks, but doesn't argue.

Chapter 40

Draco

He does not look like his father anymore.

For a moment, Draco thinks of turning around, because he must have been given the wrong cell number. This man huddled in the back of his cell cannot be his father, not when the man he remembered had stood so tall, so proud (*was hiding behind a man who was not a man proud? Was he brave when he cowered under the lash of someone else's wand, when he let the walls of his own house become a cage?*). This man was a skeleton, his eyes sunken and the blades of his shoulders prominent even through his shirt, the skin stretched too tight over the bones in his face. It could not be the man he remembered, and yet-

"Dad?" He forced himself to talk, the words being strangled by the pressure building in his throat and takes a step closer, hands wrapping around the bars. He wants to yank it back, because it is so cold, the chill biting through his skin, but then the man in the corner turns toward him and he does not feel the cold anymore.

"Draco?" He drags himself to his feet and has to hold onto the wall for support, moving towards the gate in great, lurching steps. His hair falls around his face in strings, and Draco wonders why he has not bothered to cut it. "Is that you?"

His voice is barely above a whisper, strained and cracking. How long has it been since he had someone to talk to?

"It's me." There are tears building in his eyes. Draco had promised himself that he was done with tears. "It's me, dad."

"What are you doing here?" They are inches away from each other. Draco could reach through the bars and touch him if he wanted to, but he doesn't.

"I wanted to see you." It sounds like a question. "I got permission from the minister."

"Good of you." His hands are trembling. There are no dementors, but it is still not a happy place- its cold, and damp, the water from the waves soaking in through cracks in the stone and spilling out over the floor, the only comforts a lumpy mattress and threadbare clothes that do nothing to keep out the chill. He's heard that a few have still gone crazy, left alone for as long as they are. "But you shouldn't have come."

He turns his back on Draco, a move that would have once devastated him, but it does not have the same affect now, not when he is so weak from disuse that he stumbles as he moves back towards the bed, almost sending himself sprawling. *I did not deserve this*, Draco thinks, looking at his father, looking at this cell, remembering when he sat in front of the Wizengamot and did not even fight, but nothing he did was bad enough to warrant living this kind of life. But his father- Draco had long stopped making excuses for the things he had done. *If I were here, it would be because of him, not because of me.*

"I wanted to talk to you." He throws his voice through the bars, but Lucius does not move. "To tell you things. About- about Harry Potter."

There's a hiss from the cell beside them. Draco doesn't flinch.

"I've heard about you and Harry. The guards showed me a newspaper clipping." It's funny, how even when you are the better man, even when you are standing on the right side of the bars, how easily it is for someone else to make you feel small. "The two of you at a dance. Should I be expecting a wedding invitation any day now?"

It stings, but not as badly as Draco had thought it would. "I love him." The words buoy him a little. His father moves, one jerk of the arm like he is reaching out to him, but does not look up. "He loves me. And I think we're going to be really happy together."

"You think that?" His voice was silky again. It was his fake polite voice, his talking to the minister voice, his *this man is a mudblood and we need to put him in his place* voice. "You think that he could love you after everything you've done?"

"I didn't do much."

"You hated him. You hated his friends, the Weasley boy and that little mudblood you were always so enamored with." The hissing starts up again, louder, joined by someone else three doors down. He wants it to stop. "You killed Dumbledore, let death eaters into the school. You think this will last, when he wakes up each day to see that mark on your arm? Or do you try to hide it?"

He knows me, Draco thinks, dully, distantly, reeling a bit, because even though he had not known what to expect, he had thought that his father would be happy to see him. *But I do not know him.*

"I don't use that word anymore," He says, keeping his voice light. "Mudbloods. Very distasteful."

"I see." He sounds beaten, like even that attempt at reclaiming who he used to be has exhausted him. "A change of heart."

"I just wanted to tell you. Before you really did hear about wedding invitations being sent and you don't get one." Draco tightened his grip on the bars again, wondering why he had ever thought this man was so special, so scary, and why it still hurts, to see the man he had loved turned into this. "Because if you're going to make me choose, dad, I'd choose Harry over you every time. I wouldn't even have to think about it."

Harry loved him. Harry saved him. Harry is what kept him from finding a place to rot in this cell, when all his father did was bury him in more and more chains.

"Then maybe you should leave."

His back is still turned to him. Draco can't see his face, but that is okay. He doesn't want to remember him like this.

"Maybe I should." He turns to leave, and then hesitates, because he does not have to be afraid any longer. "But I could come back. Later. When you've had some time to get used to the idea of."

When you've had more time to be alone, is what he is saying. *When you realize that you really do miss me.*

Draco waits a moment, but his father does not answer. And that's okay. Draco isn't the one that needs someone to care about him.

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Is this chapter super cliché?

Yes.

Does it involve the most overused Harry Potter trope ever?

Yes.

Am I sorry?

Nope.

Harry

They are packing up to leave.

He can't believe it, honestly. Even though he had been the one to sign the papers for the cottage, a part of him must have thought that it was too good to become reality, like he had been living in half a day dream for these past few weeks. Harry had spent so long living a life where happy endings are nonexistent that he must have been constantly preparing himself for the other shoe to drop, but now, with only a few days until the move in date (and before Luna and Ginny's wedding) he finally is able to accept that he might be getting his happy ending.

"That's it then." There was a loud ripping sound as Draco taped over the top of the box, looking around the living room. He despised doing things the muggle way, but despite how many times he had tried (*and Merlin, had he tried, all last night, the tape twisting and bunching and sometimes getting so wrapped around Draco that Harry had to come cut him out of it*), he couldn't levitate the tape dispenser in a way to get it to lay neatly over the folds of the box. "Did we get everything?"

"I think so." Draco picked up his notebook and leafed through it until he found the right page. He had made lists for every room in the house. When Ron saw it, he had given a low whistle and said that it was a shame that Draco and Hermione hadn't been friends back in school. *Imagine the study schedules*, He had muttered when their backs were turned, and Harry thought that that was a good enough reason for the two of them to never have been allowed in the same room together back in school, had they not hated each other. "According to the list."

"And the list is always right." Harry tugged the notebook out of his hand and threw it down on the table, distracting him with a kiss, because if he doesn't head this off before it starts, Draco will spend the evening checking and rechecking and rechecking the recheck, working himself into such a state that Harry has to run through everything they had packed before he can walk away from the boxes.

"It seems smaller, now. All packed up."

The whole house did, really. Harry had thought about turning it over to the ministry like Draco had suggested in the beginning, turn it into some sort of museum, but he decided against it, because he did not think that Sirius would have liked that. His godfather, who had spent his whole life wanting nothing more than to break free of this place, would

have wanted to strike a match and burn the whole place down himself. It felt like the best way to honor him, making sure that Grimmauld Place dies with the ones who had lived in it.

(In a way, walking away from this house felt like the final act of saying good bye to all those ghosts

he had been afraid of facing. The first step to working through the grief he had ignored, where he walks through rooms in the house and greets memories like old friends- of Sirius, of Fred, of Mad Eye, Remus, Tonks, even Dobby, like this house was the bad parts of those memories, the raw, bloody parts that are still scabbing over, and once Harry walks out of this place for good, the memories will ease their aching, turn bittersweet instead of the white hot burning they are now.)

That's not to say it's been easy. Just as the house had fought against the cleaning crew back in Harry's fifth year, it was fighting against them now, like it could sense that when Harry and Draco drag their boxes out the door, it would be shut in, left to fall into dereliction and disrepair. Harry had picked up the crusade against its many rooms all over again, and together, he and Draco had torn the heads of house elves from the wall (*they buried them in the ruins of the Malfoy garden, because Harry could not stand the act of just throwing them in the garbage like Ron had urged them to, not under Kreacher's watchful eye and Hermione's glare*), broken into boarded up closets to clear the shelves of anything dangerous, and sealed up the cellar for good, until it was nothing but an old, creaking house with nothing left to offer the world.

Even if he tried to sell, Harry wasn't sure that there would be anyone crazy enough to buy it. The thought fills him with a little bit of joy, like he had done right by Sirius after all.

(It's sort of a fuck you, too. Like, *hey, painting of Sirius' crazy mother, remember when you would yell about mudbloods and traitors and filth? Now you can scream all you like, until the paint fades and the wallpaper peels and you are nothing but rot, no one will hear you, though it is a new level of crazy to seek revenge against a painting.*)

"Maybe you've just gotten bigger." Draco grins up from his spot on the floor, surrounded by empty boxes and pile of rubbish that they were giving away and that always present tape dispenser. "Too grown up for it now."

Yes, Harry thought, kneeling on the couch cushion above him and bending over so he can hug Draco from behind, *that must be it.*

Draco

As the house empties, becoming more and more like a new place altogether, Draco is finding it hard to sleep again.

He hides it, because he does not want Harry to worry. It's not something to worry about, just a side affect of the house looking like someplace completely new, with new smells and sounds and none of the old comforts it used to hold, and now not even the sound of Harry's breathing and the old trick of counting the cracks spiraling over the ceiling s enough to lull him back to the calm, so even though Draco had promised himself that he would try to move away from it, he turns back to what he does best.

He cleans.

Today it's the attic, the last thing to tackle just because he hadn't intended to clean it. Who cleans the attic? But here he is, dusting and mopping and wiping the layer of grime off the windows, and its pathetic, he knows, to come back to this, but he can already feel the tension ebbing from his shoulders, feels the way his skin starts to fit him again.

This is okay, Draco kept telling himself, his thoughts coming in time with the strokes of the rag against the window, the one he kept cleaning even though it didn't have a speck of dust left on it. *This is fine, that you have to do this, that you need to have something to fall back on sometimes. It isn't every night, just when things get bad. Everyone has stuff that they do to make life easier to take, when life gets back.* He wrings the washrag out. *Some people snort powdered dragon hide. All you do is clean.*

He's almost calm again, but when he sees Harry standing in the middle of the room, somehow having appeared without ever having made a noise, he still jumps.

"Harry." He bunches the rag in his fist like he's trying to hide it, but then relaxes, because it's not like he's doing anything wrong and how else could he explain this away, anyways? "Did I wake you up?"

"Did I wake you up?" Harry mimics, his voice cold and clear, his face screwed up. "Nice of you, to be considerate."

Harry was angry, and Draco could not respond, because he was unable to shake the feeling that he had been slapped.

(If he were to compare this to something, he would say its like the time back in the final battle where a death eater had not believed that he had been on their side, and then someone -he never did learn who- had cursed him out of the way, but instead of letting Draco thank him, a fist had come flying out of no where and punched him in the face. He suspects it was Seamus.)

"That's not the right question, anyways." Harry didn't look angry anymore, just a little bored, like he had better things to be doing than to calm down his nervous wreck of a boyfriend. "The better question would be what are you still doing here?"

"I'm cleaning." Draco was almost relieved that this is what it was about. He had no idea that it upset Harry this much, was all.

"Not here as in the attic, you idiot." Harry advanced on him, and for the first time in a long time, Draco felt afraid. "I meant here as in this house. I thought that you were leaving- I overheard the call with the realtor. You should have left the moment the ministry cleared you."

Draco wanted to be tough. Wanted to yell, maybe, or fight back, or at least throw the rag down and stride right past Harry and out the door, to Luna's or his mother's or even Hermione's, but he doesn't. Instead he just stands there, not even bothering to brace for the impact of the conversation, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of him, unable to come up with a single cutting response. He misses being able to be mean.

"I thought-,"

"That I wanted you? That I loved you? That you were finally getting that happy ever after, when the rest of your life had been so horrible?" He was laughing at him, Draco realized. Laughing in a way that was not laughing but a cold cruel mocking that, to be perfectly honest, Draco didn't think Harry had the ability to be capable of. He was wrong. "I didn't want you here. I was trying to do you a favor to keep you out of Azkaban, not have you stick around for the rest of my life, and really, Draco, how could someone like me love someone like you after everything you had done? Do you think that there's forgiveness for things like that, or that it would come so easily? Whatever you thought-," He crouched down, at level with Draco, because by then Draco had attempted to flee and stumbled. "You were wrong."

He kept going, saying all the awful things that Draco had been worrying about over these past few weeks, about how he was not worth this, worth anything, how Harry did not love him, that he could not love him, after everything he had done, and it didn't make sense, really, but it also did, it also didn't really even come as a surprise, because wasn't he always expecting this moment, where Harry realizes what Draco has always known and decides that it was not possible for him to love Draco back? If Draco thought about it in the right light, he could almost trick himself into thinking that it didn't hurt.

Except.

Except there was another Harry crouching beside him, shaking his arm, saying his name, over and over, looking from Draco to the mean Harry (*who was much hotter than the Harry beside him, incidentally, both because the Harry beside him had rolled out of bed and because the mean Harry had all of Draco's favorite aspects of him, only turned up to eleven*), until he finally shoved his way in front of Draco and pointed a wand out at the mean Harry, his hand shaking.

"Ridiculous," Is what he says, and for a second Draco thinks that he had fallen and hit his head, that it's some strange dream, because really, is this new Harry about to argue with

himself? But then it morphs into a dementor, and then Harry repeats the word and it whizzes back into a closet that Draco must have opened without meaning to, and his head become a little more clear.

"It was a boggart," Harry says, a bit redundantly, stowing his wand in the back pocket of his pants without looking Draco in the face. "That's all it was, Draco. Just a boggart."

"Oh." Draco felt like crying. In fact, he was crying, both because all the worst things he had been thinking since he first came to stay with Harry had been said out loud, by the one person that he did not expect to say them, and also because he had been caught at it, cowering on the floor like a child.

And also because he wanted Harry to tell him that it was all okay, which he was not yet doing.

"Right."

"Do you really think that?" Harry's head snapped up, and he was crying, too, hurt by this whole thing, and Draco just wants to melt into the floor and never come back. "That I want to say all those things?"

"I'm afraid of it," Draco answers, because the boggart has left him no choice but to tell the truth. "I keep telling myself that it was silly, that you wouldn't have said all those things if you didn't mean them, and yet," he shrugs. "Fears don't always make sense."

"Because I do." Harry's words were halted, like he was trying to reign himself in. "Care about you." "I know."

"And I have forgiven you. For everything. Everything you've done, anything you might do."

Harry waves his hand in the air. "It's like its nonexistent."

"I know that, too."

"And I know that this -what we're doing- I'm not just screwing around. It's," He is searching for a word, clearly, something strong enough to express his feelings without scaring Draco away. "This is it for me. This is all I ever want, you and me and that cottage."

That -those last six words- make Draco feel like he is able to breath again. "I know."

"Do you?"

Draco does not want to lie to him. Maybe he hasn't been lying exactly, but he has been holding back, burying things that he should have laid out in the open. "I'm starting to," He amends, which is not the whole truth but is closer than he had gotten before.

"Okay." Harry nods his head, fastens the closet closed one more time, and sticks a hand out to help

Draco to his feet. "So are we good here?"

"Yeah," Draco says, and this time, it does not feel like a lie. "We're all good."

Harry

Harry had been surprised before, but there's nothing quite like hearing your boyfriend talking to someone up in the attic and climbing that rickety staircase only to find that the person he's talking to is... yourself.

A self that is hurling abuse, apparently, as Draco sits on the floor and just takes it, like all the fight goes away where Harry is concerned and he will take what may come flying from this person's mouth as gospel, and Harry feels sick about it, and even more so when he remembers another time that he had stared at a duplicate of himself in this house, and realized that it was a boggart.

Which, when you think about it, is even worse than a doppelganger that runs around hurling venom at the people you care about.

"I just don't understand," He says later, when he has taken a shower and gotten dressed even though it is only five in the morning and came back out of the bathroom to find Draco curled up on the window seat, drawing pictures in the fog covered glass, "how you could have thought those horrible things about the two of us."

"I'm not used to people like you loving me." Draco doesn't look at him. "The war left it's mark on the bad guys, too."

"I don't think you're a bad guy."

"And that's probably the biggest difference between us."

Harry stares at him, not knowing how to fix the sudden rift that had appeared, but it seems that he doesn't have to, because Draco turns to him, face pale and jaw set like he is preparing for a punch to the face, and he knows that the old Malfoy has showed up to the fight.

"You want the truth?" Draco isn't waiting for an answer, but Harry nods anyways. "The truth is that I care about you a lot, and maybe this whole time we're together I was waiting for someone to show me how it wasn't happening, how this wasn't real or you didn't want me because it just seemed to good to be true. And I was so afraid of that that I started looking for warning signs that weren't even there, and you made this comment -I forget what it was, really, because it was *that* insignificant about how I should start looking for places, too, and I thought that you didn't want me to come with you, which meant

that you could not think about me the same way I think about you, because *you*, Harry, are it for me, too."

Harry doesn't have a response at first, because he remembers the comment (*and how stupid, because he only meant that Harry wanted Draco's opinion, not that he was trying to throw him out on the street*) and it was before they even got the cottage, which meant that this must have been needling in Draco's brain for weeks.

"You had to have known that wasn't what I meant." There were tears burning in Harry's eyes and he blinked them away. "Didn't you?"

"Well I almost bought a flat in London, so I'd say that I didn't."

"I just wanted you to be happy, so I was trying to say that- that you didn't just have to follow me, or whatever, that it wasn't my decision, it was *our* decision. That's all." He was frantic, desperate for Draco to understand this. "I was trying to let you know that we were on equal footing with this."

(There's another thought, one that he doesn't want to focus on, about how maybe Draco didn't want to live in the cottage after all, but come on. Harry had built him a potions lab, for Merlin's sake.)

"And I knew that. Logically." Draco lifted one shoulder apologetically. "But I also knew that you could change your mind any time."

"I'm not changing my mind, Draco." And even though it's much too soon, possibly even unwanted, considering how badly Harry had apparently screwed things up, he adds, "I love you."

It cancels out whatever response Draco had been forming. "You do?"

"Of course I do. Draco, you stupid, stupid man." Distantly, he registers that Draco does not say it back, but Harry doesn't think on it for long, just stumbles forward and sinks to his knees in front of him, clasps their hands together. "Of course I want you were supposed to come with me. That was never even a question."

"In your mind." Draco was smiling now, tears slipping over onto his cheeks, and Harry counted it as a win. "Plan letting me in on it next time, won't you, Harry?"

Harry smiled. As long as they were talking of next times, he figured they would be okay.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Hey, I've been away for a bit (vacation, yay!) so this is just a short little chapter to let me get back into the rhythm of things. Hope you still like it.

Harry

When it comes time for them to move in, he's almost caught off guard.

Mostly because it comes quicker than he expected it to. Hermione had told him not to think of it as an ending, but Harry had a hard time finding another word for it, when boxing up the pieces of his house felt like boxing up pieces of himself, too, old baggage that he should have shoved into storage along time ago finally being let go off and all the old ghosts of the war finally finding something that feels like peace, settling down into his skin where he can't even feel them anymore.

Some things can end, he thinks, looking up at the new ceiling over his head and reaching out to where he can feel Draco next to him. *That doesn't mean that everything has to.*

"You really need to go to sleep." Draco's voice is nothing more than a murmur, the words slurred from the way that he is buried into the pillow. They have been lying here for two hours now, but Harry cannot get to sleep, not when every nerve in his body is awake and ready, not able to settle in this new place. There are so many corners to check for cracks, so many shadows that could shape into monsters at any moment. And as long as Harry cannot sleep, Draco cannot sleep, so used to having his easy breathing to set the pace for the night. "The wedding is in like four hours."

The wedding. He'd almost forgotten. Luna had thought it was sort of symbolic for the four of them, that these new chapters of their lives would both be starting at the same time, but Harry just thought it was sort of aggravating. Both he and Draco were heavily involved in the wedding planning, and almost solely responsible for the packing (*though when Hermione is stressed from work, she sometimes comes over with a label maker and pretends it's because she does not trust their abilities, but that excuse works better with Harry and Ron than Harry and Draco*), which meant that the last few weeks had been nothing less than hectic. It seems like he hadn't even be able to find time to breathe.

"You mean we can't just sleep through the ceremony?" Harry rubbed at his eyes until it stung, wondering if it might just be more prudent to stay up through the night and drain a gallon of coffee in the morning. "It's what I was planning to do."

"Probably not, seeing as we're sitting in the front row."

Harry snorted. "Luna wouldn't mind."

"But Ginny would kill you."

Harry barks out a laugh, and then quiets again, trying to force himself to sleep. It almost works, but then Draco is talking again, his hand searching out for Harry's so he can squeeze it tight. "You need to know something." His voice is a little bit breathless, a little bit strangled, and a little bit scared. "I probably love you."

He hadn't said it yet, even though Harry had. Hadn't said it, even though they both knew the truth. Hadn't said it because, as the boggart proved, he was still terrified of trusting what he knows to be true. Harry hadn't minded the wait. But this? This was so much better.

"Okay."

"I mean, I'm pretty sure I do. I think I do." There's a smile in his voice, and now Draco is not afraid anymore, apparently comforted at Harry's continued presence beside him and the fact that he wasn't trying to make any grand declarations of his own. "Hard to tell."

"How certain are you, then?" *We do things a bit backward*, is what Harry is thinking, but he's not really bothered by it, not when he can roll over to hover on top of Draco, smiling down at him.

"Like, a good bit, or only a small bit?"

"A good bit." Draco pretended to think. "At least ninety-five percent."

"Ninety-five?" Harry bit back a laugh again. "I thought I'd be worth ninety-seven, at least."

"Maybe ninety-eight."

There's nothing much to say, after that, so they just stare at each other. Harry half expects Draco to shy away after his declaration, but he doesn't, just stretches out beneath him like there was nothing scary about this in the least.

"Hey Harry?" His voice is softer now, no joking.

"Yeah, Draco?"

"I really do love you." He reaches out to trace the spikes of the lightning bolt scar, and Harry's hands find his way to Draco's stomach, to the silver lines he had slashed across them an eternity ago.

"Really, really."

Harry wants to cry. He wants to laugh. He wants to hold onto all of Draco's sharp edges and broken pieces and old scars until he can drain the ache away, but he can't, so he settles with *I love you* instead, over and over and over, hoping that it finally makes him believe it.

"Good," is what Draco responds with, choking it out through his laughing and his tears. "Good."

Chapter 43

Draco

There's a moment where he almost turns around.

It's only a moment, he justifies later, when Luna mentions it (*and how did she even know, she was back in the Burrow and he was just on the edge of the garden*) and Ginny fixes him with a glare, but it's long enough for him to stand and watch the others call to each other, fall into lines that had been drawn before Draco had even wanted a place to stand between them, and the mark on his arm seems to burn, reminding him of how he does not belong, how they cannot want him, how he will only taint this, taint *them*, but then Harry turns to catch sight of him and Ron is raising an arm up in greeting and Hermione is racing across the grass, clipboard in hand, until she barrels into his chest.

"We did it!" The whole place looks wonderful. It's draped in silver and gold and the lightest blue, colors that he would not have picked but Hermione had somehow made work, just as Luna promised them that they would. Despite Ginny's reluctance, she had agreed to have it at the Burrow at Fleur's insistence. *Look at her. How could anyone compare our wedding to yours, when you are marrying a woman like zat?* Luckily, everyone in the room had taken it as a compliment and Ginny had agreed without any further issue. "I didn't think we were going to, but we did! And it's all on schedule!"

Ron came up behind her, Harry trailing at his heels, smiling softly. They'd been soft with each other all morning, mostly because of the words that Draco had blurted out last night, even though he had not planned to. Even though he had *planned* to say it over a candlelight dinner that he already arranged for next week, but Harry probably liked it better the accidental way.

"Ah, schedules. The bane of my existence." Ron grinned and held out a heaping plate of cookies towards Draco, who took one and wondered where he could possibly have gotten them, because they weren't on the menu. Maybe Hermione had extended another purse and stuck a buffet in there, just for emergencies. "Thought we were done with them at Hogwarts."

"Don't be daft, Ron," Hermione said, her voice sharper than normal, but when he tugs at the train of her dress she swats at him good naturedly, and Draco is reminded of how rare it is to see a love like that, one without any cracks, one that comes as easy to them as breathing. He wants that. He thinks that he might have it, given time, if he and Harry let this thing between them grow. "There are always schedules."

"And this one, Ms. Granger, says that if you don't go now you're going to get run over by the brides. And then eaten by the brides mother." George appears between them, melting out of the corn. He had told Draco that he would be hiding on the outskirts of the party for as long as he could help it, but Draco hadn't realized that he meant quite that far out.

Not, of course, that he blamed him. It would be hard, to have to walk around with people who only knew you as part of a package deal. George had told him once how he couldn't stand it, how their every move just reminds him of how incomplete he is, with their eyes automatically sliding to his right in search of someone that would not be there and constantly waiting for a punchline to a joke he cannot find the energy to make on his own. And that doesn't even take into account the missing ear.

"You good mate?" Ron and Hermione have moved on, and Harry is anxiously waiting a few steps away, but Draco hangs back. George seems just about at his breaking point. Draco can tell, when he takes the time to look- it's a crease around the eyes, a tightening in the shoulders.

George forces a smile, which seems fake, but it seems to knock the breath back into him, a reminder that if he cannot do this for himself, he would at least have to do it for Ginny. "All good, brother," and he throws an arm around Draco's shoulder without seeming to realize or care what he had said, leaving Draco to wonder if he should be flattered or worried.

He decides to go with both.

Harry

The wedding is beautiful, just like he knew it would be. Honestly, Harry expected it to all be perfect just from the combined will power emanating from both Ginny and her

mother, not to mention Draco and Hermione waiting anxiously in the wings to assist in any way they could.

(Not, of course, that it was entirely perfect. The baker made cupcakes instead of the five tiered cake they had ordered. The hem of Luna's dress was stained with dirt from where she had wandered off a bit while Dean's back was turned. And Hagrid sat in the wrong row again, breaking all the chairs, but that was to be expected.)

"I love you," Ginny is saying at the front of them all, choking back tears, one of the few times that Draco had ever seen her cry. "I love you, I love you, I love you, and that, Luna Lovegood, is not something that I was going to have the ability to stand with these people and say. We spent so long fighting. So long running." It's like her words are reaching out to the crowd, addressing everyone, wrapping everyone into this circle of love that she has in her heart, Harry most of all. "And now it's over. There are some days -a lot of days- where I wake up and look around and don't know what to do with myself, because there are so many empty places where the people I love should be standing, so many things that I can do now that had seemed impossible only a few months ago- and I don't know how to handle it. But then I look at you and I know that it's okay, because I know exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to love you, Luna. For the rest of my life, I'm going to love you." Draco squeezes his hand again, and when Harry looks over, there are tears shining in his eyes.

"I love you, too." Luna is not one for speeches, not like Ginny, but she looks radiant up there, the happiness pouring off of her in waves to infect the rest of the crowd. "I love you with everything in me. I have for as long as I can remember."

There's a moment where Harry thinks she is going to cry, but then she shakes her hair back from her face and smiles that beautiful, watery, radiant smile and pushes through it. Not that it would have mattered. Luna does what she wants, whenever she wants, and if she wants to cry during her vows, there was nothing wrong with that. Weddings are the one place where tears are always a good thing.

In his head, he can hear Draco answering him. *Not always*, he would have said, if Harry had mentioned the thought out loud, and then he would have some story about some family member or another and their twisted love affair and Harry would stop listening half way through just to watch him, to see the way he talks and looks at the world and the way that he looks back at him, like Harry is the best thing in his entire world.

It's rude, to do this at a wedding, but considering all the time that Ginny had to waste listening to Harry pine, he thinks he'll be forgiven.

"It's okay if you have to stick with maybe's." Harry has leaned over to whisper right into Draco's

ear, and other than a raised eyebrow from Fleur, who seems to have appointed herself the guardian of etiquette, no one seems to notice. "If you can never say it. Because I know. I

know that you love me, and I know that I love you with every aching inch of my soul, do you understand Draco Malfoy? For the rest of my life I'm going to love you, and there's nothing you can do about it now." Draco doesn't answer.

He doesn't have to.

Like Harry had said- tears at a wedding are always a good thing.

Draco

After the whirlwind of celebrations, Draco finds himself sitting across from Ron's Aunt Muriel.

Everyone had warned him about her. About how mean she was, how she does not care about people's feelings, how there is no comment (no matter how uncomfortable) that she will let go unsaid. Her one joy in life, according to George, is ruining an otherwise pleasant occasion by making people squirm.

"So you're the Potter's boyfriend?" She wrinkles up her nose. Draco can't tell what about -him or Harry or the fact that they are together, or if she just didn't like his cologne. So many things about him could be under attack in nothing more than a second and he wouldn't even know what hit him.

"I knew your father."

This, at least, was not something that he would have seen coming. There aren't many people here who would bring up a death eater at a wedding, especially when that death eater was a family member rotting away in Azkaban. But those people aren't Aunt Muriel.

"And your mother. And your Aunt. I helped put her away the first time." She's taken over by a coughing fit then, one that makes her shoulders heave and bends her down to the table, clawed fingers curling around the table cloth to ease her through it. Draco is already on his feet with a glass of water when she waves him away, staring across the table again, her beady eyes steaming from the effort of catching her breath. "They had me on the Wizengamot committee."

Draco didn't know what to say. It's not like it was much of a feat, sending Bellatrix to Azkaban. No one ever doubted that she was guilty. "Are you still?"

Wrong question. He knows it from the way she holds herself, her posture tightening.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I got old. Got sick. Got useless." Her voice raises to reach the table across from them, a heap of redheads all intend on ignoring her presence. "Got shut up in my house so this lot didn't have to deal with me."

It must be a bitter life that she leads. Draco would have almost thought that this war was a blessing for her, if only for the fact that it drove people into her house. Everyone, even the mean ones, starve for a little bit of human contact. It's the one thing that draws them together.

"I've heard it was a large house," he says fairly, mostly to draw the attention back into calmer waters and also because he felt bad for her, just a bit.

"Yes. Yes, it is. You used to have a large house, too." Her wand is resting in her fist and she flicks it upward so a glass of champagne lifts from the hands of one of her many nephews and finds its way to there, never mind that her nearly full glass was right in front of her. "And now you have a cottage."

"I like it better there."

"So I've been told." She tilts her head. "You're not like them, you know."

He's caught off guard. The entire conversation was giving him whip lash. "Who?"

"Your parents, your aunt, all the rest. They walk through a room like they're carved from stone and expect everyone to pay homage. And a lot of people did. But not you." She sticks her tongue between her teeth, biting down. "You're softer."

"Is that a good thing?" He didn't know why he was looking for absolution with Aunt Muriel, of all places. "To be soft?"

"It's better to bend than break, don't you think? When they lost, that's what your parents found out." She drains the glass in one go, and out of the corner of his eye, Draco can see George at the edge of the row of table watching them, clearly weighing the benefit of saving Draco in return of being called the wrong name, probably on purpose. "They broke."

"And I surrendered."

"You bent. And let yourself be shaped anew." She raises her empty, withered hands out around her. "The world is changing, Draco Malfoy. Best to change with it." Startling advice, from the woman who was being left behind and seemed to know it. "Now get. I need that seat empty for a red head who might actually listen to me for a change."

Draco leaves. *The power of a good influence*, he thinks, when he sees Harry bending a bit so Mrs. Weasley can speak to him, and finds his path cut off by George. "She alright to you?" He nods his head at his aunt, and there was none of the kind exasperation that he used to be known for, just a dull, shimmering hatred. "We can sneak a puking pasty into her food"

"Nah, she was fine. And your mother would kill you. It's alright, George." Draco puts a hand on his shoulder and drags him forward a bit, away from all these relatives who only see Fred's ghost when they should see him, away from the people who could only stare at the knot of scar tissue on his face instead of look at the person. There's not enough time in life to waste on the people who bring you pain. "We're all alright."

Harry

Ginny dances with her father, and her mother, and then with each other her brothers. And then, just when Harry thought that it would be okay for him to stop watching and tuck into the cake, she's standing in front of him, her skirt gathered up over her arm and one hand held out to him.

"I don't dance," is what he says, when he realizes what she wants and takes into account everyone staring at him, giving him an uncomfortable flashback from the yule ball.

"And I thought you knew." She laughs at him, pulling him up. "Today, Harry, is not about you."

It's not. It's about her, and this is what she wants, so Harry lets her lead him out to the floor and tries not to pay attention to the way that everyone is staring at him, letting his hands find their way to her waist. "I didn't think I'd be worthy of a dance."

He is trying for a joke, but her face bites down in a frown, just for a moment, and he feels bad. "Don't be stupid, Harry." Everyone keeps telling him that. Her, Ron, Hermione, Draco. You would have thought, after all this time, he would have managed to get smarter. "You're one of the most important people in my life. Just as important as those idiots." She jerks her head towards her brothers, who are all roaring with laughter at something that Hermione had said, who was bright red and probably spouting off about the rights of some obscure magical animal. "I love you, Harry Potter."

"Ginny." He wants her to stop. He wants to hear this when he is not standing in front of so many people. He wants, for a moment, to go back to fifteen year old Harry Potter sitting at the Dursleys on the first day of summer reeling from the fresh cut of Sirius' death and promise him that yes, it does get better. "Don't."

"I need to say it. I love you, and for as long as we are on this earth, we're always going to be fighting for each other. Because that's what people who mean something to each other do." She is fighting back tears, and it seems impossible, that she could make it through her vows but is now crying over him. "I know you have Ron, and Hermione, but I

don't -didn't- have many people to count on outside of my family. You were a first for me, Harry Potter."

"I think friend love is better, sometimes." Harry does not want to say that he loves her. Cannot make himself say it. He'd said it before, and then it had changed right in front of his eyes, like water through his palms, and he hadn't even missed it. "Can break your heart just as bad."

"It's the same." Her eyes are blazing again. "But different."

It shouldn't make sense. It shouldn't make sense, but it does, because this is Ginny, and above all things he has always been able to understand what Ginny means. It makes him sad for a moment, because this is the last time it will be like this, his one last chance of being part of the *Harry-andGinny* show until they go off on their separate ways. That's the price of getting older. So often moving on tends to look like letting go.

(Though maybe that's the whole point of this. Maybe that's what she's trying to tell him, that they won't let themselves fade away from each other, because she will reach for him and he will reach for her and they'll never let go, not really.)

"We never were right for each other," Ginny said, the two of them revolving in a circle one last time as the song dies down, the faces of the people who loved them flashing by as they make their circle.

"But I think we've finally got it figured out don't you?"

Yes, he thinks, but cannot say, because there are so many people staring and he is too busy going into a mock bow for Ron and Charlie's benefit, pressing a kiss to her temple before leading her back to Luna. *I think we have.*

Draco

He's standing with George. Again. It's become such a common occurrence that he's actually starting to believe he's some type of babysitter, like the Weasley's had decided that every time George was going into one of his slumps they would just push him towards Draco and hope that he was able to deal with it, because he doesn't think it's a coincidence that they keep finding each other and George looks like he's in no shape to be actively seeking someone out, friend or not.

George has spent the whole day swiveling between *perfectly okay* and *standing right at the edge of a cliff*, and this time, it had been Draco who edged him a little bit closer, having suggested a walk and then found himself standing right in front of the empty chair

that Ginny had insisted needed to be there in memory of Fred, just to keep her from feeling like she had forgotten him.

"That's all he gets. He dies, and life goes on, and they don't even say anything about him." He is glaring at the chair. Draco is looking for Ron or Ginny or the brother with the dragon tooth earring, someone to help him calm the storm before it boils over. "They just give him a chair."

"She probably didn't want to make people sad," Draco finds himself saying, floundering, so out of his depth it's almost laughable. "On her wedding day, you know."

"Still. He deserves better. More," And he kicks out, hard, hard enough that one of the legs of the chair snap. Draco repairs it, but that does not stop the scarlet ribbon that had been wrapped around it from floating into the air and out of reach, taking away the only sign that it was a place reserved for someone special. "Than a stupid." Another kick. "Chair."

Draco just watched him as the fury rolls over him and then fades back into nothing, leaving George standing there looking like a little kid who had just thrown a tantrum and didn't get the response he wanted. "You need to move on." He says, hardly daring the words are leaving his mouth but knowing that they must be said by *someone*, because Merlin knows none of his family are going to do it. You need to be a special kind of heartless to say what Draco is saying. "It's the only way you're ever going to get a life of your own."

"Why should I get to move on?" He kicks out at the chair again, but lighter this time, so it's more of a nudge. "Why should I deserve to have a life when he doesn't?"

"Because you're the one whose still here, and that sucks, but you've got people who love you, who so desperately want you to be okay again." Draco reaches out to him and George does not shrug him away. "Isn't that enough? The fact that you still have them, even when he's gone?"

"It would be better if he were here," George mutters, so quiet that they can both pretend Draco did not here, but then he straightens and forces out a laugh, shifting in the blink of an eye to the *George who was okay*. "Speaking of people who loved you. I was supposed to tell you earlier. Harry needs you in the garden."

"What?" The word *need* throws him off a bit, this one thing that he had not been able to shake from the war, where you must be at the right time and right place or you find yourself losing the battle, where people needing you was not something to take lightly, because only merlin knows what the problem was. "What does he want?"

"Don't know that, do I?" But he does, probably, he's just angry and doesn't know what to do with

it. "Just go find him."

Draco goes, faster than he probably needs to, weaving through the crowd and ignoring the people who are calling out happy greetings, ducking around the half empty glasses of champagne that the guests had left floating in midair so they could come back to it later. It only takes him seconds until he gets to the garden, but that's long enough to let the panic set in, so when he catches sight of Harry, it's the only thing that lets him really breathe again.

The garden was beautiful. Harry had said that it used to be a great big tangle of things, but that was before Luna got her hands on it. Now, everything was in its rightful place and there was even a walkway to the center of the garden, a little clearing with a stone bench right in the middle. You have to pass under an ivy covered arch way to get it, another one of her installments.

"Sorry I'm late." He walks through the pathway and the flowers reach out to him like they know he is there. "George forgot."

"It's alright. You're not late." Harry takes his hand and leads him over to the bench. "I just wanted to talk."

"You could talk to me out there."

"Really talk. Without people listening." Despite everything, Draco is hit with the niggling little thought that he might be about to be broken up with, which he really hopes is wrong, because Merlin would that be annoying. "Because I have something I want to tell you."

"Me first." The words jump out of Draco's mouth just like they had the night before, without reason, without warning, with nothing except for a wanting, a need for Harry to know this, because he's done with wasting time. "About last night. I love you. Without maybe's or probably's or any type of percentages. I completely, totally, definitely love you." Harry sort of looks like he's been slapped, he's that surprised. But in a good way. *Thunderstruck*, the snide little voice in his head that sounds like Pansy piped up. "I love you forever, Harry James Potter."

"Good. That's really, really good, Draco. Because," And he slips down off the bench onto one knee, kneeling in the damp grass. His hands are trembling so bad that he can barely get the box out of the pocket of his jacket, and that's when Draco realizes that it had been so long since his own hands were anything but steady. "Because I care about you more than I care about anything in my life, and I want to keep feeling this way for the rest of my life. I want to marry you, Draco Malfoy. All you have to do is say yes."

"I told you," Draco says, choking on tears. "I love you forever."

"You gotta say it." Harry's eyes were shining, too. "I need to hear you say it."

"Yes," Draco almost yells the word and then he gives up on pretense and hugs him, the force of it knocking them both back onto the cold grass of the garden. It's the most beautiful place he could ever have imagined this to happen, the moon high overhead and fireflies blinking in and out of sight and those flowers leaning in to form a sort of canopy around them, reaching, reaching, seeking out the two of them the same way that he and Harry are currently seeking each other out, until they are sharing each other's air, breathing each other's words. "Yes a million times over. Yes, yes, yes." Harry

They come out of the garden hand in hand, a ring shining on both their hands.

No one knows. No one sees, with the way they are both keeping it hidden under the cuffs of their jackets and behind glasses of champagne. And they aren't telling. It's nice, for a moment, to have something just to their own.

"You really love him, don't you?" Ron says, his eyes tracking Hermione around the dance floor as she is passed between Seamus and Dean and George in some weird dance that Harry had never seen before and does not think actually exists. There would be a time where Ron would have been forcing himself to be included, terrified that she was having more fun with them, that she liked them better, but now he's content to let her have her fun, confident that it's always going to be him she's returning to. "Draco, I mean."

Ron was the only one that Harry had told. The only one that he had trusted not to tell anyone else.

"I really, really do." He makes a fist just so he can feel the chill of his ring against his skin, even though it was quickly warming. "Forever."

(He was going to get that inscribed on the inside of their wedding bands. *Forever, forever, forever*, a new mantra to replace the soft promise of *until the very end* that had been ringing inside his bones for months.)

"Then I guess we're stuck with him." Ron's mouth twitched into a smile when Hermione was thrown into Draco's arms and he spun her around so her skirt flares out, the two of them doubling over with laughter. "No getting rid of him now."

"Guess so."

"That's alright," And it's that, the wholehearted acceptance that Ron is giving just with one casual shrug of his shoulder, that makes Harry think he is doing the right thing, because out of all of them Ron always seems to know when they are heading towards something that he can handle. "He's growing on me."

He has that affect, Harry thinks, but doesn't say, because really, he'd already said enough.

The End

