

# Of Fates Entwined: A Story of Love Lost and Found

by taradiane

Prologue

16 June, 2010

Missing Persons Division

Case File No.: HJP-072389

Name: Harry James Potter

Date of Disappearance: 16 Jun 2004, approx. 8:32am

Place of Disappearance: Primary residence formerly known as Kitchener Farm, Ivybridge, South Hams, Devon PL21

Date Deceased:

Location of Body:

Auror Ron Weasley stared at the file that lay open on his desk. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Head Auror and Ron's direct superior, had placed the familiar and well-worn folder on the top of Ron's pile a few moments ago, his face a grim mask. The folder was once a bright red – the colour given to the highest priority cases – but had faded considerably after years of handling.

"Weasley, I'm afraid the day has come," he said, his low baritone seeming to echo in the large space. They were the only two still present, the other evening shift having already begun in their designated offices across the hall.

"Yes, sir," Ron replied, expecting the delivery.

It was standard protocol that when a missing persons case had been open for a period of six years, having seen no active leads for a minimum of four of those, the case was officially closed and the person declared deceased in absentia. This allowed families to tie up loose legal ends and settle any remaining estate, and provide some closure so that lives could move on, and

resources were devoted to cases that had some expectation of resolution.

The date had been circled on Ron's calendar since the beginning of the year, a morbid countdown of Ron's final days as the official Auror in charge of locating his friend.

Ron dipped his quill in ink, and carefully filled in the two remaining blanks.

Date Deceased: 16 Jun, 2010 [in absentia]

Location of Body: Unknown

He blew gently on the page, watching the wetness of the ink fade into the parchment. He closed the folder, extinguished the light on his desk, and walked through the empty, darkened aisles that led to Kingsley's private office.

Placing the dull red folder on top of the leather chair, Ron wondered if they would ever learn what had happened to his best friend - the man who had rescued them all from tyranny, and whose short life had been full of more tribulation and hardship than most families experienced over several generations.

The only lasting happiness he had found was with Draco Malfoy, but it too was cut short. Ron wondered how the other man would feel the next day when he received the letter, fresh from the Ministry's legal office, telling him that he was now free to do what he wished with Harry's remaining assets.

"Never could catch a break, could you, old friend?" he whispered to no one, just before turning out the last light and shutting the door of the Missing Persons unit behind him.

In the morning, Kingsley would sign off on the report, declaring the case officially cold, and send it off to be filed away along with hundreds more just like it.

I.

19 October, 2010

Draco Malfoy opened the door to his third-floor walkup in South Kensington at ten minutes to seven in the evening, throwing his work bag on the floor. Removing his robe before tossing it on the sofa, he walked through the sparsely furnished front room and into the kitchen.

He grabbed a short glass from the cupboard, pulling out the icy cold bottle of vodka from the freezer, and poured two fingers worth of the clear liquid, swallowing it all in one go.

Minutes later, there were three pieces of toast with butter and orange marmalade laid out on a plate, and Draco ate slowly, methodically, as he sat at his small kitchen table for one, the wizarding wireless in the background broadcasting the daily news. After both toast and news are consumed, he conjured a cup of tea and sipped it while staring out the window, lost in thoughts of what-ifs and could-have-beens as clouds floated across the darkened sky.

When he eventually made his way to the bedroom, containing a single wardrobe and a bed suitable for one, he got undressed and pulled back the bed linens, lying down and taking little time to fall asleep.

For almost five years, Draco's daily routine hasn't changed. He wakes up, puts in a ten or twelve hour shift at St Mungo's producing medicinal potions for the hospital, and then returns home to his vodka and toast and little else. On weekends, he sometimes indulges in takeaway after his weekly grocery shopping, and on rare occasions will take in a film if the theatre looks empty enough.

And on every 16th of June, Hermione Weasley sends him a single yellow rose. It appears on his windowsill in the morning while he is still asleep, and remains there until the petals and leaves have dried up, their shrivelled skin a mocking remembrance of when it was bright and beautiful and full of life, just like its recipient.

He never acknowledges them.

=====@=====

12 December, 2010...

Hermione wrung her hands nervously, fingers twisting through the fringe of her scarf, and stared apprehensively at the door in front of her. After several tense moments, she finally summoned her resolve and knocked.

She could hear footsteps from the other side of the door, but it didn't open.

"I know that you're in there, Draco. Please let me in."

Draco reluctantly opened the door, coming face to face with Hermione after having avoided her for the better part of five years.

She looked exactly the same as he remembered, with her long curly hair pulled back in a haphazard plait.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asked matter-of-factly, as if he had just seen her yesterday.

"Are you going to invite me in?" she smiled, hoping she didn't look half as anxious as she felt.

Draco shrugged and moved aside, motioning her inside before shutting the door behind her. She followed him into the kitchen, eyeing a half-eaten plate of toast on the counter.

He looked at her, observing, watching her nervous gestures that he remembered so well from when they used to be part of each other's lives. He pulled the vodka from the freezer.

"I've a feeling I'll need this more than usual, and you certainly look like you could use some. To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asked, offering her a drink with a nod, which she declined.

"I- I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Peachy," he answered before swallowing the cold liquid and grimacing at the burn.

Hermione pulled out a chair from the table, running the fingers of her left hand over the surface and looking around the space. She could see the remnants of her yellow rose still sitting on the windowsill from when she sent it several months prior, not sure if she should be pleased that he had kept it, or disappointed that he continued to ignore them.

"You're still working at St. Mungo's?" she asked, still not certain that she could go through with what she was about to do.

"I am."

"You could reopen your private practice. Move back to Devon and-"

"Don't."

The look he gave her was as cold as the frosted glass bottle that sat on the tabletop.

"Why are you here, Granger?"

She flinched slightly at the abrupt, unkind tone of his voice, and she contemplated walking out before fulfilling her reason for coming.

She knew that it might destroy him if she were wrong, not that there was much left of him to destroy. Though Draco had avoided her, she had contacts in all areas of wizarding Britain, including St. Mungo's, and kept up to date on his self-imposed exile.

"I just returned from Toronto. I was there on Ministry business," she said, stalling. "Of course, you know that a lot of our Death Eaters fled to Canada to avoid prosecution, and the Canadian Ministry isn't too keen on extraditing them back to Britain owing to our arcane practice of the Dementor's Kiss, never mind that we haven't done that to the Death Eaters we did manage to capture and imprison."

"Sounds fascinating," he replied dryly.

"Yes, well, anyway, while I was there I had a bit of time to kill between meetings and I found this charming Muggle café near the Ministry entrance, and I spent some time there."

"Is there a point to this story?"

"Draco, I- couldn't you at least sit down? Please?"

He sighed, but did as she asked. She thought that she detected a slight thaw in his icy demeanour, and wanted to reach out – to grab his hand to let him know that she was still his friend.

"There was a man there. Working behind the counter. I met him on the second day that I went in," she continued, the words rushing out of her now that she'd started. "His hair, it was brown, and his eyes were blue – a really brilliant blue – and..."

"Spit it out already, Granger."

"I'm certain that it was-" she stopped, gathering her resolve, "Harry."

Draco's impatient expression fell, and Hermione saw grey eyes turn hard as

steel as they stared through her. His cheeks went pink with emotion.

"How dare you."

"Draco, please just listen-" she pleaded.

"Get out," he nearly shouted.

Draco stood, towering over her, waves of hurt flowing off of him.

"I'll show you," she said, the idea coming to her in a flash. "My memory, I'll give it to you!"

He looked at her incredulously, angry.

"Do you know how many times I had to go down to the Ministry after being told that Harry had been sighted in random place after random fucking place, only to find out that it was someone who barely even resembled him? Have you any idea-"

"I talked to him, Draco, and I would have never come to you if I didn't believe in my- I can feel it. It's him."

She looked up at him, eyes pleading.

Draco fell back into the chair, running his hands over his face in exasperation.

"Hermione, I'm asking you not to involve me in this. I refuse to put myself through another letdown. Maybe you can handle it, but...I just can't."

"I haven't told Ron, yet; he doesn't even know I'm back in England," she said after a moment of sad silence, and he looked up at her, his shock evident. "I wanted you to know first, that's how certain I am. Please, take the memory."

His gaze went to the floor as he seemed to consider her offer.

"You talked to...this person?"

"Yes."

Draco turned to look out the window, staring at nothing. Hermione knew that he was weighing the risk, wondering if he could take another false

alarm. After the first few years of Harry's disappearance, supposed sightings came in at a regular pace – nearly every city in the British Isles had been searched, and even places as far off as Brazil and New Zealand. One wizard who had visited relatives in Iceland claimed they had lent Harry their scarf. It was as though every British witch and wizard who travelled abroad came back with a story about having seen Harry.

He stood up again, the chair legs scraping against the tile floor, and left the room without saying a word. Hermione was just about to leave, scolding herself for not having approached the delicate situation differently, wondering how she was going to tell Ron, when he returned to the kitchen and sat a small, white marble Pensieve on the tabletop.

"Let's get this over with quickly, shall we?" he said, voice devoid of any emotion.

She gave him an encouraging look, and then lifted her wand, placing the tip against her temple and concentrating.

=====@=====

Three days earlier...

Hermione rushed out off the door of the Lettieri Café in downtown Toronto, turning the corner and walking down the side of the building. Clear of all windows, she flattened herself against the brick wall, out of the way of passersby, and cast a quick Disillusionment Charm. Paper coffee cup in hand, she closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath.

She could scarcely believe what she had just seen. Who she had just seen.

Having gone into the café with time to kill between meetings, Hermione happened across the place the day before when the scent of espresso and the promise of warm air beckoned her inside. The Ministry had sent her over as the chosen liaison to deal with her counterparts in the Magical Law Division of the Canadian Ministry to negotiate terms of extradition for the Death Eaters sitting in their prisons.

Not quite over the time zone difference, she was already exhausted and only on the third day of a five day assignment. She sat at a table in the far back corner, cheeks still flushed from the cold air outside, with legal documents systematically laid out in front of her. Distracted by the bell over the front door, ringing to signal that someone had entered, she glanced up to see a man walk inside.

Hermione did a double take, watching as he made his way to the front counter. She was unable to draw her eyes away from him, feeling her mouth gape in astonishment. From the angle she was sitting, she could only see his profile, but there was something immediately familiar about him, and it sent a chill down her back - maybe it was the messy brown hair when he removed his knit cap, or the confident gait...the strong set of shoulders that looked as though they really could carry the weight of the world upon them even while hidden beneath a thick winter coat.

It was a familiarity that made Hermione's heart catch in her throat, the pang of loss sharp and deep.

When the man turned in her direction, smiling genially at other customers and greeting the young girl behind the till, the one with the unnaturally red hair who had served her both yesterday and today, her blood turned cold. Their eyes locked as he removed his coat and gloves, only for a moment, but his smile had wavered slightly as he tugged a barista apron off a nearby hook, tying the strings around his waist.

Hermione couldn't stop staring, and couldn't stop the overwhelming rush of emotions that were boiling up inside her; grief, hope, and disbelief all churning inside; a volatile mixture that was making her lightheaded.

His eyes were a brilliant, true blue - not green; hair tousled and brown - not black. But it was his smile...the way that he looked at her for that brief moment, without recognition, that made her stomach flip. His strong jaw and the smooth baritone of his Surrey accent as he went around the tables, wiping away spilt liquids and asking customers if they were in need of anything, looking so at home in this small but bustling café.

Harry...

It's impossible...

It can't be...

She couldn't stop staring, and after several moments the girl from behind the counter with the red hair came over to her table.

"I'm taking five, Henry, you mind?" she called out to the man as she sat down in the extra chair at Hermione's table.

The man who couldn't be Harry Potter nodded with a small smile, and then



continued wiping out coffee cups with a white cloth as a girl who couldn't be a day over sixteen stood at the counter, looking up at the menu. Hermione continued to watch him, oblivious to the visitor now sitting at her table who was watching her with an amused grin. The customer having apparently decided what she wanted, the man gave her his full attention and a bright, brilliant smile that made Hermione's heart soar.

She knew that smile. She'd seen it a thousand times.

"Don't even bother, honey. He's already attached, and not to a woman, if you catch my meaning."

Hermione barely heard her over the internal arguments being waged in her mind, but finally pulled her attention away from the man who couldn't possibly be Harry - because if Harry were still alive, he wouldn't be working in a café, with brown hair and blue eyes, and acting as though everything were right in the world. If Harry were alive, he'd be trapped somewhere, trying everything in his power to get back home to his family and friends, and to Draco, whose life had fallen apart the moment Harry had gone missing.

Harry Potter, declared dead by the Ministry six years after his disappearance, wouldn't be standing behind a till and asking a blushing teenaged girl if she'd like a sprinkle of cinnamon atop her cappuccino.

"All the girls look at Henry that way." The woman grinned knowingly. "Some of the boys, too."

"I'm sorry, did you say his name was Henry?"

"He's got a boyfriend. Bit of a bore if you ask me, but whatever." She waved her hand dismissively. "Isn't it always that way? The good ones don't play for our team, and Zach isn't anywhere near good enough for Henry."

"Zach?"

"They must have come over here from England together, considering he's got the same accent as Henry, but I never really asked." The woman continued, seeming to get comfortable as she crossed her legs at the knee and settled back in her seat. "Not that I could tear Zach away from his obsessive Henry-watching to get him to answer me if I had. Do you want another?" she asked, motioning at Hermione's half empty cup.

Zacharias Smith. The name popped into her mind unbidden.

"What? Oh, um, no, I...sorry, but what did you say Henry's last name was?"

"Smith. Henry Smith. Boring name to match the boring, yet oddly creepy boyfriend. Can you believe they've even got the same last name? Maybe they were married back in England or something, I don't know. Henry doesn't divulge much. I suppose it could be coincidence that they share the same last name, but the romantic in me likes to imagine otherwise."

"Married?" Hermione's blood raced through her veins.

"Oh God, you're not one of those, are you? Because if so-"

"No! No, I just...sorry, I'm not quite myself today."

"You were here yesterday with all of this stuff, too," the woman said, gesturing to the papers still spread out on the table.

"Yes, I'm here for work."

"Name's Leah, by the way."

"Hermione."

"British, yeah? Like Henry and Zach. You talk the same."

Leah seemed to have no problems so far divulging personal information about her co-worker to a complete stranger, so Hermione decided to press her luck and ask as much as she could about the man called Henry Smith.

"Did he tell you where he's from?"

"Yeah, but I can't remember the name of it. Do you think you know him or something? Is that why you keep staring?"

"I...I don't..."

"Hey! Henry! Get over here a minute, will you?"

Hermione wasn't sure if she hated or loved Leah in that moment, completely unprepared to interact with this man - afraid of the conclusion that her mind would come to...her emotions were in a veritable whirlwind, and she both feared and dreaded either outcome.

"Henry, this is Hermione. She's from England, same as you."

"Hello," he said, holding out his hand after wiping it on his apron.

He smiled brightly, looking at her expectantly. She realised he wasn't wearing glasses, but standing this close to him, staring at him so intently, she could see the faint blue rim around the iris that indicated he was wearing contact lenses.

Those are Harry's eyes...

She reached out and took hold.

Hermione couldn't find her voice. Up close, her hand in his, she knew. How many times had she held that hand, in sorrow and in joy?

Harry, lying in the hospital wing at Hogwarts after one of his Quidditch accidents, or one of his near death experiences with Voldemort in his many incarnations...trying to offer some comfort after Sirius died, and then Dumbledore, and so many afterward...holding his hand and telling him that it didn't matter to her if he was gay, and that he needn't be afraid to tell Ron, either...healing both of his hands after he and Ron had fought after the revelation that Harry had been sleeping with Draco Malfoy, Ron having taken his insults too far...stilling hands that trembled as he showed Hermione the ring that he had chosen for Draco, wondering if the other man would accept it and everything that it meant... as if Harry had any reason to doubt Draco's answer.

Henry - Harry - started to pull his hand away, and Hermione realised that the moment had turned awkward without her noticing, lost as she was in memories both painful and joyous.

I shall not tell lies.

The sudden memory startled her, and then she remembered fully. Before Harry could fully pull his hand free, she gave it a slight turn, palm down, to look. No scar.

She looked up, not at his eyes but at his forehead. Hermione was so used to not noticing his trademark scar that she didn't realise at first that it, too, was missing.

She let her fingers graze over the top of his hand where the permanent reminder of Umbridge's torture should be, and she felt it. The faintest hint

of magic. Likely a concealing charm of some sort – whoever had placed it on him knew what they were doing.

And Zacharias Smith had been an Auror, Hermione knew, working alongside Harry and Ron for years before he quit suddenly, months before Harry's disappearance.

Harry looked the same, barely a day older than the day he had disappeared. There was something different about his face – the sharp confidence and determination that shadowed everything that Harry said and did wasn't there.

His jumper, a dark midnight blue, fit him well, as did the denim trousers. She looked down at his feet, and noticed his shoes. The same canvas Muggle trainers that he had always worn - the ones that Draco always threatened to throw away, and Harry would always go out and buy another pair, exactly the same as the ones he had worn through.

"Whereabouts are you from?" Harry asked her, the awkward moment gone as he pushed his hands into the pockets of his apron.

"Oxford," she said, her voice breathless with emotion.

"What brings you here?"

"Coffee."

"I meant to Toronto," he laughed, rocking back on his heels slightly.

"Oh. Work. I'm here for work."

She felt unbalanced, fearing her knees were about to give way.

Harry... God, how I've missed you. Can it really be you? Is it possible?

"Well, don't let Leah keep you from it. She'll talk your ear off if you give her half a minute."

"Don't you have dishes to clean?" Leah said, slapping his arm.

"Nice meeting you." He grinned a familiar, crooked grin.

"You, too," Hermione said faintly.

Harry walked over to the self-service station near the pick-up counter, gathering half-empty shaker bottles for sugar and other spices in his arms. She watched as he took them into a back room, a flash of panic rising up inside her as he disappeared through the door and out of her sight.

She had to get out of here. She needed to think.

"I should be going," Hermione said to Leah as she began to pack up her things in a rush.

"Take something to go?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

Leah took the hint, shrugging and leaving Hermione's table.

A thousand thoughts competed for attention in her mind, but a few stood out.

He doesn't know who he is. It has to be some sort of Memory Charm. Obliviation, or...

Hermione shoved the last of her papers into her bag and put on her coat, not wanting to contemplate the horrible scenario of that last option. At the door, she paused, wrapping her scarf around her neck, and then turned to look at Harry, who was no longer in the back room. His back was to her as he rinsed out dirty cups in a small sink, piling them one by one into a large plastic crate for washing.

Hating her sudden decision but seeing no other option, she walked up to the counter.

"On second thought, I think I will take something to go," she said calmly. "Americana, please, with honey."

"Sure thing." Harry smiled back at her, ringing up her total and taking her two dollar coins.

While Harry began to make her order, Hermione discreetly reached into her bag and slid her wand up the inside of her coat sleeve, leaving the end barely peeking out from the cuff. When Harry finally turned to hand her the drink, she said the Charm under her breath, and then thanked him before saying goodbye and leaving the shop.

She hated modifying his memory, especially after starting to put the pieces of the puzzle together, but she couldn't risk Harry mentioning to Zacharias Smith anything about the woman that he'd met at work that day - the woman named Hermione from England.

She couldn't risk that if she ever hoped to see Harry again, and bring him back home.

=====@=====

13 December, 2010...

"What else did he say?" Ron asked her, taking another biscuit from the plate.

"Nothing, that was all. I was too afraid that I would spook him if I asked too many questions, and I didn't want to make the other woman suspicious. I had a hard enough time wrapping my own mind around it. But Ron, it's him. I know it in my heart that that man was our Harry."

After Draco had watched Hermione's memory in the Pensieve the day before, the only thing he had said to her was that they had to tell Ron. She knew from the look on his face that he, too, believed the man to be Harry, and she couldn't begin to imagine what the past twenty-four hours were like for him.

He went home with her, and they waited for Ron to arrive. Immediately concerned by his wife's unannounced and early return from Canada, coupled with the look on both their faces, he didn't even bother changing out of his work robes before demanding to know what had happened.

Hermione told him what happened at the café, and let him view her memory as she had with Draco. Ron was silent for a long time, as shocked as she had expected him to be, before he leapt into action, rifling through the desk in their den for the copy of Harry's file that he had made years before.

She remembered how Ron had flipped through the first few pages, his eyes scanning the paper carefully, finally stopping on one of them and reading for several minutes. He had turned white as a sheet, his freckles appearing in stark contrast to the ashen tone of his skin.

"Ron, what is it?"

He looked up at them both, his eyes shining.

"Henry Smith. I remembered the name. A few weeks after his disappearance, we were coordinating all the interviews with everyone that Harry knew, thinking that maybe someone knew a detail that would lead us to some answers," he started, visibly shaken and stopping for a brief moment to pull himself together. "We talked to everyone he had worked with, directly or indirectly. Zacharias Smith was on the list, because he and Harry had trained together and partnered for a brief time during the final days of our probationary period."

"Let me guess," Draco said, his voice trembling. "You never talked to him."

"No, he never answered our requests, but he had been off the Auror force for so long by that point...no one ever followed up on it. Alfie Burke, that old man who clerks in personnel, told us he knew that Smith had a cousin somewhere in Berkshire who might know where to find him."

"A cousin named Henry," Hermione said, realisation dawning on her.

Draco sat in the space between them around Ron and Hermione's spacious kitchen table. He could remember many a meal shared at that table with Weasleys aplenty, and Harry always by his side, so close their thighs touched. A cup of tea sat in front of him, untouched and cold.

"Zacharias Smith," he said, breaking the tense silence, voice tinged with disbelief that the answer had been in Harry's file all that time, unbeknownst to anyone.

"Malfoy, I'm really sor-"

"Don't." Draco cut Ron off, slamming his hand against the table. "I do not have the fortitude to deal with anyone's apologies right now. I just want to get Harry home."

Ron nodded, but wasn't able to meet his eyes. He focused on Hermione.

"Tell me again about when you followed Harry home."

"I was under a Disillusionment Charm so he wouldn't see me. They live within walking distance in a loft, not too far from the water and just a few blocks away from the Lettieri. He went inside, and I looked at the nameplates next to the buzzers, and they were right there - Henry and Zach, 4B. I waited for a bit, just to see if he would come out again, and then a few minutes later, I saw Zach heading in my direction. His hair was

shorter, and he's gained a bit of weight, but it was definitely him."

"Makes sense, in retrospect. We always thought it was a bit weird for Smith to just bail on us like that. We don't even know why he quit, just assumed he got sick of it – you're either cut out for it or not, and you remember how he was at Hogwarts," Ron elaborated, referring to Dumbledore's Army and Smith's actions during the final battle.

"Harry mentioned it," Draco said, as though suddenly remembering.

"About six months before Harry disappeared, I think. I'd have to check the dates, but that seems about right. I remember it being just after the New Year when he handed in his resignation. He wasn't a bad Auror, just...lazy."

"And he could have easily gained access to the wards that Harry and Draco had around their home through personnel files at the Ministry."

"If he greased the right palms, sure. I'll check to see who was working around that time that would have been able to pass them on. That was the one thing that always bothered me the most," he said, looking now at Draco. "We never knew how the wards were disabled without setting off your alarms."

Hermione poured them all another cup of tea.

"I'm going there," Draco said suddenly, standing up from the table.

"Draco, we need a plan first-"

"I need to know that it's him."

"But you saw my memories-"

"They're not reliable, love. Pensieve memories are what you believe you saw, not a factual representation of the scene."

"Ronald Weasley, if you think I'm-"

"I do believe you, I'm just saying that we need to be absolutely, one-hundred and ten percent sure, and the only way we're going to be is by forcing a confrontation."

"I'm going."



"Mate, we can't just go in there and take him-" Ron said, standing up across from him.

"The hell I can't! He belongs home, with me!"

"He's right, Draco. Think about it," Hermione implored, grabbing his wrist, "Harry's apparently had his entire memory either Obliviated or modified to where he doesn't even know his own name. Smith was an Auror. Maybe not a good one, but who knows what kind of safeguards he has in place to cover up his crime, and that includes Harry's new identity? We need to go about this carefully, cautiously."

"You can't ask me not to-"

"Ron, what if Draco and I go back while you do a bit of investigating here? I'll take Draco to the café with me; let him see with his own eyes. I'll make up some story for the girl, she's bound to remember me, and we'll just be two out-of-towners having a coffee. Then you can meet up with us in a few days and tell us what you've found, and we'll decide what to do from there."

Ron looked at Draco, doubt sliding across his features.

"I want this to be Harry just as badly as anyone, but promise me you won't do anything to bollocks this up," Ron said pointedly at him.

"It's late, why don't you sleep here tonight, Draco, and we'll leave in the morning?" Hermione offered.

"I have something that I need to do first."

Draco shook off her grasp, and moved into the hallway, grabbing his cloak from the hook by the front door.

"Malfoy-"

"Ron, let him go," she said as they heard the door shut.

=====@=====

Draco hadn't set foot in the hallway of the house in years. Five years, four months, and two days, to be exact. He had stayed in his and Harry's home for nearly a year after the disappearance, but eventually the ache became too unbearable, the memories sharp like knives, and he moved back into the flat in London that he had lived in before he and Harry decided to live

together.

Their house elf, Kreacher, kept the unused home in immaculate condition, always ready for his master's return. Though the elf was also loyal to Draco, the elf was yet another reminder of a life now gone, and he had forbade Kreacher from entering his flat despite the elf's protestations.

When Draco had first opened the front door, the elf appeared within seconds, uncharacteristically pleased at the sudden arrival as he tried to take Draco's coat and gloves. Waving the house-elf away, he walked up the curved flight of stairs and down the hallway that led to their bedroom.

Staring at the door, Draco took a deep breath before grabbing hold of the knob and turning, slowly revealing the room behind it. Candles instantly lit the room, bathing it in a soft golden glow. That Charm had been Harry's doing, saying to Draco shortly after they moved in together that he hated walking into a dark room. It looked exactly the same as the multiple teams of Aurors had left it after weeks of investigating, having searched the room countless times for some clue as to who - or what - took Harry, and where. No magical signatures had ever been found aside from those belonging to the two men who lived there.

He stood at the threshold, staring at the bed that stood opposite, and thought back to that horrible morning...a morning that had started off as celebratory, the day that Draco's private practice was opening for patients, and ended up being the worst day of Draco's life.

=====@=====

"C'mon Draco...just five more minutes," Harry mumbled against his neck.

"Food, Harry. I really want food," Draco answered, fingers tracing the curve of Harry's shoulder. "Specifically of the breakfast variety." Draco wriggled out from underneath him and sat up, only to be grabbed by the arm and pulled back down.

"You know you want to stay," Harry licked the skin just below Draco's collarbone.

"After breakfast, I promise to shag you like you've never been shagged before."

"Promises, promises.," Harry sighed dramatically.

"When have you known me to break a promise?"

He dragged Harry into a messy kiss before loosening his grip and rolling over to his side of the bed.

"Can't argue with you there."

Draco stood up, taking his bathrobe off the hook from the back of the door and pulling it on before heading down the hallway and making his way downstairs. He walked into the kitchen, greeted Kreacher who then loaded up a tray with two plates full of food. Draco started back up the stairs, but then stopped and turned, grabbing a fresh daisy from the flowerbox on the windowsill and placing it inside a tiny blue vase that Harry had taken a liking to a few months earlier.

When Draco walked upstairs and into their room, Harry wasn't there. He noticed the sheer organza curtain on the window blowing gently, assuming Harry to have opened it while he was downstairs. He smiled at Harry's love of the warm summer breeze, even when it was hot enough to necessitate Cooling Charms. Placing the food-laden tray on the bed and calling for Harry in a singsong voice, he expected the other man to emerge from the bathroom since he could hear the tap running.

After several moments, without a reply from Harry, an unsettled feeling began to take root in Draco's stomach.

"Harry?" he called out, crossing the bedroom and walking into the en suite.

But Harry wasn't there.

"Harry?" he called again, louder this time.

Draco began to search the upper floor of their house, his panic escalating. Downstairs, he asked Kreacher if he had seen Harry come down, and the house elf shook his head.

He looked in every single room of the house, even going into the converted barn next door that was his private practice. Harry couldn't have walked to the building without Draco having seen him while he was in the kitchen, but he had to check.

Harry wasn't there.

He wasn't anywhere.

It was as though he had just...disappeared. Into thin air.

Another frantic search throughout their house, desperate pleas to the house-elf to do something, and the eventual arrival of the cavalry intent on finding Harry Potter turned up nothing.

Three nights later, after being forced by Hermione to get some rest, Draco lay in their bed alone.

He wasn't sure how he was able to keep on breathing.

=====@=====

Draco walked over to the bed that held the memory of the last time he had seen his Harry. He could remember when they had picked it out together – Harry wanting something simple, but Draco insisting on a four poster design. He thought about every time that Harry had gently tucked him into it after a back-breaking twenty-four hour shift at St. Mungo's before he had earned his Healer's license. He remembered lazy, cool mornings after frenzied, heated nights. Every touch, every caress, every secret shared and laugh exchanged; Sunday afternoons when the day was entirely theirs, and the hours after lunch were spent devouring one another for dessert. He remembered making up after a quarrel, and Harry holding Draco tight the night that his parents were found dead.

He had nearly burned the bed in the months after Harry's disappearance; he couldn't bear to even look at it. Instead, Draco had ordered the room to be locked, and never entered it again. After three months of sleeping in the guest room, he moved out altogether and never went back.

Draco sat down, smoothing out the duvet on what was once Harry's side - it didn't matter that they usually woke up in the middle, wrapped around each other. Next to the bed was a small table, and atop it sat a small crystal vase of rich, cobalt blue, the same vase that Draco had used for the daisy that morning in June. It was no bigger than two inches tall and meant for a small rosebud, and Harry had bought it on a whim at the same time that they had purchased the bed and other furnishings for their new, shared space. It was the first of what was to be a collection of cobalt blue vases, and Draco thought of the shelves in the kitchen downstairs that were adorned with the rest of his collection. He never knew what Harry liked so much about them.

Their garden out back had been kept well by the previous owner, every

manner of lush, colourful bloom you could imagine interspersed throughout. Harry once told him that gardening was the only chore that his aunt Petunia had tasked him with that he never really minded, and their dinner table was often decorated with peonies or hydrangeas standing tall and proud inside one of Harry's blue glass vases.

Emotions that long ago were buried deep clawed their way to the surface, and Draco felt his eyes begin to burn.

Could he really be alive? After all this time?

He let the tears flow freely, not in anger and rage like they had so many times before when he allowed himself this release, but out of pure sadness and grief for all that he had lost - that both of them had lost.

At sunrise, he pocketed the small blue vase and left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him, and Apparated back to his flat in London.

II.

16 December, 2010...

"What if he's not even here anymore? What if Smith saw you that day, and they're already halfway around the world by now?"

"They're not. I asked Leah. He had the day off yesterday, that's all."

Hermione had never seen Draco's emotions so raw and on the surface. Even during the months after Harry's disappearance, there was a thick wall around him that no one could penetrate.

Hermione tried not to look at Draco with pity in her eyes, knowing that would only anger him.

"Maybe you should ask her again if he's due to come in, just to be sure," Draco said, punctuated by the nervous tap-tap-tap of his fingers against the table.

I have to be right about this, because Draco won't survive it if I'm wrong.

Hermione was just about to respond when she saw Henry - Harry - outside, walking toward the door of the Lettieri from the far window, wearing the same coat and knit cap as he had been the last time that she saw him.

"We don't have to. He's here."

Draco, who'd had his back to the door, turned in his chair and stood in one swift motion. Hermione grabbed his wrist; afraid that he would do the one thing Ron had warned them against by running up to Harry and frightening him. The plan had been to strike up a casual conversation in the café, linger for a bit, and then return to the hotel. Once she gave Ron the signal - using a modified version of the same Charm she'd used on the coins for the DA, enabling them to work across even an entire ocean - he would travel there via Portkey and introduce himself to Harry in an official capacity, indicating that he had information they needed on an investigation. He'd then arrange to meet Harry at the same hotel where Hermione and Draco would be waiting, and they'd do their best to break the news to Harry as easily as possible. They expected him to be shocked, and possibly combative, but if they took things slow, it would make the transition easier on Harry.

She looked at Draco's face in profile, and watched all the colour drain from his face as Harry finally walked through the door, the bell over the door ringing with his arrival.

"Sorry I'm late, Leah, our hot water was out and-"

"Harry!"

Blue eyes turned in their direction, and Hermione froze for a moment before standing, tightening her hold on Draco's wrist and whispering frantically in his ear.

"Draco, stop, you can't-"

Harry looked at Draco, his relaxed countenance fading, mouth gaping slightly, obviously startled. Hermione realised that Harry seemed almost fearful as he stared at Draco.

In an instant, his expression changed and he smiled at her, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"Oh, hello!" Harry said to Hermione cheerfully, pulling off his hat and coat, "Americana, right? With honey?"

Hermione nodded, her fingers still tight on Draco's arm. She guided him back into his chair forcefully.

"Oh my God," she heard him say under his breath as he sat back down.

"Your friend, is he all right?" Leah asked from where she stood behind the counter, Harry walking up beside her.

"He's fine. Just jet-lagged."

Hermione watched Harry and Leah whispering to each other, the girl occasionally glancing their way curiously. Harry was giving Draco an odd look - she couldn't decipher what he might be thinking, but she knew that seeing Draco was causing something to happen in Harry's mind.

"Draco, pull yourself together. You can do this," she said quietly, his eyes still on Harry. "I know it's a shock, but please."

He didn't respond, just stared, some of the colour having finally returned to his face. Harry looked away, and Leah whispered something in his ear, nudging him with her shoulder when he gave her an apprehensive look.

"Stop staring at him, Draco, you're making him nervous."

"Hermione, he-" Draco started to say, finally giving her his attention.

They were interrupted in that moment when Harry walked over to their table, carrying two cups of what turned out to be tea, and a plate with an obscenely large slice of coffee cake.

"Leah thought that your friend here could use a bite to eat," he said to her, looking only at Draco.

"Yes, thank you. Very much...Henry, isn't it?"

"Have we met before?"

Draco kicked her foot under the table, and she winced inside at her own mistake, remembering that she had purposely made Harry forget her name.

"It's on your nametag," Draco pointed, speaking to Harry for the first time.

Hermione was amazed at how he had changed his entire demeanour when she wasn't looking, seeming every bit the calm, collected Draco Malfoy that she'd always known.

"Oh, yeah, forgot about that," Harry smiled, blushing slightly as he set down the cups and plate, and started to walk away.

"I'm Hermione," she blurted out, not wanting him to leave. "And this is Draco."

"Like the dragon," he said. "Pleased to meet you, Draco."

Hermione watched the heavy gaze the two men were locked in - Harry seemed to be searching for something in Draco's face, and it took all her willpower not to ask him what he was thinking. She didn't need to ask what Draco was thinking, it may as well have been written across his face.

Draco knew. He saw what she did. They were, without any doubt left in her mind, standing in downtown Toronto, talking to Harry Potter.

Draco put out his hand, willing Harry to take it.

Hermione suddenly had a very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach when she recognized the calculated gleam shining from grey eyes.

Their hands met, and in the next moment, her bad feeling proved right when there was the soft pop of Apparition, and Draco had disappeared...along with Harry.

Shit! Shit, shit, shit!

Hermione scrambled, but made quick work of insuring that none of the patrons - and especially Leah - wouldn't remember their visit or the sudden disappearance of Henry the barista. She then quickly walked into the café's loo and Apparated to the one place that she hoped Draco had taken Harry in his irrational frame of mind.

=====@=====

"You-"

"Let me look at you," Draco said reverently, running his hands along Harry's body, gentle yet eager, up his arms and across his shoulders, cupping his face.

"What the hell-"

His words were cut off by Draco's thumb tracing his bottom lip, and Harry seemed too shocked to breathe.



"Harry, Harry it's me, don't you remember?"

Harry jumped back as Draco moved closer, looking frantically around him as though trying to ascertain where he was. Draco moved toward him again, and Harry walked backward as far as he could go, eventually hitting the wall behind him.

"You're real. You're alive and you're real and you're here," Draco reached out to touch his face again, and Harry shoved him, hard.

Hermione Apparated into the middle of what looked like a stand-off between the two men; Draco's gaze desperate and near tears, Harry looking like a frightened animal ready to fight back. Her arrival gave him another shock.

"You! Who are you? What are you doing?"

"Harry, it's okay, you don't need to be frightened," she said quickly, trying to diffuse the situation by keeping her distance. She pulled Draco by the arm and forced him to move, placing herself between them.

"Draco, stop it," she said furiously in low tones, "This is exactly what we were trying to avoid!"

"I'm not Harry! My name is Henry, you know that-"

He was now in a full-blown panic, and Hermione hoped that Ron would hurry - she'd signalled him from the café just before Apparating to the hotel.

"Your name is Harry," Draco answered him anxiously.

Frightened blue eyes looked at him incredulously, then to Hermione as though asking for help.

"My name is Henry," he said slowly. "You have me confused with someone else!"

Draco took a step forward, halted by Hermione's arm preventing him from moving any closer as she saw Harry flinch at the movement.

"You didn't say anything about your sudden appearance in this room, nor hers," he said, his eyes narrowing. "You know, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"About magic."

"Of course I do! I may be a Squib, but that doesn't make me brain dead."

"Squib?" Hermione and Draco said in unison.

Harry stared at them, his panic now tinged with confusion, and Hermione could tell his defences were only getting higher.

"Let's just all calm down," she said, leading Draco toward the small sofa that was arranged opposite the large bed and pushing down on his shoulder, forcing him to sit. She motioned for Harry to do the same on the bed, but he didn't move.

She sat next to Draco, her hand pressed against his leg in warning to stay put. She knew that Harry would feel at an advantage if he were the only one standing.

"You're a Squib?" she asked calmly.

"What's it to you?"

"So you haven't got a wand?"

"I- no, why would I? What's this all about? Why did you bring me here?"

"And Zacharias told you this?" Draco nearly spat out the name

"Yes, I- wait, how do you know about Zach?"

"Because he bloody well stole you from me!"

Hermione frowned in frustration, Draco's shouting only making the situation worse - if that were even possible.

"Are you two touched in the head or something?"

"Harry-"

"My name is Henry! Henry, not Harry!"

"We just want to talk to you, Henry," Hermione said in supplication.

"I've had enough of whatever it is that you two think you're trying to pull

here," Harry said, his panic still evident as he made his way to the door.

In a flash, Draco was in front of him, blocking his path and the only exit out of the room. Their faces were inches apart, and Hermione saw their eyes lock, both of them breathing heavily - one out of fear, the other out of...the need to hold on.

Another pop, and then a fourth person was in the room. Hermione's wand was out in a flash, but Draco was quicker as it was his spell that landed the intruder on the ground with a Stunning Charm that made the curtains shiver and the bed shake with the force of it.

In the middle of the floor lay Zacharias Smith, eyes darting around wildly, unable to move any other part of his body.

"Zach!" Harry cried, nearly falling to his knees to crouch next to him, cupping his face with his hands, feeling to see if he was okay. "Are you all right? Blink if you're all right!" He glared daggers at both Hermione and Draco, his cheeks now flushed with anger, and shouted at them, "Let him go! Release him right now!"

Harry found himself being forcibly moved by an unseen force and slammed up against the foot of the bed. Draco was now kneeling over Smith, his knees crushing the arms of the heavier man as he groaned from his spot on the floor, Draco's wand jabbing the soft flesh of Smith's throat.

"I should kill you right here in this room for what you've done to Harry. I should tear you limb from limb and scatter your body parts across this country, sending bits and pieces to your mother on holidays."

Where the hell are you, Ron? Hermione thought frantically.

A strong arm came across Draco's shoulders and threw him to the ground, his head hitting the carpeted floor with a solid thud. Hermione couldn't bring herself to move, her feet frozen in place, at a loss of what to do in this situation which had deteriorated so quickly.

"Don't you ever lay a hand on him again," Harry shouted, his forearm pressed against Draco's throat.

Draco took advantage of where his legs were positioned in relation to Harry's, and kicked out, causing Harry to stumble. Draco wasted no time in reversing their positions fully, allowing for no weakness in posture, and held Harry's shoulders to the floor even as he tried to twist and squirm his way

loose.

Draco's wand was pointed at him, and Hermione feared that he was actually going to use it.

"That man that you are so eager to protect kidnapped you and did God knows what else to you, tearing you away from everyone you ever loved! Your name is Harry James Potter, not Henry Smith, and I'm the one that you should be protecting, not him!"

Harry looked at Draco as though he were a madman, and struggled again to try and break free.

"I'm the one that you used to come home to, not him! It was never him! Me, Draco Malfoy, you were mine! Listen to me!" he lifted Harry's shoulders up off the floor, slamming them back down as though that were going to stop the struggle.

"You're a liar! Get off of me!"

The touch of his wand to Harry's cheek made the other man go still, fear radiating off of him.

"Draco," Hermione warned.

"You're the most powerful wizard alive, Harry James Potter, and you're the exact opposite of a Squib! He lied to you, Harry, he's hiding everything about you from you! Stop fighting me, damn it, and listen to me!"

A powerful burst of magic had Draco flying across the room, his back hitting the far wall and landing him on his arse.

Harry looked as stunned as Draco.

"It wasn't me," Hermione said as they both looked at her.

"Well it sure as hell wasn't him," Draco said, pointing to Zacharias - still Stupefied on the floor - with one hand and rubbing the back of his head with the other.

Harry sat up on the floor and scrambled backward until he felt the bed against his back.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Hermione asked quietly.

She and Draco looked at him intently, waiting for an answer as Harry's gaze volleyed between them, looking more confused and scared now than angry.

"I don't...know..."

"It's your magic, Harry," Hermione said, moving toward him and kneeling beside him, careful to keep a safe distance between them lest she frighten him even more. "You're all worked up and it needed an outlet."

"But I-"

"You felt it, didn't you? For just a split second. Like an electric current running through you."

Harry nodded hesitantly, eyes as wide as she'd ever seen them.

"He lied to you."

Draco still sat on the floor, leaning against the wall - exhaustion and the solid knock to the head having taken the fight out of him, and even his accusation lacked bite.

"I want to show you something," Hermione said, standing up and offering her hand to Harry.

He took it, tentatively, and stood, letting her lead him into the hotel room's en suite bathroom. She turned on the light, and placed him in front of the mirror. He looked at himself for just a moment, wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his brow, and then looked over at Hermione.

She pulled her wand from where she'd tucked it inside her sleeve.

"What are you-?"

"Just watch," she said, gesturing to the mirror.

She waited until he was looking at his reflection again.

"Finite Incantatem."

Like most spells that had been in place for long periods of time, it disappeared slowly...but after a few moments, brown hair began to turn darker, blue eyes became more green, and the faint pink outline of a

lightning bolt shaped scar began to appear on the formerly smooth forehead, just left of centre.

Harry's jaw dropped open as he watched the transformation, knowing full well what the spell was that Hermione had cast. "The spell to end another," Zach had told him the first time he saw it used.

"I don't...understand..." he said faintly, unable to tear his eyes away from his own reflection, now fully changed.

"This is you. The real you."

Draco walked into the bathroom, standing behind Harry, and felt Hermione grab hold of his hand as the three of them stood there, staring at the face of Harry James Potter for the first time in six and a half years.

=====@=====

Harry sat on the uncomfortable sofa while staring at a photograph that Hermione had given him. In the picture, he saw himself standing next to her, and on her other side was a ginger haired man; all of them smiling happily, and wearing formal dress. Ron Weasley, she told him, pointing him out, was his best friend and former Auror partner, and the man she married the day after that picture had been taken. It was a moving photograph, and on a repeated loop, Harry saw himself tug on the arm of another man to bring him into view of the camera - it was Draco, and he watched with an eerie sense of detachment as his photographed self repeatedly kissed the blond man's cheek.

He couldn't ever imagine looking at the Draco that stood across from him the same way that he apparently had when this photograph was taken.

"None of this makes sense," he finally said, "I don't know any of you."

"Correction - you don't remember any of us because this useless waste of oxygen didn't want you to," Draco bit out from where he leaned against the hotel room window, kicking Smith's foot for emphasis.

What he wanted to do was break every single bone in that body, use his talents to heal him, just so he could have the pleasure of doing it all over again.

Harry glared at him, but Hermione saw the flash of hurt mixed with anger as his eyes skated over the still petrified form of Zacharias Smith, deliberately

avoiding looking at his face. The former Hufflepuff had ceased trying to get Harry's attention with his eyes, and was staring blankly now at the ceiling, blinking occasionally and being forced to hear his entire plan unravel.

"He must have had a Tracking Charm on you. It's the only way he would have known that you were here."

"Stalk you at work, does he? Does Mister Control Freak check on you every fifteen minutes to make sure you are where you say you'll be?" Draco sneered, visibly disgusted. "I'm sure he was terribly worried when you weren't safely behind that counter doing menial labour for menial pay."

Harry ignored him, and looked down again at the photograph.

"I Obliviated everyone in such a hurry, I may not have done a perfect job on Leah," Hermione said. "If she mentioned me in any way, even just a description, coupled with what you look like...he would have easily put two and two together and panicked."

"Let's let him talk, shall we? I'd like a few answers myself."

Draco kneeled next to Smith, poking him hard in the arm with his wand.

Hermione glanced over at Harry and the look of unease on his face, and shook her head.

"We need to wait for Ron. It's been about forty minutes since I contacted him, and he should be here any minute now," she added, looking at her watch. "Smith needs to be arrested. We have to do this by the book, Draco, remember?"

"Arrested?" Harry said, her words finally registering.

"Yes, arrested," Draco said, his glare daring Harry to challenge it.

"He didn't hurt me."

Both Draco and Hermione looked at him incredulously.

"Look, I understand that maybe you once knew me-"

"Once knew you?" Draco interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"Once knew me," Harry continued, sounding as though he was trying to give

a perfectly rational argument, "but that's clearly all in the past, and if you don't mind, I'd like to go back to my normal life."

"With him," Draco added - it wasn't a question.

"Yes," Harry said after a moment's hesitation. "Whatever he may have done in the past is just that - the past - and we're...good friends, roommates, actually, and-"

"Lovers?" Hermione blurted out, knowing that Draco wouldn't.

Harry blushed, but didn't reply, and it was answer enough.

Draco swallowed the bile that threatened to rise into his throat.

"Excellent, we can add rape to the kidnapping charges before they throw his arse in Azkaban to rot!"

Draco was standing over Harry now, fists clenched at his sides.

"What? No one raped me, for fuck's sake!"

Harry stood up, moving to put distance between him and Draco, and Hermione once again had to play referee.

"Both of you, just stop-"

"Did you fuck him?" Draco shouted accusingly.

"As if that's any of your business!"

"Shut up, both of you!" It was Hermione's turn to yell.

Harry and Draco looked at each other murderously, the tension in the room as thick as treacle.

There was a knock at the door, and Hermione moved quickly across the room to answer it, hoping it was her husband.

"Sorry I'm late, babe, I didn't feel the coin vibrating in my coat pocket," he apologized with a peck on the cheek, moving past her and into the room.

"That's why you were supposed to put it in your shirt pocket like I told you to."



"Harry!" Ron said, enveloping his old friend in a firm hug, his smile as big as Hermione had ever seen it. "Mate, you've no idea how good it is to see you again."

Hermione could hear the emotion in his voice and knew there'd be tears in his eyes when he pulled back.

"The whole family, we just couldn't be happier. Everyone missed you so much, yeah? Especially mum. She's probably knitted you thirty jumpers by now," he laughed, punching Harry's arm lightly and wiping at his eyes.

Hermione took his hand and squeezed when Harry's lack of response was finally noticed.

"I don't..."

"Remember me? Yeah, I know. But we'll get it all sorted, won't we?"

He clapped Harry on the back, and gave Draco a nod in greeting.

"Way to stick to the plan, you two."

"Oh stuff it, Weasel."

"Not even if you offered me breakfast in the morning, ferret."

Hermione felt a bit of relief as Draco smirked back at him, a sure sign that he had calmed down enough to spar verbally with her husband.

"What do we do now?" Hermione asked.

Ron finally took notice of Zacharias Smith as he lay petrified on the floor, and kicked the man's leg.

"Chubby little fucker, isn't he?" Ron said mockingly, before bending down and putting his face in view of Smith's. "Life of crime making you put on a bit of weight, has it? No worries, you'll drop a stone or four in Azkaban and be back to your usual svelte self."

"Ron," Hermione chided.

"I want to go home," Harry said suddenly.

Hermione could see that familiar glint of determination in his eyes.

"Good, because that's exactly where you're going," Draco answered in challenge.

Hermione resigned herself to being in the middle of yet another argument.

"Not with you," Harry glared at Draco before turning to the rest of them.  
"Not with any of you."

"Ay, I had a feeling about this. Look, mate-"

"I'm not your mate-"

"You can't stay here. I can take you willingly, or I can arrest you as well as Smith. The Canadian Ministry is already aware of the situation and I need only sign my name to the paperwork."

Ron was lying, of course, but Harry didn't know that. The file had already been relegated to the cold case room, and with Harry declared dead, there would need to be an official re-opening of the case for Ron to have any jurisdiction over the matter.

"Weasley," Draco started to say, but was silenced with a look from Hermione.

"Arrest me for what?"

"Don't know yet. I'll make something up, but I'm not leaving this country without you. You're both the victim and a material witness in the case against your kidnapper-"

"The only person who has kidnapped me is him," Harry said, pointing at Draco.

Draco laughed derisively. "Smith really did scramble your brains, didn't he?"

"You can't arrest me," Harry argued.

"Can, and will, actually."

Ron twirled his wand for effect, and Harry opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it as he seemed to take in the severity of the situation that had unfolded.

"I know you've no reason to trust us right now, but I'm going to ask you to anyway," Ron said, all levity gone from his voice. "We can do this the easy way, or the hard way, and I'm asking you as someone who knew you like my own brother, please don't make me do it the hard way."

Harry's jaw clenched, his mouth a narrow line on his face.

Draco had seen that look of defiance before – it seemed as though Harry had chosen the hard way.

"Fine. Arrest me," Harry said, and held out his wrists.

"Harry, please-" Hermione interjected, pushing his arms down as she stood between him and Ron.

"Listen to me, Potter," Draco said, moving behind Harry and leaning in close, his mouth barely an inch from the curve of Harry's ear. "If after seeing your own face change before your very eyes because this scum-sucking piece of shit decided to keep you like a pet for his own amusement hasn't planted even an ounce of doubt in your mind as to who you really are, where you really come from, then you have bigger problems than anyone in this room is equipped to handle," Draco said, his tone brooking no argument.

Draco could see the tiniest piece of Harry's resolve fall away.

"But if that doubt is there," he continued, "if you have any question whatsoever about all of the things he's told you that don't make any sense, about the missing pieces of the puzzle that you've never quite been able to piece together, then trust it, and come with us. Willingly. You've been taken by force too many times for one lifetime already, wouldn't you agree?"

Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and stared down at Zacharias Smith, and walked over to look him in the eyes for the first time since exiting the bathroom.

Smith began blinking furiously, as though trying to speak in some secret code, but Harry closed his eyes and turned away.

They knew that they had won this battle when Harry's shoulders fell in defeat, and he sat down on the end of the bed, staring at the floor.

Hermione suddenly saw the same boy that had suffered so many betrayals at the hands of those who were supposed to take care of him, and the

hatred she felt for Smith in that moment overwhelmed her.

As Hermione moved to sit beside him, nervously taking his hand in hers and looking encouraged when he didn't pull away, Draco felt like he was able to breathe for the first time in days.

And it hurt like hell.

III.

19 December, 2010...

Within a forty-eight hour period of returning to England, Zacharias Smith had confessed to everything with a little prodding and a lot of Veritaserum. His Ministry provided barrister assigned to his defence had initially listed only one condition in exchange for the full confession, and that was that his client be allowed to speak with Harry, alone, for one hour.

Ron told the barrister exactly where he could stick his sole condition, and all Aurors on staff were advised that former Auror Potter was not permitted to see or have any form of contact with the accused.

It had been decided shortly before they all departed Canada that Harry would stay with Ron and Hermione until things settled down - a decision that cut Draco to the quick, but logically he could find no fault with it. Ron, a Ministry official who had already threatened to arrest him once, could control Harry in ways that Draco could not - that, and the majority of the man's animosity was being directed at Draco. If Harry felt more comfortable in his absence, then Draco could not begrudge him that after everything that he had already gone through.

"It won't always be this way. He just needs time," Hermione had said to him.

Draco rather thought that he'd waited long enough, but kept those thoughts to himself.

Because they were so close to the Christmas holiday, the Ministry decided to postpone the trial until after the New Year to allow Smith's barrister ample time to create a valid argument for leniency, his guilt no longer in question and the only thing left was to decide on a sentence. Draco hated it, wanted to see the man who ruined his life trussed up like a Christmas goose and thrown into a cold, damp cell, never to see daylight again - preferably after a sound beating. It would have been the perfect gift.

Harry may as well have been a deaf mute as far as Draco was concerned. He didn't acknowledge him in any way, except to shoot him dirty looks whenever he showed up at Ron and Hermione's, and Draco knew that his taking Harry from the café was the reason why he was bearing the brunt of his anger.

It's as though he'd lost Harry all over again.

In that same two day period, with Zach's confession as their guide, as well as boxes full of evidence that a team of Canadian Aurors had taken from the Toronto flat, the new trio of Ron, Hermione, and Draco had pieced together exactly what had happened in the months leading up to Harry's abduction.

It was actually calming to Draco, being able to put it all together and have some resolution - answers to the questions that had plagued him on many a sleepless night.

=====@=====

Zacharias Smith had, without warning, handed in his resignation to Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt on the 2nd of January, 2004. They were then able to trace his steps to Toronto, where Smith purchased a flat, with cash, in the Muggle part of the city. He illegally procured a false identity, the name stolen from his own cousin, for one Henry Smith from Basildon, England, complete with Muggle passport and all the necessary documents to comply with Muggle laws regarding residency for a British citizen living in Canada.

The following February, Smith then re-entered the country and met up with a woman named Zoë Littleton, a witch who had dated Smith's uncle, and who conveniently worked in the Ministry's personnel department. A 'coincidental' meeting at a pub, several drinks, and an Imperious Curse later, Smith had a listing of all the wards surrounding Harry and Draco's home.

Smith then procured a plot of land in Wiltshire - Draco bristled at that choice of location - which contained an abandoned cottage, recreating the same combination of wards so that he could practice and perfect disabling them in the amount of time that it would take to remove a Stupefied Harry from their home in just a matter of minutes. Smith's prior months of stalking told him that Harry was rarely seen out in public alone, and never in a place deserted enough that someone wouldn't notice what had happened. His only option was to get Harry where he was most vulnerable - where he lived.

The amount of patience and study behind the entire plot both impressed Draco, and made him queasy. No one would have been safe from Smith's machinations - not even The Boy Who Lived.

His dismantling of the intricate web of wards finally perfected, Smith took on the new task of stalking his prey to learn both his and Draco's routines. It is unclear why, ultimately, Smith chose the day that he did - a Wednesday that both marked the start of Draco's private practice, and a day that Harry had taken off work "just because." Ron posited that it was likely he knew Harry would be at home the entire day, possibly even plotted to wait until Draco was in his practice next door, but took advantage of the opportunity when he saw Draco through the kitchen window when he was hiding on the property.

Wards dismantled without setting off any alarms, just as he'd practiced, Smith ascended the Transfigured ladder to the window that he probably knew would be unlocked, climbed inside, and came upon Harry while he was getting dressed. Harry never saw Smith, according to his confession, his back turned and defenceless to an attack, and in the moments before Draco came back upstairs with their breakfast, Smith had Levitated a stunned Harry through the open window, Vanished the ladder, and Apparated with Harry to the abandoned property in Wiltshire.

It was there that Smith began to work on destroying Harry's memories, using a combination of Obliviation and memory modification, like they had suspected, and stuffed him into the same trunk that Mad-Eye Moody was kept prisoner in so many years before. He had apparently taken it as a parting gift from the Ministry's evidence room that no one even knew was missing until Smith's confession and subsequent discovery of the trunk in the Toronto flat. Harry, barely able to speak, so muddled was his mind, was left to starve and dehydrate for several days, eventually passing out.

Smith then transported the trunk and himself to Toronto, ordered takeaway, and then walked into a Muggle police station and reported his boyfriend, Henry Smith, missing, telling them the man had never returned from his daily run. The following day, Smith left Harry's unconscious and weak body in an alleyway near the local hospital, safe under cover of early morning darkness. He kicked Harry, once in the head and several times around his ribcage, making it look like a mugging turned violent, and then changed his appearance to that of Henry Smith. Come daylight, he knew the body would be seen from the street, and be taken to hospital, compared against missing persons reports, and he'd receive the telephone call.

The Muggle doctors explained the amnesia as an unfortunate result of Harry's extremely low blood sugar when he'd arrived, as well as a severe blow to the head and exposure to the elements for however long he had lain in the alleyway. The Muggle police chalked it up to a mugging gone awry, just as Smith had planned.

The last piece of the puzzle was the biggest - why had Smith done it? The answer he gave during interrogation was that Harry deserved better than Draco Malfoy, and that Harry had never given Smith the credit he was due. When asked if he loved Harry, he predictably said yes, and admitted to being obsessed with the other man's approval. His warped mind worked out that if Harry was no longer his superior, but instead dependent on Smith for his every need, Harry would see that Smith was worth more than he had ever been given credit for.

Draco didn't know how to feel about the fact that it was the only part of Zacharias Smith's horrible crime that he understood.

When Zacharias took Henry Smith home, he fed him lie upon lie about who he was and who they were to each other, and counted on their happily ever after.

If Hermione hadn't been sent to the same city on Ministry business, and walked into that café, Zacharias Smith damn near would have had it, too.

IV.

Christmas Eve Morning...24 December, 2010...

"Please say you'll come, Draco."

"My answer isn't going to change just because you ask repeatedly."

Draco was sitting on the bed in his flat, a cup of coffee warming his hands.

"You need to do this if you're going to make any progress with him," she said resolutely, still wearing her coat and gloves.

It was her second visit in three days since Draco refused her initial offer to join them for a meal on Christmas Eve. She decided to make her plea in person instead. It had been Ron's idea, saying that Harry was going to be overwhelmed on Christmas Day at the Burrow, and that perhaps it would be nice to have a smaller version of Christmas dinner with just the four of them the night before.

"I don't need to sit across from him and have him looking at me like I'm the one who ruined his life," Draco said quietly, "which is exactly what he does on the rare occasions he actually does look at me."

"Draco, he's been through a lot-"

"And I haven't? We all haven't?" Draco shouted as he set his cup down hard enough on the bedside table to cause a crack.

Hermione waved her wand, fixing it before coffee could leak out, and was about to reply when the icy glare on Draco's face silenced her. She had been wondering when his calm façade was going to crack, just like that cup, and it looked like she was about to witness it.

"For six years I've had to live with his absence - I know that you were the 'golden trio' and best mates and all that rot," he said derisively, running his hands over his face, "but I shared his bed and no one - no one felt his loss more keenly than I did. Don't lecture me on what he's been through when he can't even remember what he lost! Because you know what, Granger, I do!"

Hermione's eyes widened as Draco shouted at her, brushing her shoulder roughly as he exited the room. She paused a moment, debating on whether or not to push the issue further. When she followed him into the front room and saw him sitting on the couch, head in his hands, looking lost, she made up her mind.

"I remember it every second of every day, Granger," he said sombrely, "and quite frankly, I'm starting to wonder if we wouldn't all be better off if we had never found him again...because it would hurt a hell of a lot less than looking into his eyes and seeing only disgust staring back at me."

Hermione gasped in disbelief at the harsh statement.

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I?" He laughed bitterly.

She walked over to sofa and sat down, laying a hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently. He was right; she couldn't imagine what he was going through. For her and Ron, it was different. Harry was releasing the majority of his anger on Draco, even when he wasn't there to face it, and she hadn't worked out exactly why - the excuse that Draco had been the one to take



him from the café that day was too easy...there was something else fuelling it.

"I would like for you to be there with us, and while he may not appreciate it now, years later when Harry does know what Smith took from him, he'll be grateful that you never gave up on him, even when he was being a complete arse," she said, giving him a small but encouraging smile.

Draco didn't respond, but she knew that he was reconsidering whether it was worth it for him to come. She hoped that he would, for Harry's sake and his own.

=====@=====

For the first few days, Harry hadn't spoken to anyone at all - just locked himself in the spare room that Ron and Hermione had sorted out for him, and refused to leave. She knew that he was sneaking out late at night when her and Ron had retired to bed, one night having heard the shower running in the bathroom down the hall, but he was absent at mealtimes. It was on the third day that Ron burst through the door, pulled Harry up by his shirt from where he had sat sullenly on the bed, and despite Hermione's protests, reminded Harry that he was thirty years old, not thirteen.

"I'm aware that you hate your life right now, but you are a guest in our home, a welcome one at that, and whether you like it or not, mate, we're all you've got right now. I know more about you than you know about yourself right now, so if you have any desire whatsoever to regain your independence and the life that Smith ripped away from you, I suggest you rejoin the living and have your arse planted in a chair at the dinner table in five minutes."

Hermione had blushed with pride, despite the seriousness of the situation. When they were younger, people often thought of Ron as the Hero's Sidekick...but to her, Ron was every bit as much a hero.

Five minutes later, right on schedule, Harry had come through the kitchen door, still looking worse for wear, and sat down at the table, asking Hermione to please pass the potatoes. It was a quiet meal, but for the first time since Harry had come back into their lives and into their home, enough tension had dissipated that she could breathe a little easier.

The following morning, after Ron had already left for the Ministry, she took tea and toast up to Harry's room and broached the matter of his magical ability. That seemed to perk him up considerably, and he was talking

animatedly to her for the first time. She saw glimpses of the old Harry, and it gave her real hope for the first time that things might be all right.

Harry had eventually started to settle in well enough at her and Ron's house, still mostly keeping to himself but occasionally asking questions about his past. When he asked about his parents, she touched lightly on the subject of the war, but discouraged him from probing further, saying that she didn't want to overwhelm him with too much information when he already had enough to deal with. She also noticed that she was the only one, aside from Molly Weasley, that he had shown genuine kindness to, everyone else warranting only basic civility and common courtesy. Even Ginny was only given a curt nod in greeting days earlier when they were reintroduced, but he hugged Molly when she embraced him, and didn't seem bothered by her motherly attentions. She had better luck engaging him in conversation when Ron wasn't nearby, and at first, Hermione chalked it up to her and Molly being female and Harry not wanting to seem rude, but that didn't explain his reaction to Ginny.

The news of Harry's rescue had not yet reached the general public. The small group of Aurors who had been involved in the case was under strict orders to speak to no one, not even their own families, about Harry having been found alive. Anyone even suspected of leaking the information, were it to get out, would be contemplating whether or not it was worth it from their new cell in Azkaban...and everyone knew that Shackbolt wasn't one to bluff when it came to the safety and security of others, especially that of former Auror Potter.

Harry seemed the most interested in discovering his own magical ability, and procuring a wand for Harry was easy enough. She and Ron had Apparated with Harry into Ollivander's after arranging for it the previous day, introducing him to the nephew of the man who had given Harry his first wand years before. After the twenty-seventh wand had proved another poor fit, Harry finally had a new wand - or rather, it found him; eleven inches of cherry wood with a dragon heartstring core, and rather rigid. She elbowed Ron for having laughed at the dragon detail, but Harry was too enamoured of the wand to pay much attention. Hermione promised to begin teaching him basic magic as soon as they returned home, and he smiled like a first year attending his first class at Hogwarts.

Ron took care of modifying the younger Ollivander's memory, and they returned home, Harry eager to get started on learning as many spells as he could. Hermione had deliberately tasked Ron with some of the work, claiming housework was piling up, and it took less time than Hermione thought it would for Harry to warm up to the best friend that he couldn't

remember.

There were two things that Harry seemed especially unwilling to discuss - the time that he spent with Smith, and anything concerning his past with Draco. Both Ron and Hermione knew that Harry was holding on to some misguided loyalty to Zacharias, having been warned about possible Stockholm Syndrome by the Healers who had given him a thorough examination, including checking for any spells or potions that may have been under the influence of - thankfully there were none, though whether that was going to make Harry's transition to his new life easier or more difficult, she wasn't sure.

The best news that they had received was that Smith hadn't done a pristine job of Obliviating Harry's memories. In fact, there was more memory modification that occurred rather than full Obliviation. The Healers told them this meant that, while it was likely most things would not return, it was possible for Harry to have flashes of memories or recognize people or places he didn't recall encountering before. When Smith was questioned about why he used the spells he did, he answered very matter-of-factly that he still wanted Harry to be Harry - modifying a memory meant overwriting an existing one, but the truth still lay buried, deep in the subconscious and affecting the victim in ways they aren't even aware of.

Draco had nixed the idea of having Harry work with a professional to try and uncover those buried truths, knowing there was only a fifty-fifty chance that it would work - and the negative portion of that percentile would mean possible permanent damage to Harry's mind. It was a risk that Draco wasn't willing to take, and refused to allow the prospect to even be offered to Harry by pulling rank as Harry's listed next of kin.

"He's had enough of people tampering with his mind, don't you think?" he'd asked coldly, and it wasn't spoken of again.

Hermione had been worried that the approaching Christmas holiday would find Harry's spirits cooling once again, perhaps thinking of Smith in Azkaban and of the Christmases they'd no doubt shared together, but that wasn't the case. Harry seemed to be genuinely warmed by all the holiday cheer. It surprised both her and Ron enough that he mentioned it to her while they were lying in bed one night, three days before Christmas. It was also the night she found out something regarding Harry's time with Smith that had shocked her.

"Do you think he's remembering things and not telling us?" he asked, twirling a lock of her hair around his finger as she lay against him.

"It's possible, I suppose, but I don't think so."

"Well he's hardly ready to go out carolling, but I nearly fell on the floor when he asked where he could go to buy presents for everyone."

"Has he mentioned Draco to you at all when I'm not around?"

"No. You?"

"No, and I'm afraid to admit that I stopped trying to get him to tell me what he's thinking where Draco's concerned. I can't imagine what Draco must be feeling. Knowing that Harry lived with that monster all those years."

"I should probably tell you something."

"What is it?" she asked, rising up to look at him, concerned by the shift in his tone.

"It was routine to ask, you see - always part of our line of questioning in any kind of kidnapping."

"Ron, what is it?"

"Smith wasn't sleeping with Harry."

"What?"

"They weren't sleeping together. Not for lack of Smith trying, and I suppose we should be grateful that he didn't resort to...you know...but it was the truth - said it under Veritaserum."

"I don't believe it," she said, astonished.

"I nearly didn't, either. Smith said Harry always rejected him, said he didn't think of him that way. Blimey, can you imagine, concocting that elaborate scheme and going through all of that just so you could play house with the Golden Boy, and not ever getting to, well, play house?"

"Don't you think it's a bit strange that Harry was fed all those lies from Smith about their past together, and yet Harry never...I mean, all those years?"

"There's so much weirdness about the entire situation that I can hardly

narrow it down to one thing, 'Mione."

Hermione lay back down, but something niggled in the back of her mind. Harry never slept with Smith, and he was irrationally angry at Draco. Somehow, those two pieces fit together, but Hermione didn't know how.

Not yet.

Hermione could feel Ron shaking in laughter beneath her.

"What's so funny?"

"Harry Potter, born-again virgin."

"Ronald!"

=====@=====

Christmas Eve Night...24 December, 2010...

Hermione took the bundle of Satsumas from Draco's gloved hands, giving them to Ron and shooing him off before helping Draco off with his heavy lambs wool cloak. She hung it on the hook by the front door, and looked at him appraisingly.

"You look nice," she smiled teasingly.

"I always look nice," he chided in return.

"I'm glad that you came," she said gently, touching his arm and feeling pleased when he returned the gesture, covering her hand with his and squeezing it lightly in acknowledgement.

"He's in a good mood today."

Hermione had spoken with Draco every single day since Harry's return, telling him even the most mundane details about Harry's day. She knew that it hurt Draco not to have him in the place they used to call home, even though he agreed the current arrangement was for the best - but she didn't want him to feel left out in any way and was careful to include him as much as possible, even if from a distance. The few occasions that Draco had come over for a visit, Harry had either retreated to his room, or sat and glared, giving one word answers to Draco's perfunctory questions.

"Excellent, I'll be sure to spoil the evening thoroughly by my mere presence."

"Shush, you. Come on, we're having drinks in the front room."

Every time that Draco had seen Harry since that day in the hotel room was like an electric shock to his heart. Equal parts pleasure and pain coursed through him whenever those green eyes met his - eyes that used to look at him in love and lust, now staring at him with thinly veiled contempt.

"Hello, Harry," he said genially.

Harry downed his drink in one go, not even bothering to acknowledge the greeting, and casually walked by him and out of the room.

"Well, that went swimmingly," Draco muttered. "I'll just be off, shall I?"

"Not so fast," Ron said, shoving a glass of red wine into his hand and clapping him hard on the back. "I need a chess partner for later."

"Well there's an incentive I can't refuse," Draco answered dryly.

"Let's cut drinks short, eh Hermione? I'm famished."

Hermione nodded and disappeared through the same door that Harry just had, Ron's hand still on Draco's back as though holding him in place.

"She said that he was in a good mood today."

"Listen," Ron started, turning to face Draco, "neither of you have really been in the same room with each other for more than a few minutes since he got back. Stick it out tonight, will you? At least give him a chance to either warm up to you, or decide you're his mortal enemy for life," he finished with an obnoxiously wide smile.

Draco took a deep breath, and then swallowed half the wine in one gulp.

"Easy there, don't want you being too easy to beat later - you're the only chess partner worth playing anymore - and Hermione's got a different wine for each course."

"I can hardly wait," Draco deadpanned.

"Hey, at least the soup will be good. Even Hermione can't ruin soup."

=====@=====

As it turned out, the food was excellent.

"I had help from Molly." Hermione blushed when both Ron and Draco complimented her on the meal.

The table was covered in what would be tomorrow's leftovers of turkey with gravy, roasted chestnuts and potatoes, parsnips, tiny sausages wrapped in crisp bacon, asparagus (which Ron refused to touch, much to the amusement of the other three), and thick slices of homemade bread.

Ron sat back, patting his belly and grinning happily. "I thought I recognized that gravy."

"Molly will have a huge spread for dinner tomorrow at the Burrow," Hermione said to Harry, "but I wanted to do something special this year for Christmas Eve since it's your first one after coming home to us."

"It was very nice, thank you," he said, and Hermione was warmed by the genuine gratitude in his quiet voice.

Throughout the meal, Harry had been cordial enough, despite his obvious unhappiness with the presence of their guest, but he still hadn't addressed Draco directly. It was as though Draco wasn't even there.

"You're looking well, Harry," he said.

Draco got a nod for his effort.

"He does, doesn't he?" Hermione beamed.

"Mum's already been trying to fatten him up," Ron added, wiping his hands on the linen napkin that Hermione had set out for the occasion. "Reminds me of summers away from Hogwarts when Harry would finally be rid of those horrid relatives who starved him, and mum spent the rest of our vacation trying to put two stone on Harry before we all went back to school."

Harry used his fork to idly move the uneaten food around his plate - a restless gesture that Draco remembered from long ago.

Hermione noticed it as well.

"Who's up for pudding?"

"You don't need to ask me twice!"

Ron patted his stomach eagerly.

"No, but I do need to ask you to go and get the brandy." she laughed, pulling her husband from his chair and pushing him toward the front room where they kept the drinks cabinet.

Hermione started to clear dishes from the table to make room for the dessert plates, when Draco stood up.

"I'll help with that," he said, reaching in front of him for the near empty bowl of parsnips.

There was a gasp in the room, and both Draco and Hermione looked up, each assuming the other to have done it. Hermione then looked over at Harry, who was white as a sheet, and staring at Draco's outstretched hand.

"Harry, what's-" she started, concerned, but then noticed what Harry was looking at so intently, shock written across his features.

"What?" Draco asked, looking between the two of them with increasing concern.

He followed her gaze to the band of silver and gold that wrapped around the ring finger of his left hand.

Hermione could still remember the day that Draco, in a fit of grief-fuelled rage, had practically ripped it from his finger and thrown it on the floor, shouting through angry tears that he had never deserved Harry to begin with; that his disappearance was just Fate's way of resetting the balance. It had been one of the last times she had seen Draco, finding out that he had left his and Harry's home for good a few days later.

She also remembered not seeing it on his finger in their numerous encounters since that day in his flat when she told him about the man in the café.

"Yes, well..." he said quietly, not wanting to get into a discussion about it.

"I just...I didn't notice that you had it on."



Draco wasn't one to normally blush, but he did in that moment. "Why shouldn't I wear it?"

"You should, I only meant-"

"What is that?" Harry blurted out accusingly.

"Nothing," Draco shot back defensively, confused by the sudden outburst.

"It's not nothing!" Harry stood, nearly knocking his chair over with the force of it, and grabbed Draco's hand, causing him to drop the bowl of parsnips that went crashing back to the table, breaking in pieces.

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

"Let me see!"

"It's just a fucking ring, all right?" Draco glared back at him.

Harry was gripping his hand tightly, almost to the point of pain, but Draco still didn't want him to let go.

"It's- you-" Harry cut short his tirade, dropping Draco's hand like it was diseased.

Hermione saw his own hands start to tremble before he turned and fled the room, knocking into Ron on his way out.

"Whoa, what the hell happened?"

"I don't know," Draco said, eyes blazing, "but I'm about to find out."

Draco chased after him, nearly running up the stairs and down the short hallway to the guest room where Harry had been staying; Ron and Hermione were soon on his heels as Draco started to bang on the locked door.

"Here, let me," Ron said, moving in front of Draco and pulling out his wand to force the door open when there was no answer.

They found Harry sitting on the floor under the large window, his head in his hands and rocking back and forth.

"Just leave me alone," he muttered.

Hermione moved to enter the room, but Draco stopped her. He crossed the threshold, kneeling next to Harry and pulling his hands down, forcing Harry to look at him.

"Tell me about the ring," he pleaded.

Harry looked frightened, staring again at the ring, eyes shining bright in the dim light of the room. Draco's arms ached with the desire to pull him close, hold him tight, and show Harry that everything was going to be all right...that as long as he drew breath, Draco wasn't going to let anything or anyone hurt Harry ever again.

He saw Harry –his Harry – for the first time since his discovery in the café. Draco had been so focused on uncovering what happened in the past, and brooding over the anger that was directed at him by the man who used to look at him like he mattered in the world, that he had forgotten about what ultimately mattered...Harry was home, and he was hurting, and Draco could not abide it.

Harry wasn't a stranger to them, he had just lost his way...and Draco was going to do everything in his power to guide Harry onto the path that would truly bring him home - body and soul, heart and mind.

Draco lifted his hand slowly, bands of yellow gold and silver platinum twisted together, contrasts intertwined, glinting between them. It was simple, but classically beautiful. Draco had been impressed when he learned that Harry had picked it out on his own. Harry used to wear its match, but the Aurors hadn't recovered it from the Toronto flat. When Smith was questioned about it at Draco's insistence, he found out that the ring had been destroyed - burnt with the rest of what stood of the abandoned cottage where he had taken Harry immediately following the kidnapping.

"Please, Harry, tell me," he implored gently. "Have you seen this ring before?"

Harry looked over Draco's shoulder at Ron and Hermione, standing in the doorway. He swallowed thickly and nodded.

"Where?"

"In my-" Harry started, and then hesitated, looking again at Ron and Hermione. "I- dreamt about it."

Hermione made a strangled noise of surprise from where she stood in the

doorway behind him. Draco covered his own shock at the revelation, wanting to encourage Harry to continue.

"You're right," Draco said, his voice barely above a whisper, "it is your ring. You bought it...for me."

Draco removed the ring, gently pried open Harry's clenched fist, and placed it in his palm; he let his fingers slide across the other man's skin as he drew his hand away, lingering, relishing the charge that passed between them at the tender touch.

He didn't know why he had put it on today after so many years of keeping it hidden away, its presence too painful of a reminder to have staring him in the face every single day. He had shoved it away in a box, having retrieved it from where he had thrown it days before, and tucked it away in the bottom of his closet, tied to the string that bound a large stack of letters that he and Harry had exchanged over the course of their relationship.

Draco had felt a sense of relief after Hermione had left his flat earlier in the day, her insistence that he come to dinner tonight to spend time with Harry still weighing on him heavily. He shouted at her about all that he had lost, and was losing again thanks to Smith's manipulations of Harry's mind, telling her how it had been suffocating him. It felt good to finally say the words aloud, even if they were in anger directed at a friend.

When he finally gave in to the pull, unable to resist any chance to be near Harry – no matter how unpleasant the other man was sure to be toward him – he got up from where he'd been brooding on the sofa, and went into his bedroom to get dressed. He had been looking for his dress boots when his fingers grazed the familiar box that had long been ignored but never forgotten, and on a whim, opened it up and untied the ring from where it was fastened in the ribbon surrounding the letters, putting it on.

It felt foreign and heavy, the metal cold against his skin still overheated from the bath. He realised in that moment that he should have never taken it off, and silently vowed never to remove it again – no matter what happened.

"Harry, what was your dream?" he asked when there was no response.

He looked up at Hermione, green eyes darting between her and the ring.

"I...was looking for it, like...I had to have it, and if I didn't, then- but every time it happened, I could never find it. I'd never even seen it before, but I-

it was like I...knew. It was mine and I had to get it back."

"You dreamt about it more than once?"

Harry nodded at Draco's question, looking at him and Draco felt like Harry was seeing him for the first time.

"I asked about it once, but Zach, he...he just said it was a stupid dream."

The next words out of Harry's mouth hit Draco like a punch to the stomach.

"Your face, I-" he started, looking unsure about whether or not to continue.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, walking toward him.

"I saw it, too," Harry finally whispered, looking at Draco.

Harry's hands began to tremble again.

"Before the day in the café?" Hermione asked excitedly, moving closer and kneeling beside him and touching his shoulder.

Draco had to sit down - his knees had gone weak at Harry's revelation. He knew my face. The floor was hard beneath him, but he could barely feel anything - his entire body had gone numb.

"In your dreams?" Draco could barely get the words out.

Another nod.

"Those may have been memories," Ron said, speaking for the first time.

"You were chasing me," he continued, still looking at Draco, their eyes locked on each other.

And then words started pouring out of his mouth, as though if he didn't say them fast enough, he wouldn't remember them.

"You were chasing me and I was running, but not getting anywhere - like I was running in place, and no matter how fast you ran, you still couldn't catch me. I was afraid, I- when I woke up, all I remembered was being-scared," he hesitated, as though afraid to admit his own fear. "The dreams, they kept coming, almost every night for a long time, and then they just...stopped, but it was you, and I- when I saw you in the café that day, I

knew that I had seen you before, but I didn't know, wasn't certain, not until..."

Harry looked briefly at the ring that still lay in his hand, raising his other as though about to touch Draco's face, but stopped. Draco took hold, wanting so badly to feel his touch again, pressing palm to cheek as his eyes burned, his vision suddenly blurry.

He could hear Hermione next to them, sniffing, and Draco let his eyes close for a moment, tears slipping down Harry's fingers.

"I never stopped chasing you, Harry."

=====@=====

Hermione, Ron, and Draco sat around the table later that night, the dishes having been cleared, replaced by tea cups and a kettle, the Christmas pudding long forgotten.

After the revelation about Harry having dreamt about both Draco and the ring, he shut down completely, asking to be left alone. It was torture for Draco to leave Harry in that state, but he was too afraid of pushing Harry past the breaking point; his unspoken fear that Harry might run and disappear again – unable to cope – always a constant threat.

"It all makes more sense now," Hermione said, breaking the silence and taking a sip of her tea.

"Even if he didn't remember your face right away from those dreams, more like nightmares from how he described it, something in him did, and that's why he's been so cruel to you. His nightmare came true when you Apparated with him to the hotel that day. You chased him, and literally captured him – he must have been so frightened of you."

Draco glared at her choice of words, but couldn't deny their truth.

"You know what she means," Ron added sympathetically. "You should be happy, really. It means his memories aren't all mush. Remembered your ugly mug, didn't he?"

"Ronald," Hermione chided him for his failure to see that now wasn't the right time for humour.

"No, he's right," Draco said, sighing and rubbing his hands over his face,

exhaustion starting to take hold. It was already close to midnight.

"Harry remembered me, even the ring he once gave to me. It's something."

"He must feel so lost and confused," Hermione said sadly.

Ron reached across the table and took Hermione's hand, squeezing gently.

The three of them sat in silence, mulling over their own thoughts on everything that had transpired. Ron suddenly sat up straight, looking at Draco, a sly grin appearing on his face.

"Hey Malfoy, you up for a little vacation?"

=====@=====

Christmas Day...25 December, 2010...

"This isn't exactly how I planned to spend my Christmas morning, Weasley."

"You had better things to do? Besides, this is for Harry, and we'll be back in time for dinner. You think I want to face mum's wrath, let alone Hermione's? I think she's been giving my wife screeching lessons on the sly or something."

Ron pulled out a small scrap of paper that listed which wards had been placed around the door of Zacharias and Henry Smith's Toronto flat. When Hermione mentioned how confused and lost Harry must feel, Ron had the idea that if Harry were surrounded by some of his own things, it might give him something to anchor himself to - Harry was in a limbo of sorts, being pulled in directions he was unfamiliar with, his entire life turned upside down only to find that everything he had known was built on lies and deceit.

While Aurors had searched every inch of the flat for evidence pertaining to the kidnapping plot, there was nothing personal of Harry's that had been sent for him from Canada to England. The Canadian Auror team had put the responsibility of clearing out the flat and all the contents in Shackbolt's hands per his request, wanting to wait for Harry to decide what he'd like to do with everything when he was able to make the decision.

The clothes he wore were Ron's, a little oversized but still suitable, until Hermione had purchased him a few things of his own, but so far he had never asked about his belongings back in Canada. They didn't even have any information about the kind of life that Harry had led, aside from the job

he held, because Harry refused to talk about it.

While Ron had been inside the flat once before, albeit briefly, this was the first time that Draco would get a glimpse of who 'Henry Smith' was.

The loft-style unit was decorated blandly enough, although the mess the Aurors had left certainly hadn't helped. The first thing that struck Draco was the total lack of colour - what wasn't beige or cream, was white. It was the complete opposite of what Harry liked, and it made Draco wonder just how much control Smith exerted over Harry that not even an ounce of the man's personality was evident in the place he called home.

He smothered a bubble of rage that threatened to boil over - it was neither the time nor place.

Draco opened the door to his immediate left, closing it when he discovered it was only a bathroom. The next door led to a bedroom, and beneath piles and piles of upended clothes and other assorted belongings was a small bed, definitely only suitable for one person.

"Smith's room," Ron said from the other side of the loft, watching Draco from where he was rifling through newspapers that sat on a faded leather chair, pausing to look around him at the mess. "Blimey, they really tore this place up, didn't they?"

Draco turned to look at him, the unasked question hanging in the air. That bed is too small for two people...

"Slept in there alone. I verified it myself, mate. Can't lie under Veritaserum," Ron said, walking through clutter on the floor toward the kitchen area. "If Harry was shagging anybody, it sure wasn't Smith, much to that wanker's chagrin. Should've seen his face when he had to admit that he couldn't even get an Obliviated Harry Potter into bed."

Draco didn't bother hiding his satisfied grin. The knowledge that Harry hadn't slept with Zach - willingly or otherwise - gave him relief he wasn't expecting. He had just assumed...

"Ugh, whatever was in here has gone well off," Ron grimaced, closing the door of the refrigerator.

Draco walked across the wide open area, admiring the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows that showcased the downtown skyline, heading to the door opposite Smith's bedroom.

Turning the handle and slowly opening the door, he felt along the inside wall for a switch, flipping it on and lighting the darkness of the windowless room.

What he saw inside sent a jolt of shock through him.

Well fuck me...

Across all four walls were rows and rows of shelving, all the way from shoulder height to the top of what had to be a fifteen foot ceiling. Hundreds of crystal vases were lined up in neat rows; varying shades of cobalt blue, arranged by shape and size, and even depth of colour. This wasn't a collection, it was an obsession.

He heard Ron walk up behind him.

"Whoa, look at all that," he said over Draco's shoulder, breath releasing with a whistle.

"You didn't see this before?" Draco asked, still staring at the sea of blue glass.

"No, I was only in here for a minute or two, and didn't go in this room."

Draco turned, a determined look in his eyes.

"Can we make this quick? There's something that I need to do."

"Yeah, sure," Ron said, concern evident in his expression at the sudden change in Malfoy's mood. "Hand me that bag over there and we'll pack up some of this stuff."

Between the two of them, Ron and Draco had managed to grab several things from Harry's room - he seemed fond of fictional crime novels, particularly Sherlock Holmes novels, which perversely made sense considering he was once an Auror - a dozen or so items of clothing, and a few personal affects from the bathroom.

What continued to rankle Draco the most throughout their rudimentary search was how little of Harry was here. Aside from the blue vases, Smith could have been living with any random roommate. The entire flat lacked...life. Everything that made Harry Harry was completely stifled and smothered by his kidnapper.



"I think this is all we're going to find. Ready to get the hell out of here?" Ron eventually said, "This place is kind of creeping me out."

"One minute," Draco said, feeling drawn back to Harry's bedroom, looking around for the final time.

You couldn't have survived this long without an outlet of some kind...you only bottle things up for so long before you explode - I've been on the receiving end of it often enough. What am I missing, Harry? Help me out here, love...show me...

On a hunch, he walked over to the bed and lifted the mattress. Gotcha. He smiled at the discovery - a leather bound book, well-worn and obviously handled often, lay atop the bed frame. He snatched it up and tucked it inside his coat.

He took a last turn around the room, looking again at the myriad of blue vases, seeing one that stood out to him for reasons unknown. It was small, fitting easily in the palm of his hand, with a delicately fluted rim; the base was a rich, deep hue, the blue gradient ascending lighter into crystal clear glass.

He suddenly remembered the tiny vase that he saw in his old bedroom in Devon a couple of weeks earlier - the one in his hand now almost could have been its twin.

Draco closed his hand around it carefully, and placed it in his pocket.

=====@=====

"Harry, could I speak to you alone for a moment?"

Harry leaned his head back to look up at him, startled to see Draco so close behind him, but he nodded and stood from where he sat sandwiched between Ron and George on the sofa.

Ron having used his position as an Auror to procure them an emergency transcontinental Portkey, he and Draco had barely made it back in time to get dressed and ready for Molly's Christmas dinner. They were just about to settle round the tree and exchange gifts when Draco pulled Harry away.

"Not too long, boys, we're about to start opening presents!" Molly said in her sing-song voice, full of joy that only a mother surrounded by an extended family of children and grandchildren can feel.

"We won't be a moment," he replied, leading Harry through to the kitchen, his hand on the small of his back. He ignored how Harry's body went tense at the touch.

Draco had been warned by Hermione after he and Ron returned him to be careful with Harry. After Draco had gone home the night before, she went to check on Harry before going to bed.

"The incident with the ring has him really shaken up, Draco. You should have seen him. I've never seen him look so broken, not even when he lost Sirius."

Draco hadn't noticed it at the time, but most of his anger at the situation had faded away as well with the revelation that Harry had remembered his face. He no longer felt like there was a tiny flame inside him, ready to rage out of control at a moment's notice. Instead, he just felt tired.

Harry had been unsurprisingly quiet all evening, and Draco suspected that he felt out of place among the tight, close-knit family. They had all gone out of their way to make him feel welcome, but Draco had a feeling that the effort only made Harry feel even more of an outsider because they were trying so hard.

With as much privacy as they could manage in the Burrow's kitchen, Draco reached into his pocket and pulled out the shrunken leather book that he had found under Harry's old mattress earlier that morning. With a flick of his wand, it was restored to its original size, and he handed it over to Harry.

"I thought that you might like to have this back."

Harry snatched it from his outstretched hands, looking at Draco accusingly.

"I didn't open it, I promise."

Harry seemed to doubt him, but begrudgingly thanked him anyway.

"How long have you had it?"

"Just since this morning. Ron and I went to your old flat to see if there was anything there that you might have wanted with you here," he said, looking for some sign on Harry's face that that bothered him. Draco was surprised at the lack of reaction, considering he was likely the last person Harry wanted going through his private things. "We were in a bit of a rush earlier,

not wanting to be late for Molly's dinner, I told Ron that I'd give you your things tomorrow when you'd have more time to go through it all, but...this seemed important."

"Thank you," Harry said again, his voice low as he stroked the cover as he must have done a thousand times before.

Draco ached to know what was inside, but he meant what he said – he hadn't looked inside.

"There's something else," Draco said, reaching into the other pocket and pulling out the small blue glass vase.

Harry looked surprised, reaching out to touch it reverently.

"That...it's my favourite one."

"I'm glad," Draco replied.

The kitchen suddenly felt too small, like the walls were closing in on them, as Harry looked up from the vase into earnest grey eyes; his fingers scraped along Draco's palm, sliding the glass from the cradle of Draco's hand.

"Boys! Presents!" Ginny called to them, her long red hair swinging around her shoulder as she appeared in the doorway.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Draco said quietly, not ready for the moment to end, despite Ginny's interruption.

Harry walked away from him without reply, but Draco watched him turn, just before disappearing from view, and look at Draco over his shoulder, the barest hint of a grateful smile gracing his lips.

Draco smiled back, feeling inexplicably sad, and watched him go.

V.

22 January, 2011...

"I just don't see why he needs to be here every single day," Harry said to Hermione, taking plates out of the cupboard while she pulled cartons of rice, pepper chicken, and shrimp lo mein from a large paper sack.

"I don't like the idea of you being alone all day, every day, now that I'm

back at work," she answered honestly. "I thought that you'd enjoy the company."

"Maybe someone else's company," he grumbled under his breath.

Hermione turned, pulling on his arm to make him look at her, and frowned.

"Why are you so determined not to get to know him, Harry? This is the same man you were going to spend the rest of your life with – the least you could do is let him be your friend."

Harry didn't reply, just looked down at the floor, brow furrowed in frustration.

"You don't give him a chance."

"He's pushy. He-"

"What?" she prodded gently.

"Expects things."

"Like what?"

"I don't know! He just...he's always staring, like he's trying to read my mind or something. It's unnerving."

Harry picked up the plates he'd gathered and carried them over to the table, setting them in place.

"Because you don't even try to talk to him-"

"Why should I?" he interrupted, voice rising with irritation. "I'm not going to say anything he wants to hear – I'm not going to suddenly say 'Oh, I remember everything, please let me move back home, Draco.'"

Hermione frowned at his mocking tone.

"He doesn't expect that."

"He wants it, though."

"Well of course he does, Harry, he loves you-"

"He doesn't. He loves some version of me that doesn't even exist because I can't remember it," he interrupted her, opening a drawer and pulling out three forks.

Hermione ignored him, not willing to get into that argument again.

"He doesn't expect anything from you. I know that he can be a bit...intimidating – Draco's always had that way about him, but he just wants you to be happy, and he's trying to cope with everything as well. You seem to forget that."

"I haven't forgotten, but I can't be who everyone else expects me to be."

"Harry," she said, waiting for him to stop what he was doing and look at her.

"I know that this has been hard for you, but I think that some of the pressure you're feeling is self-inflicted."

Harry pulled out a chair from the table and sat down, shoulders slumped.

"You need to relax, just take things as they come. Draco is...he was your complement, you came alive when you realised how you felt about him in a way that you'd never been before, not for as long as I'd known you."

He pulled at a stray thread on the cuff of his cotton pullover, avoiding her eyes.

"He was a good friend to you, before everything else, and I know that so many things have changed since then, but you're still you, Harry."

Hermione touched his cheek affectionately, and he looked up at her.

"People come into our lives for a reason, because destinies are intertwined, and that empty space inside you where Draco fit so perfectly is still there."

"So you're saying I have no choice in the matter."

"Of course you do, but maybe you shouldn't analyze it so much. Just...follow your instincts. You were always good at that."

Harry breathed deeply, and seemed to consider what she'd said. He stood up and resumed setting the table for the meal.

"Oh, and Harry?" she said, turning her back to him and hiding her smirk as she reached for the bottle of wine that had been breathing on the tabletop, "We'll need another setting for dinner."

"God, you're relentless," he said under his breath, but when Hermione laughed at his exasperation, he couldn't help but smile.

=====@=====

In fact, Draco had been spending a lot of time alone with Harry ever since Hermione had ended her leave of absence in early January and returned to work. She had been worried about spending too much time alone, knowing how he was prone to bouts of broodiness, and insisted that he make daily visits no matter how much Harry resisted. And resist he did, for the first few weeks, at least, and then one day, out of the blue, Harry had asked him if he'd like to play chess. It was a bit awkward and uncomfortable, and Draco didn't expect the offer to come again, but when he went over the following day, Harry already had the board set up for match.

Slowly but surely, Harry started to come out of his shell when Draco was around, and two weeks earlier as Draco was about to leave, Harry had asked if he would come the next day, actually looking pleased when Draco nodded.

It had warmed him to the core, but the truce wasn't to last...the following weekend, Harry found out about the war and Draco's role in the event leading up to and during the final battle.

Ron and Hermione had warned Draco that they had put off the conversation long enough, and as Smith's trial was set for the sixth of February, it needed to be done.

Shacklebolt had been given a head's up that Smith's entire defence apparently rested on the fact that Draco was a former Death Eater, and was only rescuing Harry from what was sure to be an elaborate revenge plot that would eventually result in Harry's murder. Smith was actually going to justify his crime by saying he was pre-emptively acting in self-defence on Harry's behalf.

Ron knew that the worst thing would be for Harry's knowledge about Draco's actions to come from the press, and so they sat him down on a Sunday afternoon and told him everything. The hours long conversation had ended with Harry abruptly grabbing his coat and walking out of the house, declaring that he couldn't stand to hear any more.

Draco had shouted in frustration just after Harry had walked out that apparently the fact that he had devoted his entire life to the same person who tormented him throughout school, plotted to kill Dumbledore, having

poisoned or cursed others in the process, including Ron, let murderous Death Eaters and a rabid werewolf into a school full of children, was just too much for him.

By the time Draco had left to return to his flat, his emotions were shattered; resigned to the fact that even a friendship with Harry wasn't going to be possible, never mind ever being able to win back his heart.

Draco got an owl from Hermione the next morning, telling him that when Harry had come back late the night before, she and Ron tore a strip off him for his hurtful, selfish behaviour.

Draco stayed away that day, and the next, and the following day after that. In fact, he hadn't been back to Ron and Hermione's since that day, unwilling to face Harry looking at him with disgust again...not after he had finally started to make some headway with him.

When Zacharias Smith was pronounced guilty of kidnapping and misuse of Memory Charms, and sentenced to life in Azkaban on the twelfth of February, Draco wanted to be the one to tell Harry of the man's fate. He had declined to go to the trial or sentencing, his statements to Aurors immediately following his return to England entered in as testimony. Hermione had told Draco that it was a good sign - that any loyalty he may have felt to Smith was likely gone if he didn't feel the need to see the man who had kept him captive for so long.

When Draco walked into his room and told him the outcome, Harry had just sat there on his bed, stone-faced, and thanked Draco politely for telling him.

He'd never seen Harry so void of emotion, and it scared him a little bit.

Draco was resigned then, as he shut the door on Harry's room, that Smith had succeeded in killing Harry Potter that day in June, 2004, whether it was his intention or not.

Draco knew that his Harry was never coming back.

He went home to his flat in London that night, and every single dish, teacup, and glass had ended up in shards in the middle of the kitchen floor.

=====@=====

13 February, 2011....

"You want me to babysit him?"

"You don't have to put it like that, it's just that Ron and I haven't really had time alone since he got back, not that we mind, necessarily, but it's Valentine's Day, Draco. Please?"

Hermione rested her arms on her desk, papers strewn this way and that. Draco could hear the whiz of Ministry memos flying past her open office door, and the bustle of workers just outside it.

"We're not even friends."

"That's not necessarily true," she said, searching her top drawer for a quill. "He talks to you now, and he doesn't avoid you when you come round for tea or supper anymore."

"What am I supposed to do with him?"

"You were for all intents and purposes married to him - you figure it out." She smirked at him.

Draco rolled his eyes at her

"Honestly, could you be more of an ostrich?" Hermione sighed.

"Pardon?"

"You are a professional when it comes to burying your head in the sand and ignoring the issue," she said, twisting her hair back and off her face, "Or issues, as it were."

"You mean the issue that he hates me, or the issue of him thinking I'm a coward?"

"That's a load of tripe and you know it. There was a lot of information to take in, but he had to know before the trial where it was bound to come out - which, I might add, it did."

Draco didn't reply, but Hermione could see from the look on his face that he was discouraged.

"It took time after you and Harry reconnected after school to finally forge a friendship. You have to give him time, Draco. He's taking this in all at once, you can't simply give up."



"I don't know if I have it in me anymore," he said dejectedly.

She stood up from her chair and walked around to the front of her desk, standing next to where he sat and touching his shoulder.

"Harry would never give up on you."

"That Harry is dead."

"He's not," she said, taken aback at his vehemence.

Draco exhaled a sigh of frustration. She knew that he was missing his daily visits with Harry, especially since he had started to warm up to Draco. She tried to imagine herself in his shoes...if it had been Ron and not Harry, and she had to deal with what Draco had to go through, she knew she'd be inconsolable.

"We always include you, you know. All the stories that we tell him, about growing up - all your silly little pranks like Potter Stinks badges." Hermione grinned, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Those were brilliantly clever, I'll have you know."

"And he does ask about you - I think he's even come to terms with what he found out about the war."

"Why doesn't he ask me?" Draco asked, leaning forward and hoping he didn't sound as petulant as he did in his head.

"I think he's just nervous. Look at it from his point of view. All he's ever known has been Smith and whatever friendships he was able to cultivate in Toronto. He finds out who he really is, and that he lived with the same man who'd been haunting his dreams for years-"

"Nightmares," Draco interrupted sullenly.

Hermione pursed her lips, ignoring the correction.

"He's had to adjust to twenty-four years of a new life in a matter of months, and along with it he's got you being, well, you, and smouldering when he's in the room-"

"I do not smoulder-"

"Oh yes you do." She laughed. "You practically leave scorch marks in your wake, you smoulder so much. Christ, you two probably shagged every damn day of your relationship, it's no wonder you've got all that repressed energy itching for a way out. It's not normal for two people to have as much sex as you did."

"Jealous?" He smirked.

"Immensely, but you're missing the point. You intimidate him, and yes, part of that is on a sexual level - and let us not forget that Harry has apparently gone without for almost seven years, and as grateful for that as you may be, he may not know how to deal with that yet," she said, sitting back down and looking at her calendar, making a note in the margin. "Not with you at least," she couldn't help adding with a smirk.

"Meaning?"

Hermione saw a flash of defensiveness in his eyes.

"You're an intense person, Draco - it's just who you are," she said, still immersed in her schedule. "In the back of his mind, he knows there are certain expectations because of what you meant to each other...he's heard the stories, believe me. But he's putting a lot of pressure on himself, too, all the while knowing he can't fit that mould anymore."

She leaned forward, giving him her full attention again.

"His instincts tell him to resist and retreat. Ease up on him, Draco. Remember what he just escaped - we all know that Smith was controlling and obsessive. It's...overwhelming living with someone who wraps their entire universe around you, especially when you don't feel the same way, and we know Harry didn't - thank God."

She was careful with her next words, not wanting him to get upset.

"Harry probably sees some of that same intensity in you, even though you've far more right to feel that way about him," adding that last part hastily, grey eyes looking sharply at her. "The more you expect him to be the same Harry that was taken from you long ago, the more disappointed you're going to be. You are right, in a way, when you say that that Harry is gone, because what happens to us in life changes us. It changed you."

"So your big suggestion to me in order to 'ease up on him' is to take him

out. On Valentine's Day," he said sceptically, eyebrow raised.

"You don't have to make it some big affair. Go out for a casual meal; take a walk across Tower Bridge or something."

"Because nothing says romance like tales of beheadings in the looming shadow of the Tower of London," he said teasingly. "I don't suppose you've broached this idea of yours with him, have you? Going to make me blindside him with the invitation?"

"He's a grown man, and so are you. I'm merely offering a suggestion to the most receptive party. He may not be the confident man you once knew, but he hardly needs leading around by the nose like some misguided teenager, either."

Draco seemed to consider the idea.

"Casual?"

"Casual." Hermione nodded. "Now shoo, I'm already behind on my work."

"Wait until Weasley finds out that you think I smoulder."

She threw a wad of crumpled parchment at his head, and Draco laughed as he ducked, giving her a wink before walking out the door of her office.

=====@=====

14 February, 2011...

When Draco had knocked on the door of Ron and Hermione's home the previous day and, as suggested, casually invited himself in for tea, Draco was surprised that Harry didn't make up some excuse as to why he couldn't make time for him - not after the chilly reception he'd received the last time they were together.

Encouraged, Draco forged onward and, casually again, asked Harry if he might want to kill some time with him the following evening. "Casually speaking, of course."

Harry had stared at him blankly for a few moments, but then gave a curt nod and agreed.

"Erm, what should I wear?"

"Whatever you want, this isn't a date."

Draco remembered how colour had flooded Harry's cheeks even the mere suggestion of a date with him.

Despite Shackbolt's six month moratorium on the press from bothering Harry or his family in any manner, now that the trial and conviction were a matter of public record, Draco thought it best to stick to Muggle London as Hermione suggested. No one was more grateful than Harry for the time given to adjust to his personal life before having to deal with a public life as well, but Draco thought it best not to tempt fate should some over-excited witch or wizard find themselves unable to respect Harry's space.

He arrived to pick Harry up at the pre-arranged time of half past five, and his nervous fidgeting as soon as Draco walked into the foyer made him smile.

He's anxious...how endearing.

"It's early yet. Fancy a warm brandy before we head out into the cold?" Draco offered.

Harry seemed to relax a little and agreed, following Draco into the front room where Ron and Hermione kept their well-stocked liquor cabinet.

"The two lovebirds already leave, did they?"

Harry nodded, taking the proffered drink, cupping the thin glass between his hands.

The plan had been for Ron and Hermione to go out for an early dinner, give Draco enough time to collect Harry, and then return home for "whatever." Draco had interpreted the dismissive wave of her hand to mean 'extraordinarily loud and vicious shagging without having to worry about the guest upstairs.'

He shuddered at the visual as it assaulted him for the second time that day, and downed his brandy in one go, savouring the warm, smooth burn as it slid down his throat. He watched as Harry sipped his slowly, staring unashamedly.

"You're always gawking at me." Harry bristled.

Draco ignored the comment.

"That jumper, it looks familiar."

"Does it?"

Draco knew it to be the same one that Harry had worn that day in the café. He was hardly about to forget what Harry looked like after setting eyes on him following a six year absence.

"We should head out," Draco said, taking the glass from Harry's hands. "It'll be dark soon."

"Why do you always use the front door?"

"Pardon?"

"You always come through the front door," Harry said curiously. "You don't use the Floo or Apparate like everyone else does."

"I hate the Floo, far too much soot, and it's rude to Apparate directly into anyone else's home but your own."

"Oh." Harry looked confused.

"Let's go," Draco said, offering Harry his coat and watching as he wrapped a bright red knit scarf, courtesy of Molly Weasley, around his neck.

"Has anyone taught you how to Apparate yet?"

"No."

"Maybe I could teach you." Draco smiled, and without warning, linked his arm through Harry's and gave his wand a familiar twirl.

=====@=====

"This isn't exactly what I was expecting," Harry said, his smile bright and warm.

"What exactly were you expecting?"

Draco set down his half-full pint glass among a collection of empty ones, careful not to let any cider slosh over onto the obscenely large and

deliciously greasy plate full of chips - their second of the evening - and other assorted vegetables that no longer qualified as such when dipped in that much batter and fried in hot oil.

"I don't know, something more...posh," he gestured with a chip before devouring it. "But this - this is all right."

Harry smiled again, full and genuine, and Draco wondered why all it took for Harry to behave like a normal person around him was several pints of alcohol, greasy chips, and an overcrowded room full of people trying to pull on the most overrated holiday of the year.

"I told you it would be something casual," Draco said, leaning in close under the pretence of not wanting to shout over the crowd.

Harry still smelled the same as he always had, an indescribable scent that was uniquely Harry - never tainted with cologne or aftershave - and Draco fought back an unexpected wave of melancholy.

"Hey, is that a snooker table up there?" Harry pointed excitedly, indicating a mostly deserted corner in the upper level.

"It is."

Draco saw the bright flash of competitiveness in green eyes, and watched Harry rise from their table, grabbing his pint of lager, and walk over to the staircase that led upstairs.

"That was almost too easy." Draco smirked, talking to no one in particular.

When they had first walked into the pub, Draco spotted the game table almost immediately, but it was just as crowded up there as it was around the bar. A quick flick of his wand, however, and the crowd soon dispersed, the Deflection Charm taking effect. All he needed was for Harry to look in the table's direction so he could remove the charm temporarily, and count on Harry's competitive nature to do the rest.

Harry was already setting up the cue ball by the time that Draco had made it over to the table, already re-casting the charm to maintain a sense of privacy. He pushed up the sleeves of his jumper, grabbed a cue and chalked the tip, looking at Harry in challenge.

Harry wasted no time doing the same before offering Draco the first shot.

"Losers first," he said cheekily.

"We'll see about that," Draco challenged, leaning over and lining up his first shot.

It was merely coincidence that he had taken Harry to a pub that hosted a sport that involved a lot of bending over a table.

=====@=====

"I'm starving - how can I be starving?"

Harry and Draco walked along a crowded street at a relaxed pace, the air particularly mild for the middle of February. He loved the fact that the streets were still crowded enough that Harry had to walk closely beside him, their arms brushing frequently.

"Perhaps because you just thrashed me in four frames of snooker."

Harry laughed loudly, his head thrown back, and Draco savoured the moment.

"How'd you learn how to play like that?"

"Zach," Harry said, his smile turning forced.

"Come on." Draco nudged him with his shoulder, not wanting to dwell on anything to do with that ugly subject. "There's a Tesco. I'll buy you something sweet."

Three milky bars and two fizzy drinks later, Harry and Draco leaned against the walkway railing on Tower Bridge, overlooking the Thames.

"What do you think Ron and Hermione are up to?"

"Do you really want to know?" Draco grimaced.

"Probably not." Harry smiled wryly.

The night was quiet, far less people here than on the streets they'd just come from, and Draco could hear water from the river lapping rhythmically against the pillars below.

"I've been thinking about getting my own place," Harry said hesitantly.

"Oh?" Draco's heart began to pound, hoping that Harry wasn't entertaining ideas of going back to Toronto.

"Yeah, I...feel a bit in the way."

Harry turned toward him, and Draco did the same.

"You're not."

"Yes, I am," Harry laughed quietly. "What married couple wants a third wheel hanging around all the time?"

"Point taken, but your circumstances aren't...ordinary. They understand."

Harry started to frown.

"You think it's too soon?"

"I think that you can do anything you set your mind to, Harry. You're forgetting who you're talking to."

Draco was warmed by the fact that Harry had asked for his opinion.

"I've never had my own place before."

Harry turned away, looking back out into the river.

"You have."

"I don't remember having my own place before," he corrected himself, "but I'd have to get a job of some kind."

"You have plenty of money, Harry, if you're serious about getting out on your own," Draco said, trying to sound positive without actively encouraging the move. "You wouldn't need to work for quite some time, or ever really, if you managed it well enough."

"My mum and dad's money, yeah, I know, but I don't want to squander that."

"You wouldn't need to."

Harry looked back at him, confused.



"Then what-"

"Our money, Harry, in the vault that we shared. I never removed your name from the access records. Your key is still at home."

"Oh."

Harry looked dumbfounded, but pleased.

"You made a fair sum of money as an Auror, and you did various promotional deals with broom makers and the like for your endorsement. And I invested our combined fortunes well enough that it grew substantially. It's how we were able to buy our house with the converted barn next door, and how I was able to fund my private practice. - although it never got off the ground."

"Because-" Harry started to say, but stopped.

"Would you go far?" Draco asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"I think I'd like to move to London," Harry answered, and Draco felt his heart stop pounding. "I mean, Ottery St. Catchpole is nice and everything, but there's not much to do, is there? And, well, the rest of the Weasleys are right up the road and...well, they can be a bit..."

"Overbearing?" Draco finished for him, smirking.

"Yeah." Harry laughed. "But don't you dare repeat that."

Draco winked at him, thrilled to see Harry's cheeks grow pink - and not from the cold air.

"We didn't live too far from them, you know."

"We didn't?"

"Well, far enough," he clarified with a grin. "Just straight down the A38, at the far south end of Dartmoor Park."

"Oh."

"Would you like to see it?" Draco offered, hoping that Harry's good mood meant that he would say yes.

"What?"

"Our home, would you like to go there?"

"What, now?"

"Why not?"

Harry didn't answer straight away - he turned to look out along the water, but after several tense moments he turned and met Draco's questioning stare.

"Yes, I think I would like that."

Body thrumming with good cheer, Draco led the way to the nearest Apparition point. As they stood there, tucked in the designated alcove of a vacant building, Draco pulled out his wand from inside his coat and held out his arm for Harry to take.

Just as he was about to magic them away, Harry grabbed Draco's free hand.

"I don't think that you're a coward," he said suddenly.

Draco just looked at him, unsure how to respond.

"For what you did. In the war, I mean. I don't think that you were a coward."

"Oh."

Draco didn't know what to say.

"Ron said that I did, a long time ago, but that once I realised what you had gone through...well, he said that he probably would have done the same thing if his family were threatened like that."

"He did?"

Draco wasn't sure what surprised him more - Harry's impromptu declaration, or the fact that Weasley had gone so far to defend him for his worst actions during the war.

"I've never had a family, and I'm not sure that I could ever understand...but

I don't think you're a coward," Harry continued, "and I'm sorry I left the way that I did after you told me. It must have been...difficult."

"Thank you."

Draco gave a gentle squeeze to Harry's hand, still holding his own, and Apparated them away.

VI.

"We aren't inside."

"Hmm?"

"Earlier, you said that it was rude to Apparate directly inside someone's house unless it was your own. So why are we out here?"

"Oh. Well, I...I haven't thought of this as home in a long time, Harry."

They walked up the short stone path that led to the front door, and Draco incanted the charms that would allow him access to the house.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"Of course," Draco lied matter-of-factly. He didn't want to get into a discussion about just thoroughly Harry's disappearance had destroyed him, so much that he couldn't even bear to be in the home they once shared.

He had hoped that Harry would be agreeable to seeing their old house with him tonight, but he hadn't planned on it definitively. He wished that it were summer, when Harry could see the bushes and flowers he had planted years ago in all their splendour.

He opened the door and gestured Harry inside, candles lighting instantly with a wave of Draco's wand. Flames roared to life in the fireplace, and Draco pushed Harry gently, his hand on the small of his back, further inside the main room and shutting the door behind them.

Draco just watched as Harry seemed to drink in his surroundings. They had decorated the house together, both of them making compromises where needed, but the cosy home suited them both perfectly. Harry got his rich, warm colours, and Draco got his clean, modern lines. There was a large sofa opposite the fireplace, bracketed by two plush, high back chairs.

Draco could remember how they christened that sofa the day it was delivered.

He directed Harry over to the fireplace, letting the other man take his fill of the dozen or so pictures that decorated the mantle. With the exception of a few, Harry and Draco were together in all of them, always side by side, always touching. Harry picked up the last photograph in the row, one of his parents and Sirius Black, on James and Lily's wedding day.

Sirius winked at him from the faded picture, and Harry placed it back on the mantle.

"Do you know what bothers me the most?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"That Zach stole what few memories I had of my parents."

Draco resisted the urge to pull him into a hug.

"There's an album full of pictures in the library, even a few of you as a baby. We can look at them if you like."

"Maybe later," Harry replied, offering Draco a small smile of thanks. "Show me the rest of the house?"

Draco took him upstairs, showing Harry the guest room, then the small library that doubled as the office where they handled their personal affairs - Draco wanting to keep his professional and private lives separate as possible. Through the window, he showed Harry the small converted barn with its thatched roof that sat opposite the house, which was at one point going to be his private practice. Harry asked to see it, and Draco promised to take him there later - he had more important things to show him first.

Leading him back out into the main hallway, he paused before opening the door to their bedroom, unsure about why it seemed so important to show Harry this room. He briefly entertained the fantasy that seeing the room would cause a flood of Harry's memories to return, but stifled that line of thinking before it could take root.

"If you don't-" Harry started to say, hesitating.

"No, it's fine. I was just...remembering."

Draco let the door swing open at the push of his hand, and let Harry cross the threshold first. The other man walked over to the large bed that was the centre piece of their room, his hand running along the smooth pale ash wood of one of the bed posts.

"It's nice," he said softly, realising where he was, his hand now moving over the buttery yellow down comforter, taking in the pale greys and crisp whites of the other furnishings.

"You picked out the yellow," Draco said softly, "saying that you wanted something bright and cheerful to wake up to since I was such a morning grump."

Harry laughed, but he didn't seem entirely comfortable to be there - Draco's instinct was right when the other man walked toward the door and attempted to pass. It didn't go unnoticed that Harry couldn't look him in the eye.

"I just want to try and be your friend, Harry, nothing more," he said, his hand firmly on Harry's arm where he halted his exit. "No expectations, no demands."

Harry seemed placated and a little more at ease with Draco's sudden declaration of intentions, even if they weren't completely honest, and the tension from entering the bedroom dissipated.

"Let's go downstairs," Draco offered, "there's something in the kitchen that I think you'll like."

=====@=====

"Wow, these are great!"

Harry's entire face had lit up when they walked into the kitchen, his gaze landing on exactly what Draco wanted him to see.

"I should think so, seeing as you were the one who kept bringing them into the house."

Harry ran his fingers along one of the two long shelves that hung next to the pantry door. He admired each cobalt blue glass vase, one by one, smiling brightly.

"I collected these, back at-"

Draco knew that he was about to say 'back at home' as Harry's smile faltered.

"I know, I saw them."

"I had forgotten," Harry said, looking at Draco as the memory of that Christmas day and the small blue vase floated between them.

"We should arrange to have them sent here," Draco suggested. "It was an impressive collection."

"I don't know why I started it, to be honest, but after I saw that first one, I just kept buying them. And they were...never quite what I was looking for...I think I was looking for one that didn't exist."

"Maybe you were trying to recreate this collection."

"Maybe."

The air felt heavy as something passed between them. Draco felt like they had reached a fork in the road, and if he and Harry were going to take the same path together, Harry was going to need a bit of prodding. He debated on how to go about it without inadvertently pushing him in the wrong direction, and then he remembered something that had happened not long after they had moved in.

"Do you want some tea?"

"It's kind of late," Harry said, looking at the clock on the wall. It was nearly ten o'clock.

"Just one cup?" Draco encouraged.

Harry hesitated for a moment, before finally nodding.

"All right, one cup."

Draco walked into the pantry, his plan sliding into place with Harry's agreement, and beckoned the other man to follow.

"Impressive."

Harry stood in the middle of the large pantry, surveying the neatly organised

shelves.

"You liked to cook," Draco said, crouching down and moving a few canisters, turning them around and pretending to read the labels.

"Did I?"

"I know there's some Earl Grey in here somewhere," Draco said, feigning distraction before looking up at Harry to say, "Oh, and watch that door, it's temperamental."

Harry's bark of laughter echoed in the small space.

"Who ever heard of a temperamental-"

BANG

"-door?" Harry finished, jumping slightly at the sudden loud noise.

"Shit," Draco muttered, walking over and turning the knob, pushing against the door with his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

Harry started to look a bit panicked.

"Like I said, temperamental. It happens sometimes when you fuse Muggle construction with magic."

Draco saw Harry's cheeks start to lose their colour.

"Well, open it."

"I'm trying, in case you failed to notice," Draco said, putting more force behind his repeated shoving, knowing it wasn't going to matter.

"Move over," Harry said forcefully.

"Have at it."

After a good five minutes of shoving, kicking, and swearing, Harry finally turned around. He looked sweaty and ashen.

Draco saw his hands trembling.

Fuck.

"Harry, are you all right?" Draco asked, approaching him slowly.

He hadn't anticipated this kind of reaction.

"Where's your wand?"

"In the pocket-"

"Well fucking use it!" Harry shouted, now in a full-on panic.

"-of my coat, which is on the back of the sofa in the front room," Draco finished weakly.

"Oh God," Harry said, and Draco saw real fear in his eyes.

"Spend days locked inside a trunk and you'd be claustrophobic too, you imbecile," a voice said inside Draco's head.

He was about to end the charade when something stopped him.

You can manage this...it might even work to your advantage.

"Let's just sit down and be calm," Draco said slowly. "Can you do that, Harry?"

Draco was talking to him like he was a rabid animal that could attack without warning.

"Come on, sit here," he gestured to the floor, "and take deep breaths...that's it," he encouraged as Harry began to follow his direction, "now close your eyes, that's right, and just try to relax."

"Draco?" Harry said, sounding strangled.

"I'm right here, love."

"I don't do too well in small spaces," he said, eyes shut tight.

Harry's breathing was too fast, and Draco feared he might start to hyperventilate. He gave himself a few more minutes, and if he couldn't get Harry to calm by then, he would open the door, hoping that Harry would



never realise it was a trick.

"I know, it's okay...it's going to be all right," Draco said soothingly. "I'm going to touch your legs now, is that okay?"

Harry nodded, and Draco took first one foot, and then the other, and stretched them out in front of him.

"See? It's not cramped in here at all - we've got loads of space."

Harry nodded frantically as though trying to convince himself that Draco was right, but his breathing had slowed enough that Draco thought the worst of his panic attack may have passed.

"How are we going to get out?" Harry asked after a few minutes, opening his eyes.

Draco was glad to see not nearly as much fear in them as he had ten minutes ago.

"I told Hermione that we might come here. When you don't come back home at a decent hour, she'll know where to look for you."

"I thought you had a house-elf?"

"He's paid wages, and with my not living here, he only does chores on the weekend," Draco lied smoothly.

Draco's web was getting tangled, but with good intentions behind it.

Hermione had no idea where Draco was taking Harry tonight, and Draco doubted that she cared - so preoccupied would she be with her own plans for the evening. Kreacher would appear within a moment of being summoned, and Draco's wand wasn't in his coat pocket; it was ensconced up his shirt sleeve, hidden by the bulk of his jumper, from where Draco had used it to trap them inside the pantry in the first place.

Temperamental door, indeed.

Some of the colour had returned to Harry's face, and Draco thought it safe enough to sit beside him, even though their proximity would be close.

"Keep talking to me," Harry said as Draco's leg brushed against his, voice still a bit shaky, and when he reached over blindly and grasped Draco's

hand, looking for reassurance, Draco held on tightly.

"We couldn't wait to show off our new home," Draco started talking, his voice low and even. "You'd spent weeks in the back garden, planting peonies and hydrangeas and rose bushes."

"Petunias?" Harry asked.

"No."

"Good, I hate petunias."

"I remember the very first blue vase that you brought into our home," Draco continued, and felt Harry's hand give his an encouraging squeeze.

"We were at an antiques shop in town. We still had rooms to fill in this house, and I was looking for one of those old fashioned apothecary cabinets for my practice. When we walked into this one shop, we saw the bed that now sits upstairs and we knew it was the perfect fit." Draco noticed that Harry's breathing was coming in even intervals now, encouraged that he had been able to calm him.

It meant that in some way, Harry trusted him enough to believe Draco when he said he was safe.

"The old man who ran the place kept trying to sell me this beaten up old wardrobe that smelled of moth balls and mould." Draco laughed, having just remembered that detail. "And you were laughing at my subtle attempts to turn him down from the other side of the store. And then you found two bedside tables to match the bed, and inside the drawer of one of them was a small blue vase."

"Tell me what it looked like," Harry asked, his body now turned slightly toward him.

"No taller than your hand from wrist to fingertip," Draco said, lifting Harry's hand and running his fingertip along the same path to demonstrate. "Cobalt blue, just like all the others, but not so dark that you couldn't see through the glass. I said something about it being useless because of its small size, and you said that it was perfect for clippings from the miniature rose bushes that you wanted to put on either side of our front walkway."

"Was it?"

"Yes, and you've been buying them ever since."

Harry hadn't moved his hand from Draco's grasp, and he took full advantage of the other man's acquiescence and continued to draw patterns on his palm, tracing lines with his finger.

"Did you think it was stupid?"

"No," he said, looking in Harry's eyes. "Why?"

"Zach did."

Their faces turned toward each other, Draco couldn't help but notice the soft puffs of breath against his cheek...if he just leaned forward a little bit...

"He's not capable of seeing anything beautiful in this world," Draco finally answered, "all he wants to do is destroy it like he tried to destroy you."

=====@=====

"He never mistreated me."

Harry's head was resting against the door, his posture relaxed as they continued to talk.

"I mean, nothing that I remember after he took me home- after I got out of hospital."

"I'm glad."

"You never ask me about it."

Harry angled his head to look at him and Draco mirrored the gesture to meet his gaze.

"Would you have wanted me to before tonight?"

"I...no, I guess not."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Draco wanted him to say yes, even though it would be hard to hear - he just wanted Harry to feel comfortable enough to divulge that information to him...things that he hadn't even told Ron or Hermione.

"I'm still trying to make sense of it, myself."

"Despite reports that you may have heard to the contrary, I'm an excellent listener."

Harry seemed to consider him, and several minutes of silence passed.

"I don't know who I am anymore."

Draco nodded in understanding.

"At first, it was like I...was just going through the motions. Not even my own, but someone else's. I did whatever he told me because I couldn't seem to...to get a handle on anything. When to sleep, when to eat, when to watch telly – whatever he told me to do, I did it. My head felt...cloudy."

"Extreme memory modification spells usually have an element of the Imperious Curse woven inside them to make the victim as pliable as possible."

Harry looked down, and Draco thought for a moment that that was the extent of what Harry was willing to share...but then he started talking again.

"And then, maybe three or four months after I had woken up, the cottony feeling inside my head just went away. I started to feel like a...a real person. And Zach, he..." Harry hesitated again.

"Go on," Draco said, quietly encouraging him.

"I liked him. We had fun, you know? I didn't feel...trapped or anything. He showed me around the city, told me about all the places that we enjoyed before my accident. I didn't have any reason not to trust him."

Harry sounded like he was trying to convince himself just as much as Draco...he knew from what Hermione had told him that Harry had begun to dwell on how he hadn't been able to realise Zach was not who he seemed.

"He was very good at manipulating people," Draco offered.

"One day, when Zach had gone to work, I decided to go out on my own. Just for a walk. I hadn't been out on my own before that, but I thought that I'd seen the city enough times to at least manage a few blocks on my own. I felt ...I don't know, restless I suppose - I just wanted to get some air.

When I got home, Zach was already there, waiting for me," Harry said, his voice going quiet. "He was livid...I'd never seen him so angry."

Draco shut his eyes, pushing down a wave of anger. Harry shifted beside him, trying to get comfortable on the hard floor.

"He said he was sorry, later... saying that he had only panicked because of what had happened the last time I'd been out on my own. I felt so guilty, you know? For putting him in such a state that I...I didn't go out on my own again for a very long time."

"A prisoner without a cell," Draco said under his breath.

"I suppose I was."

Draco's hand brushed against Harry's.

"But you were working at that café when we found you."

"I'd insisted." Harry let out a bitter laugh. "And we fought about it, a lot, before I took the job. He didn't want me working anywhere--"

"He didn't want you independent," Draco clarified.

"I...guess so, yes. But I guess my stubbornness won out in the end."

"Imagine that." Draco smirked.

"He checked on me every day that I worked there. Hell, for the first month or so, he actually changed his schedule at work so that he could sit there in the café while I worked my shift. At first, I thought he was just being cautious, but...and God, but Leah hated him." Harry smiled at the memory of it. "She was smarter than me, I suppose."

Draco frowned at his self-degradation - he realised that Harry really had no idea the depth of manipulation that he had been subjected to.

"Anyway, after a while, he must have trusted me enough to leave me to it, and only showed up when my shift was over to walk home with me."

"He had a Tracking Charm on you," Draco added, "so he always knew where you were."

"Yeah, that's what Ron told me."

He ran his fingers through his hair self-consciously.

"It all sounds pretty fucked up, doesn't it? How stupid was I?"

"Harry-"

"I wanted to leave, you know... eventually. Find a place of my own. But I hadn't saved up enough money, and I wasn't even sure that I could afford it on what I was making at the café if I did move out."

"You were always fiercely independent, Harry. What he did to you- it was devastating."

"I know that now," Harry said, looking down.

Draco turned his body toward him, placing his finger beneath Harry's chin and tipping his head up, forcing their eyes to meet.

"None of this was your fault, Harry. He had control, but it was nothing to do with you being the weaker person...it was everything to do with him being the most cruel."

"Draco?"

"Yes?" he said, reluctantly lowering his hand.

"I'm...sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry for."

Harry gave a small laugh of disbelief at Draco's easy dismissal of fault.

"I haven't made things easy on anyone, least of all you."

"It's understandable."

"Is it? Because I don't understand half of what goes through my own mind anymore."

He rested his head back against the door again, and released a beleaguered sigh.

"How long do you think we've been in here?"

Draco glanced at his watch. "Two hours, maybe. I don't know when, exactly, we came in here."

"Doesn't seem that long," Harry said, noticing the timepiece around Draco's wrist, the brushed silver shining dully in the muted light of the pantry.

"You bought it for me on my twenty-sixth birthday." Draco grinned at the memory...especially the part where he'd shown Harry his gratitude.

"I lost mine in...all the confusion."

"Now I know what to get you for your next birthday." Draco winked at him.

Draco saw Harry angle his head to get a better look, so he lifted his arm to remove the watch, offering it to Harry for closer inspection.

"You had it inscribed on the back."

Harry flipped the piece over and read:

No more lost hours or wasted minutes. Love, H.

"It was the first birthday we shared after we...figured things out," Draco added with a sad smile.

"What's it mean?"

Harry ran his thumb across the engraved letters.

"We lost a lot of hours and wasted a lot of minutes fighting when we were younger, time we could have spent doing far more enjoyable things."

"Oh."

=====@=====

"Did you really break my nose once?"

Harry was sitting across from him now with a crooked grin on his face. Draco noticed that he had sat close enough that their knees were touching, however.

"And did a damn good job of it, too."

The temperature in the pantry had risen slightly, enough so that Draco had already removed his black cashmere jumper, wearing only his button-down shirt that he'd worn underneath it - being careful to keep the wand up his sleeve concealed, grateful for the starched, heavy cotton that helped hide it. Harry had followed his lead shortly thereafter.

"Did I deserve it?"

"Absolutely." Draco laughed. "And you took your revenge later."

"What, did I mess up your pretty little face, too?"

"Not exactly."

Draco regretted making reference to the incident that had once been a tremendously touchy subject between them, off the cuff as it were.

"Well, what did I do?" Harry nudged his leg expectantly.

He looked at Harry's curious expression, mulling over what to say...and then he decided to show him instead.

Draco unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt, and pulled the fabric down and to the side, revealing a thin, silvery scar that extended far below where Harry could see.

Harry's mouth gaped, looking at him in disbelief.

"I..."

"You were convinced that I was up to no good during our sixth year - and you were right. That was the year I was trying to fix the Vanishing Cabinet, lest my parents be tortured and killed for my failure," he told him, removing his hand and letting the fabric cover the scar again. "You followed me into the bathroom one day and caught me in a...bad moment, and we fought - I attacked you first, I might add. Anyway, you eventually hit me with the curse that caused my skin to rip open."

Harry looked horrified that he could have ever done such a thing.

"Why would I do something so horrible?"

Draco remembered feeling the same way the night he'd woken up in the



hospital wing at Hogwarts - it was the first time he'd actually been afraid of the boy that he'd tormented for so long.

"You didn't know what the curse was meant to do. You'd read it in a book, but it didn't describe the effects."

"How- how bad...?"

"This scar extends to the top of my thigh."

"Oh my God- Draco, I-"

"It's okay," he interrupted, not wanting Harry to get upset over something that had happened so long ago.

"It's not okay!"

"It is," Draco insisted. "It healed years ago, Harry."

Draco took Harry's hand, and pressed his fingers against the exposed line against his collarbone.

"I'm so sorry," Harry whispered, his face full of regret.

Draco could feel warm fingers tracing the sensitive scar - it had always been sensitive to touch, especially Harry's.

"You made your apologies long ago, Harry," he said softly. "We forgave each other many transgressions."

"How could you forgive me for something...something like this?"

Draco made sure that Harry was looking at his eyes, and not his scar.

"Because I love you. It's that simple."

=====@=====

"Favourite colour?"

"Hmm, probably green, though that's subject to change without notice."

"Food?"

"You absolutely cannot beat a good Yorkshire pudding, especially when it's dripping with gravy."

Harry had moved back to where he was sitting before, next to Draco and resting against the door...and his head now lay comfortably on Draco's shoulder as he began to tire.

Draco wondered if the moment felt as perfect to Harry as it did to him. He wasn't ready for it to end, smiling to himself when he realised it didn't have to, not yet anyway...

"I shouldn't have asked that – now I'm hungry."

"If I had a tin opener, we could make a veritable feast out of these canned peaches." Draco laughed.

"Favourite holiday?"

"My birthday."

"That's not a holiday," Harry argued good-naturedly.

"It is to me."

Harry raised his head, Draco secretly regretting the loss of warmth, and seemed to consider him for a moment.

"First kiss," Harry continued their game of **Q&A**, changing the subject with devious grin.

"Girl or boy?" Draco countered easily.

"Both, of course."

"Let's see," Draco began, tapping a finger against his chin as though trying to recall. "Pansy Parkinson...fourth year...before the Yule Ball."

"And the boy?" Harry prodded after Draco didn't offer more.

"His name was Adrian Pucey, and it was also in fourth year," he smirked, "after the Yule Ball."

Harry burst out laughing.

"Tell me how we met."

"You know how we met. You were eleven and-"

"No, I mean the other time," he said, slapping Draco's arm. "When we...you know..."

"Oh, that time. I was still in training at St. Mungo's, and you were just about to get your Auror shield."

"And I was hurt? On the job?"

"Actually, no, it was Ron. I was supposed to be working paediatrics that night, since it was my chosen concentration, but they were short staffed in the urgent care wing so I was pulled from my usual rotation and moved over there. The first chart I was handed was Weasley's - just minor injuries, a fractured femur, a few cracked ribs, nothing too serious - and I nearly quit there on the spot."

"Not on friendly terms then, I take it?" Harry laughed.

"Not hardly, and imagine my surprise when it wasn't just him behind the curtain waiting, but you as well - second only to Weasley in the 'Draco Malfoy Is A Rotten Little Shit' guild."

"Oh come on, it can't have been that bad." He smiled, but Draco noticed his eyes momentarily move to where he'd seen the scar earlier.

"Well, no, but very nearly."

"So we weren't fast friends?"

"Hardly, but to your credit, while Weasley didn't even try to be grateful, you were...nice."

"Don't sound so surprised," Harry pretended to be affronted.

"But I was. True, you had spoken on behalf of me and my mother during the trials after the war, but I had no reason to believe you didn't hate the very sight of me even after all that time. I nearly died of shock when, a few days after, you actually sent me a letter, thanking me for doing such a good job on Ron's injuries, and, even going so far as to apologize for his rudeness."

"What did you do?"

"I wrote back, of course - and you replied again. I think it was the fifth or sixth letter where you suggested we meet up for coffee to, what was it, "exchange occupational hazard stories," I believe it was."

Draco's entire body thrummed delightfully when Harry laid his head back on Draco's shoulder.

"I still have all of our letters," he added.

"We still wrote to each other?"

"Hmm, nearly every day."

"So, when did...things change?" Harry gestured between them.

"A little over a year later. It was two days before the New Year, and you had asked me what my plans were for when the clock struck midnight. I said that I was hoping for some tall, gorgeous, preferably mysterious stranger to approach me, giving me the snog of my life as tradition dictated."

"And?" Harry prompted when Draco paused.

"And then suddenly you said, 'Why wait?' Next thing I knew, I had a lap - and mouth - full of Potter."

Draco looked down and saw Harry blush magnificently.

"I did that?"

"Ever the brave Gryffindor, diving in headfirst.

"But I must have...had some idea that you..."

"Wouldn't throw your arse out the window for sullyng my virtue in such a manner?"

"Yeah." Harry laughed.

"I can't answer that for you. I hadn't even dared to think of you that way until that moment," he said. "But there was always something between us, Harry. Hermione used to joke that our fights at Hogwarts were merely

extended bouts of foreplay. Thin line between love and hate, or so the saying goes."

"Did we really? Hate each other?" Harry's tone turned serious, raising his head to look at him.

"I'm sure we did, at times. Mostly, though, we just annoyed the shit out of each other. There was a lot of bitterness and, well, jealousy on my part. And, of course, as we got older and things got...complicated, our differences could have filled an ocean. But there was always something."

He saw something in Harry's gaze then that he couldn't put into words; as though Harry had, in that moment, seen a part of Draco - or maybe himself - that brought new clarity to his life.

Something changed in the aura surrounding them, and Draco suddenly felt exposed...naked to his core. He had to look away and catch his breath.

"Draco?"

"Hmm?" he responded, wiping dust that had gathered on the cuff of his trousers from the floor.

"I had a nice time tonight."

Draco did look at him then to find Harry scrutinizing him carefully, leaning forward ever so slightly.

"I'm glad."

"I have something to tell you."

"All right," he answered, a lump having formed in his throat.

Something's happening, it's either going to be really good...or really bad...

"When I said that I'd had dreams of you, from before...chasing me..."

"Yes?"

"Sometimes you did catch me."

Harry raised his hand, and slowly - gently - tucked a wayward lock of hair behind Draco's ear.

Definitely something good...

"Did I?"

"And it wasn't frightening or scary," Harry continued, almost in a whisper.

"It wasn't?"

So close now...

Harry moved, turning and sliding his leg across Draco's, straddling his thighs.

He could scarcely breathe.

"Did you mean what you said before?"

"Before?" Draco asked, suddenly having trouble remembering anything beyond the last thirty seconds.

"About only wanting to be my friend?" Harry clarified, his hand curving around the back of Draco's neck. "No expectations or demands?"

Draco could only nod. He felt paralyzed.

"I'm going to dive in headfirst now."

Draco didn't have time to respond, not that he could have if he'd wanted to, because in the next moment, Harry's lips were brushing against his own, soft and tentative.

Of all the kisses that Draco had ever received, this was the sweetest, the most pure.

He whimpered unashamedly when Harry pulled back slightly.

Don't go - I only just got you back...

"Is this okay?"

Draco could barely hear what Harry had said over the rush of blood in his ears before he was wrapping one hand around the back of Harry's neck and pulling him back into the kiss - nothing soft or tentative about it this time -

and wrapping his arm around Harry's waist like he was clutching a life preserver, holding on for dear life.

He couldn't hold back - he knew that it would probably scare the other man, might even ruin everything, but Draco needed Harry's lips on his like he needed oxygen to breathe.

Draco could have wept with happiness when he ran his tongue along the seam of Harry's mouth, feeling his lips part at Draco's silent plea; he tasted every inch of Harry's gloriously hot, wet, eager mouth, and when he moaned, and Draco swallowed the sound like it was the elixir of life.

Lost in sensation, nerve endings that had lain dormant for nearly seven years sang their awakening - he'd never felt so alive, so real. Harry eagerly, brilliantly, answered every lick from Draco's tongue against his own in kind.

He wasn't sure if Harry had begun to pull Draco toward him, or if he himself had pushed against Harry, but suddenly they were moving in tandem to lie on the floor, Harry looking impossibly beautiful beneath him, panting and tugging on Draco's hair when he broke the kiss to look into those green eyes; he had wanted so badly for so long for Harry to look at him the way he was looking at him now - excitement and desire and want shining out at him...for him.

Harry pushed his hips off the ground, smiling shyly, and forcing their bodies together in the most delicious way.

If Harry was going to change his mind, Draco knew that there were precious few seconds remaining where the other man could do so without killing him.

"Draco," Harry said, almost like he was hearing himself say it for the first time, almost reverently.

Draco scraped his teeth along Harry's chin and jaw, loving the feel of stubble-roughened skin against his lips, needing to taste everything he had missed so keenly.

"I've never-" Harry started to say, nervous laughter bubbling forth. His hands were suddenly between them, moving toward the waist of Draco's trousers, finally grabbing hold of his belt buckle.

"Oh but you have, believe me, you have." Draco kissed him hungrily, the noise from their quickened breathing and slick mouths moving in tandem filling the tiny space. "Right here on this very floor even," Draco added,

before connecting their mouths once more and sucking Harry's tongue with greed, lifting his hips up just enough to separate their bodies, helping Harry with his belt buckle before tackling his own as well.

All of a sudden, the sound of smooth, polished wood hitting the floor echoed all around them, and Draco felt a chill run down his spine.

"What was that?" Harry murmured, breaking free from the kiss and looking at the door in panic, as though someone were about to walk in on them.

"It was nothing," Draco said, desperate to distract him and pulling his attention back to where Draco wanted it.

Harry kissed him again, but as his hand shifted on the floor to find better purchase, his fingers felt something that shouldn't have been there.

"Draco, wait, there's-"

He shut his eyes, unwilling to watch as Harry looked down and realisation dawned.

Barely a few moments passed before he felt Harry scrambling to get out from underneath him, and he opened his eyes. Harry was already standing, silent as he held Draco's wand in his hand.

Draco couldn't move from where he sat kneeling on the floor, caught in his own web of lies...defeated.

He watched as a myriad of emotions crossed Harry's face - shock, confusion, comprehension. Then came betrayal, and anger.

He was actually relieved to see the last one - it would be easier to deal with.

"You..."

"Lied, yes. Tricked you, deceived you, whatever you want to call it," Draco said stoically.

"Why?" Harry's words were cold as ice, unrecognizable from the warm, breathless sounds he was making only moments ago.

Draco looked at the floor, unable to stare at the hurt he knew would be radiating from the last person in the world he wanted to inflict it upon.



"No expectations, no demands?" Harry's voice was hard now, accusing.

He watched Harry's shoes as he walked toward him, stopping just before he would have made contact. Draco thought for a moment that he might get kicked in the teeth, deservedly so, but Harry only walked around Draco's still unmoving form to get to the pantry door.

"Alohamora," Harry bit out, and Draco heard the door swing open easily.

He could hear his wand hit the floor, bouncing as it clattered on the hard wood, finally rolling into his line of sight.

"How do I get out of here without having to look at you?" Harry's voice was low, dangerous, and Draco's eyes began to burn.

"Floo powder. On the mantle," Draco answered from his position on the floor. His knees were screaming, but he didn't care. The physical discomfort was barely noticeable against the shame, frustration and rage that were running through his veins.

After several moments, he heard the telltale whoosh from the fireplace in the other room signalling Harry's departure, and he finally stood up, leaving his wand on the floor where it had been dropped. He walked into the kitchen, grabbed the half empty bottle of tequila that he knew would still be in the cupboard above the sink, and went upstairs into the guest room, slamming the door shut behind him, settling in for sleep...or alcohol poisoning, whichever came first. He didn't particularly care.

VII.

16 February, 2011...

"Wake up, you idiot."

Draco, startled by the unexpected intruder, had sat up so fast that bile, still tasting of alcohol, rose into his throat, threatening to make an appearance on the bed linens as the room spun violently.

Bright light suddenly flooded the room, like a million tiny blades stabbing at his eyes.

He could hear Hermione's heels shuffling along the carpeted floor as she made her way over to him, the mattress dipping slightly under her weight as she sat down next to him.

"Get out," he said, sounding like his vocal cords had been dragged through gravel, yanking his pillow over his head - anything to block out the light.

"You, Draco Malfoy, are an idiot."

"You said that already." He kicked out from the sheet tangled around his leg, voice muffled. "Now leave."

"How could you do that to him?"

He didn't need to ask for clarification on what that was.

"None of your business."

"The hell it isn't!" she shouted, ignoring his visible flinch and not caring if the noise hurt his head. "What the hell were you thinking, tricking him like that?"

"You-"

"Never mind, I know exactly what you were thinking," she barked at him, tugging hard on the pillow over his head until it finally pulled free, "and what you were thinking with."

Draco glared at her from where he lay, brushing unkempt blond hair off his face annoyingly. If he had gone to sleep naked like he usually did, he'd of had half a mind to give Hermione a free show in the hopes that she'd be offended enough to leave him alone - but he lay there in the same shirt and trousers that he'd worn the night with Harry, now wrinkled and stinking of booze.

"Harry's moving out," she said, more calmly now.

"I don't care," he grumbled, both of them knowing it was a lie.

"He started ranting this morning about how tired he was of everyone manipulating him into doing what they want him to do, and how he didn't need anyone dictating his life anymore." Hermione stood up and paced around the room. "He's packing up his things as we speak, and I had to take the day off to come looking for your sorry arse."

"No one asked you to."

Draco sat up again, slowly this time, feeling like his mouth was full of mouldy wool, grimacing as he finally registered the foul taste in his mouth that only copious amounts of cheap liquor and a good sulk could provide.

"You have to fix this!"

"Fix what?" he shouted back at her, regretting it instantly as his head began to pound, "I happen to agree with him!"

She tsk'd her irritated disapproval, and Draco suddenly found her wand pointed at his head. He braced himself for the hex he most certainly deserved.

Instead, the pounding in his head faded to a tolerable level, and a burst of mint cleared the nastiness from his mouth.

"How can you agree with him? He shouldn't be alone right now."

"Harry deserves a bit of independence, don't you think? After six years of dealing with an obsessive, controlling psychopath and now living under your thumb-"

He could only blame the last traces of alcohol in his system for having the audacity to argue with the agitated witch whose wand was still firmly in her grip.

"How dare you compare the two!"

"I'm not comparing them," he placated, moving his leaden legs over side of the bed, "but you coddle and smother him like he's some frail baby bird that hasn't found its wings yet."

That had sounded less biting in his head than it did actually coming out of his mouth.

"Let him go, Hermione," he said, softening his tone, "let him live his life however the hell he wants to."

"Without you."

"Most likely, yes."

Draco wouldn't have been surprised if he never saw Harry again after the way he'd left Draco last night in the pantry. He could still remember the

look on the other man's face - it was burned in his mind, constantly punishing him.

"It's your own fault, you know," she finally said, most of the venom gone from her voice.

Hermione sat down beside him again, touching his leg lightly; comfortingly.

"Isn't it always my fault?"

"No, actually, it isn't, so stop acting the martyr and pull yourself together."

She pushed against his shoulder, turning him toward her, smoothing out his mussed hair with deft fingers. It felt nice, and unspoken apologies for harsh words passed between them when he finally looked her in the eye.

"I fucked up, Hermione."

"That was obvious enough, but it's nothing you can't fix."

"Maybe I'm tired of trying."

"Tired?"

She said it as though she didn't know the meaning of the word.

"Yes, tired," he sighed. "I'm tired of trying to gain the trust of someone determined not to trust me - and who can blame him? How can he trust anyone after what's happened to him? You said as much yourself the other day," he reminded her. "And then I went and pulled my brilliant stunt," he added mockingly.

"Yes, but-"

"But nothing - he's right, Hermione, I am a manipulative bastard, no better than Smith, and instead of just letting Harry come to me on his own terms, I had to concoct some stupid scheme that landed me right back where I started with him."

He finally stood up, walking over to the window and looking outside at the soft layer of frost on the grass below.

"I deserve every bit of hate he throws my way."

She came up behind him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You're nothing like Smith, and he doesn't hate you."

"You'll forgive me if I'm reluctant to take your word for it," he said, turning to look at her.

"Then take a step back and give him a bit of space, but that doesn't mean you have to disappear completely – and I know that that's exactly what you're planning on doing," she added quickly, "but I won't let you, you stubborn little prat, not this time."

"Too much has happened, Hermione, and-"

"You think you're so clever, Draco, yet you can't even see what your own life has become," she interrupted, and Draco could tell she was working up to one of her signature lectures.

"Both of you disappeared that day. You've been as lost as Harry, locking yourself in some self-inflicted purgatory. We understood it, Draco, believe me we did." She looked at him with pity in her eyes> "But you stayed lost. You gave up everything – your home, your career, and for what? Some cold, lifeless flat in London? A menial job at St. Mungo's making potions, locked up in a laboratory all day with no one to keep you company but the occasional owl delivering supplies? What kind of a life is that?"

Hermione did something then that she rarely did, and hadn't done at all since Draco reappeared into her life - she pulled him into a hug, wrapping her arms around him tightly. She waited for him to reciprocate, feeling hesitant hands against her back - Draco had no one to comfort him anymore, not for almost seven years, and she was going to force it on him if necessary.

"You cut yourself from all of us, your family, and we lost two people that day – not one," she said against his shoulder, tears starting to well up in her eyes. She pulled back, not caring if he saw her cry. "Draco, we missed you, and with Harry back, you started to come alive again, just like he did, and I just can't bear to see you fall apart again. I can't."

He touched her face, wiping away her tears. Next to Harry, she had been the one true friend in his life. He realised then just how much he had missed her.

"I just wanted his attention."

"You always did." She gave him a watery smile.

"I thought that I could force him to see me," he tried to explain his actions from that night. "No distractions, not being able to walk away when he got the slightest bit uncomfortable. I was tired of waiting. You have no idea what his dismissal of me has been like, Hermione," he said, hoping she understood. "There's only so much that I can take. I never gave up on him, not even when the Ministry had him declared dead. I was still waiting for him to come back - I would have felt it if his soul had left this world, but I didn't. I could still feel him, but I was helpless to do anything. Do you know how useless I felt?"

Hermione pulled him back toward the bed, both of them sitting down.

"And then you came to me that day, and you said those words. All those years of waiting, hoping...and then he doesn't know me, doesn't even like me - I didn't get an ounce of kindness from him," he said, not caring how petulant he sounded. "All of you - hugging him and kissing his cheek, telling him how happy you were that he was home - and all I could do was watch. All I wanted was touch his face, his hand, any part of him, and tell him that I was the one who never gave up, that I waited...that I still loved him with everything I had, and always would," he finished quietly.

She squeezed his hand in sympathy, but knew there were no words to fix what was broken inside him.

"For a couple of hours, he was mine. It felt real again - I felt real. We talked about nothing and everything, and...and then he kissed me, right out of the blue." He smiled sadly at the memory. "Just like the first time - and God help me, Hermione, they could have dropped a nuclear bomb outside and it wouldn't have stopped me. He wanted me, for those precious few seconds - I looked in his eyes and he was there...my Harry with his stupid hair and that crooked smile." He let himself laugh.

"At least I had him back for that moment. Maybe that was my chance to say goodbye, and I just didn't recognize it for what it was before fate stabbed me in the back." He sighed. "Stupid fucking wand."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, to try and offer some words of comfort or advice, but none were forthcoming.

"Do you want to know the worst part of it?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I would have taken it as far as he would have let me that night, regardless of whether or not he was ready for it – and believe me, his body may have been ready, but not his mind. I am no better than Smith, just another selfish, greedy bastard...and if we hadn't stopped, he would've hated me even more when I eventually had to open that door and he figured things out anyway...after."

"Harry wouldn't have done anything that he didn't want to," she insisted.

"Wouldn't he?" Draco asked pointedly. "Hasn't he been conditioned to do exactly that for six whole years?"

"He didn't do everything that Zacharias wanted."

"Then maybe that makes him a better person than me." He laughed bitterly, running his hand through his hair.

"Don't say that."

"You're right about one thing," Draco said, standing.

"What's that?"

"I do need to move on...but without Harry," he said softly, putting his hand up to halt her protest. "Maybe he's not the only one that needs to find out who he is again."

VIII.

15 June, 2011...

"It's just a standard case of dragon pox, Mrs. McAlister; I assure you that your son will be fine."

"Oh, thank goodness!" the young, harried woman sitting in the chair opposite the examination table replied, her shoulders slumping in relief.

"It can be a bit scary when it's your first child, but by the fifth one," he winked, "you'll be an old pro and won't need my services at all."

"Healer Malfoy!" She laughed, wiping stray bits of hair away from her flushed face.

"All done, Jack," Draco said to his young patient, his spotty face looking up at him expectantly.

"Would you like a lolly as a reward for being such a good patient?"

The two year old nodded enthusiastically, his floppy brown fringe hanging in his eyes.

"Down you go, then."

Draco lifted him from the high table and directed him toward the large, clear glass bowl full of sweets that he'd put out for the children that made up the majority of his patient list, though the older ones never said no, either.

"You're so good with him."

Draco smiled and thanked her. Jack McAlister was a frequent visitor to his private practice, having seen him no less than seven times in the two short months that he'd been open to patients. His mother, Jane, was a lovely woman of just twenty-three, but was like most first time mothers, treating every scrape and sniffle as though it were a life or death emergency.

"You should have children one day," she said, standing and making sure that Jack hadn't shoved his pockets full of candy.

"Perhaps," he replied, not about to explain to her exactly why that would never happen.

"You'll send the due bill?"

She bent down to pick up her son, his arms outstretched, hands already sticky from the lolly he'd chosen from the bowl.

"I'll get around to it." He winked at her, and she smiled gratefully.

He knew that the McAlister's weren't very well off, and if he 'forgot' to charge her on occasion, it was of no consequence to his bottom line. He was still building his patient list, and she had become his biggest advertiser around the small town.

"Healer Malfoy, your next patient has arrived," his assistant said as she opened the door just a fraction, poking her head in the exam room. "It's that bloke with the strange name that I told you about yesterday."



"Tell them I'll just be a moment, would you, Margaret?"

She nodded, causing her smartly stylish glasses to slide down her nose as she shut the door. There was an amused glint in her eye that Draco was too distracted to ask her about, but made him curious nonetheless.

Fresh from Hogwarts and hoping to get into the training program at St. Mungo's, Margaret had been hired on the spot when Draco saw her notebook peeking from the large shoulder bag that she carried during her interview, a dozen different coloured tabs marking various pages. He needed someone organized, and something about the girl reminded him of a young Hermione; and they took to each other instantly, and after a brief conversation about her past work experience and goals, he'd offered the job to her, pleased when she accepted without a moment's hesitation. She had settled in easily, unsurprising since she had helped her father with the bookkeeping at their family's co-op in town. They got along well, Draco's decision to hire her constantly reaffirmed.

He began to prepare the room for his next consult, sterilizing the examination table and tools with precision. He had been working diligently and with single-minded focus to try and piece back together the life that he had lost when Harry was taken from him. The day after Hermione had found him curled up in that dark room, still reeking of tequila, he had moved back into the home that he used to share with Harry - the door to their former bedroom the only one to remain closed. Four days after that, he unlocked the doors to the converted barn that held his private practice, letting cool air blow through the windows, taking cobwebs and painful memories with it.

Fifty three days later, he placed an advert in Devon's local version of the Prophet – the Daily Devon – and within a week he had opened the doors to patients. Jane McAlister had walked through the front door that first day, frantic that her son had most certainly broken his elbow. A thorough cleaning of the shallow wound caused by Jack's run-in with a splintered fence post, and several assurances that there were no broken bones, he'd sent them on their way with a feeling of satisfaction; he knew that he'd made the right decision to get on with his life, even if Harry's lack of presence by his side still stung sharply.

Devon had been a good fit – not just in the past, when Harry was by his side, but also now that Draco was alone. After the war, Hogsmeade was no longer the only all wizarding village in Britain, small settlements popping up all around the country. It took a while for the Malfoy name to lose most of its taint, and Draco had fought hard after he was exonerated – with Harry's

help – to be admitted into the training program at St. Mungo's. Being in such close proximity to the heart of the British Ministry, and politics being what they were, Draco knew that he wouldn't remain there once he attained his license – prejudice would have prevented him from reaching his full potential.

He would have to go to a place where the ground wasn't stained so much with blood spilt during the war, re-shaping the destiny that had been forced on him since he was a small child.

His surprising friendship with Harry during his final year of training, which led to something infinitely more precious, eventually found them choosing their new home together; they had decided on Devon quickly, with its friendly residents and quaint scenic views, and close (but not too close) proximity to Harry's chosen family – the Weasleys. Devon also boasted a rather large percentage of Muggleborn witches and wizards, and there was an all-wizarding settlement not twenty miles from the centre of town. Harry had found their five bedroom, three bath home through an advert in the Daily Devon, telling Draco that they could turn the barn into a medical office...with Draco being the only magical Healer for the surrounding wizard folk who had to seek care by travelling to St. Mungo's, it was one of the easiest decisions Draco had ever made.

The first week of May that year saw them collaborating on their clashing furniture collection, the occasional spat ending in kisses - and comprises sealed with impromptu, vigorous shagging. Draco was happy for the first time in his life, and finally felt as if he'd come into his own, having broken free of all the chains his father and family name wrapped around him – he should have known it wouldn't last.

It was just five weeks later when fate laughed in his face, and everything had gone to hell.

Pulling himself from his reverie, Draco laid out a fresh sheet atop the table for his next patient and heard a gentle knock on the door.

"One minute, Margaret," he called out, looking for the patient's chart that she usually left for him to peruse before the exam started. It wasn't in its usual place, and when Draco turned to see if she'd left it on the chair opposite the window, he heard the soft snick of the knob being turned.

Harry stood in the doorway, the dark blue patient folder Draco had been searching for gripped in his hand, looking at him expectantly.

Draco found himself at a loss for words.

"Hello," Harry said, pausing for a beat before walking toward him and holding up the folder.

Draco took it, feeling like his arm was moving through treacle, unable to take his eyes off Harry's.

The other man looked...good. Different. There was a confidence about him that made Harry stand a little bit taller, his shoulders more broad. Harry's newfound independence suited him, it seemed, and underneath his shock, Draco was genuinely happy to see him looking so sure of himself.

"I have an appointment," Harry said, breaking the silence and taking another step forward, holding out the folder for Draco to take.

"Appointment?"

"Yes, I have...several complaints. I was hoping that you could help me."

Harry smiled at him then, showing just a hint of straight, white teeth.

Forcing himself to move, Draco grabbed the folder, opening to the first page and trying to quiet his racing thoughts before attempting to read it.

Margaret's neat handwriting covered the new patient questionnaire, Draco having to go over the same lines several times, unable to focus with Harry standing so close.

Name: Wazlib, Roonil

Age: 31

D.O.B.: 31 Jul 1980

Height: 175.26cm

Weight: 154.2lbs

Health Concerns: Psychological, refused to disclose except to Healer Malfoy.

Allergies: Unknown

"I'm not a psychologist, Mr. Wazlib," Draco eventually said, playing along

with whatever charade Harry had concocted. A sick feeling started to pool in his stomach - if this was the start of a cruel joke, Draco couldn't say that he didn't deserve it.

"You're the only Healer in the vicinity, and I heard that you were the best."

He saw Harry's fingers start to fidget, a crack appearing in his confident demeanour. This actually helped to put Draco at ease, knowing he wasn't the only one feeling unsettled.

"If you've a physical ailment, I would gladly treat it, but otherwise I would need to refer you to someone more qualified to assist you."

"Oh, well..." Harry frowned slightly and looking at the floor.

After a moment, he looked back up at Draco, a surprisingly bright smile on his face.

"I do have a physical ailment."

Draco was almost afraid to ask.

"And what is that?"

Harry walked toward him, and before Draco could react properly, he'd raised his arm and slammed his hand down on the edge of the tabletop, palm facing up, hard enough that Draco flinched.

"Potter!"

"I hurt my hand...see?" Harry said, grinning like a fool and holding it up, the skin already turning an angry red.

Draco swung into action, gingerly lifting Harry's hand and turning it over, checking rapidly swelling flesh to see if any bones were broken.

"You daft git!"

Harry kept smiling at him, like he'd won an argument; Draco turned to reach behind him for the container of alcohol soaked swabs, beginning to clean away the blood from a spot where the edge of the counter had claimed a swath of skin.

"You could have broken one or all of your metacarpophalangeal joints," he

glared at the other man.

"Metawhat?"

"Your knuckles, you twit." Draco glared at him, satisfied that the sting of the alcohol had wiped the smirk off the other man's face.

"Did I?" Harry winced as Draco touched the open wound again with the burning liquid.

Harry took half a step closer, and Draco could smell the clean linen of his shirt even through the medicinal tang of alcohol. He looked up, prepared to tear a strip off him for doing something so ridiculously juvenile, but his throat closed up when he found Harry staring at him.

He widened the distance between them, taking out his wand and healing the wound before wiping away the last remnants of blood.

"Now can we talk about my other issues?" Harry asked, leaning forward slightly.

"Harry-"

"I'm a patient now," he interrupted, tapping the folder that sat next to him on the exam table. "You have to treat all my ailments, its part of the Healer's code of conduct or something."

Draco stared at him incredulously. Harry really had found his confidence – maybe too much of it.

"Actually, this is a private practice, so I've the right to refuse any customer."

"And I would have the right," Harry challenged, "to tell certain people how the new Healer in town callously disregarded my medical needs-"

"Is that why you're here?" Draco blurted out, that sick feeling that this was payback rising up again. "Did you come to exact a little payback for what I did? Because trust me, Potter, I'm already paying for it in spades."

Harry's cocky expression fell, looking at him in earnest.

"I just want to talk."

"You've a fucked up way of going about it," Draco said defensively.

"I thought that I could..." Harry started, searching for the right words.  
"Okay, so maybe tricking you was a little bit of payback on my part, but I didn't do it to be cruel. I really do want to talk to you."

Draco crossed his arms over his chest.

"You could have sent a letter."

"I hate writing letters."

"You never used to."

"Yeah, well I don't remember that now do I?"

It was Harry's turn to be on the defensive, his tone turning accusatory.

"Hermione said that you've been ignoring her and Ron."

"I've been busy."

Draco turned his back to him, straightening up the row of canisters along the back of the small sink cupboard, just to give him something else to focus on besides Harry and how much he wanted to reach out for him.

"I've been busy, too," Harry responded quietly. "I'm out on my own now... I've got a flat above a chip shop in Chelsea. It's not much, but it's a space of my own."

"I know," Draco said softly.

"So you have been reading Hermione's letters – she'll be glad to know it."

She had written Draco nearly every day at first, after their confrontation when he'd decided to get his life back. She kept insisting that he should come round for tea, and when her request was refused for the umpteenth time, she didn't send anything for eight whole days; Draco assumed that she had finally given up, but the next morning, there was a five page letter waiting for him on the kitchen table.

She had told him about how Harry moving out, having found a respectable flat in Chelsea, and that he had seemed to be getting on well enough despite his constant diet of fish, chips, and mushy peas. She also told him that she was going to respect his wishes and maintain her physical distance for the

time being; that she understood why Draco felt the need to do what he was doing, though warned him that she would continue to write to him.

Hermione's letters always started off with news of Harry – how he was spending his time, how his magic lessons were coming along, and even how Harry had started asking after Draco – begrudgingly at first, but then with genuine concern as time passed without contact between the two men. She told him all about the mundane goings on of their extended family, her way of letting Draco know that he was still very much a part of it.

She said that Harry was happy, his newfound independence seeming to embolden him with the confidence that she had always admired.

That had broken Draco's heart – surprised that there was anything left to break - even though it was exactly what he wanted for the man he loved.

He just wished that he could have been a part of it.

Harry's gentle voice broke the silence.

"Why have you been avoiding everyone?"

"It's for the best."

"Best for you, you mean."

"Yes," Draco said, annoyed, turning to face him. "Is that allowed?"

Harry put his hands up in a submissive gesture.

"Of course, I didn't mean to-"

"Have you any other complaints that need addressed aside from your battered hand, Mr. Wazlib?"

The thread that was holding Draco's sanity together was about to snap.

Harry looked disgruntled for a brief moment, and then sat on the exam table, crossing his arms in defiance.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Well?" Draco bit out, exasperated – wanting the torture to end.

"I have a, um, chronic case of...of...wankeritis."

"Wankeritis."

"Yes, stubborn, selfish wankeritis." He nodded, completely serious. "And it causes all sorts of problems."

"Such as?"

"It makes me run out of situations without thinking - without taking the time to contemplate why others...do what they do."

"Chronic means unable to be cured."

"That's not my only issue, either," Harry continued.

Draco took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

"It isn't?" he played along dejectedly, listening for the sound of thread snapping.

He idly wondered if, when it did, it would cause him to strangle Harry right there in his exam room...or tear their clothes off and- he had to stop that line of thought before it took hold.

"No. I've loads of them, but..." Harry hesitated, "but the only other one that really bothers me is...um, my heart is broken...as in not working, I mean."

"Taken a class in cardiology, have you?"

"I know I have a broken heart," Harry insisted, "because I don't feel what other people feel when...when their heart is broken."

"And why would you want to feel that?"

"It's only fair, isn't it? When there's...someone else, whose heart is broken, too, and they're hurting because of you, but you're not hurting because...because something was stolen from them that makes them not feel that same pain."

"I see," Draco said, at a loss of how to respond to Harry's rambling.

"Can you help me?"



"Harry-"

"Not because I want to feel that way, that would be ridiculous." He laughed nervously. "But because even if I may not be able to feel what's wrong with me, there's still something not right, and maybe if you help me fix my broken heart, I could..." Harry paused, standing up and reaching into his pocket, pulling out something that Draco couldn't see.

He tentatively took hold of Draco's hand in his, and held his closed fist over Draco's palm, waiting for him to open it. When he did, Draco felt a small, heavy weight fall onto it, and he looked down.

It was his ring – but not his, because that one was still on his finger from when he'd put it back on last December.

This meant...the ring had to be Harry's.

"I could fix yours, too," Harry finally finished.

Draco sat, transfixed, staring at the ring in his palm. It was dull and scratched, misshapen in parts, as though it had survived fire just hot enough to change its form, but not so hot that it would have melted away into nothing.

"Where..."

"Two weeks ago, I'd asked Ron to show me the place in Wiltshire where Zach had taken me right after the kidnapping. I don't know why, I just...had to see it, and when we were there, I was looking around at what was left of the cottage where he'd kept me for days, locked in that trunk, and I saw this on the ground, shining underneath a bunch of soot and ash."

"I thought that Smith had- that it was gone...destroyed..." Draco could hear his voice shaking.

Harry knelt down in front of him, taking Draco's trembling hands in his own.

"I understand now, Draco. I can't explain why, but I do. Something clicked; it was like...someone turned on a light inside me. I see you, Draco, more clearly than before." He tilted Draco's head up to force him to look up from the ring. "I want to get my life back, whatever that means, but it won't be right if you aren't there with me."

Draco's throat physically ached, a strangled sound escaping.

"Draco?" Harry's voice was laced with concern.

"I don't want to be friends with you, Harry. It's- not enough, I can't handle that. Please don't ask me to," he pleaded, ready to get on his knees and beg if he had to...anything to make Harry release the stranglehold on his heart.

"I'm not...I'm not asking you to just be my friend."

"Then-"

Draco didn't get a chance to ask Harry what he meant, because the lips pressing against his own were answer enough. Harry pulled back, breaking the kiss and cradling Draco's face in his hands, pressing their foreheads together, both of them breathless.

"Not only my friend," he whispered, and when Harry covered Draco's mouth with his again, Draco felt the thread snap inside him, and he nearly collapsed against Harry in overwhelming relief.

Harry's kiss was like coming home after years of exile.

For long moments, their mouths spoke in a language that only they shared, every slick slide of their lips together like a hundred promises they hadn't been allowed to keep, not until this moment.

"I have something to show you."

"What, now?" Draco gasped, intent on keeping Harry's tongue in his mouth for several more days at least.

Harry laughed breathlessly at Draco's obvious reluctance to stop kissing even for just a moment, and reached between them; Draco could feel his hands tugging something near his belt buckle.

"Trust me, I've seen it before." He laughed.

Harry wiggled his eyebrows lasciviously, pulling his wand out and twirling it.

=====@=====

They made quick work of removing each other's clothes, mouths only

separating for the fraction it took to pull Harry's jumper over his head, Draco's shirt sliding off easily, thin pants the only thing separating them. They were in their old bedroom – Harry had Apparated them straight to it, and Draco felt his heart jump when he saw the four poster bed and realized where they were.

Harry must have felt the shift in Draco's mood, brushing his hand across his cheek.

"Is this all right?" he asked, breathless from their kisses.

Draco answered him with lips and tongue, slowly. He didn't want to rush the moment, not after the last time when he thought he'd lost Harry's trust for good.

"Tell me, Harry," Draco said after they tumbled onto the bed, Harry's warm, willing body beneath him.

"Tell you what," he managed, intent on tracing the shell of Draco's ear with his tongue.

"Tell me what happened in your dreams," Draco pressed a kiss against the dip of Harry's throat, "when I finally caught you."

Harry moaned deliciously, the vibrations of it travelling from Draco's mouth straight to his groin.

"You touched me."

Draco smirked just before biting a hardened nipple, beginning his descent downward, tasting every inch of flesh that lay in his path.

"Where?" he demanded.

"Everywhere," Harry breathed, his hands gripping Draco's shoulders.

Draco looked at his face, green eyes turned dark with lust, wide with anticipation.

"Here?" he teased, kissing along the curve of Harry's hip, feeling the other man shudder beneath him as Draco slowly began to pull down the waistband of Harry's boxers.

"God, yes."

Harry's cock peeked out from the top, beautifully hard, precome beading on its tip. Draco's mouth began to water at the sight of it.

"What about here?" Draco asked innocently, his tongue flicking against the overly sensitive flesh.

"Yes, dammit!"

He pulled Harry's pants off completely in one smooth movement, not wanting to drag it out too much longer...it had been a long time, for both of them, and while he wanted to take the edge off, he didn't want Harry coming before they'd even started.

"Did you enjoy it?"

He got comfortable between Harry's legs, cupping the back of his knees and spreading them further.

Harry threw his head back against the pillow, the muscles in his neck sticking out like thick cords as he arched his body, making sinfully gorgeous sounds of neediness and anticipation, seeking out the touch he wanted so badly.

"Draco, please-"

The scent of Harry's arousal was overwhelming; Draco wanted to pull those perfectly round balls into his mouth and let his tongue map every inch of them, but past experience reminded him that it was the last part of Harry's body he should touch if he wanted this to last.

Draco licked the tender stripe of skin where thigh met groin, smirking smugly when Harry growled in frustration.

"Did I lick you there, just like that?"

"Bastard."

"What else did I do, Harry? Did I put my mouth on your cock?"

"Yes."

"Look at me."

Harry obeyed.

"Tell me what you want, Harry, you're in control."

Draco's mouth hovered over the head of his cock, lips parting...grey eyes locked with green as he waited patiently. He knew that Harry's cheeks were flushed with more than just desire.

"I want you to su- suck my cock, you prick-teasing bastard," Harry finally cried out, all embarrassment sliding away.

Draco rewarded him with soft, gentle licks around the crown, savouring the salty, bitter fluid that coated the tip of his tongue.

"Say that you want me, just me."

Draco rubbed the shaft of Harry's cock against his lips, foreskin moving against the wet slickness of them.

"Just you, nobody else," Harry practically choked out his words, "not ever, now get on with it or so help me God-"

"Well, if you insist," Draco smirked, just before taking the entire, considerable length into his mouth, the weight of it familiar and heavy against his tongue.

Harry cried out, and Draco hummed his approval around the throbbing flesh.

Draco rose up, letting go of Harry's cock with an audible pop and shifting his body so that his own cock, thick with need, could find relief against the sheets.

"Christ, Draco," Harry gasped, "were you always this cruel?"

"Yes, and you were the masochist that loved every second of it," he said, getting back to the task at hand. Or mouth, as it were.

When Draco swallowed him this time, nose and lips pressing against thick, coarse curls, Harry's entire body went stiff. Draco used his thumb and forefinger to grip the base of his cock, squeezing tightly, delaying orgasm just a little longer - both Harry's and his own. Draco wouldn't need much direct stimulation to come...every tremor and shiver that ran through Harry's body went straight to his groin like a gentle caress. He could already feel his balls tightening up, and he knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

Draco went to work, licking and sucking and worshipping the overheated flesh; drinking in every keening sound of pleasure that Harry made. He lifted Harry's legs slightly, bending them at the knees and opening him even wider, allowing Draco to change the angle as he pressed his tongue against the underside of his prick, following the thick vein from root to tip. Harry's toes curled into the sheets as he cried out, the head of his cock brushing repeatedly against the back of Draco's throat.

Just before Draco was about to come, he relaxed his grip around the base of Harry's dick and sucked hard, cheeks hollowing out from the suction as he quickened his pace, head bobbing up and down as Harry's hands tangled in his hair.

"-nngggguuhhhh ohfuck Draco imgonnacome-"

With a sharp arch of his back, and a strangled cry, Harry pulled on his hair in warning. Draco shoved his hands under Harry's arse, cock snug in his mouth, refusing to release it as his tongue twisted and pulled Harry's orgasm from him. Draco hummed his encouragement around the pulsating flesh, and when Harry finally came, he swallowed greedily every single drop that Harry gave him as his own cock jerked against the sheets, feeling hot fluid against his stomach and crying out his own release around the girth of Harry's length.

=====@=====

"Wow," Harry said, breath still laboured from their exertions, "that was..."

"Just to take the edge off," Draco said smugly as he moved up from the vee of Harry's legs, turning over to lie on his back, his head resting against Harry's shoulder.

"I'm not sure I'll survive the main event." Harry laughed. "Did you..." Harry started to ask, his hand sliding up Draco's naked thigh.

He could still taste Harry on his tongue, familiar but new; Draco vowed to show him everything else that the other man had forgotten...as soon as humanly possible, and preferably within the next ten minutes.

He had a lot to show him, after all. It was going to take hours...days.

"Yes."

Harry made a noise of disappointment.

"Well, I...could have helped."

"Watching you was enough," Draco replied honestly.

He traced the line of Harry's brow as they looked at each other – it was a moment of pure clarity that he would hold close to his heart for a long time.

It was as though the tie that bound their destinies together was pulled taut, their fates colliding and bonding, this time with a reassuring sense of finality and permanence.

Harry's cheeks, still flushed beautifully from the force of his orgasm, managed to get even pinker.

"Oh!" Harry sat up quickly, "before I forget, I have something else to show you."

Harry looked around the room as though searching for something specific. His gaze finally landed his trousers that lay crumpled on the floor, beside the bed, leaning over to grab them while Draco unabashedly admired the view, blood pooling in his groin with renewed interest.

He reached over to touch the naked curve of Harry's hip...just because he could.

Harry pulled something from the rear pocket.

"Grocery list," he grinned, unfolding a wrinkled piece of paper. "If I mess this up, don't tell Hermione - she made me practice it a hundred times. Now where'd my wand go?"

"Here, use mine."

"Can I?" he asked, surprised, "I mean, will it work?"

Draco nodded, saving the fateful story about how Harry had used the same wand years before for another day.

Harry took it from his grasp and, after a moment's concentration, cast his intended spell.

There on the bed where the paper had lay was a single yellow rose; the

small bud still closed, not yet ready to blossom.

"Hermione said to give this to you," Harry said, holding it out for Draco.  
"She said that you would know what it was for."

Draco felt an overwhelming rush of gratitude for his friend.

"I'll have to send her a thank you note."

"What's it for? She wouldn't say."

"I'll tell you later," he said, pulling Harry into a slow, gentle kiss.

"So mysterious," the other man said, words muffled by the slide of Draco's mouth against his.

"Speaking of mysteries," Draco asked, "who is Roonil Wazlib?"

Harry's boisterous laugh filled the room.

"Ask Ron, it was his idea after Hermione suggested that I corner you on your own turf. You kept ignoring the invitations to dinner."

"I didn't know that you'd be there."

Harry lay back down on the bed, and Draco fit himself snugly against him, tracing small circles on Harry's stomach, still damp with perspiration.

"Would you have gone if you knew that I was?" he asked.

"...probably not."

"Why? I mean, I know what you said, back in the office, but..."

"I wanted you to have your space, Harry," he said, pressing a kiss against cooling skin and blowing on the trace of saliva it left behind, gooseflesh rising from the stimulation. "I did have...unrealistic expectations, and I had to step away to see just how much pressure I was putting on you, even unintentionally."

Harry was quiet for a long time.

"It does feel nice to be on my own finally."



Draco smother the twinge of hurt at that statement – determined that nothing was going to spoil these moments.

"But that doesn't mean I want to be alone," Harry added softly.

An unpleasant feeling started to grow in the pit of his stomach. He really didn't want to talk about that just then. They had so many other things – better things – to concentrate on...

"You haven't had much time to spread your wings, Harry, maybe you should-"

"If you're breaking up with me already, this will go down as the shortest...whatever in history." Harry gently laughed, grabbing Draco's wrist and pulling it across his chest in an embrace.

"I just don't want to be the one tying strings to you again."

"You won't be...I won't let you. But I'm not blind – there is something between us, and not just from your side. I...I know how you feel about me, and maybe I don't feel the exact same thing, but I do feel something." Harry turned on his side, looking down at Draco's face and wanting the other man to know how much he needed to say these things to him.

"I feel that...pull. I chose you, Draco, for better or for worse, and maybe I've forgotten what both of those entailed in the past, but I'm going into this with both eyes open. There's a reason why I remembered your face, this ring..." He held his hand out to look at it fondly. "The one person that I can trust the most in this world is myself, and I trust that I made the right choice when I chose you."

Draco swallowed past the lump in his throat.

"So here you are."

"So here I am," Harry smiled.

In that moment, it was enough. Draco didn't need him to feel that overwhelming, all-encompassing love and passion the way that he did for Harry.

Later, as the evening stretched on and Draco finally guided Harry deep inside him - looking down at his face as beads of sweat and pleasure coated his scarred brow, green eyes wide with wonder at the incredible feeling

around him - it was enough for Draco to know that Harry had chosen him again, of his own free will, no matter the outcome.

Epilogue

Christmas Eve...24 December, 2011...

"What time are we supposed to be at the party?"

Harry was standing in front of the open wardrobe, a few of his own things hanging next to Draco's, deciding what to wear.

"Hermione wants us there no later than half past six; we've got an hour yet."

Draco walked up behind him, kissing the back of his neck as he reached around him, pulling out a dark green overcoat.

"Excellent," Harry said, grinning mischievously, "I have time to give you one of your presents."

"I thought that we were exchanging tomorrow at the Burrow?"

Draco smoothed out the velvety fabric, checking for stray bits of thread or lint, Kreacher's laundering skills no longer what they once were. Harry moved away from him, walking toward the door.

"This one is...well, I wanted to give it to you in private."

"Sounds kinky."

"Shut up, you," Harry said from the doorway, "It's nothing like that."

"Pity."

Harry left the room for a few moments, eventually returning with a modest looking box wrapped simply in green foil paper and tied with a shiny red bow. Draco instantly recognized it as the perfect size box for that gilt-edged Healer's journal that he showed Harry from the supply catalogue a few weeks prior, and felt warmed by Harry's support of his expanding private practice, even though it kept him away from Harry's side more than he liked.

"I think I know what this is," Draco smirked knowingly as he pulled on the ribbon and began carefully peeling back the paper.

Harry sat down next to him on the edge of the bed, their arms touching, his face betraying nothing about the box's contents.

When Draco lifted the lid, he froze in shock. Inside the box, there were at least a dozen small brown leather books, all of them with their own leather tie to keep them closed. The box hummed with magic.

"I shrunk them down," Harry said softly, awaiting Draco's reaction to the gift.

He remembered the soft worn leather of the journal that he had collected from the flat in Toronto just one year ago, even though it felt like a decade had passed since then. But there was only one, then, and now there were so many...

Their lives had changed so much. Harry hadn't officially moved back into their home, but he may as well have for all the time that he spent there, not to mention half his clothes had already migrated into the large double wardrobe that they once shared. All of their free time was spent in each other's company, usually alone, or with their close friends and family.

For now, though, they were content to relearn each other – physically and emotionally, body and mind. And when Draco told Harry that he loved him – or showed him, as he preferred to do – Harry responded in kind.

Harry was more and more the man that they all once knew, Henry Smith now just a fading memory. He had taken a life that was a mere shell of what it once was, and shaped it into something new, even more brilliant. Harry had a job that he loved, having taken ownership from the retiring pensioner of the antiques shop where they had bought their bed – and Harry's first blue vase – after first moving to Devon.

"Those are all of my journals," Harry said, pulling Draco from his thoughts. "From...before."

"I know," Draco said quietly.

He was overwhelmed, at a loss for words.

"Oh God, I bollocksed it all up, didn't I?" Harry said worriedly, reaching to take the box from Draco's hands.

"Don't," he said, tightening his grip. "Harry, I...wasn't expecting something

so..."

He couldn't possibly convey to Harry what this present meant to him. That Harry would give Draco this piece of himself rendered him speechless. For the few days that the journal he'd found had been in his possession before last Christmas, Draco ached with the need to know what was written on its pages. Just knowing that in his hands was a substantial piece of the puzzle from Harry's missing years pushed the very limits of his respect for Harry's privacy.

"You don't have to read them. I just wanted you to know that you could. You gave me all those letters that you'd kept, so..."

A few months earlier, Draco had handed Harry the stack of correspondence that he had kept tucked away, the collection of letters that outlined the journey of their friendship and everything that came after.

"I don't know what to say."

"It's silly, isn't it?"

"Harry, it's not. You've no idea what this...it means everything that you would give me these."

Draco wondered if he would find himself among the pages; if Harry had written about his dreams.

"I just thought that maybe it would...I don't know, let you see who I was then. After I moved to Chelsea, not long before I found my ring in Wiltshire, Ron took me back to Toronto to finally clear out the rest of my things...everything was such a mess." Harry reached into the box and picked up one of the books, using his wand to restore it to its original size, flipping through the pages before setting it back down. "I know you found one of these under my bed, but that's only because I was still writing in it...I had the ones I'd already finished under a loose floorboard – about two per year. I was afraid that Zach would find them."

Draco thought back to the night in the pantry when Harry had told him about the first time he ventured out on his own, and how Zach had punished him for it, manipulating Harry's guilt.

"I had nothing else better to do with my time, not until I started working at Lettieri, so that's what I did – I wrote. About everything and nothing."

"I love them," Draco said, gingerly setting the precious box on the bedside table and turning back to Harry.

He took Harry's face in his hands, kissing him gently. After several long moments, Harry pulled away long enough to unbutton his shirt, and pulled Draco down to lie on the bed, straddling his hips and starting to pull the edge of Draco's cotton tee from where it was tucked into his waistband.

"Do you think that Hermione would be terribly angry if we were late to her party?" he asked, a sly grin on his face.

Draco raised himself slightly as his shirt was pulled completely off and tossed onto the floor.

"If she doesn't expect us to show up tardy by now, she has only herself to blame."

Draco dragged him down for a heated, messy kiss.

"Or we could skip it altogether," the other man said, breath quickening.

"She'd set fire to our presents, and you know how much I like presents, Harry."

"I've got one you can unwrap." He winked, green eyes twinkling in anticipation.

===== @ =====

Harry and Draco arrived at the party, Hermione rolling her eyes good-naturedly when she noticed their flushed skin and secret smiles. Making the rounds to greet their friends and family, she couldn't help but watch them. Neville and Lavender were going on and on about their newborn, but too wrapped up in their own joy to notice that Hermione wasn't paying them much attention.

She saw how the two men stood so close to one another, their bodies always in contact; one arm pressed against the other; the way their hands lingered when a glass of wine was offered and taken, and the way Harry's lips would lightly graze the shell of Draco's ear as he leaned in to say something discreet.

She knew that it wasn't just Harry they had found that day last December - they had found Draco as well.

She was so pleased with how their lives had come full circle, that she didn't even scold them for being two hours late to her party.

FINI.

[Click here to return to Livejournal to comment.](#)

Comments

You do not have permission to add comments.

[Sign in](#)|[Recent Site Activity](#)|[Report Abuse](#)|[Print Page](#)|[Powered By Google Sites](#)