Lost In Your Arms

by Femme (femmequixotic)

***PLEASE NOTE: this is an edited copy of this fic that does not include extreme dirty talk as a kink (i.e., It’s been edited so it no longer includes words such as sl*t, wh*re and sl*g during sexual situations for those who find such language triggery.)

It does still include dirty talk defined as Harry and Draco talking about sexual acts while engaged in consensual sex, though, so please keep that in mind. If you’ve reached this by mistake and are in search of the original, unedited story, you can find it on AO3 at http://download.archiveofourown.org works/10323485.

Thanks!
Femme

Summary

Three months after their brief encounter, Draco has almost forgotten about Potter--or so he tells himself. Then a Dark wizard shows up on the Auror radar and all hell breaks loose. Draco will have to choose between everything he holds dear--everything he's worked so hard for--and a few stolen moments of passion with a certain green-eyed Inspector, once his sworn
enemy and now something rather different entirely. He'll make the right choice, won't he?

Who is he kidding? He'll ruin everything, as per usual. Bad choices and the name Malfoy go hand in hand.

This fic starts after Can't Get You Out of My Head. While it's not crucial for you to have read that one first, it'll probably make a bit more sense if you have. :)

Notes
This is a long fic that will be posted weekly on Thursdays. There are 10 chapters. However, the second installment will go up on a Friday since I'm on holiday and don't have regular access to wifi. I'll get back on my proper schedule with chapter three.

Also, please note that this fic is set eight years after the Second Wizarding War (in 2006), so any Muggle technology referenced herein is going to be of that era, and most definitely not up to our current standards. Hint: no iPhones. :)

And a warning for an offhand mention of past self-harm in the second scene.

Huge thanks to my betas sassy_cissa and noeon for all their brilliance. They're the best. <3
Draco sits alone at the bar, nursing the last remnants of a Boulevardier, his second of the night. Pansy's abandoned him a good hour ago for the dance floor of the club. Every so often he catches sight of her in the flashing pink and violet lights, her face turned upwards, hair mussed, skin shining with sweat as she throws herself into the pulsating beat of the music.

It's not for him, at least not this evening. He sucks on a melting sliver of ice, lets it crunch between his back teeth. He shouldn't have let Pans talk him into coming. The Thestral's Wing tries too hard, in his opinion, to be edgy with its shadowed corners and plush velvet hangings. It's as if a Ravenclaw's attempting to channel a Slytherin for profit, and Draco doesn't much like it. He drains his drink and sets it back down, the few bits of ice left rattling against the glass.

"Buy you another?"

Draco looks over, into familiar, deep green eyes. He's not pissed, he knows that much. Two Boulevardiers, strong or not, aren't enough to knock him into this particular fantasy. "No," he says, and he toys with his glass, light from the dance floor shimmering across its rim.

Potter sits down anyway and catches the barkeep's attention. "Two more, please?" He pushes a few Galleon coins across the smooth black marble bar top. He glances at Draco, and Draco's stomach flips in a most disconcerting way. Potter's golden-brown skin gleams beneath the club lights, bright sparkles of pink and violet flashing off his round glasses and casting an almost otherworldly sheen across his cheekbones. It's been months since Draco's seen the prat. Three and some change, if he's to be honest. Word is that Potter's been in the States the whole time; Draco's been paying attention to the talk around the pasty cart in the afternoons.

"You're back then." Draco takes the unwelcome Boulevardier the barkeep pushes towards him. This is a bad idea. He doesn't need another. What he fucking well ought to do is put the glass down, walk out of the club, Pansy be damned, and go the bloody fuck home. If he were really bold--or far more drunk--he'd toss the drink across Potter's fucking perfect face or onto the crotch of his jeans. And then maybe suck it off. Instead he takes a sip from the glass. Sour-sweet whisky with the bitter tang of Campari slides across his tongue and burns in his nostrils.

Potter picks up his own glass, mouth quirked in a half-smile. "I'm back." Draco waits for him to elaborate. He doesn't. Draco turns back to his drink. Typical Potter. No explanation for anything he's done, not for shagging Draco raw then walking out without even a proper thanks or, ohhey Malfoy, I'm going to New York this evening so don't wait for me down the local. He left Draco cooling his heels in the Leaky like a sodding fool, and Draco's never been angrier, most of all at himself for caring what this useless prat does.

Said prat looks over at Draco. "Heard you're sitting for the sergeant's exam tomorrow."

Draco doesn't answer for a moment, then he shrugs. Behind him the music shifts into a different beat, a heavy, deafening thrum that shakes the floor beneath his booted feet and rattles the bottles in the shelves behind the bar. "I made my certification. Seemed like the next thing to do. One does get tired of a constable's pay packet, after all." He's all too aware of Potter next to him, in jeans and a tight, dark shirt, untucked, the top three buttons undone. Potter's hair curls just enough over the collar to be indecent, and there's a shadow of stubble along the sharp angle of his jaw.
He looks delicious and smells even better. A hint of cigarette smoke and liquor mixed in with lemongrass and something a bit heavier. Sage, perhaps, Draco thinks, and he tries not to breathe Potter in. He fails utterly, and the faint stirrings of want in his body infuriate him.

"You'll do fine," Potter says over the rim of his glass. "Taking the written and practicum at the same time?"

"Might as well." Draco shifts on his stool, turning to look out over the throng. He's lost sight of Pansy. Another sip of the Boulevardier and his limbs loosen, warm and fluid--dangerous around Potter, he suspects, but he's still bitter. He lifts the glass to his mouth again. "Pass them both and there's no denying me a Promotion Board interview, whatever the rest of them might think." There are still rumblings among the force about him. Shah tells him to pay them no mind, but Draco does. He can't blame them, not really. Too many people had died in the war, and Draco'd had his place in their fate. He knows that. It's something he lives with every day.

Potter just watches him for a long moment, then he looks away, his fingers tight around the curve of his glass. He takes another sip. His upper lip is wet; Draco feels a sudden urge to lick it. He doesn't. Circe, he hates what Potter can do to him, how he can upturn Draco's entire existence with one small glance. He comes back in, after weeks away, and with one quirk of that unkempt eyebrow, Draco's panting after him like a bloody dog.

He also hates that he hasn't the courage to do what he wants, to lean in and drag his tongue across the corner of Potter's mouth. Grab his cock and pay him back for last time. With interest. Maybe even blow him in the back.

The edge of the bar digs into Draco's back; he can feel the barkeep moving behind him. Fuck. He really should go home. He should sleep. The exam's at half ten in the morning, and he needs to be ready for it. He's spent the past two weeks doing nothing but poring over tomes of Auror code and the Wizengamot corpus from the past hundred years. Blaise has quizzed him on obscure magical law and Auror procedure. He's ready for this test, or as ready as he can be. Still, he can't fail it; that's not an option. He knows he, of all exam takers, can't afford to cock up anything.

But then Potter's beside him, muscled thigh brushing against Draco's, and all common sense flies out of Draco's mind. He hates himself for it. It doesn't seem to matter. He wants Potter, even though it's the last damned thing he needs tonight. He really should go.

"How was New York?" he asks instead, exhaling an unsteady breath he hopes Potter doesn't notice.

Potter takes a drink, sets his glass down. He watches the barkeep pour a kir royale for a pretty girl down the bar from them. She takes it with a smile and a wink. Her dress only just covers the curve of her arse. Draco's quite certain Potter notices from the tilt of his head.

"New York was fine," Potter says after a moment. He looks back at Draco. His ridiculous, messy hair falls over one eyebrow, brushing against the top of his glasses. "Sorry for leaving so abruptly. " He has the grace to look a bit discomfited. "You know."

Draco turns on the stool, back to the crowd now. He needs time to think. He worries he's already lost control, if he ever had any to begin with. "So you're an arsehole. It's not like I didn't know that already."

"Fair enough." Potter's finger circles the rim of his glass, then dips into it. He pops his wet fingertip between his lips, then lets it slide out, and Draco's entire body tenses with want. Potter glances over at him, and there's a glint in his eye that speeds Draco's pulse. "But I did tell you I was going to wank for weeks to the thought of you on your knees with that pretty mouth wrapped
around my prick, yeah?” He smiles, a slow curve of soft lips and bright teeth. Draco’s quite certain this is how a cobra feels when confronted by a mongoose, dazed and overwhelmed. “I did, you know.”

The room feels as if a warming charm’s just been cast. Heat rushes across Draco’s skin, prickling beneath the silk of his shirt, and he can’t look at Potter. He’s doomed, he knows that now. “And I was supposed to infer from that,” he says, voice somehow staying even, “that you were intending to disappear for weeks on end?”

Potter’s silent.

Draco shakes his head. “You fucking bastard,” he says under his breath. He’s not entirely certain the barkeep’s not listening in. He’s too furious to care and too turned on to leave. He’s balanced on a knife-edge of self-hate and hate for Potter.

“Look, I never promised anything.” Potter shifts, and his knee presses against Draco’s thigh. Draco doesn’t want to move, the pressure is delicious; his body is responding to the faintest cue from Potter. Circe, he loathes himself for it. “It was a one-off—“

“I’m perfectly aware what it was,” Draco snaps. “A rough shag, plain and simple. I’m not an idiot.” He picks up his Boulevardier again. His head feels light, as if a thousand blue billywigs are buzzing about in it. “But that doesn’t make you any less of an arse.” He catches another glimpse of Pansy in the throng. She’s dancing with someone now, her pale arms draped over his shoulders, fingers tangling in his dark hair. Her red lipstick’s nearly off. Draco suspects he doesn’t have to worry about her sleeping alone tonight.


Draco’s eyes close. He can still feel Potter’s hands on his bare hips, the rivulets of warm water that’d run across their skin, the ache of Potter’s prick pressing between his arse cheeks. He draws a shallow breath. When he opens his eyes, the barkeep’s watching him. He wonders how pink his face is. Potter’s knuckles brush his thigh; Draco nearly jerks away, already impossibly aroused and desperate to hide. “Don’t,” he says. He hates it when Potter’s hand moves, settling back on the bar. He feels wound tight, a spring ready to break loose at the slightest touch.

“If you want,” Potter says, leaning in with lips too near Draco’s ear so that his breath ghosts along delicate skin. “I’ll be in the toilets.” He drains the last dregs of his glass and sets it down with a nod towards the barkeep. It takes everything Draco has not to turn and watch him walk away. Or follow him immediately.

Draco knows damned well he doesn’t truly want to resist, no matter how much he tells himself he will. With a sideways glance, he sees that perfect arse retreat into the back, followed a multitude of glances, both male and female. Potter’s broad shoulders part the bodies with a casual, effortless grace, his stride measured, yet on the prowl. No leonine preening there; rather Potter’s a lean panther, moving through the crowd with a coiled strength, a hint of danger, and more than a bloody smidge of arrogance. The whole of it goes straight to Draco’s cock.

Each second Draco stays at the bar is torture, but he makes himself count until he’s made it past seven minutes. It won’t do to seem too eager, if he decides to go back at all. He knows he’s going, but he tells himself again and again he’s not.

When he gets up, Pansy is waging to him across the club, dress straps hanging off her pale shoulders and the remnants of her lipstick smudged at the corners of her mouth, letting her pull of the night drag her away, his face turned so Draco can’t quite catch him. Smart man. Draco salutes wryly. He should follow them, he knows. It’s past time for him to make his way home.
Instead he turns and jostles his way through the throng, berating himself for being so stupid as to think Potter is still there. Or alone. It wouldn’t be the first time the bastard had led him on for sport, after all. All he needs to do is embarrass himself by looking for Potter, then go home.

Draco’s head is a mess of thoughts, figures, and an aching need to lose himself in something other than magical enforcement codes. Sideways glances and careful smiles tell him that he could have several options for this in the club, if he chose. Here he’s not the Malfoy twit; he’s just a body in the shadows, good for a few delightful moments of quick, breathless pleasure. He thinks about changing course, about drawing one of those pretty young lads only a year or two from Hogwarts into one of the corners and losing himself in quick, eager touches and rough kisses, both of them parting sated and without exchanging names. But none of them is Potter.

Bloody fucking hell.

The loo hallway is narrow and close when Draco reaches it and smells faintly of piss and, more sharply, of too-strong disinfectant charms. The dark stone floor is grey with dust in spots, and the blank row of silver-painted wooden doors are mostly closed. Weak light washes the space from overhead lamps floating near the black, embossed ceiling tiles. A row of sinks gleams from an alcove to his left.

Draco curses under his breath. This was a fool’s errand, and he’s an idiot for thinking it would be any different. Potter’s surely gone by now. He almost turns to go.

As if on cue, a varnished silver door further down creaks open toward the end of the row, catching his attention. Draco hesitates, then advances towards it despite the warning beating through his subconscious. He’s never been able to resist danger, not when his pride’s involved, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t raise his heartrate.

When Draco draws level with the door, Potter reaches out a muscled brown arm and drags him inside, warding the cubicle behind them with a snap of his fingers.

“You came,” Potter says. It annoys Draco how attractive he finds Potter’s sheer audacity.

There’s barely room to stand together, two men in a narrow space. Draco shifts, his shoulder blades to the thin dividing wall. Having a buttress at his back strengthens him.

"I thought I should make sure you were actually here and hadn't popped off to New York or somewhere.” Draco attempts to look bored. He’s anything but.

Potter smiles, the corners of his eyes wrinkling. It's not a comforting expression. "No. Not due in New York anytime soon."

"That's good, I suppose." Draco still can't look Potter in the eye. "Not that I care, mind."

"Of course not." Potter traces Draco's jaw with a warm, sure thumb, and Draco turns his head away, studying the spattering of uncouth comments etched into the back of the stall door, the great majority of them referencing the cock size of someone named Nigel. The incessant pulsing of the dance music is abstracted here, overlaid with human voices and vague sounds of clinking glassware and plumbing. Potter is silent for a few beats, and Draco thinks he may stop breathing.

"In any case," Potter says finally, his voice is low but sure. "I suppose I should make it up to you." And then Draco looks back at him, despite himself. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

As Potter cups Draco's bollocks with the confident flex of a practised hand, Draco's head tilts
back. "I think I could catch you up," Potter says, leaning in to give the barest nip at Draco's jaw.

In answer, Draco thrusts into Potter's hand. "Shit," he says, and Potter laughs against Draco's throat. Draco's achingly hard now, and he could come just from this, the pressure, the tension, the release. He grinds against Potter again, desperate for further friction, for something other than the wave of anxiety and tedium that has consumed him for months. He doesn't want to admit it, but this is the first time he's felt alive since Potter disappeared.

Potter leans back, pinning Draco in place with his arm over Draco's chest, leaving his other hand loose over Draco's bollocks. He's not letting Draco get anything near what he wants, and Draco nearly whines with frustration. "Not yet," Potter says. "Not like this. I'd planned to get you off with my mouth." When Draco tries to thrust against him anyway, Potter's strength becomes apparent. Draco literally can't move forward, and Potter barely has his weight on him. "Am I going to have to cast an Incarcerous to keep you still?"

Draco swears his prick doubles in volume in an instant at the thought, and his body shudders from his toes. Potter's low laugh sends goosepimples rising across Draco's skin.

"Like that, do we?" Potter asks. His thumb strokes along the swell of Draco's cock, sliding Draco's trousers with it.

"Fuck you," Draco says, a wave of embarrassment heating his voice. The heft of his prick in Potter's hand undermines his anger, he's quite aware. He doesn't care.

A flick of Potter's fingers, an almost imperceptible gesture, and Draco's hands are caught above his head by the spell's thin silk cords, tightening around his wrists and pulling him up onto the balls of his feet. Draco can't bite back the grunt that escapes as his shoulders twinge.

"Better?" Potter's nearly pressed against him. Draco can feel the warmth of Potter's breath on his ear.

Draco doesn't answer. Potter doesn't need him to, they both know that. Draco's cock is straining against his flies, the buttons pulling, and when Potter's palm presses down, Draco groans. Potter's mouth is on his then, rough and wet, swallowing Draco's soft gasp as he tugs Draco's trousers open and pushes his hand inside, past the waistband of Draco's pants. His fingertips brush the base of Draco's cock, and Draco twists against Potter, teeth scraping Potter's bottom lip.

"Circe, you fucking cocktease--" Draco breaks off as Potter's fingers curl around his cock, pulling it free. His head falls back against the stall wall with a quiet thud that sounds far too loud in the silence of the loo. "Goddamn it, Potter."

"What?" Potter's mouth is against Draco's throat, biting, sucking, licking. His thumbs smooths over the damp head of Draco's prick, pushing the foreskin back just enough to stroke the slit. "Am I bothering you?"

Draco's hips push forward. "You're a sodding tit."

Potter just laughs, and then he's on his knees, unconcerned about the filthy floor beneath him, pulling off his glasses and tucking them in his shirt pocket. He looks up at Draco; his eyes are wide and green and fringed with stupidly thick, dark lashes. When he smiles, deep dimples form on either side of his mouth. "I've been thinking about what you taste like," he says, his fingers curling around Draco's cock, thumb still holding the foreskin back. You know. Late at night, lying in bed. Trying to remember if you were saltier than you were sweet--" His tongue flicks across the head of Draco's prick, and Draco tries not to whimper. Potter's eyes close for the briefest moment before he's looking up at Draco again. "Definitely salty."
"Fucking hell," Draco manages to say, and then Potter's lips are pushing against his foreskin, tongue sliding across his wet slit. Draco rolls his hips, his wrists pulling against the silk cords holding him fast. He can't tear his eyes away from Potter, who's watching him as he takes Draco's thick, red cock into his mouth, slowly, agonisingly. Potter's fingers are on Draco's bollocks again, rolling them between his fingertips, and then Potter's mouth is nearly at the base of Draco's prick, his nose pressing against the pale golden curls there. He holds still, soft, short breaths coming in quiet huffs from his nostrils, steady warm bursts against Draco's skin.

Draco's trousers are rucked around his hips; Potter's pushing Draco's shirt up with his free hand, thick square brown fingertips smoothing across Draco's pale belly, over the sharp jut of his hip bone. When Potter pulls back, Draco's cock slides out of his mouth, slick and heavy. A thin string of spit connects them before it breaks, and then Potter's moving back again, his hand slipping down Draco's wet prick, his mouth following.

"More," Draco says, his voice high and taut, and Potter, to his surprise, complies, sucking Draco's prick until Draco groans and shifts on the balls of his feet. Potter catches Draco's hips, holding him still, his tongue circling around the throbbing swell of Draco's glans. "Fuck, please, yes, you arsehole." Draco's whole body shakes beneath Potter's hands. "Suck me harder, and mean it--you owe me, leaving me like you did--" He groans as Potter swallows around him, mouth tightening on Draco's cock. "Circe, you drive me mad--"

Potter's head bobs forward, and Draco wants to pull him hands free, wants to bury his fingers in Potter's thick hair as he slams forward, prick fucking Potter's perfect, pretty mouth. Instead, he swears again, his hips pushing forward against Potter's heavy palms, and he watches as Potter's mouth takes him in. He's dreamed of this moment, relived of Potter's lips on his cock as he's stroked himself off for months now, hating himself for the speed in which spunk spills over his fingers at the thought of Potter sucking him like this, and now he can barely hold himself back as Potter speeds up, his head bobbing forward, fingers digging into Draco's hips.

"You like this, don't you?" Draco says through his gasps. "Me here tied up for you, begging you to get me off--" He hooks an ankle around Potter's leg, barely keeping his balance. His arms jerk, and the pain goes shooting through his shoulders. He doesn't give a fuck. "Circe, it turns you on, doesn't it? If you could see yourself, sucking me--" Draco watches Potter bury his face against Draco's crisp curls. He shudders, body tense. "Potter, the sight of you on your knees with my prick in your mouth--fuck." Draco's entire body feels like it's on fire. He's wanked to this so many times, but it's different when it's more than just a fantasy, when Potter's here on a dirty loo floor, nearly gagging on Draco's wet cock.

Potter pulls back, letting Draco's prick pop out of his mouth. His hand speeds up, quick, firm strokes that pull Draco's foreskin up over his swollen head, then back down, nearly driving Draco mad with lust.

"Come on," Potter says, and his voice is hoarse, raw from Draco's cock. "You want to come on me, don't you? Filthy little bastard, I know you do. Come on, then, do it, yeah?" His fingers tighten and twist around Draco's prick; his eyes are bright and hot as he looks up, watching Draco writhe beneath his touch. Draco feels exposed, spread open, his body thrumming, shaking, pressing into each slide of Potter's fingers against his slick skin. He can barely breathe. He wants more than he can possibly say, more than he can possibly feel. "Take me," Potter choked out. "I want your spunk on me, yeah, on my face, just like you do, come on now, Malfoy, and give it to me--" He breaks off when Draco shudders and jerks, every muscle in his body clenching. Draco's so close, one more stroke and--

There's a pounding against the stall door. "What the fuck," a voice says, but Draco doesn't care. A cry rips from his throat, and he arches forward, thick strings of spunk spattering across Potter's
cheek, over his chin. Potter turns his face, catches Draco's cock with his mouth, sucking as Draco trembles beneath him, come spilling from the corner of Potter's lips.

"Fuck," Draco says, still shaking as he watches Potter lick him clean. He aches all over, and he feels limp and spent, only the Incarcerous and Potter's hands holding him up.

Potter rubs his cheek against Draco's softening cock. There's still come on his jaw, a slick smear of translucent white that Draco wants to taste. He barely notices when the Incarcerous releases and he stumbles forward, caught by Potter before he ends up on the loo.

"Steady," Potter says, standing up and brushing himself off. Draco doesn't think he can be. He slumps against the stall, studiously ignoring the sounds from outside, the quiet rush of water in the sinks and the murmur of voices as the door opens, then closes again. Potter wipes his face clean with a wad of tissue from the loo roll, then casts a quick cleaning spell on both of them. "You okay?"

Draco nods. He feels more relaxed than he has in days. "Tired." His eyes flutter open. "But not too tired to be of assistance."

Potter laughs, and he bats Draco's hands away from the swell in his jeans. "Not tonight. You've an exam in the morning."

"It won't take long." Draco tries to undo Potter's buttons. He wants to feel that heavy prick in his hands again. From the look of him, Potter is rock hard. Potter catches his wrists and holds them away.

"Later," Potter says.

Draco frowns at him. "I expect you'll just disappear again. Luxembourg or Bruges this time."

"No one goes to Bruges unless they're forced to." There's a loo flush from another stall, then the clank of the door opening. Potter steps back. "For Christ's sake, go home and sleep, Malfoy. They'll look for any excuse to fail you. Best not hand them your head on a silver platter."

"Ta ever so for the encouragement," Draco says. He hesitates, his hand on the latch. "You're still a sodding arsehole, you know."

"I suppose that's a compliment coming from you." Potter pushes the stall door open and steps out. A bloke at the sinks tries not to look at both of them in the mirror. Potter doesn't seem to give a damn. In fact, Potter gives him an appraising look before turning back to Draco, much to Draco's annoyance. Potter grins. "Let's not wait another three months, yeah?"

"Fuck off," Draco says, but it's more a pathetic whine, really, and he knows it. So does Potter.

And then Potter's gone, and the stall door slams shut behind him. Draco sinks down onto the toilet, his flies still undone, cock hanging limp between the folds of his trousers. "Fuck," he says, quiet at first, and then he slams his hand against the stall wall, rattling the open latch. "Fuck."

There's silence in the loo, then a hesitant All right, mate? from the sinks.

No, Draco thinks. I'm a complete fucking cock-up with a bloody self-destructive streak a sodding furlong wide, is what I am, mate, but instead he draws an uneven breath and exhales. "Yeah," he says, and he stands up, tucking his prick into his pants and pulling his trousers together. He steps out of the stall and scowls at the young wizard eyeing him sideways as he dries his hands on one
of the club's heated towels.

Draco hesitates, remembering Shah's comment months ago that Barnabas Cuffe kept Potter's exploits out of the *Prophet*. He wonders if that courtesy might extend to him. Somehow he rather doubts that. Potter might be protected, but Cuffe would take any chance he could to let a Malfoy hang out to dry. He's made that clear over the past eight years. There's barely a month that goes by without some hint of his father's scandal and his family's fall from grace being referenced in the society pages.

"One word," Draco says after a moment, not even bothering to look directly at the man, "one *whisper* about any of this to anyone and I will track you down and curse your bollocks--not hex, not jinx, but *curse*--with every form of boil, pustule and blain known to wizardkind, do I make myself perfectly clear?" He turns towards the man then, who flinches and steps backwards, nodding as he drops the towel into the bin beside the door. "Good."

The man lets him brush past in silence; when the door closes behind him, Draco lets his shoulders slump. Circe's tits. He knew better than to follow Potter. He knew better, and he did anyway, and fuck, but he's a damned fool. Filled with self-loathing, he pushes his way back into the throng of clubgoers and heads back towards the bar. Potter's nowhere to be seen, which suits Draco just fine, thanks. All he wants is another drink, maybe two to steady his nerves, calm his pounding heart.

You stupid idiot bastard, he thinks to himself as the lights from the dance floor flash across his face. None of this is going to go well. Look what happened last time.

The barkeep takes one look at Draco, then reaches for a glass and the top shelf bottle of firewhisky.

"A double," Draco says over the pulsating thrum of the music, holding up two fingers. The barkeep nods and pours, pushing the glass across the bar to Draco. He picks it up, drains it, then hands it back. "More."

He'll regret this in the morning. Fuck, he regrets it right now.

Whatever. If he can't get the feeling of Potter's hands on his hips, his prick, his bollocks to go away, he'll drink until he doesn't care.

Hangover potion's made for moments like these.

Draco takes the steaming glass the barkeep hands him and lifts it again. "Cheers," he says, and he knocks it back.

Fucking hell, it's going to be a long night.

***

"You look like shite," Shah says as Draco joins him in the registration queue for the sergeant's exam. A bored witch sits at a table in the corridor just outside the Auror department bullpen, weighing wands and examining warrant cards before sending exam-takers down towards the largest briefing room which the Promotions Board has taken over for the morning.

Draco feels like shite, to be honest. He'd made it home just after midnight and fallen into bed, nearly sleeping through his alarm this morning. He rubs the back of his neck. His hair's unwashed; he hadn't had time for a shower. Instead he'd cast a cleansing charm--terrible at the best of times, nearly useless when one has a hangover the size of Queerditch Marsh--and pulled his hair back with one of Pansy's hair ties that she'd left on his bathroom sink at some point. Somehow he'd
managed to dress in his proper uniform, even if his shirt's not properly pressed. The Manor house elves would be horrified; if he still lived at home, they wouldn't have even let him near the Floo this morning. He yawns and pulls out his warrant card. "Hangover potion hasn't kicked in. Yet."

Shah shakes his head. His dark curls bob, making Draco feel a bit off-kilter. "Mate, you are fucked, yeah? You know Bertie gave us all that lecture about being well-rested and shit. And here you are, out drinking? That's mad bollocks, innit?" He hands the witch his warrant card and wand. "Yeah, Megs?"

Megs looks up at both of them, then glances at Draco. "Sure." She marks Shah off her list. "Wand and card."

"Yes, it was stupid, and yes, I'm an idiot." Draco holds out his wand and warrant card. Megs eyes them with suspicion, then strikes through Draco's name on the parchment, the nib of her quill leaving behind a thick black line.

"Down the hall," she says. "Good luck. You'll need it."

Draco follows Shah into the briefing room. The rows of chairs have been replaced with tables, each a regulation three-feet apart, each containing an inkwell and set of quills tested by the Promotions Board. There'd been a cheating scandal two years back that had required an overhaul of the entire testing procedure, and now outside quills weren't allowed lest they be charmed already with the answers.

Shah drops into a chair beside a burly, ginger man Draco only recognises by sight. "Oi, Maxie," Shah says, bumping fists with the other man. "How's things?"

"Not bad, not bad." Maxie watches as Draco takes the table on Shah's other side. "They're letting Death Eaters sit the exam now?"

Draco tenses. His head's still throbbing; he doesn't want to have to go through this right now.

"Nah, he's all right, mate." Shah thumps Draco's shoulder; Draco tries not to wince. "Malfoy's a good one, yeah? One of us."

Maxie doesn't appear to be convinced.

The others are looking around now, catching sight of Draco, who sits stiffly at his desk, hands folded. He counts slowly in his head; he learned early that it helped to distract his anger in situations like this. And there have been many situations like this over the years. At least this time he isn't in danger of having the shite kicked out of him.

At least he hopes he isn't.

A tall woman, dark hair piled haphazardly on top of her head, stands up. She's across the room in what seems like two strides, leaning over Draco's desk.

"Malfoy," she says, and the amount of venom in her voice would quell a better man than Draco. He looks at her, gaze steady.

"Althea." There's been little love lost between them since their training days. He'd barely known her in Hogwarts; she'd been two years behind him in Ravenclaw, and when her cohort entered training, he'd been well into his second year. Her mother had been killed by Death Eaters--Yaxley and Dolohov, he thinks, but there'd been so many deaths in those days, so much killing around him, that he can't entirely remember--and Althea had been incensed that Robards had let him onto the force. She'd made it her mission to remind everyone at every possible opportunity that Draco
bore the Dark Mark.

He'd mutilated his forearm because of her. He'd been pissed out of his mind with firewhisky and pale rum—not a combination he'd ever try again—and grim after a day of Althea's shrieking at him. He'd sat in his bathtub, starkers, and used his wand to cast Diffindo again and again and again across his skin, slashing it into tatters. Blaise had found him there, blood streaked across the white porcelain tile, firewhisky a steaming puddle on the floor, and had managed to heal him before he'd gone too far, but the reminder of that night is still on his arm, thick, ropy pink scars that only just mar the faded grey Mark beyond casual recognition.

"I didn't realise Robards was letting scum work its way up the ladder," Althea says, quiet enough, but the whole room is listening in, Draco's quite aware.

His jaw twitches. "Well, you're here, aren't you?" He regrets the words the moment they leave his mouth. He knows better; he's been down this road before. Althea would have done well in the Slytherin commonroom.

There's a rumble around him, and two of the Aurors a row ahead stand up. Althea stops them, one hand raised. "You'll never get any further," she says. "We'll make sure of that, won't we, lads?"

"Quite right," someone says behind him. "Robards is off his fucking nut letting swine like that in with us--"

Draco starts counting again, breathing in and out with each numerical tick upwards. He wonders if he'll ever get used to this; he wonders if they'll ever realise that nothing they can say about him is worse than what he's thought of himself.

"Fuck off, the lot of you," Shah says, and Draco glances over at him in surprise. No one usually bothers to defend him, but here's Shah, pushing himself to his feet, his brown face scowling. "He's got every right to be here, just like you all have, and don't give me that look, Dickie-boy, because I ain't forgot some of the shite you used to get up to when we were lads on Oldham high street, yeah? Not one of you's an angel, but you're sat here, waiting to see if Robards and the rest'll say you're fit for sergeant, so I reckon, Malfoy's got the right for the same, so what I think is that you might want to sit the fuck down, Althea, and focus on your own bloody exam and not someone else's, see?"

The entire room falls silent. Althea and Shah stand toe-to-toe, glaring at each other, before Althea turns away, head held high. She brushes past Draco's desk, knocking it as she goes, and the inkwell tips over. A thick black stain seeps across the scarred wood of the desk before Draco can cast a containment spell. Althea doesn't look back at him.


"Watch that one," Shah says, flicking his wand at Draco's desk. The ink disappears, although the quills are stained along one edge. "She'll be glad to see you down a peg or two."

Draco sets the inkwell upright. It refills. He closes his eyes, wills his stomach to stop flipping. He's nervous now, even more so than he was before. He wishes Blaise were here with him, to help calm him, the way he had during their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in school. But Blaise was putting off his own exam for this very reason. If they'll let you make it through, he'd told Draco when the opportunity first came up, then I'll pass with flying colours. If they don't, none of us have a chance, whatever Robards says.

He's right.
So Draco's here today, surrounded by Aurors who he knows full well would turn their back on him if they were in the middle of a wandfight. For a moment he wonders what the fuck he's doing here, and then he glances over and sees Shah wink at him. A faint feeling of warmth twist through him. He's not entirely alone, he realises.

He picks up his quill as the Auror exam coordinator enters the room, her arms filled with stacks of parchment booklets, hair frazzled and wild.

"You'll be fine," Shah mouths at him, and Draco leans back in his chair, a calmness settling over him. He catches sight of Althea ahead of him, a furrow between her brows, her whole body radiating nervous energy.

All he wants is to best her score.

His fingers tighten on his quill, a frisson of excitement going through him, the way it had every time he'd tested in school. He has his goal; he knows his material. And finally his hangover potion is kicking in.

The smile he turns on the exam coordinator as she hands him the exam booklet is wide and bright.

***

Harry knocks on Gawain Robards' door, a quick double tap before he enters the Head Auror's office. The department is surprisingly busy for a Saturday, but most of the flurry is down near the exam room off one of the more secluded hallways. Harry wonders how Malfoy's doing; it's nearly noon, which means he's half-way through the test, if he's pacing himself well. He remembers the sergeant's exam; it'd been a beast of a test, even worse than the inspector's exam that Harry'd taken a year later. He supposes that's normal, though, given the exam's meant to separate the constabulary from the officers.

Gawain waves him in. "Harry, lad. Good to see you back with us again. New York was well?"

"For what it was," Harry says. He takes one of the wide leather chairs in front of Gawain's heavy mahogany desk. He glances around the office, with its tall, glass-fronted bookcases filled with books on Auror codes and Wizengamot judgments. Three arched windows look out on the Ministry atrium six levels below. The Fountain of Magical Brethren looks like a child's bath toy from this vantage point. Blue light spills through the stained glass DMLE logo in the centre window, pooling across the carpet.

"Well, when MACUSA asks for our best expert in Dark wizardry…" Gawain shrugs. "Besides, I thought you had personal reasons for accepting that assignment?"

"Of sorts." Harry doesn't really want to talk about those right now. It'd been a stupid idea at the time, and he'd known it. But Jake had asked, and three months together when they'd barely seen each other for half a year hadn't seemed an outrageous request. Besides, none of this was Jake's fault. He wasn't responsible for Harry's distance, for the way Harry's thoughts kept turning at the most inconvenient moments to a posh British wizard with a plummy arrogance and stormy grey eyes. Fucking Malfoy'd got under Harry's skin and stayed, and that was all Harry's bloody doing. He suppresses a shiver at the thought of Malfoy in that toilet stall last night, stretched taut, his perfect, ruddy cock bobbing so delectably in front of Harry's lips.

Harry draws in a slow breath and looks at Gawain. "Your owl said you wanted to speak about a new assignment?"

"Yes." Gawain pulls a thick file jacket from his desk drawer and sets it on the blotter between
himself and Harry. There are stamps across the front, ones Harry recognises as from the
Unspeakables. He's only seen them a few times, but it's hard to forget their thick, geometric lines and
inky black letters. He sits up, intrigued.

Gawain taps the file. "A Muggle murder was flagged in our system last week. Nothing too gruesome
or drastic. It might not have even caught our sensors, if it weren't for a witness statement that indicated
that one of the perpetrators of the incident vanished into thin air."

"Vanished." Harry's eyebrows go up.

"In a swirl of black smoke." Gawain tilts his head. "Obviously, that warranted further examination by the
Unspeakables to ascertain whether or not said perpetrator might be magical or if the Muggle witness-
..."

"Was off their face on drugs?"

Gawain smiles faintly. "Something along that line of thought, yes."

Harry leans forward, his elbows on Gawain's desk. "And?"

"See for yourself." Gawain pushes the file towards Harry. "It's been cleared for your eyes."

The file jacket is packed with parchments that are written in a code. Harry blinks once, holding the file in
his hands, and the letters shift and swirl before settling into proper English. He skims the statement.
It's as Gawain said, with a few more details, mostly irrelevant, although, Harry notes, the murder took
place in broad daylight outside of a pub in Swansea. He flips through the pages.
The victim appears to have no connection to the wizarding world, though the Unspeakables haven't
ruled out him being a Squib. Death appeared to have been caused by a knife wound with a magical
signature around the entry point that matched a historical record of--

Harry's head jerks up. "Antonin Dolohov?" The file drops from his fingers; the letters twist into code once
more.

Gawain looks grave. "So they're telling me."

"Dolohov's dead," Harry says, shaking his head. "We had his body. It was tested. McKenna and Bates
killed him themselves a year after the war--"

"In Glasgow, yes. It was quite the wandfight. Half the city centre had to be Obliviated afterwards."
Gawain runs his hand over his weathered face, smoothing down his greying beard. "I approved their
report myself. Everything was in order. And yet." He gestures, palms up. "Seven years later I have a
report on my desk from Granger herself suggesting we reopen the case."

Harry leans back in his chair, feeling oddly gutted. There hasn't been a Death Eater sighting in three
years; they've all been killed, put into Azkaban, or, in the case of Malfoy's father, virtually consigned to
house arrest. Harry'd led one of the tracking teams for two years after his training was fast-tracked. One
of his best moments had been the day he'd arrested the Carrows and brought them to the custody
desk.

Gawain gives him a sympathetic look. "You understand the sensitivity of this case."

"If it makes it to the Prophet before we know for certain if it's Dolohov..." Harry sighs and presses
his fist to his mouth. "Merlin. The whole wizarding world would implode on us."

"Kingsley would not be best pleased," Gawain says. "Which is why we want you to look into it."
Harry's fingertips brush the file again. "I can't do it by myself."

"You wouldn't have to." Gawain leans back in his chair, his hands folded across his chest. "You recall that team we discussed before you left for New York?"

Of course Harry does. But that'd been before Malfoy and the showers, and--Christ. He exhales. "I'm not certain it's a good idea any more."

"It's going to be," Gawain says. "They'll be waiting for you on Monday in incident room four. I've already had them reassigned. This is your chance to prove both of us right about them, Harry." He gives Harry a long look. "None of them have had an easy time of it since their training."

Harry doesn't say anything. Gawain takes out another file jacket and hands it to Harry. He opens it; the photo from Malfoy's warrant card glares up at him, mouth set in a narrow line, blond hair falling to just beneath his pointed chin. Malfoy looks grim, determined. Harry flips a page. There's Zabini, dark eyes regarding Harry with cool contemplation. Another page, and Parkinson looks up at him, her snub nose flaring in annoyance, one perfectly groomed eyebrow arching.

"You'll need to trust them," Gawain says. He's watching Harry with care, and Harry knows he's studying Harry's reaction with three decades worth of Auror experience. "This won't work for any of you if you don't, and they've far more to lose than you do."

"I know." Harry closes the file jacket on Malfoy's haughty scowl. This is destined to go tits up, he's certain, but Gawain feels strongly about this team, and Harry knows he's the only Auror Inspector willing to take them on. He nods his head. "I trust them not to get killed, can we start with that?"

Gawain's eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles. "I think that's fair." He holds a hand out to Harry; Harry takes it. Gawain's grip is firm and warm. "Special Branch Seven-Four-Alpha is formed--for the time being at least. We'll see how this case goes, then take it from there." He leans back and picks up his quill. "Now off with you. I'll expect you lot to be operational Monday morning."

Harry stands. "Thanks, sir." He picks the files up from the desk blotter. "We'll do our best." He heads for the door, boots sinking into the plush, pale blue carpet. What would it be like to have this office, to take on the mantle of Head Auror? He glances back at Gawain, his hand on the doorknob. Gawain's grey head is bent over a stack of paperwork; he frowns as his quill scratches across parchment. Harry can't help but wonder if it's worth it, if one day he'll be at that desk with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's not certain he wants it, if he's honest.

The outer office is quiet; Viola, Gawain's assistant, refuses to come into work on the weekends. In Harry's opinion, that's a rational decision. He's almost to his own office, across the bullpen from Gawain's when the pocket of his jeans rings. He juggles the files as he reaches in and grabs his mobile, flipping the clamshell open to see the caller ID.

Jake.

Harry hesitates, standing between empty desks in the bullpen. His thumb hovers over the mobile buttons before coming down firmly on the volume button. The ringing stops.

Guilt flashes through him, but he pushes it away. It doesn't matter that he's been ignoring Jake's calls since last night. He's busy, after all, and Jake knows that. They're both Aurors, for Christ's sake. Besides, Harry's already told him he needed some time. Some space. Jake wasn't happy about either.
Harry shoves the mobile back in his pocket and strides towards his office.

There's work to be done before Monday, after all.

***

Pansy pops a champagne cork, sending a bubbly froth pouring across Draco's small dining table, a hand-me-down he'd recovered from one of the lesser-used Manor parlours. Draco hides a wince as he lifts his flute to catch some of the champers before it completely ruins the finish.

"To Our Draco." Pansy pours champagne into lifted glasses around the table. "Brave enough to survive the sergeant's exam without having his arse flogged, more's the pity him, given he quite likes a good slap or two on the bum from what I've heard."

"Fuck off, you." Draco says amidst the laughter that ripples around the room. They're all gathered here tonight, Pansy and Blaise and Millicent and Greg and Theo, the whole lot of them. They don't see each other enough these days, he thinks. It's getting harder as they get older. Weekly dinners became fortnightly dinners and now monthly. Theo has Astoria and their daughter now, Millie's got her work as a solicitor, and Greg drifts, mostly, taking on odd jobs as he travels from country to country. He's only in London for a few weeks before he's off to Ibiza, for God only knows what reason. Draco doesn't want to know; he suspects whatever Greg's up to isn't entirely legal. "Look, all that matters is I took the bloody thing."

"Unlike Blaise." Millie clinks her flute against Draco's. "Coward."

"Testing the waters, Mills," Blaise says from the other side of the table. He drains half his glass in one gulp. "We'll see how Draco fares before I consider dashing my career hopes against the rock of the Promotion Board."

Draco lifts his glass to his lips. "Fair point."

He likes having his friends here in his flat; this is one of the few places where they can relax and be themselves without fear of someone watching, listening, making judgments. They don't all see eye-to-eye now—Theo's far more politically conservative than Draco is at the moment, and Draco's learnt to avoid bringing up any mention of Shacklebolt and his reforms when Theo's in attendance. Still, these dinners, whoever's hosting them, are their one chance to put aside the overly pleasant faces and conciliatory deference of their daily lives.

Frankly, Draco finds it a bloody relief. He doesn't mind the drips of candle wax on the cream table runner or tipped over wineglass that always happens when Greg's in attendance or the spread of dirty dishes and empty platters from the salad course and salmon mains that he'd picked up at Watchel's down Diagon after the exam. Pansy'd supplied the Victoria sponge and promised to hex him into oblivion if he let it slip she'd bought it at the Russell Square Waitrose after she'd gone for her morning coffee. It's not how any of their parents would have hosted a gathering of friends, but it's their little ritual, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Draco leans back in his chair, champagne flute in his hands, feeling warm and relaxed for the first time in days.

Millie helps him Levitate the plates into the kitchen later, as she always does. The others are deep into an argument over who's expected to top the Quidditch league tables this season. Draco knows better than to interrupt Blaise's impassioned apologetics for the Pride. Millicent, on the other hand, couldn't be arsed to tell the difference between a Chaser and a Beater, and never had been, much to the dismay of the Slytherin common room at large.
'When do they post exam results?' Millie asks, setting a scrubbing charm on the stack of dishes in the sink.

"Three weeks or so." Draco lines up the wine glasses and flicks his wand, sending a soapy sponge dancing through them. "Sooner if Robards has his way. He doesn't like the Board holding on to them too long."

Millie nods and leans against the counter. She's tall and sturdy, and no one would call her a great beauty, but Draco thinks she's grown into her looks over the past few years. Her mass of dark curls are twisted up into a loose knot, tendrils escaping at her temples. She's traded in frumpy school jumpers for silk cardigans and perfectly tailored trousers, hemmed at the right length for the small heels she favours. It's Hannah's doing, Draco's certain. Since they moved in together two years back, Millie's changed in small, subtle ways, her confidence unfurling along the way. It makes her a good defence barrister, he thinks, this being happy.

"How's work?" he asks, and Millie shrugs.

"Same as usual," she says. "You know I can't talk about it with you."

"Natural enmity between Aurors and barristers, and all that?"

Millie laughs. "See, you're practically a sergeant now."

The door to the kitchen swings open, and Pansy enters, her feet bare on the dark wooden floor, empty wineglass dangling from her fingers. "Just kill me, please," she says, "before I have to spend one more minute listening to Blaise praise the second coming of Duncan Inglebee, my God."

"Who's Dunc--" Millie starts, but Pansy cuts her off, hand held up. She's obviously had a glass or two too many of wine.

"I can't." Pansy hops up on one of the stools lining the centre island and sets her wineglass on the white marble countertop. She starts sifting through Draco's post, tossed messily in a small wicker basket at the island corner. "Suffice it to say he's wrong and a bloody idiot as well." She opens up a note with a scarlet-polished fingernail and frowns down at it. "You were sent this as well, darling?"

Draco plucks it from her hand and glances down at the scrawled note. "Right. Monday morning in incident room four. No idea what for. " To be honest, he'd assumed it'd had something to do with his confrontation with Althea this morning, but perhaps he'd been wrong. "You've been summoned as well?"

"Something along those lines, yes." Pansy's still sifting through the post. "Fuck only knows why, but if it pulls me out of the lab too long, I'll have someone's bollocks for it, and so will Jonesy. He doesn't like it when I'm away." She looks up at them both with a feral curve to her mouth. "Poor thing."

"One of these days," Millie says, "you're going to be called up on the carpet for harassing your pathetic excuse of a boss with those tits of yours."

Pansy lifts a shoulder. "If he's going to look, I'm going to torment him."

Milie snorts.

"Anyway," Pansy says. "I'm not sure I like them sending for both of us, darling." Her brow furrows. "It smacks of unpleasantness." She turns to Millie. "They can't sack you in an incident
room, can they?"

"I'm fairly certain they send you to human resources for that," Millie says dryly. "After writing you up in triplicate more than once. There are procedures, after all."

Draco folds the note up and tosses it on the counter. "Stop opening my post, you cow."

Pansy holds up another note, this one in his mother's hand. "You missed Sunday roast again, I see." At his glare she drops it back into the basket. "Fine, ruin my fun. I only came in for another bottle of wine anyway." She slides off the stool and pads over to the cupboard Draco uses as a wine cellar of sorts.

Millie exchanges a glance with Draco; he rolls his eyes. With a shake of her head, Millie walks up behind Pansy and reaches into the open cupboard to pull out a bottle of particularly drinkable Haut-Médoc. "Come on, love," she says. "Grab your glass and we'll leave the idiots to it, shall we? A warming charm or two and the garden'll be lovely."

*Thank you,* Draco mouths at her, and she wrinkles his nose at her as she leads a tipsy Pansy out of the kitchen. He doesn't even mind her selecting one of his favorite wines. Millie did have surprisingly excellent taste; everyone in the Common Room'd always underestimated her.

He hesitates for a moment then reaches for the note from Robards on the counter, unfolding it again. He frowns. There's something about the order that niggles at him, worrying its way into the back of his mind. Perhaps it's just the Auror in him, but every instinct he has is telling him there's something off. One doesn't get a note from the Head Auror on a weekend. There's a reason behind it, and Draco'd prefer to know what that reason might be.

With a sigh, he puts it back into the post basket. Like it or not, he'll find out soon enough, he supposes.

A swish of his wand sends the wine glasses back into the crystal cabinet across the kitchen. He catches one as it flies past, then heads over to the cupboard for another bottle of the Haut-Médoc. Pansy has it right, really. If he has to go endure Blaise's pontificating about Quidditch he'll need a full bottle just for himself. He also needs to keep his mind from spinning thoughts about Potter. He can't afford to daydream in front of the people who know him best.

He flicks the kitchen light off behind him.

***

Harry's sat at the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place, the Dolohov file spread in front of him, an open bottle of firewhisky at his elbow. He hasn't even bothered with a glass; it seems easier just to drink it as it is. There's no one here to impress, anyway, other than Kreacher, and frankly, Harry's house elf doesn't particularly care how Harry chooses to imbibe. They've reached an uneasy detente, he and Kreacher, over the years. As long as Harry invites a few friends into the house every so often, Kreacher keeps his whinging to a minimum. Still, Kreacher bemoans the state of the house most days, and how terribly it's fallen from its former glory. Harry doesn't care. He's not often in London long enough to even notice his surroundings, and when he is, he's mostly in and out of the Ministry.

Behind him, Kreacher bangs some pots into a cabinet, muttering unintelligibly. Hermione thinks Harry should release Kreacher from service, let him retire someplace warm, but Harry thinks that'd be cruel. Kreacher's too old to go anywhere else, and Harry suspects Kreacher wouldn't know what to do with himself even if Harry set him up with a place of his own. Besides, Kreacher enjoys complaining about Harry—to Harry and to anyone else who might pop by to listen. Harry'd
never want to take that away from him. Really, he'd miss it too.

He takes a swig of firewhisky and flips a page in the file. There's something about the witness statement that's bothering him, and he scrawls a note to have one of the team action that. His quill hovers over his notebook, and a drop of ink splatters across the margin. Harry's not certain he knows how he feels about having a team again, much less one made of Malfoy, Parkinson and Zabini. He'd thought it a brilliant idea back when Gawain had first brought it up, agreeing with him that having Aurors familiar with Dark families and Dark wizardry as a whole would be a benefit on a team charged with going after said Dark elements. Still, theory is different than practice, and Harry's more than a bit trepidatious about how the lot of them are going to take the possibility of working beneath him.


Harry sighs and sets the firewhisky bottle down with a thump. Fucking hell, but that's throwing a bloody spanner in the works, isn't it? Harry'd spent all last night with his cock in his fist, wanking to the thought of Malfoy's spunk spattering across his face. He'd barely made it home from the club before he had his hand fumbling in his jeans, a wet spot already spreading across his y-fronts. He'd just fallen on the sofa in the lounge, denim pushed down around his thighs, hardly tugging at himself when he'd come, hard and hot over his fingers, Malfoy's name on his lips.

Christ.

And here Gawain was asking him to take Malfoy onto his team, which made everything they'd done last night and the times before utterly against protocol. If Malfoy wanted to, he could have Harry hauled in for inappropriate behaviour. Harry doesn't think he will, though. Malfoy'd wanted more last night, would have let Harry fuck his mouth and probably his arse if they'd made it to that. Harry'd been a fool not to go further, but he'd wanted Malfoy gagging for it later, wanted to drag whatever this was between them out as long as he could.

That's rightly buggered now. Or perhaps spectacularly unbuggered.

The banging in the cabinets stops. Kreacher shuffles past, his dirty tea towel hanging from his shoulders. He refuses to wear the new one Harry's left for him in his rooms off the kitchen. Kreacher scratches his hip; the edge of the towel flips up to reveal a glimpse of scrawny elf arse. Harry looks away, waiting for Kreacher to disappear through the small door leading to his quarters. It's half-
ten, and Kreacher never stays up later than that.

The door snicks shut and Harry runs a hand over his face. He doesn't know what to do, really. He wants Malfoy. He has for years, and the little tastes he's had of him lately haven't done a damned thing to assuage that want. If anything, he wants him more than he ever has. And now he can't have him.

"Fuck," Harry says, slumping in his chair. He can't--he shouldn't--push this further, whatever he might want. He knows that. If Gawain finds out it'll be both of their careers, his and Malfoy's.

Still.

"Fuck," Harry says again, and he pushes up his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. Monday morning's going to be a complete bitch. He's quite certain of that.

His mobile buzzes beneath a sheaf of papers. Harry reaches for it and flips it open. He glances at the number calling, then swears once more, imbuing the word *fuck* with all the frustration and irritation that's been building up in him since his meeting with Gawain. He hesitates; the mobile buzzes again. He doesn't want to answer. Hasn't wanted to for days, and he doesn't want to think
about what that might mean.

He closes his eyes and hits the accept button, raising the mobile to his ear.

"It's me," he says, and he leans forward, elbow on the table, fingers pressed into his hair. "Hey, babe."

Christ, but truly he hates himself right now.

***

"Well," Blaise says, dropping into one of the chairs in the incident room, a mug of coffee cupped between his palms, "have we any idea what this is about?"

Draco shrugs. "Wrightson only said he didn't expect to see me back on his team for a bit. Robards' orders." He glances between Blaise and Pansy. "Not keen on the fact that we're the only three in here, though."

"They're going to sack the lot of us, I'm telling you." There are dark circles under Pansy's eyes, and she yawns, wide and loud. Draco's curious about what kept her up last night, but when he'd asked earlier, she told him to mind his own damned business. His money would be on a bloke, and most likely one he wouldn't approve of; that's usually the only reason she'd brush his interest off. He's willing to let it be. He doesn't want Pansy sniffing around his own recent mistakes. Pansy stands and stretches. She's dressed in pressed black trousers and a black silk shirt, the first two buttons open at her pale throat. It's odd to see her outside of her usual workday scrubs, Draco thinks. "I wonder if the French Aurors are hiring," Pansy says, walking up to the whiteboard, then back to her seat. "I quite like Paris." She's a bundle of nervous energy. Draco wishes she'd just sit the fuck down. The more she paces, the more tense he's getting.

When the door opens a few minutes later, he nearly jumps out of his skin. Robards strides in, followed closely by Potter, and Draco exchanges a look with Blaise and Pansy. This can't be good.

"You're here," Robards says, and he drops a stack of lavender file jackets on the table near the whiteboard. Classified files, judging by the colour. Draco's interest is piqued. "Constable Parkinson, if you don't sit down, I'll have accounting dock your pay for the day."

Pansy sits immediately.

Draco can't help but shift in his chair, straightening his posture. Robards has that effect on him, as much as he hates it. Blaise, on the other hand, lounges loosely in his seat, long legs stretched out, arm dangling over the back of the chair beside him. The epitome of calm coolness. Draco despises him sometimes.

Potter lingers near the door. He doesn't look at Draco, not at first, at least, for which Draco's both miffed and relieved. He wants Potter's gaze fixed on him, wants Potter to see him, to want him, to need him. But not, perhaps, at this exact moment. Not with Robards in front of them, handing out file jackets. He takes his, and opens it up to the first page.

"Special Branch Seven-Four-Alpha?" Draco looks up at Robards. "There's not a--"

"There is now." Robards eyes the three of them. "You're each being assigned to it, for the nonce at least. We'll see how you fare over the next few weeks. You will, of course, receive a pay rise commensurate with that of all other special unit Aurors."

Pansy's raised hand goes down.
The corner of Robards' mouth twitches. "You'll be under the command of Inspector Potter, who's chosen each of you for your special abilities--"

"We'll what?" Draco can't stop himself from interrupting Robards. His stomach flips, and he can't look at Potter.

"Which part of my statement wasn't clear, Constable Malfoy?" Robards scowls at him.

Draco tries not to flinch. His gaze darts towards Potter, who's standing to the side, his hands shoved in his trouser pockets, ruining the line of his uniform coat. The look he gives Draco is even, but his eyes flick away quickly. "Inspector Potter is our SIO?" Draco asks. He tries not to let his voice shake. Pansy doesn't frown at him, so he thinks he might have been successful. "It's just-"

"I'm quite aware there is some history between the two of you," Robards says, and for a moment Draco stills, terrified that Robards somehow knows about The Thestral's Wing, that the wizard in the loo had talked despite his graphic threats. "However, Harry assures me that schoolboy bygones are indeed bygones. I'll expect the same level of maturity from you."

Draco relaxes a bit, until a wave of irritation hits him. Level of maturity, his arse. He looks at Potter then, long and hard, and he fights back the urge to flick two fingers his way. Fucking arsehole. Potter just quirks an eyebrow at him. Draco wants to deck him.

"I don't understand, sir," Pansy's saying. "What's the point in a special unit with us--"

"You have the qualities I need," Potter says, stepping forward. He pulls his hands out of his pockets. His coat falls to his sides, slightly wrinkled. "The Ministry wants us to take on Dark wizards--"

Blaise frowns. "I thought we'd put them all in Azkaban."

"Most of them." Potter crosses his arms over his chest. He's in full-on Saint Potter mode, Draco thinks. It's his least favourite Potter persona. "Clusters of Dark Arts practitioners have been cropping up across Europe in recent months. The States too. That's part of what I've been involved in for the past year or so. Various law enforcement squads have been tracking increased chatter--"

"Illegal surveillance," Draco says. "There's not been a Wizengamot ruling--"

"Post-war legal directives give the Minister the right to order Unspeakables to register and record conversations that might have a bearing on national security," Potter'says, and Draco rolls his eyes. What a crock of shite.

"That's a fine line," he snaps, "and you damned well know it."

Robards holds up a hand. "We're not here to debate legalities, Constable Malfoy. In fact, quite the opposite."

Draco falls silent. He can't tell if Potter's annoyed or amused. Probably both, the bastard.

"Gawain and I think we'll have more luck tracking this uptick in the Dark Arts," Potter says after a moment, "if we have a team capable of recognising the people, items, and magic involved in said practice. That's where you come in. And me as well. We've each been touched by the Dark, haven't we?" Potter's gaze shifts from Draco to Blaise and Pansy. "We've seen it up close and personal, and forgive me if I'm wrong, but you lot wouldn't be sat here today if you hadn't rejected
"They've just been given free reign. Any spell, legal or not. Including Unforgivables."

"You'd be a fool to trust me, too."

All of them, Robards included, flinch at that name. Draco's surprised Potter's admitting this to them. It's not as if they don't know: there's been speculation and rumours for years about Potter's connection to the Dark Lord. Draco'd even heard whispers of it in the corridors of the Manor those last few years of the war. Still, the matter-of-fact way that Potter lays it out there discorcks him. Puts him on his back foot.

Perhaps that's Potter's intention.

"So," Blaise says. "You're asking us to go after Dark wizards. Because we were raised with them."

Robards nods. "In a manner of speaking."

"But just one Dark wizard right now," Potter adds. A snap of his fingers and the pages in their file jackets reshuffle. A photograph of a man Draco knows all too well appears on the top of the pile, dark eyes glowering up at him from beneath heavy black eyebrows. His blood chills. "Antonin Dolohov," Potter says.

"He's dead." Pansy's voice is faint. Wobbly. Draco understands completely.

Potter's shaking his head at her. "Might not be. His magical signature came up in regards to a Muggle murder. We want to find him, or whomever might be impersonating him. That's where our team comes in." He looks at each of them in turn. "Out of all the Aurors in this building, you're the least likely to get your fool arses killed in an investigation like this. You know the dangers. You know the people. You know what they can do, what lengths they will go to."

"And I think," Robards says, "that you'll be willing to do whatever it takes to bring Dolohov, or whoever this is, in. So I'm authorising you, with Minister Shacklebolt's full support, to use any means necessary to complete your mission. If you'll put your wands on the table, please. Yours as well, Harry."

Uncertain, Draco stands, along with Pansy and Blaise, and lays his wand beside Potter's. They step back, all them, and let Robard move in closer, bending over the table until his grey hair nearly brushes it. Robards sweeps his own wand over the four tapering wooden forms with a murmured incantation. Draco feels something uncurl inside of him, a subtle click of magic releasing, unlocking. The others feel it too, judging by the way they shift on their feet. Only Potter's still, his face closed, expressionless.

Robards straightens and turns towards them. "No more spell limiters," he says, and it's only then that Draco understands exactly what they're being allowed. After the war, a policy went into place to make certain every Auror has restrictions placed on their wands at the time of recruitment, ones that stay in place throughout their employment, and beyond, which keep them from casting any illegal spell. The only ways to get around the limiters are to have a new wand, one that hasn't been registered within the Auror system, or to have the restrictions lifted by the Head Auror himself.

They've just been given free reign. Any spell, legal or not. Including Unforgivables.
"Fucking hell," Blaise says, and Draco quite agrees.

"Don't make me regret this," Robards says. His gaze settles on Potter. "Any of you."

Potter gives him a small nod, which Draco finds curious. Perhaps Potter's not quite as golden as the wizarding world might like to make him out to be.

"You'll also need these," Potter says, and he pulls three small mobiles from his pocket, handing one to each of them. Draco's feels like a small, grey plastic brick in his hands. It's heavier than he expected. Nokia is spelled out above the miniscule screen; the numbered buttons are ridiculously tiny. "MACUSA's been using them for special teams. They're more effective than our usual methods of communication--" He breaks off at Draco's snort, a faint smile curving his lips. "Yes, well, Patronius and owls are a bit last century, aren't they? These are warded against spell tampering and magical influxes. The first generation had a tendency to burst into flames when exposed to a certain level of magical energy, but that flaw's been fixed now. My number's already programmed into each of them for you, but I don't suppose any of you have experience with a mobile?"

Blaise's thumb is already darting over the keys; something dings in Potter's pocket. Potter pulls out a mobile of his own and flips it open before barking out a laugh. He eyes Blaise. "Foul, but effective. I'm going to assume you've used one before."

"Mother prefers them," Blaise says. "These two, on the other hand, haven't a clue." Draco can't argue. He's seen mobiles before, but never had need for one. Pansy's holding hers as if it's a viper ready to strike. Blaise shakes his head. "Leave them to me. I'll bring them up to speed."

"Thanks." Potter tucks his mobile back into his pocket, but not before scowling down at it and shaking his head. He looks back up at them. "Keep these on you day and night. There's tracking spells on each of them, in case you lose yours--or we lose you. They're also equipped with a charm for instant communication within Auror earpieces if we're within a half-mile of one another. Should come in handy for tactical work, which we will undertake on this assignment."

Pansy's already shaking her head. "I'm a lab rat--"

"Who'll be out in the field at times." Potter shakes his head. "You'll get your lab time, Parkinson, but Gawain and I agree that having a magi-forensicologist in the field will save hours, if not days. I don't want our work held up in the laboratory backlog. You'll do it on the fly if necessary."

There's a mulish set to Pansy's face. Draco almost feels sorry for Potter. "That's shit science--"

"You're the top of your cohort," Robards says evenly. "I've seen your exam scores." He looks at each of them. "All of your scores. I wouldn't be endorsing this team if I thought you weren't capable of doing exactly what we need. You're operating outside of normal Auror parameters. There's no question about the guilt of the men and women you'll be sent after. We'll have the intelligence for you to work from, thanks to the Unspeakables. What we need from you is the ability to bring these individuals in for prosecution by the WPS in any way possible, up to and beyond standard Auror operating procedures on authority of the Office of the Minister himself. Are there any issues with that brief?"

They're all silent. Robards nods. "I thought not." He stands up. "I'll leave you to it, then." He claps a hand on Potter's shoulder. "Keep me up to speed, Harry."

When the door closes behind Robards, Draco pushes himself out of his chair and walks across the room. He turns when he gets to the wall, looking back at the rest of the team. "I'm not entirely certain I'm comfortable with this," he says. "Potter'll come out of this smelling like a rose; he always does. But what do we get from it? Anything we do crosses too far a line, and it'll be our

Potter ignores him. His gaze is fixed on Draco; it's disconcertingly sharp. "You're on this team because you have what it takes." He pushes himself off the edge of the table and strides towards Draco. He hasn't shaved this morning; there's a shadow of stubble along his jaw. "I'm in this as deep as you lot."

Draco laughs at that, a raw, bitter burst that jolts from the back of his throat before he can stop it. He presses his knuckles to his mouth; his other hand still grips the mobile tightly. "Bollocks."

"You have to trust me," Potter says. He's an arm's-length from Draco. There are toast crumbs on Potter's jacket. Draco wants to brush them off. He doesn't. Instead he turns away.

"I don't," he says. "I'm not sure I can." The words lie between them, heavy with a meaning that he knows Pansy and Blaise won't quite understand. But Potter does; Draco can tell by the almost imperceptible flinch that crosses his face.

Potter's still. His fingers flex at his side, almost as if he wants to reach for Draco. Draco steps away, moving past Potter, back to his seat. He drops his mobile in his pocket.

"Malfoy," Potter says finally, and Draco stops, his hand on the back of his chair. Potter's looking back over his shoulder, not having moved. "I will protect you. All of you. Whatever happens."

Draco sits down, a rush of weariness overtaking him. "I suppose we'll see, won't we?"

Potter walks back up to the whiteboard and picks up one of the charmed quills on the quill tray. "Antonin Dolohov," he says after a moment. "Let's go over what we know."

Pansy and Blaise flip open their lavender file jackets. Pansy gives Draco a small smile. Draco wants to bury his head in his hands and breathe.

This is all going to go spectacularly tits-up, of that he's quite certain.

***

"So what you're telling me is that you think you ought to throw away the chance at being part of a special unit?" Bertram Aubrey sets a mug of Yorkshire Gold in front of Draco, steeped double-strength the way Bertie prefers it, and with a generous splash of firewhisky steaming up the whole brew. He grunts as he sits back down behind his desk, slapping his hand against the bum leg that got him pulled from the field fifteen years ago. "Are you a damn fool?"

Draco blows across his tea. He's learnt from experience that Bertie's cuppas are scaldingly hot. "Potter's a shit, and if I've trouble with the rest of the force as it is, how's this going to help? They'll be ready to lay blame at my doorstep the minute something goes wrong." He frowns. "And with Potter in charge, something will go wrong."

Bertie's bushy grey eyebrows draw together. He looks like an annoyed terrier, all salt-and-pepper scruff and bulbous pink nose. There was a rumour going about at one time that he might have goblin scruff and in his family tree. Draco wouldn't be surprised. He's a half-head shorter than Draco, even in his boots, and he favours thick wool jumpers ten months of the year. He's wearing one now, blue tweed with the sleeves pushed halfway up his muscular forearms. Draco thinks he's seen Bertie in proper Auror uniform perhaps twice in all his years on the force.
"Potter's a good man to have on your side, though," Bertie says. He swallows a slug of tea. Draco winces. Steam's still curling around the top of his own mug, drifting over his fingers. "He's right to say he could protect you."

Draco slouches in his chair. It's old, and the stuffing's starting to poke through the seams on the arms. He's been in here countless times over the past eight years, one of Bertie's chipped mugs cupped between his hands. No one on the force knows him better; Bertie's one of the few Aurors whose opinion Draco actually trusts. "This wasn't what I wanted when I went forward for more training in February."

"You don't always get what you want, lad." Bertie sets his mug down on a stack of file jackets. His office is small and cramped and tucked away down a side corridor in the DMLE. Books and files are piled up in some mad order only Bertie understands, and the walls are lined with photos from Bertie's forty-five years as an Auror. Five more, he always says, and he'll retire with his pension in a Cotswolds cottage. Draco doesn't think he actually will. Bertie's a fixture on the force. Draco can't imagine it without him.

"It just irks me," Draco says. He knows he sounds like a petulant child.

Bertie drums his fingertips against his desk. "And Blaise and Pansy say what?"

"It's an opportunity to move up." Draco knows they're right. Special team assignments are like hen's teeth: seldom seen in daily life. At least not without a certain level of clearance and status, neither of which any of them have. For Circe's sake, they're still on the constable's level, as Pansy had pointed out. Most Aurors aren't considered for plum assignments until they're sergeants or higher. He sighs. "It just doesn't feel right to me."

He can't say what he wants to, can't point out that he thinks Potter's doing this to get under his skin, to humiliate him, to make him writhe with shame instead of desire. Potter knows Draco craves the respectability of the Auror force. How could he not? And here he was, toying with Draco like this, most certainly laughing up his sleeve. Hot tea splashes over his fingers, and Draco swears beneath his breath.

Bertie just watches him for a moment before he hands over a scrap of handkerchief pulled from his desk drawer. Draco doesn't want to think about the last time it might have been laundered properly. He dabs it over the drips of tea on his hands and his trousers.

"I reckon you're overthinking this," Bertie says finally. "I know there's no love lost between the two of you--" He shakes his head at Draco's protest. "You think he's a wanker, lad, and I'm not disagreeing. Seems to me our Chosen Saviour's been hurried up the ladder a bit faster than's good for him. I'd call him reckless and arrogant if he were under my watch, but he's still a damned fine Auror, even with all that." Bertie's eyes crinkle up. "Besides, it's not as if I don't have an arrogant little sod sitting across from me right now."

Draco huffs, but the smile on Bertie's face eases the sting of his words. "I'm not Potter." Thank Merlin.

"But you're a good Auror." Bertie leans back in his chair, hands folded over his chest. "And you've worked with difficult SIOs before. Potter's no different from, say, Channing, and you survived him."

Channing never thoroughly buggered him though, Draco wants to say. Not in the literal sense of the term, at least, and he feels his cheeks heat at the memory of Potter pressing him against the cold, wet tiles of the Auror showers three months ago, spreading Draco's arsecheeks with that
brilliant prick of his.

Fuck.

"This is never going to work," Draco says, and he sets his mug of tea aside on a tiny sliver of Bertie's desk that's free of parchment stacks. Elbows on his knees, he buries his face in his hands and just tries to breathe. He can't shag his senior investigating officer, that's for fucking certain, and he's not sure he can manage to spend day in and out with Potter at his side without wanting to sink to his knees and suck the bastard until he's begging to shoot his spunk across Draco's face.

"Is there something you're not telling me, lad?" Bertie asks gently.

Draco shakes his head and drops his hands. He sits back in his chair. A spring presses into the small of his back. He takes a deep breath, then exhales. He must look a fright, judging from the concern writ large across Bertie's face. "You really think this is a good idea?"

Bertie shrugs. "I think being on a team with Potter can't hurt your career, whatever you might believe. He has the ear of the Minister and the Head Auror. Keep your head down, do what he tells you, and he might put in a good word for the lot of you." His face softens. "And it's not just you, lad, is it? This could help Pansy and Blaise move forward, and it certainly couldn't hurt your chances with the Promotions Board. Think of it. You go in for your interview and they see on your C.V. that you're under Potter's command. They can't touch you then, can they? No whiff of the Death Eater when standing in the reflection of Potter's glory. Think about that, yeah?"

He has a point. "I want to go on record," Draco says, "of pointing out how awful of an idea this is. So when I come in and tell you I told you so, you owe me an apology."

"I'll throw in a bottle of whisky even." Bertie grins at him. "You can trust me."

"We'll see." Draco reaches for his teagain. He's probably making the worst mistake of his life, but there's no way to tell his mentor that. Not without ending up in front of the Ethics Review Board.

Fuck it, he thinks.

Bertie's right. It's only one assignment; he's certain the whole team will implode before they find Dolohov.

He just has to wait it out until then.

***

Harry's second-guessing his decision to have his team meet up in the sparring room at the Auror training centre on Tuesday after lunch. It'd seemed a good idea at first, a chance for him to assess the physical assets each of them brought to the table.

He hadn't, however, realised how distracting some of those physical assets might be. Christ, he's an idiot, he thinks, but his eyes keep drifting towards Malfoy in those joggers that stretch over his arse just so each time he runs up the staircase leading to the upper-level track circling the padded sparring mat. Malfoy's a good runner, with perfect form, knees high, back straight, eyes level even as he takes the steep steps. It's stood him in good stead during the paces Harry's put them through. He's quick and smart and can get out of the way of nearly any hex thrown his way.

And that arse. Merlin's sodding balls. Harry can remember how it felt beneath his hands, how tight it was when he pushed between those smooth cheeks. He has to look away before he pops an erection right here in the middle of the room.
Malfoy passes Parkinson easily. She doesn't have his fleet feet, but Harry'd been surprised at how strong she was. She'd taken Zabini down without breaking a sweat, and when Harry'd been shocked, she'd just grinned at him and said, "My ex was into Krav Maga." She's lean and muscular in her fitted crop top and leggings, her dark hair pulled up into a tight knot at the back of her head. For a labrat, she's lethal, and Harry's starting to feel better about having this team foisted off on him.

Zabini's a good dueller, almost as good as Harry himself. What he lacks in strength and swiftness he makes up in cunning. Malfoy's frustration sometimes interferes with his wandfighting, but Zabini stays cool and calm, always looking a step ahead. He's a full track rotation behind Malfoy and Parkinson, but that can be fixed, Harry thinks.

He claps his hands. "Come on, you lazy sods. Push yourselves. This is Dolohov you're going up against. He's strong; he's smart; he's a fucking killer. You need to be in the best shape of your lives." That earns him two flipped fingers from Malfoy. Parkinson and Zabini don't have it in them to do more than keep running, gasping for breath.

Malfoy reaches the end of the track, and, instead of taking the stairs back down, launches himself over the railing in an easy flip. He lands in a crouch with a grunt, trainers pressing into the soft mat, shoulder muscles tight and clenched beneath the sheen of sweat, damp hair falling into his face. Harry's grateful for the bagginess of his track pants, particularly when Malfoy grins up at him before standing straight.

"Fucking show-off," Parkinson calls from above. She takes the stairs, coming to a stop beside Malfoy. Leaning over to catch her breath, she punches him in the side. "Arsehole."

"Keep up, woman." Malfoy grabs a water bottle from the pile of towels and clothing at Harry's feet. He's on level with Harry's prick for just long enough; Harry pretends he doesn't notice the quick glance Malfoy casts at his crotch before looking away. Malfoy uprights himself and opens the water bottle, lifting it to his mouth. Water spills down his chin. Harry turns away, his traitorous body responding.

Zabini walks the last quarter of his lap, then limps down the steps, hand on his side. He's discarded his t-shirt at some point, and his dark skin gleams with sweat. "You're a sadist, Potter," he chokes out, then he gestures for Malfoy's water bottle. "Sustenance."

Malfoy hands the bottle over. "I'll leave your arse to be killed, you know." He's barely breathing hard now. Harry's impressed.

"There's a little thing called Apparition, you twit." Zabini drops down on a wooden bench. He winces, then lies down, stretching his long limbs the length of the bench. "Who needs to run?"

"Blaise is a lover, not a fighter," Pansy says to Harry. Zabini shakes a fist weakly her way. Harry hides a smile. "Seemed pretty good on the duelling pitch, unlike some."

"Fuck you," Malfoy says. He pulls the hem of his t-shirt up and wipes his face. Harry gets a glimpse of solid abdominal muscles and a hint of hip bone. "Are you satisfied we won't die on your watch?"

"Not entirely." Harry throws a towel at him. Malfoy catches it without looking. Seeker's reflexes, Harry thinks. It's part of why he's so fast on his feet. "But you'll do." He checks his watch. "We've still a half-hour to go, but what the hell. I've got what I need from you. You still need your medical checks before human resources will officially switch your clearance and your assignments--"
"Don't forget the pay rate," Parkinson says, and Harry grins.

"And your pay rate," he adds. "So if you want to spend this time over at St Mungo's, I'm fine with that."

Zabini groans. "I'm just going to lie here, thanks, and think about dying."

"Lazy sod." Parkinson stretches. "I'm off to hospital then. See if there's a nice young Healer who'd like to sign me off as healthy. Maybe check personally."

"Showers it is for me." Malfoy tosses his towel over his shoulder and heads off for the locker room.

Harry glances down at Zabini. "You're not actually dying, you know."

"Leave me be," Zabini closes his eyes. "I need to bloody recover from you idiots."

Parkinson shrugs when Harry raises an eyebrow at her. "He's always been a bit dramatic. And a sluggard." Her laugh follows her out the door.

Zabini continues to lie prone on the bench moaning. Harry suspects it's more for show than anything serious.

"All right there, Zabini?" he asks after a few moments. "Or shall I send for the medics?"

Zabini flings out an arm in response and shoves himself off the bench. "I suppose I can manage if I must." He winces when he takes a step. "How terribly unpleasant."

"It'll be worse in the morning," Harry says, with sympathy. He's been there before, muscles sore and cramping after a too intense training session. "You've got great technique, yeah? You're ace with a wand, but you'll need physical speed as well to survive against a wizard with experience like Dolohov has."

"Oh, trust me, I'm not above running away," Zabini says, shifting to gather his holdall and heft it onto his shoulder. "If perhaps a bit more slowly should we keep working this hard."

Harry snorts. "In that case, from where I'm stood, fighting looks like your best option."

If Harry is going to bond with the Slytherins, he's going to have to spar with them verbally as well as physically. He knows this, and yet, he's so used to working solo or on guest missions that it's strange to have a team of his own to build. It's a challenging proposition even without the complication that's lurking in the showers, occupying Harry's mind with rather too much intensity for the past few minutes. Malfoy, naked, soaping up that lithe body and tight little arse of his. Malfoy turning towards him, his prick bobbing out from his taut, hard belly. Malfoy on his knees in the tiled shower, eyes closed against the spray and water streaming down his face as he sucks Harry's cock.

Christ al-fucking-mighty.

"It's your fault if I don't pass the medical," Zabini says. Harry blinks, startled from his reverie. It takes him a moment to focus on Zabini, who's eyeing him, perhaps a bit too curiously for Harry's comfort. "You all right?"

"Sorry. Tired. Probably time-lagged." Harry rubs the back of his neck. He is worn out; he hasn't been sleeping well the past few nights. This assignment can make or break him, he knows that.
He's rather afraid it'll be the latter.

Zabini raises an eyebrow. "Yes, well, I can imagine it's quite exhausting keeping track of a stopwatch all afternoon."

Harry's mouth quirks to one side. He's starting to like Zabini. He's a mouthy little bastard, but Harry'd rather have that then the usual obsequiousness or sullen obedience he gets from the other Aurors. "Off with you, before I send you on another lap or twenty."

"God forbid," Zabini says with such sincere vehemence that Harry can't help but laugh.

He busies himself with the equipment in the room, checking and gathering his own things until Zabini's well down the hall, on his way to the small bank of Floos near the training rooms. It's foolish of him, Harry knows. Beyond, really. But he can't stop thinking of Malfoy, and even if he can't have anything else, he wants a glimpse of that long pale body. Certain that he's alone, Harry heads straight for the locker room, practically flinging his bag on the changing benches and tearing off his clothing. Steam seeps into the changing area, and he can hear the steady rush of water against tile. Harry hesitates, takes a moment to fold his clothes into a neat pile, his glasses perched on top. He wraps a white towel around his waist and takes a deep breath.

This isn't anything, he tells himself. Just a look as he walks past. A moment to think about later, as he sprawls in bed with his cock in his fist. He still feels like a bloody pervert.

It doesn't stop him from walking into the shower room towards the steamy cubicle to his left.

Harry pauses at the threshold, watching Malfoy's naked body under the torrent of hot water. The reality hits Harry like a blow. If his imagination was distracting, it's nothing like the real thing.

Harry's riveted, unable to look away from the way Malfoy's muscles tense and flex as he moves beneath the water, arse round and dimpled, skin flushed pink from the heat. He's beautiful like this, his guard finally down. Malfoy lifts his face into the spray of water; his hair falls against his jaw, sticking to his wet skin. He turns to the side, and Harry sees only sharp hipbone and muscled thigh. It's the first time Harry's really had to look at Malfoy like this, to study the flat planes and solid angles of his body, to drink him in like pale champagne.

He takes Harry's breath away.

And then Malfoy wheels to face him, a wandless hex on his lips.

Stepping into the cubicle, Harry says, "It's just me."

Malfoy rubs wet blond hair the color of sand out of his face, pushing it back behind his ears. His sharp face is twisted in a furious expression. "What the fuck are you doing here?" His tone is low and dangerous. When Malfoy gets angry, Harry's noticed, he gets very, very quiet.

Harry doesn't answer. He just looks at Malfoy, taking in his pink nipples and flaccid cock, the narrow rivulets of water that roll off his flushed skin and splatter between his toes and the dark golden trail of hair that runs from his navel to his pubic bone.

Still, Malfoy doesn't move to cover himself up. He stands there, water pouring over his shoulders, his hands at his sides. He's looking back at Harry, mouth a thin, tight line. "For fuck's sake," he says after a moment. "I don't know where you get off, Potter. I could march up to Internal Affairs and have you put on suspension without so much as a by-your-leave."

"You could do." This is entirely true; Malfoy would be well within his rights. Harry's his SIO, not to mention two ranks above him. This breaks every code of conduct in the Auror handbook. It wouldn't
take much for someone to think Harry was overstepping his bounds, possibly even
putting pressure on Malfoy to continue their sexual encounters. Which, by the by, he ought to have reported to Robards before he was put in charge of a team Malfoy was on. Harry knows all of this. He understands exactly what is at stake.

And still.

Malfoy's not turning away. "I should," he says.

Harry nods.

They watch other, silent. The rush of water echoes through the room. Harry hesitates. Hopes. For what, he's not certain. He wants to reach out and touch Malfoy's arm, but he doesn't dare. This isn't his choice, not entirely.

When Malfoy glances away, Harry's stomach flips. Perhaps he has the wrong impression, after all. He's not certain if he feels relieved or disappointed. Perhaps a bit of both, if he's honest. "Right then," Harry says. He turns to go, cold air striking his chest as he moves from the warmth of the steam.

He's make it three steps out of the cubicle, when Malfoy says, "Wait."

Harry looks back.

Malfoy is still furious, mouth twisted in a faint snarl. But his cock has certainly stood up to take notice, and Harry's responds. Malfoy wants him. He wasn't wrong at all.

"Get your ridiculously attractive arse and loose interpretation of the Auror Code of Conduct back in here, Potter." The glint in Malfoy's eye is almost predatory. "Before I realise what a horrible mistake I'm about to make."

Harry does as he's told, pausing only to let his towel drop to the floor. When he steps back into the cubicle, Malfoy turns to the side to give him room. The shower is still on, steam warming the space between the slick walls.

Harry stands facing Malfoy, letting his body relax. He's not sure of this, not sure of Malfoy. He doesn't know what Malfoy wants or why he called him back. Somehow the knowledge that he's not in control is oddly elating. He can only wait for Malfoy to tell him. The thought sends a shiver through him, one that he's certain Malfoy notices.

An odd look flits across Malfoy's face, and he crosses his arms over his narrow but muscled chest. His prick is full at attention now, heavy and ruddy and curving up towards his belly, and Harry struggles to look at his face.


Something about the way the honorific comes out, sharp and sarcastic and scornful, makes Harry's cock twitch. Fuck, but Malfoy's shirtlessness gets under Harry's skin in just the right way. He can't keep back the small smile that curves his mouth. "I thought you'd already done that."

"I want to see it again. And more, perhaps, this time." Malfoy pauses, pondering. His eyes narrow as he studies Harry's body. "Are you limber enough to stick fingers up your own arse while wanking? I'd rather not see you die in the shower. Explaining that away might get a bit messy."

Harry's body trembles a bit in anticipation. "Yeah. I could do that."

"All right." Malfoy leans back against the wet shower wall. "Show me, then."
Keeping his gaze locked with Malfoy's, Harry reaches his hand out for an experimental tug on his prick. The heat and the intensity of his response under Malfoy's scrutiny takes him by surprise, and his eyelids flutter shut of their own volition. "Oh," he breathes out.

"Yeah, just like that." Malfoy's voice is rougher now. Harry notices, his eyes still closed. He doesn't know how, but the insult makes him even harder. That familiar, sneering tone is some kind of perverted aphrodisiac. He thinks he might be able to come just from the scorn in Malfoy's plummy voice. Harry speeds up his pace, fingers tightening around his cock as he pulls harder, breath catching.

"No, slow down, Potter." Malfoy sounds annoyed. Irritated, even. "You've got to work for this one. Show me how much you want me to look. Hold my attention, for Circe's sake. If you're going to break rules, do it properly, you idiot."

Harry risks a quick glance then. Malfoy's attention is fixed on Harry's prick; he bites down on his bottom lip, then licks it, his chest rising with each uneven breath as he watches Harry's fingers slip down the length of his shaft.

Well, then, Harry thinks. Might as well give him a show. After all, that's how he reeled in the bastard in the first place, now wasn't it? And wasn't that fucking hot, watching Malfoy's stealth charm fade and tremble as Harry stroked himself off? Christ, but Harry'd come hard for a good fortnight afterwards, every time he'd thought of Malfoy watching him. It'd got to the point where Jake'd barely needed to touch him before Harry was shuddering against him, his thoughts consumed with visions of Malfoy naked, shoulders pressed against the white tile wall, the head of his cock wet and red between his fingers as he wanked to the sight of Harry tugging one off.

Fuck.

Harry shifts, bracing his shoulders against the tile and thrusting his hips forward. He knows he looks good. He's been working hard at his physical training for months now, and he's muscled and lean. He has Jake to thank for that, he thinks with a brief pang of guilt. All those extra training sessions in the New York Aurors' gym had really pushed his fitness to the next level.

Much less the exercises in the bedroom that had followed.

Harry doesn't want to think of those. Not right now. Instead he rolls up on the balls of his feet, pulling his prick roughly from root to head, rolling his palm over the swollen tip, then pushing his foreskin back with his thumb. The slide is delightful, as is the stupefied expression on Malfoy's face as Harry fingers the slick slit, opening it ever so slightly with a fingertip. He bites back a soft hiss. He loves the feel of that, his nerves tingling with each small press of his finger into the soft cleft. He wishes Malfoy's tongue was on him, dragging over his slit, tasting his salty wetness.

"Is this how you want it, Malfoy?" Harry manages to get out. He twists his finger over the tip of his prick, then lets his foreskin slide back over. He pulls and tugs it, rolling the velvety skin between his fingertips before pushing it back again. He's leaking more now, and he spreads it over the head, down the shaft.

"Yeah." Malfoy's hand is curled around his own cock now, not wanking it yet, but clearly on the verge. His voice is breathy. "Yeah, that's good. Put some muscle into it, Potter."

Harry plays with his foreskin again, pinching it together and rolling it over the tip. He loses himself in the sensation, his mind remembering what it had been like to sink into the plush perfection of Malfoy's arse. He doesn't know if he'll be able to shower here anytime soon without his cock hardening. It's almost Pavlovian: the showers, Malfoy, the quiet gasps of breath, his prick heavy and hot in his hands.
"I thought I told you to stick your fingers up your arse." Malfoy is definitely wanking himself now, though he's still trying to be subtle about it. His fingers move slowly over his stiff length, barely brushing over the skin.

Harry aims to change that. He turns himself around, cheek to the shower wall and arse facing Malfoy. Pushing his hips back, he puts his hand under the shower spray, then touches his fingertips to his arsehole. He's taken his fair share of rough rides over the years and enjoyed the fuck out of most of them, so he's pretty good at relaxing dry. His fingers are wrinkled from the steam, and a bit easier to slide in. He makes a show of breathing hard and tensing his arse muscles as he presses a finger into his hole, working it in slowly up to the first knuckle. He lets himself settle for a moment. It burns, but he exhales, willing himself to relax. His body is hot and tight, and he wonders what this looks like to Malfoy, him pressed against the wall, fingers twisting carefully into his arsehole.

By the regular slapping sound behind him, Malfoy has lost his control and is wanking himself roughly now. Harry imagines Malfoy stretching him open, shoving that hard cock inside him with an imperious groan. It's easier to slide the tip of his second finger deeper into the rim of his arse when the muscle relaxes more. God, but it feels good.

"Is that enough for you, Malfoy?" Harry's rubbing himself with his right hand, not enough to get himself off but more than enough to stay interested. He could come just from the closeness of Malfoy and the high of presenting himself for Malfoy's enjoyment.

"Not hardly, Potter." There's a groan between the words, and Harry can hear the uneven breaths Malfoy's trying to suppress as his hand moves over his prick. "Frankly, I'd rather be ramming you into the wall. But since you're my SIO, it hardly seems appropriate." The wanking sounds indicate that this consideration doesn't slow Malfoy down very much. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"You could, you know." Harry grunts as he manages to get the second knuckle in on both fingers, and he hears Malfoy's rough intake of breath. "I'd let you shag me rotten here, no lube, just your cock and my arse."

Malfoy bites off a moan. Harry hears it, and it goes straight to his own prick. He wants to ruin Malfoy with this, ruin both of them. He wants Malfoy to want him the way Harry bloody well wants Malfoy: with a wild, unstoppable, career-destroying madness.

"Fuck," Harry says. "Anyone could walk in here, you know. See you deep-dicking your SIO. Watch me on my knees for you." Harry is on the edge from the thought of it, his balls drawing up and away from his body. He's ready to shoot at any moment. Malfoy is close too. He's not talking, but the sound of his breathing is choked in the small space.

"Would you like that, Malfoy? Do you want people to see you fucking me?" Harry twists his fingers against the rim of his arse. It's not as good as Malfoy's cock, but it's all he has at the moment, and he's going to bloody well make do with it. "God, I'd do it. I'd put my arse up in the air for you--"

"Shut up," Malfoy chokes out. "Circe, Potter--"

Harry groans. "Yeah. Come on. Show me. Splatter my arse with your spunk." He shudders. His arse is loosening around his fingers and he's almost managed to find a spot that feels amazing. He's in that zone where the climax is coming, it's just a question of when. "Fuck, yeah. Let me have it."

Malfoy reaches out, and Harry feels his own fingers pushed further inside his arse by unexpected
pressure. He groans, surprisingly wrecked by Malfoy's hand on his. It's only sheer willpower and the determination to push Malfoy over the edge first that keeps him from coming. His body is shaking with the strain of it, but it feels amazing at the same time.

"God. Potter. You insufferable prat. I can't." Malfoy's breath hitches. "I can't fucking believe we're doing this. Fuck."

Harry wiggles his arse, and it brushes Malfoy's cock and that's all it takes. Malfoy swallows a shout as he shoots all over Harry's lower back and arsecheeks, his palm keeping Harry's fingers shoved up inside him. Harry shudders, drawing up on the balls of his feet, his whole body prickling hotly from the sound of Malfoy's climax and the delicious burn of his own fingers in his arse coupled with a perfect squeeze of his own hand on his prick. He cries out; the force of his spunk hitting the tiles takes him by surprise. It's as powerful as if Malfoy had been fucking him all along, and Harry supposes, in a way, he had. In both of their minds, at least.

"Fuck," Malfoy breathes out, and then he steps back, the warmth of his body gone from Harry's back. Harry turns around, but Malfoy doesn't look at him. "Don't," Malfoy says when Harry opens his mouth. Harry falls silent. He feels hollowed out, unsettled. The water's lukewarm as they clean off, shoulder-to-shoulder, but not speaking a word.

Malfoy leaves the shower first, letting Harry soap up his hands one more time before shutting off the spray and reaching for the rough towel he'd dropped on the floor outside.

Harry's not surprised to find Malfoy sitting on the bench in the changing area, a towel still slung low around his hips, his shoulders slumped. As Harry slides his glasses back on, Malfoy is quiet, his hands scrubbing over his face.

"What are we doing?" Malfoy asks finally. He looks up at Harry then, and his face is tight. Unhappy. "Because this is madness, Potter. We both know it."

Harry doesn't know what to answer, so he waits.

Malfoy rakes his fingers through his wet hair. Water drips down onto his bare shoulders. "And it's not just me, mind, or you and your sodding golden reputation. My best friends are on this team. And I have to lie to them." He drops his hands, leans forward, elbows on his thighs. His fingers twist together.

Harry leans against a metal locker, a clean, grey t-shirt in one hand. He's still a bit boneless from the force of his climax. He hasn't a good idea of what to add, but he suspects that Draco is on a path to saying something important, and he doesn't really need to contribute anything. Not yet, at least.

"This was the last time," Malfoy says, looking away from Harry. "I don't, I can't, I won't sleep with you. Not when you're my SIO. Maybe not even when you're based in Britain. I can't have this bollocksing everything up. I've worked too hard."

"Fair enough." Harry's voice scratches his throat. This isn't what he wanted to hear, but he's not surprised. He even thinks Malfoy's right. This is reckless. Stupid. Idiotic even for Harry, and he's done plenty of foolish things since the war. Still. There's a part of him that's drawn to Malfoy like a moth to a flame, fully aware that he'll be consumed, burnt alive. He draws a deep breath. "It doesn't change anything about our work on the team. That was never... I talked to Robards about creating this team. Before, you know."

Malfoy's eyes are wide, wild, and he stands. Harry wants to take a step back. "I know this is a game for you, Potter. You've nothing to lose, but me? I have everything to lose. Everything." He
takes another step forward. Harry can't step back any further--his back is pressed against the metal. Malfoy advances on him, Harry stands firm.

And then he kisses him, and Harry drops the shirt to the floor in one motion as his arms come up to grab Malfoy's shoulders and Malfoy's hands are on his hip, pulling him close. Malfoy bites his way into Harry's mouth, teeth on Harry's lips, licking his tongue hard into the depth of Harry's mouth, and Harry lets him. It's like a benediction, a release, a contract signed, a bond sealed. They don't need to say any more than this. The die has been cast. They're too deep into this to stop.

Harry waves his conscience goodbye as Malfoy pushes him into the locker, snogging him like a randy teenager.

This is worth it. This is enough.

Malfoy pulls away, stumbles back. He presses his knuckles against his mouth and shakes his head. "I can't," Malfoy says. He grabs his clothes from a locker and pulls them on, his back to Harry. "Malfoy--"

"Please don't." Malfoy's voice is quiet. He turns and looks at Harry. "If you want me off the team--"

"Don't be an idiot." That's the last thing Harry wants. His heart stammers against his chest. He knows it'd be better for both of them, but the thought of Malfoy walking away makes him feel like sicken up. He doesn't want to think about that and what it means.

Malfoy's silent. He sighs. "You're a temptation," he says after a moment. "I ought to run away as fast as I can--"

"You won't," Harry says softly.

"No." Malfoy picks up his holdall. There's a bitterness in his voice that Harry recognises. "Because I'm a damned fool."

Harry stops him before he reaches the door. "I'll control myself," he says.

Malfoy gives him a wry half-smile. "The problem, Potter, is that I'm not certain I want you to." The door closes behind him.

Harry runs his hands over his face.

"Christ, Potter," he says under his breath.

He wants to believe he can walk away from this, wants to think he can keep Malfoy at arm's length, wants to do the right thing, be responsible, not fuck up his life and Malfoy's to boot.

Deep down inside, he knows he can't. He won't.

Harry slams a locker door. The metallic clang echoes in the silence. "Fuck,"

he says, and he sinks down onto a bench.

One day he'll be a better man. Just not today.
Next chapter will go up on Friday, March 24! Subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on Tumblr at femmequixotic!
Chapter Summary

In which Harry struggles to get his team together and be a proper SIO, and Draco...well. Draco isn't helping. At all.

Chapter Notes

Hermione is POC in this work because I love and adore POC!Hermione. <3 This chapter has an autopsy scene, some post-war trauma, and a rather embarrassing preoccupation with sex. Oh, and there's definitely some more power imbalance and role negotiation. Six ways from Sunday.

Thanks again to noeon and sassy_cissa for the beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco runs through St James Park, the slap of his trainers against wet asphalt almost matching the harsh huff of his breath. Cold rain soaks his hoodie and plasters his hair against his cheeks. It's mad of him, he knows, but he hadn't been able to sleep, and it seemed a better use of his time to run to work, rather than sit at his rain-streaked kitchen window with another cup of tea, his thoughts swirling once again around Potter.

At least this way he can distract himself somewhat with the burn in his thighs and calves. Draco turns onto Birdcage Walk; the spires of the Abbey rise up over the buildings around him. Bleary-eyed Muggle civil servants on their way to various Ministries and departments spill out of the Tube stations and onto the slick streets of Westminster, a sea of black and grey umbrellas occasionally broken by a bright floral or plaid or even the rare Arsenal or Chelsea supporter who'd obviously left their good brolly at the pub. Another turn left, and Draco's running down the broad pavement of Whitehall, his steps taking him past the Imperial War Museum and the guarded gates of 10 Downing where his Muggle counterparts watch him suspiciously as he dashes past them, pushing himself as hard as he can, his gasps coming in rough, ragged bursts that feel like Diffindos slashing through his lungs.

He barely thinks about Potter at all.

Draco's feet take him into a narrow street behind the Old War Office Building. He slows, his chest heaving, then draws to a stop, feet stuttering in splashes along the puddled pavement. He walks a few steps and stretches before he glances around. No Muggles in the vicinity, at least not yet. He touches the wand tucked in the waistband of his leggings, then with a sharp crack, Apparates into the Ministry atrium. His wet trainers leave marks on the polished wooden floor, and his bedraggled appearance earns him more than one quizzical look from the stream of Ministry workers swirling around him in their neatly pressed robes. Draco just takes a deep breath and exhales, his eyes closed for the briefest of moments. He doesn't know how he's going to make it through today, how he's going to face Potter across the incident room after last night. He can still feel Potter's body against his, hot and slick and hard, following Draco's every instruction, and the
very thought makes him shudder with want, right here.

"Pull yourself together, you twat," Draco murmurs to himself. He looks up at the towers rising around him, glittering columns of stone and brick and glass that curve their way up to the domed glass skylight. Six floors above him is Robards' office, with its three distinctively arched windows, stonework curlicued around them, a stained-glass rendition of the first DMLE logo gleaming from the centre one. Draco almost thinks he sees Potter standing in the left window, but he blinks, and the figure's gone. Circe, but he's losing his damned mind.

He shakes his head and makes his way to the nearest loo. A quick slash, then a drying and a cleaning spell, and he slips out of his wet running kit and into his work clothes, pulled from his charmed holdall. He doesn't bother buttoning his Auror's coat, but he does run his hands through his pale blond hair, not that it helps any. He'll still be sporting the drowned rat look today, it seems.

With a sigh, Draco gives up and heads to the lifts. Might as well get this over. He'd considered Owling in ill this morning, but he was fairly certain Pansy'd see past that ruse and start asking potentially humiliating questions. She knows far too much about his encounters with Potter in February. Thank Merlin he hadn't told her he'd actually let Potter bugger him; she'd have him by his bollocks for that. As it was, she's already pulled him aside to underscore exactly how problematic it would be should Potter know Draco'd been watching him wank in the training centre showers three months past. Draco'd lied through his teeth, swearing to her it'd never happen again, that he wouldn't be so foolish as to put all their careers on the line.

He hates that she'd believed him. He's never lied to her about something like this.

The lift doors open with a soft whoosh and a woman's voice saying, "Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement." Half the lift comes with him, a few fellow Aurors with paper cups of tea already in hand from the commissary, as well as several assistants, arms filled with stacks of file jackets, parchments sticking out of the ends. The lot of them ignore him, to Draco's relief. He'd rather that than be accosted, as he had been his first few years on the force.

He makes his way into Auror headquarters, raising a hand at Shah across the bullpen before heading down the corridor towards the incident room. He almost reaches it before Althea turns the corner, flanked by Davies and Shah's friend Maxie.

"Malfoy," Althea says, but she doesn't move out of the way.

Draco sighs. "Circe, are we really going to do this?" This is not what he needs right now, not when he's already so tense. He knows Althea loathes him. She's been perfectly clear about that, and Draco's also quite aware that the knowledge that he'd been picked for Potter's team has filtered its way through the force over the past two days. Althea'll be furious about that, he's certain. She'll want his place, and then his bollocks on a silver plate.

"Think you're special, do you?" Althea's nostrils flare. "What exactly did you have to do to get Potter to notice you, Malfoy? Bend over?" She scowls at him. "Open that pretty little mouth of yours?"

For a moment, Draco's heart stutters, and he's afraid someone's found him out. He can't breathe for the shock of it. A steady look at Althea, though, and he's certain she's only stabbing in the dark. Because, of course, Potter'd only want him for his team if Draco put out, wouldn't he? A Malfoy hadn't anything better on offer in these days, no matter how hard he might have worked to prove himself to these tits. Still, deep down, Draco's not so sure Althea's entirely wrong, and that thought stingterribly.
"Naff off, will you?" Draco tries to sidestep the group, but Maxie blocks him. Draco eyes his bulk and his muscular, crossed arms. Fuck. He doesn't want to get into a scuffle here. No matter how it goes down, it'll be him against the three of them, and Professional Standards will, of course, take their side. Who'd believe the word of a former Death Eater against three outstanding Aurors with commendations? Even if he is a special unit Auror now.

After all, Draco's never been commended for anything.

"We're watching you," Davies says, stepping closer to Draco. Draco pulls away; his back hits the corridor wall. Davies smells like cheap apothecary cologne, and his dirty blond beard needs trimming. "You're up to something, that much we know."

Draco bites back the mad laugh that threatens to bubble up. Fucking Merlin, it's like he's back in Hogwarts again, trying to repel those fucking cupboards with Potter and his friends following him about. "I'm not," he says. "For fuck's sake, do you think I'm an idiot?" Obviously, they do, and that offends Draco more than anything. He moves away from Davies' stink, not bothering to hide his disdain. "Get the hell out of my way, the lot of you."

Althea's wand is out, the point pressed against Draco's throat. "I don't trust you, Malfoy," she says, and then her eyes flick to the left, her focus behind Draco. Her wand lowers.

"Is there a problem?" Potter says from behind Draco's shoulder, and Draco wants to throw a strop then and there. Shit. Fuck. Bugger. The last bloody thing he needs is Potter rescuing him. He's going to have to prove himself without Potter; intervention from the higher ups only ever make these animosities worse. Besides, it's a sodding combination from hell, this is: Potter in full on saint mode, conjuring up all of Draco's agonies and ambivalence and attraction towards the arse at the moment, and Althea, like usual, mulishly determined to be a right proper bitch this morning. It's a toss-up which is worse, and, really, he can tell already this is going to be a tipple from the firewhisky flask kind of day.

Draco sighs and turns, and Potter's there, a cup of tea in hand, Bertie beside him, one bushy eyebrow raised.

"No problem at all," Draco says, and he smooths his coat down. "Althea and I were just having a discussion, weren't we?"

But Althea's looking at Potter now, a frown scoring a deep line between her eyebrows. Her features are sharp, almost ratlike in a way, although Draco hesitates to compare her to rodents. He likes most animals better than he likes her, after all. "They say you're working with Slytherins," Althea says, spitting the house name out.

Potter shrugs. "And?"

This puts Althea on her back foot, but only for a moment. "You can't trust them," she says. "They'll stab you in the back--"

"So will anyone else, if you let them." Potter takes a sip of his tea. "I've known more than one Gryffindor who'd do the same."

Althea's frown deepens. "Not true." She hesitates a perfect moment before adding, "sir" with just the right amount of contempt and politeness. Draco's impressed, really. It's one of the things he likes about Ravenclaws, that well-calculated jibe.

Potter's mouth twitches; Draco's surprised that he's caught the subtle dig. He'd always thought Potter just a bit too thick for that. He'll have to be careful not to underestimate this astute side of
Potter. "I suppose we'll have to agree to disagree. Wouldn't you say, Aubrey?"

Bertie clears his throat. "I reckon." He gives Althea a pointed look. "Might be some of us are a bit too young to understand what certain squads bring to the table."

Althea's face flushes. "Malfoy's a Death Eater--"

"Unproven," Potter says. He doesn't look at Draco.

"He has a Mark!" Althea's voice rises; Draco winces at the shriek. An assistant crossing the hallway down from them nearly drops his stack of parchment. He casts a curious look their way before hurrying on his way. The whole bloody department'll know about this by the time Margaret comes through with the tea cart at eleven, and she's the worst gossip of them all, even if she does like Draco a bit--only because she's a bit of a pash on Blaise, he knows, but still. He'll take what favour he can get.

Potter doesn't flinch. "I've only seen a scar. You, Aubrey?"

Bertie scratches his jaw and frowns. "Big scar."

Draco feels his cheeks warm. Potter's still not looking at him; Draco's grateful. He doesn't think he could handle it. He hadn't realised Potter'd seen his forearm, although he supposes that was a stupid assumption. Potter'd been inside him, for Circe's sake, and all over him after that. It's not that he's hiding the scar outright--despite his best efforts and to his great chagrin, it's been glimpsed or whispered about by half the force by now--but it's personal in a way that makes him squirm to have had Potter's eyes on it.

Althea looks as if she could spit fire faster than a Norwegian Ridgeback. "I don't know what the hell you're doing, sir," she says to Potter, "but if you don't think this will blow up on you--"

"Stand down, Whittaker," Potter says, his voice taking on a sharp edge, and Draco sees the superior officer in him now, tall and commanding, the mantle of Auror Inspector settling across his wide shoulders. Fuck, but he finds Potter attractive like this, and he truly hates himself for it. Besides Potter ought to know better, and Draco wonders how long it's been since he's been on a team. His interference is only going to come out of Draco's arse later, after all, once the higher ups aren't looking.

Still, if he's honest, he'd go down on his knees in a heartbeat for this Potter, despite the ranks between them and the humiliation he'd endure. A roil of heat flutters through his belly. The ignominy has an erotic edge.

Althea stills, bristling, and Draco almost thinks she's going to push back again, but a touch of Maxie's knuckles against her forearm and she's stepping away, clearing the corridor. "Sir," she says again, once more imbuing the word with all the disgust she can without crossing a line.

Davies looks a bit alarmed. He side-eyes Potter, who ignores them both. Draco notices the tense clench of Potter's mouth, though, an expression he recognises from their school days. He has a wild urge to goad Potter, to make him lose control the way he had when they were children.

"Get to work," Bertie says, and Davies and Maxie nod, nearly marchstepping Althea away. Bertie turns back to Potter and Draco. "Christ, that woman."

Potter shakes his head. "I can't blame her," he says after a moment. "She watched her mother be tortured to death when she was sixteen." His jaw works. "You know, she asked to join the team yesterday. Heard we were going after Dolohov."

"You turned her down," Draco says. He feels an odd twinge of sympathy for Althea, which
annoys him no end. He doesn’t make a point now of having enemies--it’s a mindset he’s better off avoiding--but she’s creeping into that slot despite his best intentions.

"It wouldn't have been good for her." Potter's still looking down the hallway, towards the bend that Althea's just disappeared around. "She's too close to it; she'd get herself killed."

Draco watches him, conscious of Bertie's presence at Potter's side. "I lived with Dolohov--"

"You're not going to get yourself killed," Potter says, voice sharp again. He looks at Draco then, his eyes narrowed and bright behind his glasses. "Are you?"

"No." Draco doesn't really believe himself, but Potter needs to hear it, he thinks. And there's a bit of him that thinks maybe Potter wouldn't mind so much if Draco died in the line of duty. It'd be a fitting end, wouldn't it? Death Eaters killing each other off and all that tragic, moralistic tripe. He scowls. "I'm quite good at looking after my own skin," he snaps. "Aren't I?"

Potter nods. "Then get your arse into the incident room. We have work to do."

Annoyed, Draco nods to Bertie, who appears to be trying not to smile. Then he turns on his heel and storms into the room, slamming the door behind him. Blaise and Pansy are already there, in front of the white board that has key case info scrawled across it. They look up.

"All right there, old man?" Blaise leans back against one of the desks, arms folded over his chest.

Draco calms himself, aware of Potter coming into the room behind him. "Brilliant," he says trying not to sound bitter. Neither Blaise nor Pansy look convinced. Pansy's eyes flick towards Potter, and the furrow in her brow deepens. If Draco's not careful, she's going to have the truth soon and then the jig really will be up.

Potter walks past Draco, so close that Draco can smell the crisp scent of the soap he used this morning. He wants to smell so much more. He looks away as Potter stops in front of the board, studying it.

"So," Potter says after a moment. "What we know is that there was a murder in Swansea two weeks past. It flagged for us last Tuesday, so it's been in our system eight days now."

"Slow start." Blaise chews on a sugar quill. He keeps them in his pockets for when he's thinking; it's one of his odd work quirks that he's kept from his Hogwarts days. Draco finds it amusing most of the time. Today it just irritates him.

Potter runs a hand through his hair. "Yeah. But to be fair, it took some time to convince the higher-ups that we might be looking at Dolohov."

"I'm still not certain we are," Draco says after a moment. He's managing to calm himself somewhat. Enough to slide into his Auror persona. Practical. Cautious. Not stupid enough to nark off his superior officer, if he can help it. Definitely not stupid enough to sleep with him, or at least that's what he'll pretend. "Magical signatures can be forged."

"True." Potter shrugs out of his Auror coat. His white shirt is creased and rumpled across the back, and he's wearing a set of dark blue braces that are attached to his grey wool trousers with silver clasps and only serve to highlight the shift of his muscles beneath the white cotton. "I had Gawain sign off last night on a review of known magical signatures in our database that might come close to the one recorded at the murder. Dolohov's a perfect match, but there are others that come close." He picks up a stack of file jackets and hands them to Draco. The quick contact of their hands is warm. "Sort through the reports and pull the ones that are the closest match, then run a whereabouts check on those."
Draco nods. It's something to do that'll keep him out of the incident room for a while. He's grateful for that. He doesn't know how much more scrutiny he can stand today.

Potter turns to Blaise. "You I want reading through the Muggle reports. At some point I suspect we'll need to interview the witness, and I'm going to put you on point for that."

"Thanks, I suppose," Blaise pops the sugar quill out of his mouth. There's a faint red stain on his bottom lip.

"You're good with people," Potter says. "I've read your file. Out of all of us, I think you're more likely to charm some information out of her--" He catches himself. "Within proper protocol, of course. Whatever freedoms we have on this squad, I'd rather wait to use them when necessary."

Blaise wrinkles his nose. "Pity." He points his sugar quill towards the picture of the witness on the whiteboard, a petite, curly-haired blonde. "She's not bad on the eyes." He's all talk and little bite, Draco knows. Blaise has never been the one night stand sort of fellow. He likes the chase, the push and pull of seduction. He's more like his mother than he'll admit.

"Keep your trousers done up," Pansy says from her chair. When Potter looks back at the white board, she winks at Blaise. Her hair's loose around her shoulders today, and Draco thinks he might see a love bite on her throat, half-hidden by the high collar of her purple blouse. He wonders if it's the bloke from the club last weekend, and that makes his cheeks heat, remembering exactly what else happened that night. He doesn't have love bites—he was careful to spell everything away, but that doesn't mean he wasn't marked by it. Pansy shifts in her seat, turning towards Potter. "Tell me you want me in the lab."

"That I do," Potter says, and Pansy cheers. Potter gives her a warm smile; a flare of jealousy twists through Draco and he glances away. Potter's his, not hers, for fuck's sake, as much as Draco bloody well hates that feeling of possession, of ownership. He's no right to it, after all. He breathes out through his nose, calming himself. Potter discombobulates him, irritates him, drives him around the bloody twist. He doesn't know how he's going to manage working with Potter. This is all a horrible idea. Wretched, really, and the only person who's going to be buried by the rubble of the certain implosion is him. Draco rubs his hand over his face and sighs.

"All right there, Malfoy?" Potter asks, and Draco drops his hand. Pansy's watching him again, her eyes hard and calculating.

He clears his throat. "Fine." Blaise knocks his elbow against Draco's and gives him a small smile. Draco tries to smile back. Judging from Blaise's quirked eyebrow, he fails.

Potter hesitates, as if he wants to say something, then he shrugs and turns back to Pansy. "It's still just a theory that Dolohov's alive," he says. "I want you to go through his remains and prove one way or another who they belong to." He checks his watch. "They should arrive within the hour, or so I was promised."

"You already got the disinterment order?" Pansy looks impressed. Draco is as well; it takes an Upper Wizengamot Council vote to touch human remains. Even for Potter that's a lot of influence.

Yet another mark in the finding Potter attractive column, damn it.

Potter smiles. "Pulled a few strings. What's your working theory on how Dolohov might have managed this?"

"I think the Unspeakables might be onto something." Pansy taps a lavender file jacket with a pale pink fingernail. "Their report suggests the possibility of a transfiguration spell. Possible, but not
likely. I'll start with that premise and see what I find."

"Right then." Potter claps his hands together. "Clear out, and if you need to cut through red tape, ring me on my mobile."

If Draco weren't so still impressed, he'd be rolling his eyes at Potter's smug assurance. They all stand, and Draco's almost at the door, behind Blaise, when Pottersays, "Malfoy, a word, please."

Bollocks.

"Try not to be a complete prick," Blaise says to Draco under his breath with a pointed look, and then he's gone, trailing Pansy down the hallway. Draco doesn't blame him. His fellow Slytherins know the depth of his temper and his capacity for self-destruction. He steadies his shoulders, then turns back, his hand still on the doorknob.

"What?"

Potter rubs the back of his hair. He looks delicious in his button-up shirt and braces, blue tie loose around his neck, his warrant card clipped to the waistband of his trousers. "I just thought we should…" He trails off. "Yesterday."

Of course Potter just can't leave it be, can he? Bloody Gryffindors and their need to talk things through. It's worse than being with a woman sometimes, Draco thinks. Not even Pansy wants to dwell on uncomfortable subjects this much. She'd much rather wave a wand to hex you and then get ratfaced.

"There's nothing to say." Draco closes the door and leans against it. "It was a mistake, and we both know it. Don't we?"

Potter hesitates, then he shrugs. "If you say so."

"I do." Draco can feel the thud of his pulse against his throat. "Are we fine? Sir?" He's a bit late on adding the honorific.

Potter doesn't look happy. "Sure." He moves closer to Draco. "We'll be working together, after all. Wouldn't want anything to be uncomfortable."

Draco tenses as Potter stops in front of him. "No, we wouldn't." Potter's mouth looks so soft and tempting, demanding so much more than Draco can give him now. He breathes out in a slow huff. "Even though you're an arsehole."

Potter just watches him.

The room's silent, save for the creak and wheeze of the old radiator in the corner. Draco's entire body feels tight and hot, and he wants nothing more than for Potter to reach out and touch him, to press the heel of his palm against the swell of Draco's crotch, to feel Draco get hard beneath his fingertips. To bring him off mercilessly and make him beg for more.

"Fuck," Draco says, and he turns away, hand ready to pull the door open. "I can't--" "If Althea gives you any more shite, tell me," Potter says then, his voice low.

Draco looks back at him. Potter's arms are crossed over his chest, wrinkling his shirt even more. His hair's falling forward, over the rim of his glasses, and he looks grim. Severe even. "Yeah," Draco says, and they both know he never will.
Potter sighs. "Malfoy--"

"Look, guv," Draco says, and he hates himself for sliding into the familiar Auror slang, for creating that connection between himself and Potter. 'I've work to do. So, if you don't mind...' He doesn't wait for Potter's answer or his permission before stepping out into the hallway, file jackets under his arm.

Draco strides down the hallway, his hands shaking, not even looking back when the door opens behind him.

This is going to be impossible, he thinks. Perhaps Althea's right. Potter wants him because he's good at sucking his prick, doesn't he? He looks good on his knees. Draco's fingers tighten around the file jackets. It's not because Draco's good at his job.

Bastard.

He turns the corner, catching a glimpse of Potter in the hallway behind him.

Fuck that. He'll prove him wrong.

He's a damn fine Auror, after all.

***

“Oi, you’re late, stranger,” Ron says from kitchen doorway when Harry tumbles into the cosy Islington flat Hermione and Ron only just moved into six months back. They’d paid a small fortune to have the hearth redone and hooked into the Floo Network; two generations of Muggle tenants had sealed the fireplace behind plasterboard and a terrible cottage rose wallpaper that Hermione’d stripped off the first day they had the keys. Ron’s doing well for himself now. He has a good head for business, and combined with George’s creativity, Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes is already considering expansion into the French and German markets. This, along with Hermione’s position with the Unspeakables--she's rising quickly through the ranks of the Department of Mysteries--has catapulted them into a comfortable post-war domestic life. "Hermione said you’d be here at half-six."

Harry brushes soot off his trousers. It's the first time he's been over since he got back from New York a week ago. Hermione'd found him in the commissary at lunch and insisted he come for dinner.

“Sorry. Got caught up with work.” Even if it's not the entire truth, it's also not a lie. Not really. Sure he’d spent half the afternoon checking in on Malfy every hour or so, but it's his responsibility as team leader to make certain his Aurors are doing what they're told. And if it'd annoyed Malfy a bit to be watched from the doorway, well, that was just a plus in Harry's book. A flushed, irritated Malfy's like bloody catnip to him right now. He scolds himself for thinking it a pity he couldn't stay to rile him more.

Anyway he'd mostly wanted to make certain Althea and her lot kept their distance. The last thing he needs is a kerfuffle on his hands. He'd spoken to Gawain already, asked him to make certain personally that Althea was given a one of the better cases on file, something that would keep her not only occupied but also feeling favoured. It was a diplomat's trick he'd learnt from Jake, smoothing ruffled feathers by making people feel wanted, respected. Most of the time it works brilliantly. Harry suspects it'd have the opposite effect on Malfy. Christ, but the prat went out of his way to be a prickly bastard. Harry's still not entirely certain he's doing the right thing, having Malfy on his team. Parkinson and Zabini are more malleable. There's a chip a mile wide on each of their shoulders, sure, but nothing that Harry can't handle. They both want to prove their worth, and he can use that to his advantage.
Malfroy, on the other hand, is an enigma, a Pandora's box of contradictions and ambiguity and anger, and Harry finds that combination dangerously appealing. And whatever it is between him and Malfroy—animosity, attraction, a heady combination of lust and loathing—Harry knows it's personal, that Malfroy reserves a special place in his scorn just for him. Perhaps that's why Harry just can't help but provoke him.

"Beer?" Ron asks, moving back into the kitchen.

"That'd be great, thanks." Harry toes off his boots and drops onto the long and cushy tufted beige sofa that Ron had talked Hermione into after seeing it in a store window in Chelsea. A soft crimson cashmere blanket's draped over one rolled arm; Harry pulls it over his lap and stretches his stockinged feet out towards the fire. It started raining again an hour ago, and a wet chill's taken over the crisp May air. In the breeze outside, tree branches tap against the two tall, thin windows framed by white wooden bookshelves that stretch up to the ceiling, already stacked with all of Hermione's treasured books.

Ron leans over the back of the sofa and hands Harry a bottle of porter, opened. "This should take the edge off."

Harry takes a swig of the beer, letting it roll around on his tongue. "Fuck," he says after a moment. "I've missed a good beer. It's all about IPA in New York, and everything's served too cold." He leans back against the arm of the sofa, looking over at Ron. "How've things been around here?"

"Not bad. Shop's well." Ron settles into an overstuffed armchair next to Harry. His feet are bare beneath his frayed jeans and he's wrapped in an old Gryffindor Quidditch jumper. His ginger hair's cut short, and his beard is neatly trimmed. It suits his face, Harry thinks, as much as Hermione'd complained about it at first. Ron takes a drink from his own bottle. "Hermione's busy with the Unspeakables, but you know that better than me, I'm sure. She just got home herself—she's back changing." He lets his bottle dangle from his fingertips, over the arm of the chair. "We're talking about kids again. Maybe."

"Really?" Harry's pleased. It's been three years since their wedding, and he's ready for another godchild, which reminds him that he has Sunday roast this weekend with Teddy and Andromeda, if the case doesn't keep him in the office. "That's brill, mate."

Ron flushes and gives him a half-smile before lifting his bottle to his mouth again. "Yeah, well, we'll see. We just got Mum off our backs, so…"

Harry knows what he means. It's taken years for Molly to stop trying to put Ginny beside him at every family dinner, much to their amusement. Ginny's dating Neville, now, and Molly likes him, so she only gives Harry a wistful look now and then across the table.

"Harold!" Harry laughs at the familiar nickname as Hermione flies out of the back hallway, her dark curls bouncing against her brown cheeks, lithe in joggers and the FC Barcelona t-shirt he'd brought back for her a year ago when he and Jake had been in Spain for a mini-break. He doesn't remember exactly when she'd starting calling him that—no one else does—but it's set in over the years, and it makes Harry feel warm and loved. "God, I'm so glad you're home." She wraps her arms around him and kisses his cheek from behind. She smells like the rose and jasmine perfume Ron buys her from a parfumier just off Boulevard Saint-Germain every time they go to Paris. "I hate it when you're away so long."

She drops down on the other side of the sofa; Ron beams indulgently at her when she props her bare feet against Harry's thigh. Harry pulls them into his lap and rubs at her toes. She has a penchant for wearing too high heels that pinch her feet. "There's only so much New York I can take," he says.
Hermione flexes her feet beneath his fingers and sighs. "Even with Jake around?" The smile he gives him is sly.

"Even then." Harry doesn't want to tell her he'd fled back to London, that he'd left with only the briefest of goodbyes to his erstwhile boyfriend, and he's been dodging his calls more than he's answered them. He particularly doesn't want to explain why.

She frowns at him now, apparently sensing something from the shift in his inflection. "Something's wrong?" Hermione's always been good at picking up his moods even when Harry'd rather keep his thoughts private.

He shrugs. "It's not really working," he says after a moment. The truth is usually the safest place to start, even he's not sure what it is.

"You've been together a year and a half," Ron says, putting his beer bottle on the floor. He ignores the frown his wife gives him. "I thought this was serious." He sounds a bit disappointed, much like his mum, and Harry feels guilty again. Ron's happy with Hermione; he'd like nothing better than for Harry to find someone to settle down with--man, woman, Ron's made it clear he doesn't care as long as Harry's happy and comes round for meals enough. Every time Harry breaks up with someone, he's certain he's letting Ron down once more.

Hermione snaps her fingers and a coaster flies from the mantel to the dark wooden floor, nudging itself under Ron's bottle. Being an Unspeakable has been brilliant for her magic; she's been doing wandless spells longer than Harry has. "Wasn't that the whole point of this New York trip? Seeing how you did living together?"

"I suppose." Harry rubs a knuckle down the arch of her foot and her toes wiggle. There's no way he's mad enough to tell his best friends that he couldn't stop thinking about grey eyes and long, pale limbs every time he was in bed with his boyfriend, and that seemed, perhaps, to be a warning sign. It wasn't Jake's fault, after all. Harry'd been the arsehole in the relationship, and he's willing to admit it, to himself at least. Jake Durand's the nicest bloke Harry's ever dated: smart, funny, genuinely kind. All of Harry's friends like him, and that had surprised them since Harry's usual type tends to be a bit of a shit. Harry'd met Jake in Luxembourg when they both were training with the European Auror force. The brash American hadn't any idea who Harry was, and Harry'd liked that anonymity. It also hadn't hurt that Jake had bright blue eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled and a perfectly toned, muscular body that Harry could lose himself in every night they spent together. Their relationship had been on and off again, whenever their paths crossed in Luxembourg or Brussels, both of them open to seeing other people in between. Still, it'd only seemed right that they give it a proper go when Jake was called back to New York. Harry'd put a request in with Gawain to consult with the Yanks, and he'd been happy, at least for the first month.

And then the thoughts of Malfoy and that one last fling--that mad, sensual shag in the shower that Harry'd given in to because he'd been certain it was his one chance to fulfil a schoolboy fantasy--had wormed their way into his mind, catching him unaware at the worst moments. He and Jake had started arguing, and Harry knows full well he'd picked most of those fights, the way he can sometimes when he doesn't know what else to do, when he's uncomfortable with how he feels and unsure of the choices he's making.

Hermione's giving him a worried look, and he shakes his head. "Maybe we just work better with a bit of space between us."

Ron snorts and picks his beer up again. "Right, mate. That's healthy."
"At least I'm back, yeah? No moving to New York permanently." Harry hands Hermione his beer and starts rubbing her feet with more purpose. It's partially an attempt to distract her and partially an apology. She quite likes Jake, after all, and he hates disappointing her too. "And Gawain has us looking at that file on Dolohov you sent over." Despite Hermione's frown, Harry doesn't bother keeping secrets from Ron, whether or not a file is marked confidential. He's not bound by the Unspeakable's rules, and besides, Ron usually doesn't give a damn. Since Hogwarts, it's always been the three of them, and Harry doesn't like to keep secrets now. Guilt flickers through him. At least not ones he doesn't have to.

"Us?" Ron asks, honing in on the only part of the statement that interests him. Hermione takes a drink from the beer bottle, then summons another coaster from the mantel and sets it down on the floor beside her.

"I've a new team," Harry says. The fire sparks and pops across the room, and a bank of candles start to flicker on the mantel as the light through the windows grows fainter when the rain starts to pick up outside. Harry flexes Hermione's toes with his thumb and she makes a happy hum. "Gawain and I've been talking about it for a while. Using Slytherins on the force to track Dark wizards."

Hermione stretches and tucks her arms beneath her head, her hair spread across them in a thick mass of curls. "Not a bad idea in theory. They might have sources outside the official channels."

"Yeah," Harry says, relaxing at her agreement. He thought he'd have more of an argument from her. He's proud of his team, even this early in. He thinks it's going to be a good fit, once they work out some of their issues. "So it's me, Parkinson, Zabini, and Malfoy--"

"It's who?" Hermione sits up, pulling her feet out of Harry's lap. "Harry, you're not serious!"

Even Ron looks a bit taken aback. "Right, mate. That lot--well, Zabini's not horrible, I reckon, but the other two..." He shakes his head. "I wouldn't trust any of them."

"Nor should you," Hermione says, her cheeks flushed. She doesn't quite meet Harry's eye. "I don't understand how you could work with Malfoy of all people. I can't believe they even let him on the force, if I'm honest. He's a known Death Eater. The Ministry file on him--"

"Is mostly from when he was seventeen, yeah? Not very recent." Harry sits forward, and Hermione huffs at him. She doesn't deny it, though. "I've seen it. And he's not that bad now. Still a bit of a tit, but it's not like he's out beating up Muggles in the street. And you just said it was a good idea--"

"I said it wasn't bad in theory." Hermione pushes her hair back from her face. Her hand trembles a bit. "Have you forgotten what Malfoy and Parkinson did during the war? To you? To me and Ron?" Her voice rises. "For f*ck's sake, Harry. Parkinson tried to hand you over to the Dark Lord personally--"

Harry can't argue that. "I think she's a bit different now," he says quietly. Parkinson keeps her head down for the most part. Stays in the lab and out of people's way. They all do, and that's what fascinates Harry. He'd have never thought he'd see Malfoy back down from a fight the way he had today. Ten years ago, Malfoy would have eaten Althea alive and spat her out with threats about involving his father. Not that Malfoy's in any way defanged. He's just more careful, Harry thinks. There's still a touch of that vicious Malfoy deep down inside. Harry can see it in the contemptuous glint of his glare. "You can't judge them on who they were--"

"And Malfoy--where do I even start?" Hermione doesn't pay attention to him. She's up on her feet now, pacing in front of the sofa, arms wrapped around herself. Ron shoots Harry a worried look.
"He called me a Mudblood, his family supported Voldemort in their house, his aunt tortured me--"

"But he didn't," Harry says. He feels awful, especially when Hermione turns towards him, her eyes a bit wet around the lashes. That's anger, he knows, and a bit of grief. He knows it's hard for her still, all the memories of the war. It's why she became an Unspeakable, to do everything she could to keep that from happening again. He bites his lip. "Malfoy didn't torture you himself, I mean. He didn't even turn us in that night, and he could have. I know he recognised me. It doesn't mean he wasn't a sodding prat back then, and that his family weren't murderous berks. Hell, he's still a prat sometimes even now, but I do think he's changed. A bit, at least. His record with the force is impeccable--"

"What do you expect?" Hermione sounds sceptical, bitter. She blinks away the dampness at the corner of her eyes. "Of course he'll keep his nose clean now; it doesn't mean he doesn't still think those things. Blood purity and all that bollocks." Her mouth twists to one side. "He was a Death Eater who took the mark, Harry. Never forget that."

"I don't, Hermione. But so was Snape, and he died for our cause," Harry says gently, hoping to placate her. "Regulus Black--"

"They're different," Hermione says. "Malfoy let Voldemort and the rest of them into the castle, Harry. He tried to kill Dumbledore in front of you."

"But he couldn't." Harry rubs the back of his hand over his face, pushing his glasses up before they drop back on his nose. He wonders if he's being influenced by his cock. He wants Malfoy, and so he's making excuses for him. It's possible, he supposes, but still. There's something about the way Malfoy looks whenever another Auror comes into the room—that sense of fear and bravado and determination to prove himself—that makes Harry think that he's right about all of his team. They're not the teenagers they once were. None of them are. And they've been made to pay for the mistakes of people much older than them, no matter where their loyalties lay at the time.

Besides, he's seen the scar on Malfoy's forearm, the puckered, pink slick skin where the Mark had once been. It must have hurt when he'd done it, when the Diffindo had cut into his flesh, and Harry can't imagine someone being willing to mutilate themselves like that if they didn't hate what that Mark had come to mean to them. Didn't hate what it meant about their past.

"I don't know," Harry says after a moment. "Maybe he hasn't changed, but he's hiding it well, if that's the case. And he's treated like shite by half our colleagues--"

"Good," Hermione says, vehement, then her hand flies to her mouth. "I didn't mean that," she admits. She sits on the edge of the sofa. "I just…" She trails off, looking into the fire, then she draws in a long breath.

Harry understands. It's hard, even all these years later. They'd been so young and so stupid when the war had happened. It'd left its mark on each of them, in ways they're still discovering. Sometimes his reactions take him by surprise. His own anger and grief still seethe beneath the surface, waiting until his defences are down before they surge forward, leaving him broken and breathless again.

He knows his friends have these moments too. They're very hard to talk about, but he can see it in the occasional haunted looks on their faces.

Ron pushes himself out of his chair and crouches beside Hermione. "It's okay, love," he whispers into her hair, his hands curling around hers. He's always been her rock, Harry's rock too if he's honest. Ron can fight with the best of them, but in the end, what he most wants is for everyone to agree, to be comfortable again.
To be safe.

"I'm a terrible person," Hermione murmurs. She presses her forehead against Ron's. "I want to think the best of people, but, Malfoy…" Her shoulders tense, and she pulls back, looks over at Harry. "I still have nightmares sometimes, you know. Of that house, and the dungeon, and Bellatrix Lestrange bending over me." She shudders. "I ought to forgive, but it's hard to forget what the Malfoys let happen. All those people dead because they wanted power, all those people who lost family, friends--" "Her fingers clench around Ron's. "Like Fred."

Ron's face falls at that, pain twisting his lips. The whole Weasley family still grieves Fred every day. Molly leaves a chair for him at Sunday roasts, with a plate and cutlery, right next to George and Angelina. Everyone knows not to sit there, even the grandchildren. "She has a point, mate," Ron says to Harry.

Harry shifts on the sofa, moving closer to his friends. He hesitates. Hermione holds out an arm, and he buries himself against her side. "It's not easy," he says. "We all have bad dreams." His wake him screaming some nights, his body soaked in sweat, his fingers flying to his scar. He worries that it'll start hurting again, that he'll hear the soft hiss of Voldemort, urging him to do things that horrify him, to give in to the darkness Harry's afraid still hides somewhere deep inside of him.

He wonders if Malfoy feels the same.

"I hate them," he murmurs. "The dreams. How they make me feel when I wake up."

Hermione's fingers card through his hair. "I know," she says, voice soft.

"They might have them, as well," Harry says after a long moment. "The Slytherins. We were all kids, really."

"Well, they made shite choices," Ron says from the floor. He reaches up and brushes his wife's hair back from her cheek. "You don't have to forgive them that, love."

"Maybe." Hermione's fingers still against Harry's temple. "Are you certain you're making a good choice with this, Harry James?" She taps a thumb against his cheek. "It feels terrible to me."

Harry smiles against her side. "You're probably right." She usually is. Still, the thought of disbanding his band of misfits bothers him. He looks up at her. "But I really want to trust them," he says after a moment. "I want to believe people can change, because if they can't, then what did we fight for? What are we still trying to do? We want to reform wizarding society, don't we?" Hermione nods, and Harry sits up. "Then if we can't give my team the chance to prove themselves, to show they're not the stupid teenagers they once were, what hope do we have of making any bloody progress with the rest of our lot?" He doesn't know why he feels so strongly about this, but he does, just as he had when Gawain had first brought it up to him. "If not us, Hermione, then who? I watch the way the rest of the force treats them, and I don't want to be like that. I know you don't either."

"No." Hermione touches his cheek. She sighs and gives him a faint smile. "You're a bloody idealist, Harold." He relaxes at the nickname. She's forgiven him at least. "I want to go on record, though, that I think this is utter madness, and that Parkinson's a right bitch when she wants to be. Or she was, at least, when we were in school." Hermione's nose wrinkles. "I can't believe you're working with her."

"Malfoy's worse," Ron says, settling on the sofa on Hermione's other side. He pulls his wife up against him and kisses the top of her head, her curls brushing his cheek. "What a bloody wanker,
Harry. I don't know how you handle him. I'd deck him after half a minute."

Harry thinks it's best not to detail exactly how he'd like to keep Malfoy in check. Ron and Hermione'd have him in one of St Mungo's locked wards in a heartbeat, and he's not so certain they wouldn't be right to do so. Instead he reaches for his beer bottle, taking it from Hermione's hand. "He needs a pay packet," he says. "He's a little mouthy sometimes--" And, oh how that turns Harry on. Fucking Christ, but it does, and Harry despises himself for that fact. "But he's not outrageous. Besides, Aubrey likes him well enough, and I trust his judgment."

"Aubrey's a good sort," Hermione says, and she plops her feet back into Harry's lap. "You're both off your nut though." She shakes her head, and the look she gives Harry is concerned. "You'll be careful, won't you? For all oursakes?"

"I will," Harry says, setting the bottle down and rubbing his palm over the top of her foot. She sighs. "And I really do think there's worse out there. I mean, would you want just anyone to go after Dolohov, if it really is him?"

"No." Hermione's answer is swift, and some knot within Harry loosens. "But don't think I won't check up on you!" She leans back as Harry applies himself to her arches.

"I wouldn't expect anything less." Harry hopes he can be cautious. Responsible. A damned grown-up, at least. It's hard enough to be working with their former enemies, letting it separate him from his closest friends. It's far worse to be obsessed with a certain measured insolence and the fall of chin-length blond hair, much less the promise of snarling resistance and intoxicating surrender. Malfoy winds him up like almost nothing else, and if Dolohov doesn't get him, maybe this will.

At times like tonight, though, Harry'd do anything to get Malfoy out of his head. He suspects that's a bloody impossibility. But Merlin, he wishes he could, if only for the fact that Hermione will kill him if she finds out. And she does know exactly where to hide a body so it won't be easily found.

Taking a deep breath, Harry centers himself on his friends, Hermione draped over him, Ron on her other side. Surrounded by warmth and love, he convinces himself everything's going to be okay.

His heart tells him it couldn't be further from the truth.

***

Half-clothed, muscular strangers dance beneath the flashing blue neon lights of the Muggle club. Draco's sat at one of the long, low benches slung the length of the Barcode Vauxhall, the remnants of a pint in one hand. He's not really finding much to hold his interest, but he keeps watching the planes of men's bodies gyrating in the play of lights anyway.

In all honesty, he doesn't know why he came here, other than the fact that he doesn't want to go home to his empty flat. That and he's in foul mood, for which he damned well blames Potter. Every time he'd looked up from his stack of file jackets, Potter'd been in the doorway, or so it'd seemed. Draco doesn't know how he's going to continue on the team if Potter keeps this up. He can't decide if he wants to punch Potter or throw him against the wall and suck his cock.

Perhaps both. In that order.

There's a buzz of alcohol in his head, along with the throbbing pulse of the dance music. He hasn't been to Barcode in over a year; Nicholas had loved coming on Friday nights to dance away the workweek, usually ending the night by shagging Draco raw in one of the quieter alcoves. It's one
of the few things about that disaster of a relationship Draco misses. There's something deliciously exciting about public sex, he thinks. He loves the feeling of being on show, potentially, for anyone to walk by and see.

Well, those days are well-gone. Or so he'd like to think, maybe. Whether or not he wants to admit it, that's part of what he's enjoyed with Potter. And Potter's notoriety makes it more intense. With Nicholas it was just about the thrill of being watched. With Potter...well. The question of whether or not one might end up in the papers for a shag in the loo does add a bit of spice to the act itself.

Merlin, what have I come to? he thinks with a tinge of disgust.

Draco's just resolved to give up and go home when a familiar figure catches his eye across the room. There's a flash of dark hair, a sharp angle of a jaw, and for a moment Draco's stomach drops and his blood sings with possibility. Then the man turns, and Draco's fear eases. Not Potter then. Just someone who resembles him. Draco sinks back into the bench. He's not certain if he's relieved or disappointed.

He lifts his pint to his mouth.

The music swells and crashes around him; the lights glow from blue to red and back to blue again, gleaming off a crush of bare chests and broad shoulders.

"Hey," a voice says above him, and Draco looks up.

The man's there--the Potter look-alike--and Draco takes him in, from his dark curls to his flat, bare belly to his narrow hips clad in jeans that hang far too low for comfort. The man cups the swell of his half-hard cock in one hand, the bulge already pressing against the denim flies.

Draco just raises an eyebrow.

"Saw you looking, mate." The man smiles, and he squats, his elbows resting on Draco's knees. One hand brushes along Draco's inner thigh. "Fancy a go of it?"

Fuck, Draco thinks. He hesitates, looking at taut nipples and a full, soft mouth. His eyes flick lower. This is what Potter could be, he thinks, if there weren't years of bitter history between them. An easy, quick shag in a club. No strings, no regrets, no worries.

He drains his glass and nods. Not-Potter's smile widens and he reaches for Draco's flies. Draco catches his hand. "Not here," he says. Setting his pint down, he sits up. The man stumbles backwards as Draco stands and heads for the loo.

It's a terrible idea, Draco knows. But it's not worse than shagging Potter. Not nearly.

He doesn't look back. The man'll follow, if his experience's any gauge. They always have.

***

Potter's alone in the incident room when Draco slinks in at half-ten, trudging up six flights of back stairs just to avoid the lifts. Draco curses under his breath. He'd hoped that maybe, just maybe, Potter'd be using that lovely side office they'd given him, the one with the door that actually shuts.

"I see you decided to come in this morning," Potter says. He has the Daily Prophet spread open on one of the desks, pretending to read it though Draco can tell from here as Potter flips a page that he's not really focusing.

"Yeah, sorry. I did." Draco stops a few feet away, his back to the whiteboards on the right they
havent't yet filled in. He crosses his arms. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon. Might as well act as if he's not bloody well hungover from far too much drink last night. He lifts his chin, hoping the dark circles under his eyes aren't dreadful. "Where are Blaise and Pansy?"

Potter looks up then, folding his paper slowly, then stands up. "Ah, see. You do care. Zabini's with Shah trying to wrangle us CCTV footage of the murder from the Muggles, and Parkinson's where she's happiest--other than tormenting Jones with her tits--she's off playing with human tissue. She's an odd one, isn't she?"

"More than you know," Draco says under his breath. When Potter comes closer, Draco's hackles suddenly raise.

"Which leaves us," Potter says, "with you and why on earth you're sailing in here an hour and a half late with not even two of your supposedly closest mates knowing where the fuck you might be."

Draco ducks his head reflexively. He'd overslept his wake-up charm this morning, but he doesn't care to explain why. Frankly, it's none of Potter's concern, and Draco'd needed last night with the pulsing beat of the club, its bright blue light strobing over his face. Waking up late also meant he hadn't had time to run this morning. He had just thrown on clothes and Apparated, grabbing a coffee on the way in. He's missing that lovely calm from endorphins that usually takes a few hours around his fellow Aurors to lose. "Sorry, guv. Traffic, you know."

"That'd be a far more effective excuse if you weren't a sodding wizard, Malfoy." Potter's breath grazes Draco's ear; he actually thumbs the skin over Draco's collar, pushing his hair back. When Potter leans back, he's furious. Draco can tell from the tightness of Potter's body, the twitch of a jaw muscle. Despite the lack of windows, the room feels suddenly overcast, or is it Draco's imagination? He certainly gets the sense that lightning is about to strike. Potter doesn't move away, though, keeping Draco hemmed in again the whiteboards. Draco fights back a wave of panic. He recognises that mulish look on Potter's face; it'd never gone well for him in their school days.

"And traffic doesn't smell like cheap cologne or Stella Artois, Constable Malfoy." Potter's nostrils are flaring and oh, Circe, but narked off looks good on him. Dangerously good. "It also doesn't usually leave love bites down one's throat."

Shit. It takes all Draco has not to clap his palm against the small bruises. Instead he meets Potter's angry glare with a long, slow blink of his own.

"I wouldn't know, sir," Draco says mildly. He won't let his team leader hang him out to dry. He knows how to play the perfect underling while getting a bollocking, how to be as agreeable and bland as possible. He's surprised, though, that Potter can pinpoint what he was drinking last night so exactly. He's a good Auror, and a better detective, and that irritates Draco.

"So where were you last night, then?" Potter's not really asking him. His eyes narrow, bare inches away from Draco. "Let's see, Wednesday? No place in Diagon or Knockturn for that sort of thing midweek, which means you must have gone to the Muggle side of things. Slumming it, were we? I mean, Stella doesn't really strike me as your drink of choice." He doesn't give Draco a chance to answer. "There's the Hoist, but that's not your sort of place, is it? A bit too much leather and not enough lace."

Draco does his best not to smirk. Potter's off on that, at least a bit. Draco's rather fond of a bit of fetishwear now and then.

"There's the Fort," Potter says, "but again. Not posh enough, yeah, and Wednesday's their underwear night. I'm guessing you're not truly into public nudity, more's the pity. Just the
Draco's eyebrow raises despite his resolve to stay impassive. "That's impressive, sir. I'd have to consult TimeOut for that list. Although you left out the Play Pit." You wouldn't catch Draco dead in there any more, not with the new owners, but there's no reason for Potter to know that.

"I did." Potter leans further in, crowding Draco, and Draco's eyes flick towards the door that is mercifully shut. Potter must be damn sure of himself, to get this close on a Thursday morning in the middle of Auror headquarters when anyone--from Blaise to Pansy to Bertie to goddamned Althea--could walk in on them. "So what did you let him do to you, Malfoy? Or was it only one? I've been to the Play Pit, you know. I'm quite aware of what goes on in those quarters."

Draco's cheeks feel hot, even though he has nothing to be ashamed of, and he's oddly turned on, thinking of Potter in the Pit's shadowed corners, other men's hands and bodies and pricks pressing against him. He draws in a raw breath. Frankly, last night was bloody uncharacteristic of him, but he's a grown, consenting adult. He hasn't cruised for Muggles--or anyone--in ages. And in all fairness, he let himself be picked up. "Indeed," he says in a far more level voice than his inner turmoil would warrant. "I couldn't possibly comment, sir."

Potter eyes him as he moves around Draco's side. He pulls at the knot of his dark purple tie, loosening it around his neck. He flicks his top button open, and Draco wants nothing more than to bury his face against that small exposed stretch of golden skin. "They don't have a dungeon set up on Wednesdays, so most of the interesting stuff is ruled out."

Draco's mouth opens, then shuts again, images of Potter tied up, aching and willing and wanting, now seared into his mind. Circe. Exactly how much experimenting has Saint Potter done? Not that Draco's any stranger to the leather scene, but after reaching his sexual maturity around Pansy, his standards of kinky dress and behavior are hard to match.

"And you're not walking particularly sideways," Potter says, "although there are healing charms for that. But I see a Pret muffin wrapper in your pocket which means you also ate on your way in. Sex charms around Muggles are a terrible idea, unless you're a complete idiot—which you're not-- so I'm assuming you blew or fucked him, rather than being fucked yourself." His mouth twists, ugly and sharp, and he catches Draco's gaze and holds it, his own eyes narrowing behind the gleam of his glasses. "Or he blew you, perhaps? Sucked that pretty prick of yours right into his mouth, did he?"

Draco nods, strangely mesmerised by Potter's interest. Potter has it, or part of it at least, and Draco wonders if his natural Occlumency is slipping, if Potter can somehow see into his mind, pull out the memory of that dark-haired man on his knees in front of Draco, his plush mouth sucking down Draco's cockhead eagerly. His prick is at half-mast now, and he knows it's wrong. He finds this show of jealousy on Potter's part oddly erotic, although he can tell that Potter's furious with him and desperate not to let on. Potter's always been a terrible liar.

Potter moves closer, searching Draco's face. "I think," he says, voice low and vicious, "that you let him tug you off first, maybe together, and then it was a hasty blow job in the back of the club at the end of the night. Explains why your timing charm didn't work this morning." His knuckles brush the swell of Draco's cock before slipping away; Draco tries his best to suppress the shudder of want that ripples through him. "Tired were you? Worn out from having some nameless bloke's hand and mouth on you, letting him suck and bite and lick--" Potter draws in a raspy breath, and his fingertips press against the skin beneath Draco's ear. "He marked you." Potter says, and his voice is raw and angry again. It sends another shiver down Draco's spine, and Draco pulls away, still embarrassed that he'd somehow managed to miss a love-bite or two in his haste this morning.
"Excellently deduced, guv," he says, instead. "They'll have you at Chief Inspector in no time."

And then Potter's wand is on his throat, the tip pressing into the soft flesh beneath his jaw, and for a moment, Draco's terrified, his breath catching. Potter's angry, and Draco knows exactly what he's capable of. He closes his eyes, waiting, tired of being at the wrong end of every idiot's wand this week, but Potter just murmurs a healing spell that causes Draco's skin to burn for a moment before his wand slides away.

"Wouldn't do for you to walk around like that," Potter says, and when Draco opens his eyes, Potter's halfway across the room, not looking at him. "Not with the seriousness of this investigation."

"Thanks, sir." Draco touches his neck with his fingertips. The whole of last night had been stupid of him. It hadn't even been satisfying, much to his dismay. Potter'd been better on his knees, and Draco's fully aware he was just trying to recreate that night with another man with dark hair and bright eyes. It'd failed. He'd gone home and wanked himself into his pillow, coming with Potter's name on his lips.

He'd overslept because of that, not to mention the two shitty bottles of Stella Blaise had left in his pantry and which he'd drunk at his kitchen table afterwards, starkers in his flat at half-two in the morning. No chance in hell that he'll admit that to Potter, of course.

The door to the incident room opens, and Blaise strides in. He flicks a glance at Draco but speaks to Potter. "CCTV's set up in the viewing room."

"Right then," Potter says. "Take Constable Malfoy with you. I want visual confirmation of Dolohov on the tape before we go after the witness. If it's just a look-alike, I want to know that as well."

Blaise nods. "Got it, guv." He holds the door open for Draco, raising an eyebrow as Draco stumps past him. He waits until the door shuts on them both before saying, "You're in a strop, aren't you?"

"I'm not," Draco says. He pinches his nose. "Potter just annoys me."

"Well, he's your guv," Blaise says, "whether you like it or not, and if you want that sergeant's stripe, I wouldn't irritate him too much either. Robards will have you up on insubordination if you don't watch out. And coming to work late and smelling like you fell into a vat of ale? Circe, man. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Draco wishes he knew. "Club. Sucked off in the loo. Drank that Stella you left at mine. Any more questions?"

"I'd mock you, except I'm fairly certain this is the first time you've had an orgasm with something other than your hand since Nicholas." Blaise takes a side hallway that's too narrow for them to walk side-by-side. Draco's relieved. He doesn't think he can keep a bland face at that last comment. "Well done. Pans would be thrilled for you." His tone implies that he's being a bit more judgmental about the fact. Then again, Blaise thinks anonymous sex is a bit passé. Draco's always amused that Pansy's more likely to shag a complete stranger than Blaise is. Veela-blood be damned. But maybe that's exactly why. If he wanted to, Blaise could crook a little finger and have most anyone. Draco supposes that takes the thrill out of it.

Blaise stops outside a closed door, his hand on the knob. He looks back at Draco. "Look," he
"Oi! Me mam's cousin lives in Swansea," Shah says. "She likes it well enough."

"In Swansea?" Draco snorts. "Shocking."

"We have," Blaise says. "And that Malfoy glare isn't going to get you anywhere with either of us. We know you too bloody well. Don't bollocks this up, for yourself or for us. Which means, no coming in late and hungover, for Circe's sake. It's not as if you haven't access to a decent potion. Go by the damned apothecary if you won't brew it yourself."

"Fine," Draco snaps. "Are you done harassing me? Given that I have to spend my afternoon pouring over Muggle CCTV footage, I'd like to be done with it as soon as possible."

Blaise pushes the door open with an irritated huff. "You do realise you're a complete pillock sometimes?"

Draco follows Blaise into the darkened room, fighting back a childish urge to step on his heels. A set of screens floats above a desk that Shah's bent over. He straightens up and beams at them.

"How's things?" Shah asks Draco, but doesn't wait for an answer. "You ever use one of these before?"

"Not since training," Draco admits, studying the small black box in front of him. Wires stick out willy-nilly from the back, connecting it to something that looks like an antique typewriter, of sorts. There are letters, at least, and numbers. "And I was shit at it then."

"Wasn't we all?" Shah grins. "Look, it's all right, innit? You just poke-a-poke at this bugger here." He shoves his finger against a button on the front of the box and the screens light up. "The lads in the labs've spent ages fixing it up so it's not a real dog's breakfast now, the way it was in training. No more popping and pinging if your magic gets a bit too much for it, yeah?"

Blaise slides into one of the chairs in front of the desk, his face lit by the pale blue light from the screens. His cheekbones look even sharper in the glow. "We've got three hours of footage from two angles," he says. "One from the bank across the street from the alley and one from a betting shop a few doors down. Not exactly a posh neighbourhood."

"In Swansea?" Draco snorts. "Shocking."

"Oi! Me mam's cousin lives in Swansea," Shah says. "She likes it well enough."

Draco drops into one of the other seats, his eyes only just starting to adjust to the shadows. His aching head eases a bit. "It's still bloody Swansea. And Merlin only knows what a berk like Dolohov was doing there in the first place." He waves his hand. "Let's see if we can identify this fucker, shall we?"

Shah starts the Muggle tape playing, and Draco sinks back into his seat, rubbing at his temple. With any luck this'll take most of the day. He'd much rather spend his afternoon hiding out here, thinking about Potter, rather than facing the man head on.

Circe, but he's such a damned coward.

***
Pansy frowns at the mangled remains of the corpse in front of her. Her wand hovers beside her shoulder, dipping and twitching as it records minute fluctuations in the tissue's magical field under the slowed-down analysis she's subjecting it to. Several of her earlier spell sets had returned inconclusive data, and she has to be careful not to use anything strong enough to alter the remains, particularly if there's suspected transfiguration. She's hoping that the combination of half-speed tracking under a temporal spell and a refractory magical analysis will help yield something she can bring back to Potter and the team as proof.

She's forbidden Jones from stepping foot into the lab. Pansy doesn't give a damn if he outranks her; he's an imbecile, and he's already cocked up one experiment. If she has to start over again, she'll hex his miniscule balls completely off.

The elastic on the paper cap holding her hair back from her forehead itches, and she wants to rub it with one gloved finger. She doesn't. Too much chance of contamination, and she's so bloody close to figuring this puzzle out. She can feel it, and she loves the sense of frustration and elation that hits her when she's this deep into the process. It's why she'd loved potions class, even if Draco and Granger had topped her in marks. Pansy loves unpicking obstacles, whether in a laboratory or in real life, and she doesn't let emotions get in her way. It's a habit that annoys her friends more than a bit, but she doesn't care. She's dealt with their faults and foibles most of her life now.

Her scissors snap at a strip of dried flesh that dangles from the sunken rib cage, and she sets it aside on a cloth spread out along the side of the steel-topped table. The fragment of chest muscle is dark and mottled, stark against the pristine white cotton. Pansy pokes at it with the tip of her scissors, flipping it over.

"Specimen once again shows proper decomposition consistent with a burial of approximately seven years," Pansy says, and a quill on the other side of the room scratches across a parchment scroll. "There appears, however, to be some cellular stranding on the lateral side." She purses her mouth. "Possibly a remnant of transfiguration? I'll want to test it, of course, with full record."

With a flick of Pansy's finger, her wand flies across the room and taps against a cupboard. It opens with a creak, and two beakers and a phial tumble out. The wand catches them with a swoop, Levitating them back over to the examination table. Pansy snips an end of the specimen off and drops it into one of the beakers before uncapping the phial and pouring a blue potion into the other beaker. She swirls it until it bubbles and froths, turning a brighter shade of cerulean.

"Mutandis Potion, test 14-AVM, on sample one from specimen twenty, upper left quadrant of the rib cage, desiccated muscle tissue taken from rib four."

The quill scratches again.

Pansy pours the bubbling blue potion into the beaker with the sample tissue. It pops and fizzes around the dried mass before the beaker starts to shake in her hand. Pansy dashes to the sink and drops the beaker into it, jumping back and grabbing at her wand.

"Protego Maxima!"

The beaker blows, sending shattered glass across the countertop. Tiny shards imbed themselves into the cabinets above; others clink to the stone floor as they bounce off Pansy's shielding charm. Once the immediate danger is past, she stops her monitoring spells. The force from that reaction could have distorted even a baseline observation reading.

"Well, that went well," Draco says from behind her.

"You'd best be suited up if you're in my lab." Pansy sweeps her wand across the shimmering
scrap of glass, and with a glittering swirl, they're gone. She peers into the sink where her sample's blackened and smoking. "Experiment failed. Explosive decomposition under subjection to Mutandis position, leaving tissue sample..." She pokes at the remnant of muscle with the tip of her gloved finger. "Somewhat brittle and charred, I'd say."

Draco's feet echo against the stone of the laboratory. "Looks like Greg's barbecue. Rather uncannily so."

Pansy turns. Draco looks ridiculous in the pale blue paper suit he's pulled over his clothes, but at least he's made the attempt to conform to laboratory rules, even if a strand of blond hair's hanging against his cheek. He catches her look and tucks it back into the paper cap. "I've learnt," he says, and there's a petulant tone in his voice.

"Not my fault." Pansy reaches for a monitoring box and levitates the still smoking sample into it. Might as well get a few extra readings from this one. "It's the barristers you'll be facing down if your magic or your tissue contaminate my results." The Wizengamot Prosecution Service has been cracking down on procedure over the past few years; it's one of Shacklebolt's many reforms.

Draco hops up on a stool. "What've you found?"

"Nothing definitive." Pansy seals the box and scrawls her initials and the date and time on it with a thick-nibbed quill. "Enough that I'm definitely suspicious, though."

"So you don't think this is Dolohov?" Draco eyes the pile of bones and rotted flesh with distaste.

Pansy considers. "I don't have enough data to say it isn't yet." At Draco's sideways glance, she shrugs. "But given the reactions I've been recording, I'm confident in saying there's something bloody well fishy about that corpse." She snaps her gloves off and exchanges them for a new pair, tossing the old ones in a warded bin. "How's the hangover?"

"Better." Draco tugs at the neck of his paper suit with one finger. "Thanks for the potion."

"Thank Blaise," Pansy says. He'd come in just before lunch whinging about Draco being a complete sodding arse and nearly rowing with Potter, and she'd handed over one of the hangover potions she keeps in the back of her locker. She's curious as to what Draco was up to last night, but she knows better than to ask. If he wants to say he will, and if he doesn't, well, a good bottle of wine over the weekend'll pull it out of him eventually. You have to be patient with Draco, she's learnt.

Draco scowls at her. "He's a twat, but a twat with sharp eyes." His paper-booted heels taps against the rungs of the stool. "We've watched that bloody CCTV over and over again from every possible angle all afternoon, and if it's not Dolohov on that tape, I'll wear a Gryffindor quidditch jersey and spell my hair ginger--"

"God forbid," Pansy says in horror.

"Exactly." Draco nods at the corpse. "So we just need to figure out who he is and why our lot took this poor bastard out instead of Dolohov."

Pansy walks back over to the examination table and studies the remains. "I've a few tricks left up my sleeve," she says. "Is Blaise off telling the guv what you found?"

There's a silence, and she glances back at Draco. He looks rather sullen.

"I'm supposed to be," Draco says. "Which is why I'm here instead."
Pansy sighs. "You need to get over this. Potter's Potter, but, twat or not, he's our guv, and I'm not letting you bollocks this one up, Draco."

"Yes, I've been lectured already on that topic." Draco slides off the stool in a rustle of his paper suit. "It's complicated, you know that."

"I'd be more than happy to Obliviate you." Pansy points her wand at him. "One word, and you'll never even remember seeing Potter in the showers."

Draco hesitates, and for a moment Pansy thinks he's going to take her up on her half-joking offer. "As if I'd trust you with my mind," he says, but there's a curious sadness underlying his light tone. Another puzzle there to work out when she has more time, she suspects.

He's gone with a whisper of paper boots against the stone floor.

Pansy turns back to her withered corpse.

Draco can wait. She has a job to do.

***

Harry closes a report on Dark wizarding activity across the EU over the past two years and stretches, cracking his back and his neck in the process. This is the part of policing that he hates, the sorting through files and data to make certain all risk assessments have been completed and that every jot and tittle's in order so that, should a case come to court, the WPS doesn't toss it out as unpunishable due to Auror negligence. Harry'd rather be out doing something, rather than hunched over paperwork, but it's part of the job, and he's learning to take it in stride.

It's nearly five, and the incident room outside his SIO office is silent. He hasn't seen a single member of his team, not since he spotted Zabini and Malfoy across the commissary at lunch, heads together, arguing intently about something Harry thinks he'd rather not look into any further. To be honest, Harry's glad for the solitude. He feels a right fit for this morning and the flare of angry jealousy that'd gone through him at the sight of that bruise on Malfoy's throat. It's none of his business what--or who--Malfoy does during his personal time, and as Malfoy's direct superior officer, he'd crossed a line.

He seems to be doing that rather a lot lately when it comes to Malfoy.

"Christ." Harry pushes his glasses up and pinches the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand. The desk's piled with a pastel rainbow of file jackets, from lavender to pale mint, and, over the course of the afternoon, he's sketched out a few notes in erasable black ink on the whiteboard across from his chair.

"You always did have trouble keeping your parchments neat." Malfoy's standing in the door of his office, a sulky expression on his lean and slightly less-hungover-looking face. "Didn't McGonagall once make you rewrite an essay five times?"

"Three times," Harry says, trying not to wince at the memory. She'd been right hacked off at him, and given him extra detentions cleaning chalkboards in the castle for a week. "And that was fourth year. I was a bit distracted trying to keep my damned self from being killed in the tournament at the time."

Malfoy doesn't move from the threshold, but his keen grey eyes scan the cluttered surfaces of Harry's office, likely taking the mess in. The studied insolence of his gaze irritates Harry.

"Shut the door behind you if you've got news," Harry says. "Which is why I assume you're here?"
Malfoy pauses, his face expressionless, then strides just the barest few steps inside, enough to close the scarred oak door behind him. He stops in front of Harry's desk, his hand shoved in his pockets. He's taken off his Auror coat, and his white shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows, the collar open at his throat, his hair mussed. Harry doesn't think he's seen Malfoy look this unkempt inside the Ministry. He likes it. There's a small ink mark on Malfoy's left cheek, and Harry can see the ropy scar across Malfoy's forearm where the Mark once was. He may have demurred in front of Althea, but he knows full well what that scar represents. He wonders if Malfoy realises it's visible right now. It's not something Harry thinks Malfoy'd want most people to see, and what does it mean, then, that he doesn't feel the need to hide it from Harry any more?

"You look less tired." Harry glances down at the pile of file jackets, as if he'll find some scrap of moral support in them, but nothing's there but a headache of bureaucracy and minor incidents.

Malfoy purses his lips and shrugs. He has the cheek to look bored, which Harry, clearly in need of a Mind Healer, finds attractive. It's obvious Malfoy intends to make Harry pay for this morning, and honestly, why shouldn't he? Bad enough that Harry'd showed his jealousy, but cross-examining Malfoy in the incident room about the details had been beyond the pale. Harry doesn't know how to begin to apologise, not that he's at all sure Malfoy will accept it if he does.

After a few moments of fumbling, Harry pushes away the files. He'll need to sort the pile in the morning, of course, but right now he can't be bothered. He turns his full attention to Malfoy. "Out with it then. Did you and Zabini reach a conclusion on the CCTV?" He pauses. "And where is the git, anyway? I'd have expected him to be here."

Malfoy steps a bit closer to the desk. "He left. He's getting ready to go out with his mother, Inspector Sir."

Harry sighs. "Dispense with the formalities, Malfoy. And it's not five yet. Why's Zabini already clocked out?"

"I wasn't aware you'd be following our hours so closely, sir."

Harry breathes in and counts to five before exhaling. Bloody hell but Malfoy can get under his skin with a fucking raised eyebrow and the subtle implication that Harry's a shite SIO. Malfoy has a razor-sharp instinct for knowing exactly which buttons to push; Harry's quite aware of his own inexperience when it comes to heading a team. It's been years since he's done more than consulting or training, and he'd been idiot enough to step back into command with a nestful of vipers at his feet. "Did he have a reason for leaving early?"

"Blaise takes at least two and a half hours to prepare if Mrs Zabini has summoned him to dinner, at least four if it's a major event." Malfoy's mouth twitches into a half-smile, then his expression smoothes again. Harry wants to rough it up more, to make him react. He knows he shouldn't. "Olivia has exacting standards."

"Oh," Harry says. Sometimes he thinks he'll never understand Slytherins. "But why that long? Is he plating himself in gold or something?"

Malfoy laughs, a sharp, surprised chuckle that makes Harry's stomach flutter. "I've never asked. I've seen him take a full day's personal leave when Olivia was having one of her fundraising galas. He's a vain one, Blaise is, but tolerable as long as his mother isn't involved."

"So he sent you." Harry switches tack, glad at least to get Malfoy talking. And oh, that delicious sulk comes across Malfoy's face again.
"Yes. " Malfoy's voice is low and indistinct. "He said I was an arse this morning and that I should
smooth things over with you."

The fact that he doesn't sound contrite at all makes Harry's cock twitch. Fuck, but Malfoy has an effect on him. He knows he shouldn't exploit this sullenness on Malfoy's part, much as he'd like to. Instead, he attempts to be professional, something like a proper SIO. "As far as I'm concerned, we're at least even. I should never have been that aggressive. I'm sorry, for what it's worth. How you conduct yourself outside of work hours is none of my business." He regards Malfoy steadily, hoping for some sort of detente.

"It's not." Malfoy doesn't look at him.

"However, I was genuinely concerned for your well-being," Harry leans back in his chair. "You might have rung me on my mobile to tell me you were coming in late."

Malfoy blinks, then frowns. "I'm not using that ridiculous thing unless I have to." Harry tries not to smile. "Still haven't figured out how it works, then?"

"Sod off," Malfoy says, and Harry knows he's right. He finds Malfoy's irritation charming, if moderately out of line. Which, in this situation, is an improvement.

"Still." Harry picks a quill up and rolls it between his fingertips. "I overstepped my authority as your SIO in asking about your..." He hesitates, his mind filling with images of Malfoy pressed against a filthy club wall, his cock gagging some bloke's throat. He swallows. "Personal life."

Malfoy clenches his jaw and sneers. He looks uncomfortable and, what's more, embarrassed. "Oh, for Circe's sake, Potter. If this is going to end up in a Gryffindor orgy of self-flagellation, I'd rather just suck you off right here than listen. At least then we'd be doing something worth regretting, and not just talking about it."

Harry struggles to keep hold of his temper, not to mention the heat that shudders through him at the thought of Malfoy, sucking him off here, in his office. He thrusts the quill back into its holder. "Sorry, that's not on offer," Harry snaps. "But I'll try not to force my opinions on you."

Of course, the prat moves in closer. Harry turns his chair to face him, conscious that he's at a disadvantage in a duel while sitting if Malfoy tries anything. His hand instinctively goes to his wand; Malfoy notices, and a faint, bitter smile twists his thin mouth. And then Malfoy's gaze flicks to the right, and Harry knows Malfoy can see the half-swell in his trousers.

Malfoy's tongue slips over his lip, and Harry's throat goes dry. Negating all of his own efforts to be professional, Harry lets his legs fall open wider; Malfoy doesn't look away. Harry's rock-hard in an instant. Christ, this is a bad idea. Still, he doesn't seem to be capable of making non-career-ending decisions around Malfoy right now.

"If I'm honest," Malfoy says after a tense moment, "which it seems Gryffindors prefer, it's not your opinion I want forced on me." He pauses a hair's breadth from Harry's spread knees. "Sir."

Harry reaches out then, pulling Malfoy down to straddle his hips despite the narrow squeeze. Harry privately thanks the ample behinds of his predecessors that there's enough room for Malfoy's knees to nestle next to his thighs. And then he can't think because Malfoy is astride him, back muscles moving deliciously beneath Harry's groping and eager hands. Harry manages to untuck Malfoy's shirt enough to work his hands beneath it, and then his fingers meet bare skin as Malfoy shivers, rolling his hips over Harry's and letting out a low groan.

"I want it on record," Malfoy says, and the heat of his breath huffs against Harry's mouth, "that this is
one of the stupidest things we've done." His lips brush Harry's. "Ever."
"Without a doubt." Harry's hands slip beneath the waistband of Malfoy's trousers, fingernails pressing into the curve of Malfoy's arse. "Fuck, you're not wearing pants."

Malfoy's teeth nip Harry's jaw. His fingers skim Harry's shoulders as he shifts against Harry. "Not enough time this morning."

Harry swears and his hips thrust up. Malfoy kisses him, rough and hard. "You like that," he says against Harry's mouth. "Does it turn you on to think about me, starkers in bed, pissed out of my mind after I've been sucked off in a club?"

Yes, Harry wants to say, but all he can get out is a fuck and a gasp as Malfoy rocks forward, his cock hot and firm through the wool of his trousers. Malfoy's pulling at the buttons on Harry's shirt, spreading it wide, and his hands shake as he slides them over Harry's bare chest. It's a moment of weakness that Harry needs to see; he needs to know that Malfoy's just as affected by this as he is.

"Tell me." Harry can barely breathe. He bites his lip when Malfoy's thumbnail scrapes over his nipple.

"What?" Malfoy asks, his voice low. "How he saw me across the club? How he came up to me, wearing barely anything, his cock already getting hard for me?" One hand moves, and then his fingers trail over the bulge in Harry's trousers. "Like this, really." He pulls back, looking into Harry's eyes. His palm smooths over Harry's flies. "But you're bigger, if you care to know."

Harry shudders, a thrill of jealousy and desire twisting through him. "Did you suck him?"

Malfoy's tongue flicks at the corner of Harry's mouth. "Do you want me to have?"

_I want you to suck me._ Harry thinks. He turns his head and catches Malfoy's mouth with his own. It's not a gentle kiss. They don't do that sort of thing.

Malfoy pulls back with a groan. "I'll take that as a yes," he says, breathless. He tugs at the buttons of Harry's fly, and Harry's hands meet his, helping Malfoy to pull his trousers undone. Malfoy's hand slips into the vee, sliding over Harry's y-fronts. "He tasted salty and sour," Malfoy says. "And when he fucked my mouth, I nearly gagged on his prick."

Harry groans, and Malfoy has Harry's cock out now, y-fronts pushed down to his bollocks, Malfoy's fingers stroking lightly along the underlength of Harry's prick. Harry never knew he'd had this in him, the ability to be so angry and so fucking hard just thinking about what Malfoy might have done to another man. "Fuck, you kill me," he says, and Malfoy smiles that small, tight smile of his.

"Would you like more?" Malfoy asks. His thumb pushes Harry's foreskin back. "Perhaps he fucked me, if you want. Would that make you harder? What if he pushed me onto the floor and had me there, lying on my back in the filth of other men's sweat and come?"

"Christ." Harry swears and lurches forward out of his chair, carrying Malfoy with him. Malfoy's back hits Harry's desk; his lean body sprawling over file jackets and parchments.

Malfoy grunts and then spreads his legs wider, letting Harry's hand push between them to jerk open Malfoy's trousers. His perfect, pretty prick pops out into Harry's fingers, and Malfoy's breath catches when Harry pushes their cocks together, their knuckles brushing.

"Oh," Malfoy says. He closes his eyes for a moment and exhales a ragged huff. Harry watches Malfoy spread out beneath him, blond hair mussed, and he wonders what it would be like to shove into Malfoy here, in his office, over his bloody paperwork. He holds himself up with one
hand, his other curled around Malfoy's cock. When Malfoy's eyes flutter open, his gaze is softer, pupils dilated. Harry strokes Malfoy, his palm twisting over both their damp heads. Malfoy's hand matches his, and they watch each other as they find a slow rhythm, fingers and wrists bumping together. Malfoy bites his lip.

"Did he have you then?" Harry asks, his voice rough. "Did you let him inside you?"

Malfoy hesitates, then shakes his head. "He only sucked me after I sucked him," he says, panting. It's almost as if the words are drawn out of him with each twist of Harry's fingers on his prick. "He sucked me because that's all I wanted from him, with his stupid dark hair and his almost green eyes." Malfoy groans and arches into Harry's stroke. "I wanted him to be you."

Harry nearly comes from that thought alone. He seizes hold of Malfoy's hips and drags him to the edge of the desk, leaning in to kiss him brutally. "Did he make you come like I do? Did you shout when you filled his mouth with spunk the way you did with me?"

"Only when I closed my eyes." Malfoy hooks his legs around Harry's hips, pulling him closer. Their cocks slide together, hands now forgotten in the press of skin and wool. Malfoy's fingers dig into Harry's arms. "I thought of your mouth and your hands and your prick--" He cries out when Harry rocks forward hard once, twice.

"You're gorgeous," Harry whispers near Malfoy's ear. "Fuck, what you do to me--" His cock throbs against Malfoy's.

"Yes," Malfoy hisses. "Tell me."

Harry presses himself against Malfoy, dragging his mouth along the angle of Malfoy's jaw. He can feel a slight stubble beneath his lips and then Malfoy's staccato pulse as his mouth moves over Malfoy's throat. "You drive me mad," Harry says. "You stubborn, bloodminded, prickly bastard. You walk in a room, and I want you on your knees, between my legs, mouth on my cock the way I had you that first time--" He breaks off in a breathless moan as Malfoy's hips move beneath him. "God, the only time you behave is when you're like this, isn't it?"

Malfoy pulls him into a kiss, his mouth hard against Harry's, his body writhing and twisting under Harry's touch. "Fuck you, Potter," he says, but his groan takes away the sharpness of the words.

"Too much talking." Harry's fingers dig into Malfoy's legs, and he rolls against him with a shuddering slide of prick against prick. Malfoy arches again, his hands now up over his head, fingers grabbing at the opposite edge of the desk as he pushes into Harry's thrusts. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes half-closed, and he looks bloody fantastic spread across Harry's paperwork, the parchments wrinkling between each lift of his hips.

Harry can't hold back any longer. He wonders if this was the view that anonymous bastard got last night, Malfoy nearly undone by desire, and a flare of anger fuels him, makes him rut wildly against Malfoy's cock, reaching one hand between them to hold their pricks together, hard and hot and heavy between his palm and Malfoy's taut, flat belly. It's enough to send Malfoy over the edge, swearing like a first-year Auror, his shoulders lifting up, papers still clinging to his shirt, his neck cored as spunk spatters across Harry's fingers. Harry's own body tenses, shudders, and Malfoy's fingers are now tight on his shoulders, his booted heels knocking against Harry's arse as all of Harry's thoughts release and his body clenches over Malfoy's.

They fall back across the desk, flushed and sticky and gasping. Harry buries his face against the folds of Malfoy's shirt and breathes in the smell of sweat and spunk.
"F**k," Malfoy says after a moment. They lie there. Harry feels his heart settle back into a normal rhythm. He raises his head; Malfoy's looking away, a grim set to his face. "I swore I wasn't going to do this."

"Yeah." Harry doesn't want to move; he likes the way Malfoy's body feels pressed beneath his. "We're not really good at not doing this, you know?"

Malfoy snorts and looks back up at Harry. "You do know what I'm about to say, don't you?"

"That you're never doing this again?" Harry tries not to smile. "And this time you actually mean it?"

"Something of the sort." Malfoy pushes at Harry's shoulder. "Get off me, you oaf. You're crushing my windpipe."

Harry raises an eyebrow. "I'm nowhere near your throat," he points out, but he manages to stagger to a fairly upright position. He casts a cleaning charm on both of them and collapses into his chair, tucking his cock back into his trousers as he does.

Malfoy slides off the desk and turns his back to Harry. He does up his shirt and trousers, even rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them as well before he looks back at Harry. "Last time, Potter," he says.

"Right." Harry waves a limp hand. "Etcetera, etcetera. And you think I'm self-flagellating." "You arse," Malfoy says, but there's a small quirk to the corner of his mouth. He tugs at his cuffs. "By the way, as I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted by once again your inability to hold fast to the Auror code of conduct--"

"Oh, f**k off," Harry says, although Malfoy's not wrong.

Malfoy ignores him. "Blaise and I are rather certain that's Dolohov in the CCTV footage. Or someone astoundingly good at disguise charms, but there's usually a tic one can pick out in that regard."

That piques Harry's interest. "Nothing on that front?"

"Not that we can tell, although a studied expert might see something we missed," Malfoy admits. Harry's impressed by his composure. "But we both think it's him, and the observation charms agree. Somehow. Pansy's working her magic downstairs, so perhaps we'll have corroboration from her soon."

"Good." Harry's pleased. "As long as we can back it up for the WPS?"

Malfoy nods. "We have our records." He smooths the front of his shirt. "Now that I've finally delivered that report, I'm going home." He looks up at Harry, and that small, tight smirk is back. Fuck but Harry wants him on his back again. "Sir."

"Don't be late tomorrow," is all that Harry says, although when Malfoy's at the door, Harry stops him. Malfoy looks back. "You know this is probably going to happen again, yeah?"

Malfoy tilts his head, and his hair falls over one cheek. A faint flush spreads across his cheeks. "We'll see, won't we?" The door closes behind him.

Harry just taps a quill against the arm of his chair, eyeing the scattered, stained parchments on his desk. He ought to feel guilty again. He knows this. And he will, he's certain. There's his career to
think about and his friends. And he won't let himself consider the problem of Jake and the confrontation he's been avoiding for weeks.

He looks down at a file jacket, smudged by Malfoy's hand. A faint smile curves his mouth. For now?

Well.

He's never been one to turn down a challenge, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic! Next chapter will be up on Thursday, March 30!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which our boys come to a realisation and a team begins to gel, as much as four contrary arseholes can.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the day's delay in posting! I was editing on Thursday night, hoping to have it up, but I got slammed with jet lag and the cold I managed to catch on holiday and had to faceplant into bed before I could finish. (Woe.)

Thanks again to noeon and sassy_cissa for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gawain pauses at the threshold of the incident room, his practiced Auror's eye taking stock. Zabini, Parkinson and Malfoy form a tight-knit group in the middle of the room, their heads together. It's been a week since the formation of Harry's team, and Gawain wonders when they'll bond with their SIO. In his experience, some special units do so instantly; others might never quite mesh. This team's rather intriguing to him; he's taken an interest in all their careers over the years, and thinks they have promise, if they can bloody well get over themselves.

Harry has the makings of a good leader, but he lacks experience, and Gawain's been worried that he's kept himself far too restrained in recent years. Gawain understands why; Merlin, does he ever. The Wizarding Wars, first and second, had left an impact on him as well, and he hadn't been an impressionable teenager like Harry, cast into the middle of grown men's battle. The trauma of war makes a mark on the soul, he thinks, one that's hard to entirely erase. Harry at times wobbles between too cautious and too reckless, and it seems to Gawain that he wrestles too much with the mantle of saviour. Harry doesn't understand yet that he doesn't need to be liked to be powerful, that respect is better earned than bestowed, that only grief comes from a misguided attempt to live up to others' unrealistic ideal of perfection. He'll learn in time, though. Maybe half-kill himself trying in the process, but that was up to him.

It'd been Kingsley's idea to push Harry out of his comfortable existence by sending him back to field work. Gawain had agreed. Harry'd learnt all he could from his cushy positions in training and consulting; his diplomatic skills had grown by leaps and bounds and the other Auror departments had been thrilled to have someone of Harry's reputation exchanged with them. But it's well time for him to be home--Gawain is glad that Harry hadn't committed to New York during his last visit and decided to stay. Now, Harry needs to know how to put his knowledge into practical use by heading up a team, and Gawain had suggested he take on Malfoy and his friends, appealing to Harry's sense of fairness, not to mention that strong streak of stubbornness Harry has in spades.

Gawain thought Malfoy, with his careful, pointed pushing of Auror boundaries, would be a good foil for Harry, and vice versa, if he's honest.

Malfoy'll go far in the force, if he lets himself, but he has to stop being caught in his own self-
doubt and the idiotic prejudices of others, Gawain thinks. He ought to know, after all. He'd struggled himself after the first Wizarding War with being a Slytherin in the force. If Malfoy could get over his guilt and that chip on his shoulder the size of a damned Hippogriff, he'd have less trouble integrating with the rest. Malfoy's still too bloody caught up in himself to see not only how he's holding himself apart, but also that it's drawing unwanted attention from the likes of Althea Whittaker.

Parkinson catches sight of him. "Hey, Potter," she calls out. "Head Auror's here to see you."

"Thank you ever so much, Constable," Gawain says with a raised eyebrow, "for that subdued announcement. Perhaps you'd like to shout it down the corridor as well?" He moves into the room.

Parkinson gives him a cheeky grin, although she looks exhausted. The circles under her eyes are dark and puffy. "Anything for you, sir."

Gawain glances at the still-closed door to Harry's attached office. "I'm waiting, Inspector Potter."

He likes Parkinson. She has a good head on her shoulders and enough mouthiness to balance that out. Gawain prefers his Aurors to have a bit of an independent streak. It keeps them from falling into a lockstep mentality. He’s seen firsthand what that can lead to, twice now, and he’d rather his subordinates talk back to him than nod and accept whatever shite the latest politicians in power are spouting, even if it comes from him. Not that he dislikes Kingsley and his reforms, obviously. Still, Gawain believes a bit of scepticism to be a powerful and necessary tool when it comes to law enforcement. He’d rather be shouted at by the Wizengamot than be accused of blindly following their directives.

A moment or two later the door to the SIO office opens, and Harry steps into the incident room. He leans against the door jamb, arms crossed over his chest. "Gawain," he says agreeably, but there's a tightness to his shoulders that piques Gawain's curiosity. Something to watch for in future. Harry doesn’t move further into the room. “I could have come up to your office, if you’d have liked.”

“No need.” Gawain sits on the edge of one of the desks. He eyes Malfoy, who’s most certainly not looking at him, choosing instead to toy with his quill. Interesting. He's always had a friendly relationship with Malfoy, or so he's thought, even if the man keeps him at arm's length like everyone except for Bertie Aubrey. “Just thought I'd check on your team's progress. I understand Malfoy and Zabini have identified the suspect on the CCTV footage.”

That surprises all of them, Gawain notes, and he hides a smile. He has his sources, after all. You don't get to Head Auror on paper-pushing, although it takes far too much of his time these days. Reforms are an immense amount of work, however necessary they are.

“We have, sir,” Zabini says. “I've just to file the official report this morning, but Draco and I ran all the logging and anti-tampering charms as per procedure.”

Gawain nods. "You're certain it's Dolohov, then?" he asks. He quells the shiver that threatens to run down his back. He's seen a lot of evil in his time, but Dolohov was at the top of that list. He's one of the few men who's frightened Gawain; the one time Gawain had looked into Dolohov's eyes, there'd been no emotion, no connection. He hadn't been a man to Dolohov, just an object in his way. It'd been terrifying, an experience he doesn't want to repeat. Everyone's mortal, even Voldemort, he reminds himself. Still, he feels a tinge of guilt for sending a new team out after a man he'd think twice about facing down again.

“There’s nothing we've found that indicates otherwise, sir.” Malfoy puts his quill down, eyes
dark. “Blaise and I feel confident in our identification, particularly considering Pansy’s findings. And I for one, sir, have unfortunately seen Dolohov far too often in person to mistake him for anyone else when he’s right in front of me on tape.”

Gawain nods, holding Malfoy's gaze for a moment. He imagines they share an understanding, or at least a deep shared dislike from the flat look on Malfoy's face. Then, Gawain turns towards Parkinson. "And what might those findings be, exactly?

Parkinson pulls her dark hair back from her face, twisting it up into a tight knot at the top of her head that she secures with a hair tie. The severe contrast with her pale face only makes her look more tired. “It took me all weekend,” she says, “But I agree with Draco and Blaise. The body we have isn’t Dolohov’s. I’m not sure whose it is, yet, but the tissue samples aren’t consistent either with any record of Dolohov’s DNA or with any magical signature that we have in our files.”

"Including the Continental databases?" Gawain asks. Not finding a magical match is a seldom occurrence at best. It’s not as though the wizarding communities are that large, and the record-keeping has improved dramatically in the past years with increased collaboration. Still, there are some countries who drag their feet with record updates, much to Gawain's annoyance.

"No match yet." Parkinson frowns. "I ran searches on databases from all of Dolohov's known whereabouts prior to his supposed death. The tissue doesn't match any known files on Dolohov from Russia, Latvia, Scandinavia, or Germany. I'd cross-check it with his birth files, but I'd need permission from the Russian ministry and they don't tend to make that easy for us."

Gawain rubs the back of his neck. Brilliant. Everyone knows the Russians keep a tight grip on their records. It's a holdover from the Stalinist days when the magical and mundane governments were so tightly intertwined; as it is the Russian Aurors still work hand-in-glove with the FSB. "Kingsley might be able to help there, if we need, but go on."

Parkinson leans forward, elbows on the desk in front of her. She looks a bit more animated now. "I’ve also found definite traces of a transfiguration charm, as the report from the Department of Mysteries suggests. It’s not a traditional variant—at least not one we know of—and judging from what I’ve been able to verify, it looks as if the transfiguration charm modified itself at the time of death, but not from a Killing Curse, sir. To be honest, it looks like what killed our faux Dolohov was a time stasis spell that triggered some sort of mutation in the transfiguration spell."

That's unexpected. Gawain exchanges a long look with Harry, who just shrugs and quirks an eyebrow at him. "McKenna and Bates’ report on the Glasgow event," Harry says, "indicated that Dolohov was stopped with a Killing Curse, cast in self-defence. That’s consistent with the Priori Incantatem done on Bates’ wand after the fact. He definitely cast a Killing Curse.”

“He may have cast it,” Parkinson says. She looks back over at Gawain. “But that’s not what killed my transfigured corpse, sir. I can guarantee that. It didn’t hit, or I’d see it.”

“I’m certain.” Gawain doesn’t like this. It complicates things, adds more paperwork and bureaucratic red tape to an already politically uncertain case. The Dolohov killing had been a feather in the post-war Aurors’ cap. It’d taken them six months to track the bastard down; he’d been one of the worst of the war criminals they’d been trying to find. If the Prophet finds out he’s still alive, not to mention that a potential innocent had been killed in his place, well. It’ll be Gawain dragged through the mud on this one, now won’t it? He tries not to regret his choice of difficult-to-govern Slytherins who could make his life miserable, not to mention Harry and his damned saviour issues. He sighs and runs a hand over his beard. "Any chance the body was killed prior to transfiguration?"

Parkinson's already shaking her head. "Not bloody likely, sir. Not with the cellular modification
I've seen. As far as I can tell, it was locking in the transfiguration that killed him. Whatever it was forced the cells into the equivalent of a holding pattern, keeping them from shifting. It basically froze him to death, in a manner of speaking. It would have seemed almost instantaneous, like a Killing Curse, but it would have felt more like being suffocated while under Petrificus Totalus."

"Bloody creepy way to die," Zabini says. Gawain most certainly agrees.

He sighs. "I’ll speak to McKenna and Bates about their statements, of course."

“We could handle that, sir.” Harry’s still on the edge of the room. That concerns Gawain. He knows Harry’s been working alone for far too long, but this distance, physical or otherwise, isn’t a good thing, in Gawain’s opinion. Harry needs to step in, to find his place in the team before they close ranks on him for good. He hopes the lad figures that out quickly.

Gawain shakes his head. “Best it comes from me. I know them well, and I’d rather not raise too many questions among the rest of the force. Not yet, at least.” He stands up, brushes his trousers off. “What I’ll expect from you lot is a meeting with one of the Wizengamot barristers, as long as they’re discreet. But keep Geoffrey Marcus out of this, for Merlin’s sake. The old fool runs his mouth to everyone who passes by.” Harry nods at him. Gawain looks around the room; his gaze falls on Malfoy. "You. See what we need to consider going forward from the legal aspects. For starters, I suppose we’ll need to declare Dolohov not-dead to officially reopen the case. Christ, but this is a mess, isn’t it?"

“One might say.” Malfoy gives him a wry smile. “Although I do think I might know someone we can speak with. If Potter agrees.”

“Excellent.” Gawain catches Harry’s glance towards Malfoy. There’s tension there, he thinks. Something else to watch for, perhaps. A word to Harry later, cautioning him to build a rapport with Malfoy, might not go amiss. If he’s not wrong, Malfoy’s the lynchpin in the entire team; establishing trust with him would most certainly bolster Harry’s interactions with Parkinson and Zabini. This team’s important for Harry’s career, whether or not Harry sees them that way. If this assignment goes well, and the ones it sets up, he could be in line to take Gawain’s position down the road. Harry’d make a damned good Head Auror, once he learns to get out of his own bloody way.

Gawain claps a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. “Keep me in the loop, lad,” he says, and he’s out the door again, only the faintest worries nigling at the back of his mind. It’s common enough to have jitters about difficult assignments, after all, especially with a new team tracking.

They’ll come together soon enough, he thinks. Merlin help them if they don't.

***

Millicent will only meet them in the Leaky after work, and she insists on Draco buying her a glass of the best vin rouge Tom sells, which is barely a step above pure plonk in Draco’s opinion. Potter’s late, of course. He’d made some excuse when they were leaving the incident room, saying he’d meet them, but he’d been flipping open his mobile at the time, his attention most certainly distracted. Potter has no idea how much he needs Millie to like him for this to work, nor how difficult that can be, given Millicent's disdain for the human race at large. Although he hopes for the best, a perverse part of Draco’s also looking forward to Potter’s not being able to coast on his charm and reputation. He’s still annoyed with the bastard for their combat training session in the gym this afternoon. Draco's sore in places he'd never known could hurt. Blaise, on the other hand, had top marks from Potter and had barely broken a sweat. Arsehole.

Draco sets the glass on the table in front of Millie and takes the seat beside her, his own pint of
bitter in hand. Blaise and Pans are across the table from them, which leaves the only open seat next to Draco. He doesn’t quite know how he feels about that. Under the threat of his closest friends’ scrutiny, there’s part of him that hopes Potter doesn’t show at all. Sitting next to him’s going to be bloody murder.

He’s no such luck on that front, though. Millie’s barely asked after his day when Potter pushes through the workday crowd of Ministry dullards and Diagon office drones. He looks bloody annoyed, and Draco wonders what’s put him in that shit of a mood within the past half-hour.

“Everything all right, guv?” Blaise asks over the rim of his pint, and Potter’s face shifts as he realises he’s scowling at the lot of them.

“Nothing a round or two won’t fix,” Potter says, and he digs in his pocket and counts out a handful of Galleons. “Next one’s on me. Make mine a Shivering Dragon.”

Blaise shrugs and slides out of his chair. “If you’re paying.”

“I’m good,” Millicent says, her glass in hand. “One’s my limit or Hannah’ll have my tits.” She looks over at Potter as he slides into the seat beside Draco. “Hullo, Potter.”

“Bulstrode.” Potter nudges Draco’s leg with his foot under the table. Draco shifts and frowns at him. Potter looks entirely innocent, the prick. “So Malfoy dragged you out here for your expertise.”

“So I’ve been told.” Millicent takes a sip of wine. Draco watches in fascination, glancing between the two of them. Millie’s always been more than a little intimidating on her best days, and she doesn’t suffer fools well. To be honest, he’s no idea how she’s going to take Potter; she’d thought him an absolute twat during their school days. Then again, they all had, and look at Draco now. Rutting up against Potter in the middle of his bloody office during the work day when anyone might have come in on them. He still hasn’t quite come to terms with that. It’d been all he’d been able to think about over the weekend, remembering his body spread beneath Potter’s, their cocks pressed together. Circe, but he’s wanked himself raw since Friday, sprawled across the width of his bed, arching up into his own hand, remembering the feel of Potter’s heavy palm curled around his prick.

He’d only just made it to Sunday roast at the Manor, and he doesn’t recall most of it, which is probably for the best. Once his father goes off on Shacklebolt, Draco does his best to tune out. He’s heard it all before, and frankly his time’s better spent thinking about the tiny dip above the peaks of Potter’s lips, just perfect for the tip of Draco’s tongue.

It’s only then that Draco realises the whole table’s looking at him.

“What?” he snaps. He's no idea what the expression on his face was, so he thinks it safest to act aggrieved.

“Lost you there for a moment,” Potter says. His thigh moves against Draco’s, warm and firm.

Draco feels his cheeks heat. “Sorry. Thinking about the case,” he says. None of them look convinced, least of all Pansy, who sets her wineglass aside and eyes him thoughtfully. Draco turns to Millicent, desperate to cut Pansy off before she starts in on whatever line of questioning she’s considering. “Speaking of which, we need a consult per Robarts—“

“So Potter just said.” Millie’s mouth twitches to one side. She leans forward, elbows on the table. “Sure you’re all right?”

“Draco’s never all right,” Blaise says, Levitating three pints and another glass of wine for Pansy
onto the table. Draco flicks two fingers at him. Blaise just pushes a pint towards him. “Finish up. This one’s waiting for you.”

Pansy’s already downed her first glass of wine. She reaches for the one Blaise has just placed in front of her. “Drink up, lovelies. Last one done has to stand the next round.”

Millicent drums her unpolished fingernails against the worn tabletop. She’d once explained in a drunken moment to Draco exactly why she kept her fingernails trimmed so short. Draco really hadn’t wanted to know that much about Hannah’s body, to be honest. “How on earth do you work with this lot?” she asks Potter. “They’ve been impossible since school.”

Potter shrugs and lifts his pint. “Turn them loose, and they’re decent enough Aurors. Sometimes.” His boot taps against Draco’s again, and their knees press together. Draco’s stomach flips, and he reaches for his glass, his hand bumping Potter’s as Potter sets his pint back down. It’s all Draco can do not to flush like a damned school boy. Pansy narrows her eyes at him. He meets her gaze, unblinking. He knows better than to give her any ground. She looks away first.

“About this legal matter,” Draco says, and he casts a Muffliato. The clatter and rumble of conversations around them disappears, muted by the spell. “So what exactly do we need to be mindful of?”

Millie snorts; he’d filled her in on the basics of the case when he’d asked her to meet up with them. It breaks Robards’ secrecy orders, but he hadn’t seen any other way to get her to come. Besides, Millie’s a barrister. Once he’d mentioned Dolohov, she’d gone off on a round of questioning rough enough to have been performed for the Wizengamot itself. He hadn’t stood a chance. “It’s complicated,” she says. “Are you asking me to come at it from a WPS perspective or my own?”

“What’s the difference?” Potter asks.

“Given that I take on defence work,” Millicent says mildly, “rather a lot, I’d say.”

Potter leans across the table. “So you’re our natural enemy, eh?” There’s a faint, polite smile on his face; Millicent matches it with one of her own, a bit sharper and more feral.

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard that, though it’s usually coming from that one.” Millie points a finger at Draco, and he shrugs. Potter nudges him with his knee again. Draco does his best not to react. “But no, I don’t consider myself that. More like someone who works as a balance to you lot. If I do my job well, then you’re going to have to do your job better. Keeps you all from taking the easy way out when you’re looking at potential suspects.”

“And would you take someone like Dolohov on?” Potter asks, with that faintly belligerent tone he gets sometimes when he’s been made uncomfortable.

Millie’s face hardens. “No. Not for all the illegal gold in Gringotts.”

“Guv,” Pansy says quietly, shooting Potter a quelling look. She sets her wineglass down and touches Millie’s arm. “He doesn’t mean to be a prick, darling. We didn’t tell him.”

Potter looks over at Draco, his confusion evident. “Tell me what?”

Heart heavy, Draco finds it difficult to start, but he takes pity on Potter and his bafflement. “Mills’ little brother Henry stayed in the castle during the Battle of Hogwarts. He didn’t leave with the rest of Slytherin House—“

“His best mate was in Ravenclaw,” Millicent interrupts, voice thick. She turns her glass between
her hands, watching as the wine sloshes up the sides. “Thomas O’Connor. They were inseparable, and Henry wouldn’t leave Tommy behind. He went after him, and…” She trails off.

"From what we found out later, Henry got in Dolohov’s way. Tommy made it out. He's somewhere in Kildare apprenticing to a potions master,” Pansy says. “So no, Millicent wouldn’t ever take on Dolohov’s defence.”

Potter leans back in his chair. “Christ, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know.” Millicent looks up at Potter then. “It’s why Draco came to me though.” She glances at him. “I would have thought he’d tell you, as his guy.”

Draco has the grace to wince. He hadn’t known what to say to Potter, to be honest. It's not as if they do very much talking as it is. "I didn't intend to make you tell him, although I'm a thoughtless tit, I suppose. I'm sorry. But I thought you’d want to help, and it might not hurt us to talk to a defence barrister instead of a prosecutor, all things considered. And since you won't be formally assembling evidence, there's no chance of a charge of bias in the courts.”

“You’d be right about wanting to help.” Millicent takes a drink of wine, then sighs. “Look, your main problem you’ll have to deal with is the complication of Dolohov’s assumed death. Robards is bang on about that. If you don’t have your ducks in a row, any competent defence barrister will be able to wriggle him out of it—“She holds up a hand at Potter’s protest. “Like I said, our job is to make you do your job properly.”

“So what are we looking at?” Draco asks. He can feel Harry tense next to him, and he wants to forestall his trying to get shirty with Millie. That never ends well, in his long experience. "If you were going to come for us in court, that is.”

“Your evidence best be airtight,” Millie says. “Dolohov’s purported death means that charges for his Death Eater crimes were never officially brought against him. Even his previous Azkaban sentence has been legally commuted due to the assumption of his death. You’ll have to start from scratch which leaves you with two choices: take him down on this murder or go after him for his war crimes, the latter of which could be far more difficult now that time’s passed and he's been declared dead. If I were his barrister, I’d bring up the question of whether or not anyone's memory could be trusted nearly a decade past—“

“He was a known criminal and Death Eater,” Potter says, his irritation evident. "There's plenty of evidence on that end. For fuck's sake, he killed friends of mine--friends' families--"

Lupin, Draco knows, not to mention Weasley's uncles. He's read the file.

Potter goes on. "I faced him when I was seventeen, and he tried to kill me too. He's utterly murderous scum."

Millicent shrugs, then raises both hands. “So? Doesn’t mean I couldn’t hang a jury enough for a mistrial. You've got to do your job, Potter, and do it damn well. Frankly, if you’ve evidence he’s committed a recent murder, I’d go after that charge. Build your case right, get all of the evidence airtight, and it’ll be harder for a defence barrister to fight back. The law isn’t always pretty, and it’s often unfair, but if he’s guilty and you’ve got proof, my gut feeling is that his barrister would talk him into pleading for a chance to turn witness. Then you not only have Dolohov, but whomever he’s hanging about with as well.”

Potter scratches his chin, thinking. He's stubbled today, and Draco wants to bury his face against his jaw and breathe him in. His fingers tighten on his glass. Potter drops his hand. “It’s not a bad strategy.”
“I know.” Millie brushes a stray curl back from her face. “It’s about finding the right endgame.” She glances at her watch. “Now I’ve dinner with my girlfriend.” She reaches for her bag and pulls out a small card, handing it to Potter. “The rest of them know how to reach me, but if you’ve any other questions, there’s my work Floo.” She glances around the table. “I’d like you all to find this bastard and take him down, so please don’t do anything too terribly stupid.” She stands up, and the Muffliato breaks. “Evidence is key.”

“Give Hannah my love,” Pansy says, leaning over to kiss Millicent’s cheek. “Sorry for cancelling this weekend.”

“We’ll reschedule.” Millie hefts her heavy bag over one shoulder. Her robe wrinkles beneath it. “Work first, right?” She blows kisses at Blaise and Draco, then holds her hand out towards Potter. He leans over Draco to take it; Draco can smell the remnants of his after shave, the sharp citrusy waft of verbena. “You’re all right,” Millie says. A smile plays across her mouth. “For a Gryffindor and an Auror, that is.”

Potter laughs. “I’ll take that as a compliment. From a defence barrister.” As well he should, Draco thinks. Millicent doesn’t hand them out willy-nilly. She’s terrified better men than Potter.

Draco watches her walk away smiling. He’s a bit taken aback. “She actually likes you, Potter.”

“Is that so shocking?” Potter asks, looking round at all of them. “Whatever you lot might think, I’m not a complete tit.”

“Millie hates everyone,” Pansy says. “It’s a point of pride.”

Blaise shakes his head. “Hate's too strong of a term. More like doesn’t tolerate. Hate would imply she cares.”


Potter looks amused. “She seems all right, though. I mean, beyond implying we're not doing our jobs.”

“You're lucky she didn’t take your bollocks off,” Pansy says. “Then again, we’re helping her get something she wants, so…” Her face crumples a bit, and Draco knows she's thinking about Henry. Pansy'd complained about it for years, but Henry'd worshipped the ground she walked upon since he was a first year, and his death had hit her hard.

“I didn’t know about her brother.” Potter swirls the remnants of his pint thoughtfully, looking down at the glass. “I didn’t know she had a brother.”

Pansy drains her wineglass. “The Bulstrodes have always been incredibly private. Her mother thinks Henry’s death was punishment for Pierre’s tacit support of the Dark Lord.”


“Millie’s father.” Draco pushes his pint away. “He and Roberta have moved to Lisieux. His mother's family still lives there. Mills doesn’t see them very often. They despise Hannah, so it makes it awkward.”

Potter frowns. “Are we talking about Hannah Abbott here? I didn’t realise they were seeing each other.”

The Slytherins eye each other with knowing smirks. Draco doesn't bother pointing out there's a lot
Potter’s never bothered to learn about most of the others he went to school with. Frankly, he's surprised Potter even remembers Hannah in the first place. He'd been terrible at paying attention to anyone who wasn't either in his circle of friends or annoying the shite out of him like Draco'd been.

“They’re practically married, if not in actuality,” Pansy says. “Millie and Hannah keep putting off the wedding planning, and, anyway, Pierre and Roberta don’t like that their only living child turned out to prefer lady bits.” She turns too bright eyes on Draco. “Then again, Lucius and Narcissa aren’t best pleased with Draco on that score either.”

Draco thinks she's had one glass too many. Potter is warm at his side, soothing the perennial hurt of his parents’ disapproval.

“Minus the lady bits,” Blaise says. “Although I tell Draco he could just lie back and think of England, if he must.”

“Fuck off, both of you.” Draco doesn’t need to look at Potter to feel the amusement rolling off him. “My bits and what I do with them aren't up for discussion.”

Pansy sighs. “More’s the pity. I still haven’t heard what you were up to, clubbing in the middle of the week. You haven’t done that since Nicholas.”

Draco stirs, his fingers curled around the rim of his pint glass. Potter’s gaze is on him, heated and curious. “Nicholas?” he asks, and Draco hates that Potter has that way of dragging information out of them with the smallest question.

“No one of consequence,” he says.

Blaise and Pansy exchange a glance, but they stay silent. They’re not complete fools, after all. They know how well Draco can cast a Stinging Hex, and he has no qualms right now if they bring up his troll of an ex.

“Right,” Potter says. He doesn’t pursue it, though. Thank Merlin. Draco doesn’t want to get into a discussion about that arsehole Nicholas in the middle of the Leaky. Or anywhere, to be honest. It’s far too soon for that yet, even after a year. He shoots Pansy a glare, and she has the grace to look ashamed.

“I should be going myself,” Pansy says. “Not enough sleep this weekend.” She stands up, her hand light on Blaise’s shoulder. “See me home?”

Blaise casts a glance Draco’s way, then slides out of his chair and grabs his coat, swinging it over one arm. “’Til tomorrow.”

Pansy kisses Draco’s cheek. “Sorry, love,” she murmurs. “Too much wine. And you know what a bitch I am.”

“Far too well, you virago,” Draco says fondly. He squeezes her hand. “Go sleep.” She looks bloody exhausted, and he’s caught her more than once nodding off today over her coffee.

He waits until they’re gone before he looks at Potter. “I should really—”

“Stay and have another,” Potter says. “I’m curious about this Nicholas.”

“Nicholas is off limits,” Draco looks over at him, mouth tight. “Whatever we’re doing together doesn’t involve that particular discussion. Sorry.”
For a moment he thinks Potter’s going to object, but for once the prat surprises him. "All right," Potter says affably, and Draco sinks back into his chair in relief. There's too much about Nicholas he'd rather not think about, much less explain to Potter. And he's strangely relaxed here with Potter next to him. Potter picks his pint glass up again. “You haven’t mentioned us to Zabini and Parkinson, I wager.”

“Do you truly think I’m an idiot?” Draco hesitates. “Well. Pansy does know I watched you wank in the shower back in February, but that’s all.”

Potter blinks at him. “She knows what now?”

Draco can’t hide his smile. “I had no idea we were going to end up doing anything, and I was suffering from an excess of guilt over watching a superior officer soap his prick up in bloody cock-springing manner, so I confessed it in a weak moment.” He rubs a thumb along the cool, slick side of his pint glass. “You’ve not told anyone, have you?”

The look Potter gives him is heated. He lowers his voice. “Then how would you be my dirty little secret? I can’t keep you if I tell.”

A shiver goes through Draco, from belly to prick. He shouldn’t find that so damned erotic, but he does. “And if I don’t want to be your secret?”

Potter’s fingers brush Draco’s thigh, then slide up to settle just beneath his cock. “That’d be a pity.”

“Would it.” Somehow Draco manages to keep his voice steady as Potter’s fingers trace tiny circles, his knuckles pressing into Draco’s bollocks. He sinks into the sensation. He’s fully aware that Potter can feel his prick hardening.

“I think so.” One of Potter’s fingertips wiggles into the gap between the buttons on Draco’s flies. Draco’s breath catches as Potter strokes it lightly along the seam of his y-fronts. “Don’t you?”

Draco can barely think. He’s aware of people around them, some of whom work in their office. Potter’s hand is hidden by the table, but it’d only take a heartbeat for someone to see them. He finds that idea impossibly exciting. “You should stop,” he says, his voice low with arousal.

“Probably.” Potter’s finger pushes through the pouch of Draco’s y-fronts, brushes Draco’s swelling shaft, and Draco shivers with the skin-to-skin touch. “Or I could wank you here, if you wanted, with everyone watching.” His voice catches. “Wouldn’t they love to see you come undone for me?”

The thought of Potter’s fist around him in the middle of the bloody Leaky makes Draco harder than he has any right to be. “Fuck.” He swears softly, and Potter’s mouth quirks to one side.

“Like that?” Potter’s fingertip is feather light against Draco’s prick, dragging waves of sensation from the most minimal points of contact.

Draco leans forward and turns towards Potter. “And if I slid down beneath this table and sucked your cock into my mouth?”

Potter stills, finger curving around the shaft of Draco's prick. "I don't know if I'd be able to control myself in public."

"Perhaps we shouldn't try it in public then." Draco doesn't know what has made him so bold. He came into this evening resolved to be professional and aloof, but that's all gone to shit now. Somehow every time he gets around Potter, his logical brain, the one that warns him about doom
and disaster, just goes belly up. Or arse up. Definitely prick up too. When he's around Potter, just the two of them, no one sensible around to keep him in check, he wants and wants and wants. This desire in itself is a dangerous thing.

Potter gently removes his hand, then sits back. After a moment, he casts a bored glance around to make sure no one is watching them. He takes a long sip of the dark beer in his glass, then leans forward again, eyes bright. "Constable Malfoy, are you inviting me back to yours?"

His flat is a complete tip, and there are twenty-seven other reasons Draco shouldn't, only just starting with propositioning his boss and losing his post and his paypacket and moving on to disgracing himself with the Saviour of the Wizarding World and then what to tell his mother when his name hits the gutter press. Again. He should run away screaming, in a relatively restrained fashion, so as not to draw attention or alienate a superior officer. Instead, Draco says, "And if I am?"

Potter takes his time swallowing the end of his beer. Draco doesn't watch the muscles in Potter's throat work, and he definitely doesn't lay a nervous hand on his thigh next to his prick, desperate for more friction and more contact. He wouldn't do that, would he? That would be mad.

"I accept," Potter says, wiping a strong, brown hand across his wet lips. "Are you going to give me the Floo coordinates, or would you prefer to Side-Along?"

Posed like that, the question sounds obscene. Draco is so tempted to drag him back into the loo, gutter press be damned, but he can't do half of the things to Potter that he'd like to do without a decent mattress. And they can't keep expecting their luck to hold. Public sex will eventually lead to exposure, no matter how indulgent people are of Harry Potter because he bloody Saved the World. And all that rot.

Gathering his courage and the tatters of his dignity, Draco takes out the phone he only just learnt to use yesterday from Blaise. With Potter watching him, he manages to type his Floo coordinates into the texting box, using the fucking microscopic buttons. On the third try and only after he remembers how to get the numerical keys instead of the alphabetical--not everyone can be an anorak for Muggle Studies like sodding Blaise--he manages to send it. Potter's phone trills.

Draco stands up, dons his coat, and says a curt good-bye. Heaven help him, but if he's going to go down in flames of idiocy, it will at least be after a night of Potter in his bed.

He's rather certain it's the worst decision he's ever made.

***

Shivering a bit with anticipation and the cold, Draco runs a hand over the dark green velvet hangings of his bed. His flat is spare and relatively modern otherwise, but he spent his childhood and adolescence between a drafty castle and a manor house that ought to have been in the National Trust and he still clings to the belief that a bed isn't a proper bed without a canopy. And maybe a bit of gold leaf rubbed into the carvings, which his has an ample supply of. He's already cast spells to remove the worst of the mess, sending discarded clothes into hampers and changing his bedclothes properly. He's also been to the loo and said a few cleaning hasty spells on himself, stripping down to only his pants in the process. Full nudity seemed a bit too desperate, he'd thought. Now, in the chill of his bedroom, he's rueing his decision.

Perched on the end of his wide bed, with only a few candles lit on the bedroom mantelpiece, their small flames reflected in the wide, gilded mirror above, he finds himself strangely afraid of what Potter will think. Draco hasn't had company in his bedroom in ages, and he's never shagged Potter in a truly private space. It's odd really, knowing that he knows so much and so little about Potter.
Will he laugh at Draco's choice of decoration, or not care about setting and focus in on the physical event? And what, exactly, will he want to do? Everything means so much more when it happens in his personal space.

Draco regrets his boldness in inviting Potter home, even as he curses Potter for taking so long. If he doesn't come, Draco doesn't know how he will face tomorrow exactly, although he supposes it might also be a relief. Draco may have extended the invitation, but as he waits, Potter's imminent arrival becomes more and more of an intrusion. Draco's stomach is slowly tying itself in knots over the prospect.

It's too dark in the room, he thinks. He snaps his fingers and the gold and frosted glass sconces on the walls light up, pushing away the shadows. Better.

And then he hears the flare of the Floo and the thump of Potter's boots against the parquet of the sitting room.

"Malfy?" Potter calls out, his voice echoing in the silence of the flat.

Draco takes a deep breath and stands. This changes everything, he knows, even if he's not certain how. "Down the hall."

Potter's footsteps match the steady thud of Draco's heart. A moment later the door pushes wider, and Potter's there, tall and broad, filling the room with his presence as only he can. He looks at Draco, taking him in with one long, heated sweep of his gaze. "Hey."

"Hi." Draco feels oddly shy, like a heroine in one of those gothic novels Pansy keeps in her bedside table. He doesn't like it.

"Nice bed." Potter comes closer, eyeing the hangings and the wall behind. "And are those sconces elvish?"

Draco smiles despite himself. "Pillock. They're Art Noveau."

Potter turns, taking in the tall, glass-fronted bookcases that match the ones in Draco's sitting room, the thick rug in tones of green that's spread across the herringbone parquet floor, and the classical columns on each side of the fireplace. "So this is yours."

"This is mine," Draco agrees. He watches as Potter reaches for the top button of his coat. "We're going to do this, then?"

"Only if you want, although you do seem dressed for the event." Potter pauses on the third button. He gives Draco an even look over the rims of his glasses. "I can leave--"

"No." Draco's stomach flutters. "Don't." He chews on his bottom lip. "It's just..." He hesitates.

Potter moves closer. "This is different," he says, almost as if he can read Draco's mind. "Intentional."

"Right." Draco cracks his fingers, the way he always has when he's nervous. The sound's sharp in the quiet room. This is sex, not a mutual wank or a quick rutting. There's something much more deliberate about their coming together here. They're choosing this now; they're not just falling into a fuck or a grope beneath the spray of a shower. "We can't just write this off as hormones or alcohol, can we?"

Potter's laugh is low and husky. "Not really." His knuckles brush Draco's jaw, and Draco turns his head into the touch. "But, fuck, I want to do this. I want to have you properly this time."
Draco swallows. His throat's tight, and his half-swollen cock feels heavy in his pants. "I'd rather fuck you," he says, and Potter blinks once, his mouth opening slightly. "I've been wanking to fantasies of it for ages now. You beneath me, my prick throbbing inside your arse--" He licks his lip. "If you do that, I mean."

"Yeah." Potter breathes out the word. "I do." His hands settle on Draco's hips, wide and warm, his thumbs hooking into the waistband of Draco's pants. "Do you want to come in me, then?"

"Oh," Draco says, as Potter tugs his pants down over the swell of his prick. "Without doubt." He lets the scrap of white cotton slide down his thighs, crumpling around his feet. He kicks it off, and he's standing naked in front of a fully dressed Potter, who's looking at him with dark, hungry eyes. Draco likes being on display like this for Potter; something about the way Potter watches him makes Draco feel sexy. Attractive. Wanted. It's like a bloody rush of power, he thinks, knowing that Potter enjoys Draco's body, that he wants Draco so badly he's willing to risk his career to have him. He wonders if Potter feels the same. Draco reaches out, splays his fingers across Potter's shirted chest, slipping them beneath Potter's coat. He can feel Potter's taut nipples through the soft fabric. "You've too many clothes on, you realise."

"Do I?" Potter watches Draco as he pushes Potter's coat off his shoulders. He shrugs out of it; it falls to the rug with a quiet rustle of fabric and buttons and buckles. Potter slips his braces off, letting them hang from his trousers. "Better?"

Draco loosens Potter's blue tie. "Not quite," he says, and his fingers work at the Windsor knot, undoing it before he pulls the slippery silk free and tosses it onto the end of the bed. He moves behind Potter. "Fuck, but you're gorgeous, aren't you?" His hands cup Potter's arse through his wool trousers. It's hard beneath his palms, mostly flat, but rounded just enough towards Potter's thighs. He wants to rub himself against it. Instead, he presses his fingers against Potter's crease, pushing the fabric of Potter's trousers into it. Merlin, but he'd like to bury his prick in Potter. "Have you cleaned yourself properly?"

"Why do you think it took me so long to get here?" Potter looks back at him, eyes heavy-lidded.

A rush of lust goes through Draco, and he moves again, coming to a stop in front of Potter. "Shirt off," he orders, and Potter's fingers go to the buttons, working them free. Potter slides out of the shirt, tosses it to the floor. His skin gleams golden in the candlelight; his nipples are hard and round and brown. Draco can't stop himself from touching them. His thumbs slip over the muscled, solid plane of Potter's chest, catching on the pebbled nubs. Potter breathes in sharply, and Draco can feel Potter's cock rise through his trousers. His own prick bobs against his stomach, dripping and hot. "Like that, do we?" He flicks a thumbnail against one of Potter's nipples again, then pinches it between his fingers. Potter groans, and his hands catch Draco's hips again.


That goes straight to Draco's cock. He rolls his thumb over Potter's nipple, then catches the other between his teeth, biting lightly before he drags his tongue across. Potter swears; his fingers dig into Draco's hipbone. Draco does it again, loving the response he gets from Potter, the way Potter sways into him. He pulls back after a moment; Potter's lip is caught between his teeth, his hair tumbles forward over the rims of his glasses. He looks divine.

"On your knees," Draco says, one hand firm on Potter's shoulder, pushing him down. Potter's skin is soft beneath his fingers, the muscles firm and solid. Potter hits the floor, and looks up at Draco, eyebrow raised. "Oh, I think you know what to do." Draco lets the damp head of his prick drag across Potter's lovely mouth. His heart thuds in anticipation. "You're good at sucking cock, after all, remember?"
"Am I?" Potter's cheeks are flushed and his eyes are bright as he plucks his glasses off and sets them on his coat.

Draco leans back against the edge of the bed. "If memory serves." His fingers stroke the length of his cock, pulling back his foreskin. He taps the head against Potter's bottom lip. "Open wide. I want to see you swallow my prick with your mouth first."

Potter's tongue flicks against Draco's slit. His hands slide down Draco's thighs, then back up along the inner skin, pressing Draco against the edge of the bed, pushing his legs wider. His fingertips brush Draco's bollocks, just barely lifting the sacs higher.

"Fuck," Draco says, and then Potter's mouth is on him, sucking him in deeply, warm and wet. Draco catches himself on Potter's shoulders, mesmerised by the sight of his prick almost entirely in Potter's mouth, the thick length pressing against Potter's cheek. He's not huge, but he has girth, and Potter's lips are stretched around Draco's cock as he pulls his head backwards, Draco's shaft sliding out bit by bit.

It's the hottest thing Draco's seen. He wants to slam his hips forward, wants to make Potter gag on his prick, wants his spunk to spill over Potter's pretty lips. Instead his fingers tighten on Potter's shoulder, and his breath comes in a short, ragged gasp. "Fuck," he says again. "You gorgeous thing. You like cocksucking, don't you, Potter? Down on your knees for me. You have no idea how good you look like this." He reaches down and pinches Potter's nipple again, twisting it just enough to make Potter groan around the head of Draco's prick. Potter's fingers press against Draco's bollocks, sliding behind them to circle across Draco's taint. Draco's thighs shake and he spreads them wider, his arse braced against the bed. Circe, but it feels amazing, Potter's mouth moving on him, his fingers pressing into Draco's skin. He could come from this, he knows, and it's a temptation, the idea of Potter swallowing him down, Draco fucking deep into Potter's mouth.

But Draco wants more.

He pushes Potter back, his palm against Potter's forehead. He's breathing hard, and there's a flush across his pale chest. "Not yet," he says when his prick pops free from Potter's wet lips. Potter licks them, and, for a moment, Draco wants to shove him backwards onto the rug and straddle him, seeing how quickly he could get Potter's cock up his arse, how long he could ride him before Potter came undone beneath his thighs. He can't get enough of Potter, he thinks. He wants him every way he can have him.

His cock aches.

"Get up," Draco says, and he feels a thrill of excitement when Potter obeys, silent as he stumbles to his feet. Draco presses his palm against the swollen front of Potter's trousers, his fingers smoothing across the hardness of Potter's prick. "How badly do you want to come?"

"I'm getting there," Potter says. He catches Draco's mouth with his, kissing him long and hard. "But I'd rather wait until you're moving inside me."

Draco's already undoing Potter's trousers. He needs them off now, needs to feel Potter's prick against his. Fuck, this is madness, and he knows it, but Potter's a bloody drug for him. This will end badly; that much is evident. But Draco's too far-gone to stop himself now.

Potter's pants follow his trousers, and then Draco's turning him, pushing him onto the bed as he kisses Potter, his teeth scraping Potter's jaw. "Circe, what you do to me," he says, and Potter rolls over, presses Draco into the mattress, his cock dragging across Draco's thigh.

"Same for me," Potter chokes out, and somehow they move up the bed, hands sliding over each
other's bodies, mouths and teeth and tongues pressed against heated skin.

Draco drags himself away from Potter long enough to scramble through his bedside drawer for the bottle of lube he knows is there. He hasn't used it on anyone else since Nicholas, but he knows it's still good. He'd slicked up his own arse last night, fingers inside him as he wanked to thoughts of Potter.

Potter's sprawled across the bed when Draco crawls back, looking up at the canopy. "You've charmed it," he says, and Draco glances up at the constellations that glimmer in the dark folds of the draped velvet above them.

"I like the night sky," Draco admits. "My mother put this charm on my bed when I was a boy. I've kept it with me ever since."

"Even at Hogwarts?" Potter rolls onto his side, looking at Draco. He runs a fingertip along Draco's chest.

Draco nods. "I've recast it in every bed. Stupid, isn't it?"

Potter looks back up. "It's nice." His eyes follow the curves of the stars. "Which one's Draco?"

"Left corner." Draco points out the serpentine curves of his namesake constellation. Potter's hand curls around Draco's wrist, following his movements, before pulling it down to press his mouth against Draco's pulse, licking and sucking and biting.

"Fuck," Draco whispers.

Potter rolls over Draco, pressing him into the mattress. "Isn't that the idea?"

Draco rolls his hips up. He loves the slide of his naked body against Potter's. "You arsehole," he says, but there's no sharpness to the words. They're warm and soft, and he stills, looking up at Potter, his heart stuttering.

"Idiot," Potter whispers. It comes out like an endearment, gentle against Draco's jaw.

Draco's eyes flutter shut. His whole body feels heated, flushed, every nerve ending aware of Potter pressed against him. The phial of lube is still clenched tight in his fingers; he lets it slide free, dropping to the coverlet beside them. "I want you," he says. "It's madness, I know. We've lost our bloody minds." He opens his eyes, and Potter's watching him, hair mussed, cheeks pink.

"I can't keep away," Potter says. He strokes a knuckle along Draco's face. "I don't want to keep away."

Draco shifts beneath Potter. He can feel the hard length of Potter's prick against his hip. "Fuck the rules," he says after a moment.

"You sure?" Potter's mouth is only inches away from Draco's. He can feel the soft huff of Potter's breath on his lips.

"No," Draco says. "But I don't bloody care right now." He hooks a leg over Potter's hip, pulls him closer. "I want to make you come." His hands slide over Potter's arse, pulling his cheeks apart. His thumb slides through Potter's crease, circling over his puckered hole. "Maybe I'll regret this tomorrow--I probably will. But here and now? I want to fuck you, Potter. I want my cock splitting you in two, I want you writhing on my prick, I want you shuddering with spunk."

Potter bites his lip. "I can't object to that."
"Then roll over." Draco pushes at him, and Potter complies. "I want a good look at that gorgeous arse of yours."

Potter shifts and settles into the coverlet, his arse lifted up on display. "Like this?"

Draco didn't know his prick could get harder. "Yes," he breathes out, and he raises up on his knees, moving between Potter's spread thighs. Potter's arse is beautifully muscled and taut, and Draco can't keep himself from pressing his mouth to the soft skin, letting his tongue make its way over to Potter's crease. He licks once, then twice, and Potter hisses, his whole body tensing beneath Draco's hands.

"Steady," Draco says. He pulls back, and pats the bed, searching for the phial of lube. When he finds it, he opens the cap, pouring a little bit of oil over his fingers before sealing it again. He strokes his fingers along his cock; the sensation's almost too intense for him.

"Come on." Potter's arse shifts from side to side. Draco watches the way Potter's hole opens. He places a slick finger against it, feels it twitch beneath his touch. Potter's breath is uneven.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Draco works his finger into Potter, twisting and pressing as Potter groans. His hole is tight and hot, and Draco can barely think about what it'll feel like around his prick. He can't make it, he thinks. He'll spunk over Potter's arse before he gets half-seated in him. "Circe," he murmurs, and he presses another fingertip into Potter, spreading him wider. Potter's face is pressed into the mattress, and he lifts his arse higher with a muffled moan.

Draco's mouth is on the join between Potter's arse and his thigh, his gaze fixed on the way his fingers look sliding slickly into Potter's body.

Potter arches his back. "Deeper," he says. "Fuck, Malfoy, fill me up--" He breaks off when Draco pushes another finger into him, his thumb stroking the soft skin between Potter's bollocks and his hole. Potter's legs tremble; he's barely able to hold himself up.

"Enough?" Draco asks. All Potter can do is gasp.

Draco's fingers twist deeper into Potter, stretching him open. His prick aches, the head wet and sticky already. "Look at you," he says. He lets a finger slip free; Potter's hole gapes wide. "So ready for my prick. Who'd have thought you'd love cock so much, Potter?" He leans over Potter's back, letting his slick head slide across Potter's thigh. "Is that what you want? To be fucked by a fat prick until you're shouting, begging me to get you off?"

Potter manages to nod. "Yes," he chokes out. "Fuck, I want to be split open by you--"

"On your back then." Draco pulls his fingers out of Potter's arse. His hole's hot and eager. "I want to see your face when I fuck you senseless."

He leans back as Potter flops over. Potter's cock is so hard it lies nearly flat against his belly, and Draco takes a moment to look over Potter, taking in the hard muscles and sharply cut hipbones. He's gorgeous and golden, spread out beneath Draco, a perfect contrast to the dark green coverlet. Draco's fingers brush over Potter's soft bollocks, nails scraping lightly over crisp, dark curls. Potter hisses and twists.

Draco tuts at him. "Hold still," he says, but Potter tries to reach for him. Draco bats his hands away, glancing over to see Potter's tie still at the foot of the bed. He grabs it. "Hands up."

Potter shakes his head. "I want to touch you--"
"Hands up," Draco says, voice sharper.

Slowly, Potter raises his hands above his head. The look on his face is inscrutable. Draco's not certain this is a good idea, but he doesn't care. He wraps the tie around Potter's wrists, tying it loosely. If Potter really tries, he could get free, Draco knows that. He wants to test Potter's boundaries, see how far he can push him.

Draco lets his hands drift down Potter's body. "Look at you," he murmurs once again. He can't believe he has Potter here in his bread, splayed out for him. With one knee, he nudges Potter's legs wider. "Are you ready to be fucked?"

"Yes," Potter says, his voice barely a rough whisper.

"Yes, what?" Draco pinches both of Potter's nipples. He nearly arches off the bed with a moan. "Please."

Potter licks his lip. "Constable. Fuck me."

For a moment, Draco's not certain he won't come from that. He presses his palms against Potter's thighs, holding him still. "Why, Inspector Potter, sir, how many codes of conduct would we be breaking?" He leans in, letting his cock slide over Potter's. "Whatever would the Head Auror say?"

"That if you're planning to do this you'd better fuck me good and proper--and make me come," Potter snaps at him, but he holds steady, his arms still stretched out above his head. His fingers flex. "Hard."

Draco shivers at the command in Potter's voice. He pushes Potter's legs up, hooking them over his forearms as he positions himself, his prick pressing lightly against Potter's hole. "How hard, sir?"

"Goddamn it, Malfoy--" Potter's cut off when Draco pushes the head of his cock into him, pulling up short at the tight heat of Potter's body. Potter looks up at him, his breath coming in sharp, quick huffs, a flush spreading down over his chest. "That's a start."

Yeah, Draco thinks. A start. His whole body feels like it's on fucking fire. He sinks deeper into Potter, marvelling at the way Potter feels around his prick. It's better than he'd imagined, and Draco wonders how many men Potter's let inside of him. He's no virgin, that's for certain, judging from the way Potter widens his thighs, relaxing his body so there's no resistance to Draco's slow, steady press.

He stills, his cock nearly entirely inside Potter, and he looks down at their joined bodies. Potter's hole stretched tight around him. "Fuck, that's hot," he says, and Potter laughs, a rumbly chuckle that shakes his whole body.


Potter breathes out. "Not bad."

"Let me try again." Draco pulls back, then pushes into Potter again, quick and hard, and Potter cries out. Draco loves the sound of his need; he thrusts into Potter once more, biting his lip to keep from groaning. His thighs tense and tremble.

"Fuck me like you mean it," Potter says. "Give me your sodding cock, Malfoy. Come on. Don't act like this is your first time in a man's arsehole."
Draco rolls his hips forward, his bollocks slapping against Potter's arse. "Yeah, you want to be fucked, do you?" He digs his fingers into Potter's thighs, pushing them higher, lifting Potter's arse off the bed. "Sweet little thing like you, putting your hole up in the air for any prick that comes by--"

"Only yours," Potter says, and he struggles to keep his tied hands above his head. "That thick cock of yours--" He breaks off in groan. "God, you can fuck me all night long, Malfoy."

If only he could. Draco's hips jerk forward again. He's nearly lost in Potter's body again. "Yeah? You want my prick until you're so sore you can't walk straight?"

Potter's arms jerk, the tie loosening around his wrists.

"No," Draco says, and Potter stills, his arm muscles corded with the effort. He breathes out; his cock is swollen and wet and ruddy against his belly. Draco raises Potter's knees, trying to get a better angle with his next thrust.

Potter cries out. "Fuck, oh, fuck, yeah--" He tangles the ends of the tie around his fingers, pulling them tight, holding his arms tense. "Malfoy--yes--fuck, like that, yes, come on, do me harder, goddamn--"

Draco slams into Potter's arse, his fingers slipping across Potter's slick skin. He groans. "Yeah, you want this--"

"Harder," Potter says, and his arse twists, grinds against Draco's hips, pushes into Draco's bollocks. "Fuck me like you mean it--" He shouts, his voice hoarse and raw; his legs slide off Draco's arms and Draco leans in over him, pounding his prick into Potter's tight arse, his hair swinging forward, catching on his sweaty cheeks. Draco's never fucked like this, wild and desperate, urged on by Potter's thrusts meeting his own, Potter's heels digging into Draco's bed, pushing his hips up, their bodies crashing together in a cacophony of gasps and grunts and groans, the mattress creaking and bouncing beneath them, barely able to keep up with the rhythmic slap and shove of their bodies.

Draco reaches up and pulls the tie off Potter's wrists. He wants to feel Potter's hands on him.

He doesn't expect Potter to flip him over, to rise up over Draco, his thighs straddling Draco's hips, Draco's cock still thrusting into his body.

Potter rides Draco, head thrown back, throat a long, lean line, knees pressing into the mattress. Draco's never seen anything as magnificent as Potter over him. He reaches for Potter's prick, fingers pulling at it, slick against Potter's wet foreskin.

"Oh, God," Draco says, and he can't take his eyes off Potter, can't stop the roll of his hips up with each press of Potter's arse along his cock. "I can't--oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, Potter--" He draws in a ragged, painful breath. "Don't you fucking stop, you gorgeous thing--I'm going to fill you--fuck, yes--" His whole body feels tight and on fire, and fucking goddamned beautiful, "oh fuck, yes, please, don't stop, Potter, I'll kill you if you stop--fuck me, ride my cock--please, yes---" He shouts, his body taut and tense, a shudder going through him, deep and hard and fast.

He falls back against the mattress, gasping.

Potter's hand is on his prick, covering Draco's, moving them together up and down his shaft, the foreskin sliding beneath Draco's fingers. "Get me off," Potter says. "Come on--like that--" Potter's fisting himself then, pushing Draco's hand away. "I need--"

"On me," Draco chokes out. "Want your spunk on me, Potter. Do it--"
Potter cries out again, and thick strands of spunk spill from his fingers, spattering across Draco’s hipbone. Potter keeps riding him, and Draco can feel his spasms around his softening prick.

"Fuck," Draco says, and Potter collapses on him, his breath ragged and harsh.

"Yeah." Potter puts his hand on Draco's hipbone, smearing his come across Draco's skin. "God, you're a good fuck." He shifts his hips and Draco slides out of him, sticky and sated.

"Not bad yourself." Draco moves and winces. He's still hurting from combat training. Potter notices. "All right?"

"Just sore." Draco rubs at his hip. "Some sodding arse made me dodge Blaise’s Imperius for two hours this afternoon."

"Well, perhaps that sodding arse would like to keep you alive a bit longer." Potter rolls off him, onto his back. They lie there for a long moment, their breaths still uneven. Potter turns his head. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll be up for another round."

"You're insatiable." Draco lets his eyes drift closed. He's tired and happy.

"Around you, yeah."

Draco feels Potter's hand settle over his arse. "That's not been ten seconds, let alone ten minutes."

"Didn't say I couldn't get you hard again." Potter shifts up against Draco's side. "Think of it as a challenge."

"An impossible one." Draco opens one eye. Potter's leaning over him, a small smile curving his mouth. "Refractory period, Potter."

Potter's fingers tug at his foreskin. "Sure about that?"

"Positive," Draco says. He pulls Potter down into a kiss. It's slow and easy, and he loves the way Potter tastes. "But I suppose we could try."

With a laugh, Potter rolls him back into the mattress, one leg settling between Draco's thighs. To Draco's surprise his cock twitches.

Thank fuck they have all night.

***

Harry watches Malfoy run in front of him.

There's a languid grace to the way Malfoy's heels hit against the gym's track, the line of his back as he leans into his stride, the tightness of his arse as he takes each bounding step. Harry could pass him, easily, but why would he? He'd rather watch the shift of Malfoy's muscles beneath his joggers and t-shirt, thinking about the way that body had moved over his the night before. It's enough to make him hard right now, even with Zabini and Parkinson trailing them around the curve of the track.

He'd slid out of Malfoy's bed just after two, or at least that's what the round face of his watch had said, gleaming in the moonlight. Malfoy'd been half-asleep and shagged out when Harry'd kissed him goodbye. Harry hadn't wanted to leave, not really, but it hadn't felt right to stay, either. They
aren't the roses and coffee and slow morning sex kind, at least not together. There's no romance to him and Malfoy, only a deep, drowning lust that he can barely keep in check. It unsettles him at times; he's never been this overwhelmed by anyone he's fucked, but Malfoy, no matter what Harry does, seems to draw him back into his intoxicating orbit. Sometimes Harry thinks he's slowly going mad.

Perhaps if he'd hadn't been so angry last night when he'd showed up at the pub, if Jake hadn't left that infuriating message about Harry's inability to have an honest conversation about their relationship---like they're bloody lesbians, for Christ's sake---perhaps then Harry might not have thrown himself into Malfoy's bed.

Harry swears beneath his breath. Who's he kidding, really? It doesn't matter what might have happened before, Harry'd still have ended up beneath Malfoy, shuddering with each thrust of Malfoy's prick inside of him. He's still sore this morning, each step he takes along the track reminding him exactly how whorish he's been.

There's no madness here. No one to blame but himself for the way he's set to bugger up his entire life. Dirty little secrets have their way of being unearthed; he's seen it happen to more than one good Auror. Harry knows he's teetering on a knife's edge with Malfoy, and the longer he lingers, the more precarious his position becomes. He just can't summon up the courage to walk away---or, rather, to stay away, he supposes. One heated look from Malfoy and whatever resolve Harry has to be the better man melts away. He's a shit, he knows. A cheater, at best. At worst, one of those blokes he loathes, caught between two lovers, too much the coward to push either one away.

Fuck.

He speeds up, trainers slapping against the pavement of the indoor track. "Faster," he barks, as he passes Malfoy. "Unless you want Dolohov's hex on your back."

"Sadist," Malfoy says, and he's on Harry's heels, almost keeping up with him. Harry doesn't regret the daily gym time he's requiring of his team. He'd first gotten interested in fitness when working with the French Aurors two years back. They'd been in fighting shape, their reflexes sharper and faster than any Aurors Harry'd trained with before. It'd kept them bloody alive in a wandfight, too. Going to New York and working with Jake had pushed him to go further. He wants to bring his team there with him; he'll only know if it's worked once they're out on the hunt. However much they might complain about his expectations past the standard Auror fitness requirements, Harry still thinks they're better off facing Dolohov in top physical form.

Harry can hear Zabini puffing behind them. "You're both cunts," Zabini chokes out, then yelps as Parkinson smacks him.

"Don't be sexist, you berk," she says. Harry glances back over his shoulder at her. Parkinson's gleaming with sweat, wisps of her hair escaping from her ponytail and sticking to her damp cheeks. Still, she and Zabini are keeping pace better than they have in days. He decides they've had enough and, on the next curve around the track, heads for the steps down into the sparring arena. His team follows, Zabini and Parkinson dropping down onto the mats with a relieved groan. He doesn't have the heart to tell them they'll start weightlifting tomorrow. Yesterday's combat training had Malfoy cursing at Harry in English and French.

In contrast to his teammates, Malfoy barely looks winded.

Prat.

Harry stretches, raising his hands above his head. "So today," he says, and the others look at him. "Thought we'd delve a bit more into this Muggle murder, and see if it unearths any more clues for
"You're welcome," Parkinson says from the floor. She waves an arm weakly.

"Swansea seems our best bet." Harry nudges Parkinson's shoulder with his trainer. "You and I'll go to the morgue." Malfy looks a bit disappointed, which Harry likes, if he's honest. Still, he doesn't trust himself alone with Malfy right now. They've work to do, and he's afraid he'll just pull Malfy into the showers and suck his cock all morning. Not exactly the most effective use of Auror resources, he supposes, but perhaps the most entertaining. He glances down at Parkinson. "I want you to check out the body. Tell me if there's any spell residue."

Parkinson sits up. "It's been two weeks. There might not be, depending on cellular degradation levels."

"Then we'll know that, yeah?" Harry turns to Malfy. "You and Zabini ought to speak to the DCI in charge of the murder investigation. Find out if there's something that might not have made it into the written report."

"And how do you expect us to do that?" Zabini flops onto his back. He wipes his face with the edge of his t-shirt, pulling it up to expose a flat, muscled belly. Harry notices that he's not the only one looking. Parkinson's outright admiring, and Malfy's gaze drops down, then flits back up to meet Harry's. Malfy's mouth tightens. He glances away. Zabini, on the other hand, is oblivious to all the attention he's receiving. "Without breaking the Statute of Secrecy, at least."

"I'll talk to Maggie in the Muggle Liaison office," Harry says. "She'll set it up before we Apparate to Swansea. Just act as if you're with the Met, sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong. They're rather used to that."

Zabini shrugs and holds a hand out to Malfy, who helps pull him to his feet. "Whatever you say, guv. I'll be needing a shower first, if you're wanting me to face down Muggles."

"Proper clothes, too," Harry says. "Transfigure or glamour. No robes, please."

Malfy gives him a scathing look. "As if we're that idiotic."

"Just a reminder." Harry catches Malfy's elbow as Zabini and Parkinson head for the showers. "A word?"

"Only one?" asks Malfy. He turns towards Potter. "Cat have your tongue today?"

Harry'd like to remind him exactly what he can do with his tongue. He looks away. "Wanted to make certain we're good." He pauses, then adds, "After last night." The expression on Malfy's face lets him know exactly how unnecessary that was. He feels his face flush. "You know what I mean."

"Why wouldn't we be?" Malfy pulls away. "We fucked. I'm certain we'll fuck again. We seem to be quite good at finding ourselves in that particular situation."

"Yeah, well." Harry frowns. "You seem a little tense. I thought maybe it was because I left?"

The look Malfy gives him is both scathing and incredulous. "I certainly didn't intend for you to stay."

"Oh." Harry takes a slight step back. He doesn't know why he feels a bit disappointed.
Malfoy's frown deepens. "Don't be precious, Potter. Not everything is about you."

That's not what Harry thinks. He does, however, suspect that there's something bothering Malfoy. Still, he's not fool enough to poke a serpent that's already hissing at him. "Message received." Loud and fucking clear, he thinks.

For a moment, Malfoy looks as if he's going to argue. He glances around the empty gym, lip caught between his teeth, then he reaches for Harry, twisting his fingers in Harry's t-shirt. "You are bloody impossible," he says, just before his lips crush against Harry's. The kiss takes Harry by surprise, but he sinks into it, letting his mouth open into Malfoy's assault, his hands settling on Malfoy's arms. His whole body responds to Malfoy's touch, his arse tightening, remembering the feel of Malfoy's cock deep inside of him last night, sensations of pleasure and desire shuddering through him with each slow roll of Malfoy's hips.

Christ, but it's almost too much for him. Harry wants to drop to the mat, tangling his body with Malfoy's, rutting his half-hard prick against Malfoy's hip until they're both panting and desperate once again.

Malfoy pulls away just as quickly as he'd started, leaving Harry off-balance and unsettled. He can still feel the warm press of Malfoy's lips, the sharp bite of Malfoy's teeth.

"Circe," Malfoy says, running his hand through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. It falls back over his cheeks, pale blond strands drifting through his fingers. "You're going to get me sacked before the end of this, aren't you?"

Harry thinks it's the other way around, really. He's a superior officer. He's held to a higher standard, particularly when it comes to abuses of power, and he highly doubts anyone over him would think him shagging one of his team was anything but a way to exert his position over Malfoy. It's not. He doesn't think it is, at least. But it doesn't matter, not when it comes to the court of public perception.

Malfoy turns his back on Harry, striding towards the showers. Harry's fingertips brush his lips.

He'll see this through, whatever that makes him. An idiot, a bastard, a fucking prick, all of that wrapped up in one. He doesn't care. All he knows is that no matter how destructive this will be, he can't resist Malfoy.

Even if he wanted to.

Harry draws in an uneven breath and heads towards the showers, grateful for the fact that Zabini's in there as well. He needs that space that the presence of Malfoy's friends allow between them.

In the scant week since it was called into existence, he's started thinking of this team as his. Harry is immensely protective of all of his Slytherins, in spite of this arrangement with Malfoy, or perhaps because of it.

He only wishes he could stop the sense of dread, the irrational fear that he could be the worst thing that's happened to any of them.

Especially Malfoy.

***

Pansy's never been in a Muggle morgue before. It's sparser than either the one at St Mungo's where she did her training or her current half-laboratory two floors beneath the DMLE, tucked behind the Pest Advisory Bureau.
This morgue's all pristine white tile and gleaming steel equipment, nothing like her stone floors and marble autopsy table. It feels cold and too sterile for her liking. She'd hate working in here, she thinks as the double doors swing closed behind her and Potter.

A tall, willowy woman turns at the sound of their footsteps. She's wearing blue scrubs, her blonde hair twisted up in a knot on the nape of her neck. A wisp slips free, brushing against her cheek.

"Inspector Potter?" she asks, a definite Welsh lilt to her voice, and Potter nods, holding out his warrant card. He's spelled it, Pansy notices with grudging respect, to look like it's been issued by the Met. The more she works with Potter, the more she realises he's not a complete idiot.

"Doctor Griffiths, I presume," Potter says, and he tucks his warrant card back in his pocket after Griffiths' examined it. "Thanks for seeing Constable Parkinson and me on such short notice."

Griffiths pulls off a pair of gloves and drops them into a bin marked biological hazard. Pansy eyes the man's body on the autopsy slab, rib cage splayed open, a small set of what looks like pruning shears lying in the ridged groove that runs the length of the steel table. Curious, she thinks. A Diffindo charm's much easier for the y-incision, not to mention neater to reseal.

"You'll want to see the body, then," Griffiths says. She makes her way to a wall of small metal doors, not bothering to wait for them to follow. "Richard Thomas, late of Cwmbrwla, Swansea. Official cause of death is heart failure, potentially brought on by trauma caused when something of great force hit his chest." Griffiths snaps the lock on one of the doors, letting it swing open as she reaches in. The body slides out on a long, narrow steel tray, with barely a squeak of metal against metal. "Our local boys still haven't figured out what it was that hit him."

"Any thoughts you have?" Potter shifts, positioning himself between Pansy and Griffiths, blocking the pathologist's line of sight. Pansy hides a smile. Nice one, guv, she thinks, and she moves closer, barely paying attention to Griffith's response. Potter's been acting odd all morning, strangely tense and snippy at times, but he seems more settled here in the morgue. Strange, she thinks, but Potter can be moody when he wants to be. It doesn't really bother her. She's far too used to Draco's melodramatics to let Potter's odd moods put her off. She presumes that's why Potter keeps calling Draco back after group sessions, to have a word with him about his attitude. She only hopes that Draco can hold his natural viciousness in check. Potter's a good SIO, or will be once he settles down and stops trying to win their favour.

Pansy looks down at the corpse. Richard Thomas, or what's left of him at least. He was a solid man, not quite heavyset, but a touch less than athletic in Pansy's opinion. She moves down the side of the tray, her back to Potter. There's a discolouration across Thomas's chest, over the neat stitches with which Griffiths has closed his y-incision. It's consistent with the bruising that sometimes occurs on impact when the Killing Curse is used.

Potter's asking something else of Griffiths. Pansy doesn't care what it is, as long as he keeps her distracted. She slides her wand out of her jacket sleeve, but only just barely, letting the tip graze over the mottled skin of Thomas' chest. It's not admissible evidence--not yet, at least--but that's not what she needs right now. The spell sparks, a faint green light seeping from beneath the stitches of the y-incision. Pansy watches it, lets some of it drift over her fingertips. It's cold and almost damp, stinging her skin as it disappears in small, tight tendrils, and it's familiar in a way she can't quite explain. Without further testing she can't prove these remnants match the magical signature the Ministry has on file for Antonin Dolohov, but she's studied it enough over the past few days to be certain enough for her own purposes.

"What the hell are you doing?" Griffiths asks from behind her, and Pansy drops her hand, turning to look back at Potter.
"A word, guv?" she asks, and Potter nods, letting her draw him aside. She lowers her voice. "I'd like to bag him and tag him and get him sent back to our lab for Jonesey to take a look at. I don't have anything that'll stand up in court, but if that's not Dolohov's signature on the bits of Killing Curse still lingering, I'll give up wine for a week."

Potter looks impressed. "That certain are you?"

"I never joke about wine," Pansy grins, and then he's turning on his heel, blocking her from Griffiths' view.


"I like to think of it more like reappropriation, yeah?" Potter grins, and then he's turning on his heel, blocking her from Griffiths' view.

Pansy's hand brushes Thomas' cold, clammy skin. With a crack of Apparation, she's spinning away, fingers clamped tight to a corpse's forearm, just as Potter raises his wand.

"Obliv--"

A memory charm to cover their tracks. Unorthodox, she supposes, but effective. She rather starting to like the way Potter thinks.

***

Draco's always been fascinated by how comfortable Blaise is around Muggles. It's not surprising, perhaps, given that at least one of his stepfathers had ties to the Muggle world. Olivia has never been one to prioritise blood purity over monetary considerations. Still, Draco finds himself feeling out of place, standing in the middle of a Swansea police station. Draco doesn't usually give a damn about Muggles, but that ridiculous, fear-mongering childhood training of his runs deep sometimes, surprising him when he least expects it. Right now he's uneasy. Unsettled. Utterly uncomfortable with the way the old man slumped on one of the chairs across the room is watching him. He's practically a sack of dirty clothes and he smells like he fell into a vat of Ogden's Finest-- rather reminiscent of Draco's ancient Uncle Arsène--but his blue eyes are bright and sharp, and Draco's half-afraid he's going to stand up and start shouting that they're not who they're claiming to be. Draco doesn't like feeling as if he's on his back-foot, and Potter, the shit, has already managed to put him there today.

Blaise, on the other hand, is calm, hands shoved in the pockets of his trousers as he rocks forward on his heels. "All right there, old man?" he asks, and Draco wants to deck him, just on general principle. Blaise makes everything look easy, and Draco envies him his self-assurance. He always has.

"I'm fine," Draco says. He looks around. The waiting area's painted a dingy grey-green and faded posters line one wall, most of them exhorting the reader to "see something, say something" which makes no damned bloody sense to Draco. A constable sits at the front desk, staring at one of those Muggle computers, looking bored and annoyed at the same time. Draco wants to sit down on one of the chairs, but he's not certain they're steady enough and there's stuffing starting to come out of one of the cushion corners. Not to mention, he's not certain he can take the scent of the old man. "Circe, where is this arsehole?"

"Probably watching you be a prick on CCTV," Blaise says. He eyes Draco. "Are you all right,
seriously? You've been antsy since this morning, and it's starting to get on my tits, just in case you're wondering."

Draco tugs a lock of his hair, rolling it through his fingertips. "I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well." It's true enough, in a way. Potter'd woken him up when he'd left in the middle of the night, and Draco hadn't really fallen back asleep. He's tired and irked in a way he can't quite explain. It's not that he wanted--or expected--Potter to stay until morning, but when he'd opened his eyes to see Potter sliding out of bed, looking guilty to have been caught, it'd stung a bit, particularly when Potter'd tried to cover himself by kissing Draco, murmuring some tripe about needing to make his way home before dawn.

Whatever. It doesn't matter. It's not as if he's dating Potter, after all. They're fucking, and they're fucking well, in ways that make Draco's body ache and shiver to remember. All he wants from Potter is his cock and his arse and to give, or receive, a good, rough shagging as often as he can get it. Nothing more. The very idea of expensive dinners and nighttime walks along the Thames makes Draco snort. It's the furthest thing from what he and Potter are, and he's glad. He had romance with Nicholas and look how that nightmare had turned out. This is better; if nothing else, he knows what to expect.

Blaise is still frowning at him when the doors behind the sergeant's desk open. A man appears, dressed in a decent-enough charcoal suit, his hand extended. "DCs Zabini and Malfoy, I presume?"

Draco takes his hand. He doesn't bother to correct the Muggle titles. "Constable Malfoy," he says. "This is Zabini. You're--" He checks his notes. "Detective Chief Inspector Hughes?"

"That's me," Hughes says. "If you'll follow me?" He leads them past the desk and into the bowels of the station. "Thought we could talk in one of the interview rooms. They're a bit more comfortable."

Opening a door marked Interview Room One, he ushers them in. The room's small, painted a pale grey. Two sofas sit across from each other, a table with recording equipment between them.

"New policing techniques, eh?" Hughes drops onto one of the sofas, motioning for Draco and Blaise to take the other. "I've been a copper long enough to remember when we interviewed people across bare tables with folding chairs. Hear they still do that in some London precincts, but you boys would know that better than me. Our guy likes to keep up with all the new-fangled ideas, though. Says it keeps our solve rate high."

Blaise gives him a bland smile. "Put the perps at ease so you can break them easier?"

"Something like that." Hughes drapes an arm along the back of the sofa. "So you lot are interested in the Thomas case?"

"Curious, I'd say." Blaise crosses one leg over the other, mimicking Hughes' casual pose. "There were a few odd elements of the report."

Hughes snorts. "I'll say. Not that our witness is entirely credible. She's a known drunk, and I reckon she's been doing a little dabbling in drugs lately as well. Officers picked her up a few days back, and she was out of her mind. Going on about magic spells and men in wizard robes. Fucking nutter, she is."

Blaise and Draco just look at each other. A fucking nutter who might just be entirely credible, at least for the Wizengamot's purposes. "What exactly did she say happened?" Draco asks.
"Not much different than what we put in the report, to be honest." Hughes pleats the sofa cover between his fingers. "Mostly just raving about men running through her alley, waving sticks about, before one went after Thomas in the middle of the street."

"Men?" Blaise raises an eyebrow. "CCTV only showed one."

Hughes shrugs. "See what I mean? She's mad. But she swears she saw two come out of nowhere, then one of them disappeared again in front of her. Vanished into thin air or something."

Well. That's a new detail, Draco thinks. There'd been nothing on the CCTV footage to indicate that Dolohov wasn't working alone. "And no one else saw any of this?"

"None that we can find." Hughes looks frustrated. "It's why we've sod-all when it comes to closing this case. Reckon your lot wouldn't have any better luck. We at least know the people."

"You'd be surprised," Blaise says. He uncrosses his legs and leans forward. "Any indication why someone might have gone after Thomas?"

"We don't know they did." Hughes sighs. "All the coroner can prove is that Hughes died of a heart attack. We thought the CCTV showed a gun—there's a flash of light from the suspect and then Thomas flies backwards--but there's no evidence of a gunshot wound. Tell me that's not weird."

Draco shifts on the sofa. It's uncomfortable. "Terribly odd," he says, trying not to roll his eyes, and Hughes nods.

"As for Thomas, none of it makes sense." Hughes rests his elbows on his knees. "No priors, no known association with any criminal elements. All we can tell is that he lived a relatively quiet life in Cwmbrwla. Small house, no wife, children, siblings. Parents died twenty-five, thirty years back. Some sort of accident that took both of them, I think. No one quite knows. All his neighbours say that he was a solitary sort. Mostly read old books, yelled at the village lads for mucking about in his front garden."

"What kind of books?" Blaise asks.

Hughes frowns, a deep furrow marring his handsome face. "Odd ones, overall. A few proper novels. Hardy, Dickens, Conrad, that sort. The rest had a bit of an occult bent. How to make tinctures and that sort from the garden. Posey charms. The kind of herbal remedies my nan's mum used to be into. Lots of weeds strung up to dry in his kitchen. That sort of thing."

_Herbolist_, Blaise mouths at Draco. He shrugs. Maybe. Still doesn't quite explain why Dolohov would be after him though. This is starting to look less like a random act of violence against Muggles to Draco; Dolohov didn't just pick a passing Muggle to kill for fun. Not even he would be that stupid. There has to be some connection, and Draco's beginning to wonder if Thomas was less a Muggle than it seems. There's no mention of a Richard Thomas on the British wand registry, but that doesn't mean anything, not really.

"Do you think we could get into his house for a look around?" Draco knows it's a shot in the dark. They'll probably butt up against jurisdictional issues.

One look at Hughes' face tells him he's right. "It's our case," Hughes says. "No need for London to be poking around."

"Of course not." Blaise leans forward. "But what if you just gave me a look around while my friend here reports back to our guv? It'd help us out a lot to be able to wave this aside, tell him it's nothing we should be concerned over, that you've got it under control. Yeah?"
Draco wants to hex him, honestly. Sometimes Blaise can be a complete tit. The last thing Draco wants is to hie himself back to London. He'd been grateful to have some time away from Potter. Still, he knows what Blaise is playing for. A chance to poke into Thomas's belongings would be quite the coup. They might find a connection to Dolohov—or to the wizarding world itself. Either would put them further in the case, slot a few more pieces into the puzzle.

Surprisingly, Blaise's gamble works. Hughes glance between them, then nods. "A look couldn't hurt, I suppose."

Blaise leans towards Draco. "You don't mind?" he asks under his breath. "Better me than you, given he's Muggle."

Draco knows he's right, even if part of him feels a bit embarrassed that he's not the right Auror for Muggle interviews and going back to London will only underscore that in front of Potter. Draco'd like to think he could handle it, but he knows as well as Blaise that he'd bollocks something up. There's still far too much about Muggles he doesn't understand, no matter how he's tried to learn over the years. "Fine," he says. "I'll go back and sort through the CCTV again. See if I can find this mystery man of the witness's."

"Good lad." Blaise bumps his shoulder against Draco's before turning back to Hughes. "Have a few minutes now?"

Draco stands up and excuses himself, more than a little relief mixed in with his shame.

When he's out of the room, he pulls his mobile from his pocket, looking down at it with trepidation. Other than sending Potter his Floo coordinates, he's really only used it when Blaise had forced him to learn over the weekend, so he'd know how it worked. Still, if he can't interview a Muggle, perhaps he can at least use their technology. Besides, the mobile's charmed, as Blaise had pointed out. It's not that bloody difficult. Draco flips the mobile open, presses the button for contacts, then hits Potter's number.

Potter answers on the second ring. "Yeah?"

"It's me," Draco says, holding the mobile up to his ear. "Thought you weren't going to use this thing," Potter says.

"I'm a man of many contradictions, you should know that by now." The mobile feels heavy and odd in Draco's hand. "Are you still at the morgue?"

"Just leaving." Potter's voice sounds oddly tinny through the mobile. Draco doesn't quite like it. Potter's voice should be rumbly and rich, sending tendrils of lust through Draco's body. "Parkinson's nicked the body."

Draco pauses a moment just outside the sergeant's desk in the waiting room. "I feel as if there's a much longer story behind that statement."

Potter chuckles, and it sends a shiver down Draco's spine. And there's that deepness to Potter's tone now. Draco relaxes. "We needed it. Seemed more efficient than trying to file Muggle paperwork and waiting." There's the sound of traffic behind his voice. "How're you and Zabini faring?"

"Blaise has managed to get the DCI to take him to Thomas's house," Draco admits. "I'm not saying he turned up the Veela genetics, but…"
"Whatever gets us information, yeah?" Potter's voice goes off a bit, echoing as if he's walking through an alleyway. "Why aren't you with them?"

"Seemed like it'd be easier for just one of us to go." Draco pushes open the door to the station and steps out onto the street. It's windy and grey, the pavement still damp in places from an early morning rain. "I'm headed back to the office."

A car whizzes past him, splashing through a puddle along the side of the road. Potter's silent for a moment, then he says, "All right. Meet me back in the incident room?"

"Right." Draco hesitates, standing beside a bright red post box. It's the only spot of colour on the street, other than a fall of pink roses that tumbles over a black wrought iron fence that lines someone's garden. "Is it just us then?"

"Yeah." There's a faint tinge of amusement in Potter's voice. "That a problem?"

Of course it is. Draco doesn't trust himself around Potter. Not without someone else there. "No," he says. It sounds weak, and he curses under his breath.

Potter doesn't say anything.

"It's not," Draco says again. He wishes he believed himself.

"All right." Potter hesitates. "I won't jump you during the day, Malfoy. Unless you want me to."

"I don't." That's a sodding lie and they both know it. "Well, I do. But if we're going to do this..." Draco trails off.

"I know," Potter says. "I suppose we'll have to come up with guidelines."

Draco shifts from foot to foot. "Probably a good idea." He has a blister on his back heel from running, and his shoe's a bit too tight. He'll cast a cushioning charm on it when he gets back to the office. "No sex Blaise or Pansy could walk in on, for starters."

"Pity to take that off the table."

"Merlin, Potter." Draco's never going to survive whatever this is they're doing. All he wants now is to have Potter on the incident room floor. Potter's legs wrapped around his hips when his friends walk through the door. Fucking hell, he'd be horrified, but that doesn't seem to stop his cock from expressing interest.

Silence stretches out between them again. Draco sighs. He stands on the street corner, watching a bus rumble past. An office building stretches up above him; he can see his reflection in a glass window. He looks pale and rumpled, and there are faint shadows beneath his eyes.

"You still there?" Potter asks.

Draco's fingers tighten around the mobile. "Yeah."

"Stop being a twat and come back then," Potter says. "And hey, Malfoy?"

"What?" It comes out sharper than Draco intends.

"Remind me sometime to tell you about this thing called phone sex," Potter says, and Draco's stomach flips and twists. "I think your dirty little mouth would be rather good at it."
Before Draco can answer, Potter's gone, and Draco leans against the side of the building, not
caring that the back of his suit jacket's getting pilled against the stone. He looks down at the mobile, then clicks it shut, tucking it back in his pocket. He breathes out.

Fuck, he thinks.

He pushes himself off the wall. Another bus rolls past, followed by two cars. He walks around the corner, back into an alleyway. No one else is around. All he can think about is Potter last night, spread beneath him, eyes glazed and unfocussed as he shudders and writhes with each thrust of Draco's hips. Bloody hell. He can't get that image out of his mind; he can't help but want more.

Potter's under his skin, filling his mind, making him hard with the faintest whisper. Nothing sates him any longer; each taste he gets of Potter only makes him long for more.

Fuck, but he's fucking fucked, isn't he?

With a roiling stomach, he Disapparates.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic. Next chapter will be up between April 6-7! (Aiming for the sixth, but since this chapter's a day late, I might need to give myself an extra writing day, so...)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which a case starts to stitch together and sex is had. With quite a lot of gusto, really.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to noeon and sassy_cissa for betaing! You both are the best. <3

Also, at one point in my editing, I sort of felt like I should apologize for the sex scene being a third of the chapter, but then I remembered that won't be a deterrent to most of you, so hey, enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's nearly ten past eleven when Draco makes his way into Auror headquarters on Wednesday morning. He hasn't slept well, and Potter'd had them in the gym first off for more physical training, this time with weights. Draco's hurting in place he'd never known were possible, and he'd considered himself in decent shape before Potter'd put him on this ridiculous gym rotation. Still, he can't fault Potter pushing them. Even Draco's wand skills are improving with the daily practice, and his reflexes have never been better.

That doesn't mean he won't treat himself to a large mug of coffee from the tea cart, with three sugars and extra milk and a pumpkin pasty on the side. Margaret tuts at him when she hands it over.

"I don't know where you put it, lad," she says, looking him up and down. Draco thinks he detects a glint of appreciation in her eye, and the fact that she's rounding sixty-five makes it a bit discomfiting. "If I were your mum, I'd be worried about you going to skin and bones."

Hardly, Draco thinks, as he bites into the buttery, gingery pasty. The Malfoy genetics will kick in soon enough, more's the pity. He has maybe another good twenty years. Thirty, if he keeps up Potter's regimen, and he feels that alone makes up for the occasional sweet. He licks his thumb as he wanders down the hall. Pans has gone back to her new corpse--with far too much anticipation, in Draco's opinion; the woman's bloody morbid at times--and Blaise has scampered off to interview the Muggle witness. His look-around at Richard Thomas's house yesterday had indicated it was far more likely they were dealing with some sort of magical connection. Thomas might not have been a wizard, or at least one registered with the British Ministry, but he'd had, as Blaise had put it, "a right sodding pile of shitty Hogwarts textbooks" in his bookcases, not to mention a plethora of well-respected tomes on Herbology and potions in English, French and German.

Definitely no simple Muggle hate crime, this.

Draco'd left the gym with Blaise; Potter'd still been in the showers, steam drifting back into the
changing rooms. Draco can't help but wonder if he'd been anticipating Draco joining him, but there's no bloody way Draco wanted that this morning. He's still trying to come to terms with Potter in his bed the other night and what that means for both of them. It's not that Draco doesn't want Potter--Merlin, he'd have him six ways from Sunday, if he could--but he's still cognisant of the effect of his dalliance with Potter on his career. On the one hand, there's the boost that Potter's patronage could give Draco within the Auror hierarchy. Whatever Althea-sodding-Whittaker might be saying about him, Draco's still noticed a certain detente in his dealing with some of his colleagues since Potter'd put together their team. Shah had nudged him at their lunch table yesterday and pointed out that Draco wasn't getting half the cold shoulders he once had. Even McKenna had given him a friendly nod when he'd passed, and that hadn't gone unnoticed by others.

On the other hand, Draco doesn't want to think about what might happen if the rest of the force finds out that Potter'd had him spread out across his desk last week. Or that he'd shagged Potter raw in his bed on Monday. It's not just that his fellow Aurors would look askance at him for being openly bent--only Saint Potter's allowed that, based on Draco's experience--it's that Draco'd be eviscerated for even daring to look at their perfect paragon. Wouldn't matter if Draco protested it was Potter who'd initiated the whole bloody relationship or if he pointed out that, out of the two of them, Potter's in the position of authority. Draco'd still be the one who'd corrupted him.

Circe, but he really is Potter's dirty little secret, isn't he?

The pasty tastes bitter now. He wraps the squashed remnants in a paper serviette and bins it in one of the currently unused conference rooms. It disappears in the Vanishing charm set on all the rubbish bins; the cleaners had objected to the piles of discarded food and tea bags they'd found every night throughout Auror headquarters. Really, Aurors, the whole lot of them, are disgusting, Draco thinks.

"Malfoy," he hears as he steps back into the hallway, and he turns to see Bertie coming out of the incident room. "Just the man I was looking for. Whole team off this morning?"

Draco shrugs. "Various places. I assume Potter hasn't made it back from training then?"

Bertie shakes his head. "Not yet." He follows Draco into the incident room Technically, Draco supposes, he ought to charm away the notes they have scrawled on the board. Protocol says that only members of the team and the Head Auror should have access to the room, but no one ever pays attention to that rule. If they did, nothing would ever get done. Half of Auror work is bouncing ideas and theories off anyone who passes by. Besides, Draco's feeling tired and lazy after his workout. He sits on the edge of one of the desks, his coffee in hand.

"What do you need?" Draco asks. He takes a drink and grimaces. Honestly, he'd prefer a well-mad cup of tea this morning, but he's learnt to appreciate the caffeine hit that Margaret's far-too-strong coffee gives him. He's had much better in the cafes of Rome, small, sweetly bitter shots of espresso that are a joy to down. Still, Margaret's swill gets the job done.

Bertie takes one of the chairs, stretching himself out, hands tucked behind his grizzled head. "Wanted to see how things were going with Potter at the helm, mostly."

Draco shrugs. "I haven't hexed him yet." Shagged senseless, yes. Cast an Unforgivable on the twat, well. He's holding off on that for now.

"A positive sign, that." Bertie swivels back and forth. "How's he as an SIO?"

An irrational need to protect Potter wells up in Draco. "Decent," he says after a moment. "Better than Wrightson or Cavanagh." He gives Bertie a half-smile. "Not as good as you."
"Obviously not." Bertie grins back at him, then scratches the stubble on his jaw. "Lots of people in the higher ranks looking at you lot, wanting to see how you do."

Draco's not surprised. "Wanting to see us fail, you mean."

Bertie raises a shoulder and wrinkles his nose, snuffling for a moment. He clears his throat, then rubs the back of his hand across his mouth as he coughs. It worries Draco; it's a reminder that Bertie's aging, getting closer to retirement age. He doesn't know what he'll do without Bertie around. He's fully aware that his mentor's stepped in to protect him more than once in ways he's not certain even Potter could do.

"You all right, old man?" Draco keeps his voice light.

"Call me that again, and you'll see the wrong side of my wand." Bertie sits forward and thumps his chest. "Nothing that a bit of firewhisky and honey won't cure. Bloody fucking rain sets in sometimes." He coughs again, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handkerchief. He wipes his mouth. "Was going to say I'm not so sure they're for you failing. At least not the ones who've talked to me, at least."

"We'll see."

Bertie clears his throat again and pushes himself out of his chair. "Not a bad idea to be sceptical," he says. "Always liked that about you. Never have trusted easily, have you, lad?"

"I suppose I learnt eight years ago that it wasn't the best course of action." Draco lifts his coffee mug to his lips. It's still steaming hot. Margaret really needs to turn down her charms a bit.

"And they say you're not the clever one." Bertie points a finger at Draco. Draco makes a face. "I'm offended."

"Ought to be." Bertie glances around at the whiteboards. "Case is moving forward, I see."

"Slowly." Draco sighs and sets his coffee aside. "We just need to figure out how to track the bastard down."

Bertie nods and moves closer to the whiteboards, his eyes scanning what Potter's scrawled down about Dolohov's known whereabouts over the past six months. "Tricky one, isn't he?"

"You don't know the half of it." Draco's eyes flick to the door as it opens. Potter strides in, his Auror coat draped over one arm, hair still damp and curling from his shower.

"Aubrey," Potter says, hanging his coat up on one of the hooks inside the door. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Checking in on my lad here." Bertie turns towards Potter, a smile creasing his wrinkled face so it nearly folds in on itself. "He says you're a first-rate SIO."

"I didn't," Draco says when Potter looks over at him, eyebrow quirking. "I said you were decent, that's all." The last thing he wants is Potter thinking he's gushing over him like a starstruck first-year.

Potter unbuttons one shirt sleeve. "I'll take it." His white shirt's a bright contrast against his golden-brown skin, and Draco can't tear his eyes away from the shift of Potter's muscles as he rolls his sleeves up his forearms. "Looking over our boards, too, are you?"
Bertie glances back at the whiteboards. "Nice work."

"Thanks." Potter shoves his hands into his pockets. It ruins the line of his trousers, but it also outlines the length of his cock, so Draco'll never complain. "Any advice?"

"You have it mostly covered." Bertie steps closer to the boards and frowns. "You certain about this list of whereabouts?"

Draco manages to look away from Potter. "Not all of them have been verified." He picks up his coffee mug. He and Potter had argued about that yesterday afternoon for half an hour. In Draco's opinion, they shouldn't be on the board until they were certain that a known sighting was actually bloody well known. Potter'd written them down anyway, saying it gave them a list to work from at least.

Potter rolls his eyes. "They will be by end of day."

"Right." Bertie rubs the back of his neck and squints at the list. "If I were you lot, I'd cross-reference that list against any Dolohov family properties. See if you find any matches."

Draco and Potter exchange a glance. "Not a bad idea," Potter says, which means more work for Draco, he's certain.

"Glad to be of help," Bertie glances at his pocket watch. "Off to a meeting with the rest of the bloody chief inspectors now, Merlin help me." He shakes his head. "Best rethink how far you both want to climb the promotions ladder. Comes a point where you have to endure Wrightson blathering on like a damned idiot for a half-hour at least. Ah well. I'll get a bit of snoozing in, won't I?" He claps Potter on the arm and winks at Draco. "Not much longer 'til somebody gets his exam results back, though."

"Still have to survive the Promotions Board," Draco says. A flutter of nervousness twists his stomach. He hasn't even thought about the next steps post-exam; he's been so caught up with Potter and his effect on Draco's career. "That's even if I passed the exam."

Bertie snorts. "As if you wouldn't with flying colours, you swot." He glances back at Potter. "Not bad for you to have a sergeant on board, though."

Potter looks at Draco. His face is inscrutable. "Malfoy'll be fine."

"That's what I tell him." Bertie pauses at the door. "Let me know if there's anything else you want to run past me, lads. I'd like you both to have the feather in your cap of bringing Dolohov in. Merlin knows McKenna and Bates never deserved it, the twats."

With that he's gone, and Draco's left alone with Potter. He wishes Blaise or Pansy were here, either of them. It's not that he can't control himself around Potter. He just doesn't always want to. Although they'd managed yesterday, mostly because Potter had irked the bloody hell out of him with his whiteboard list.

An awkward silence settles between them.

"I--" he says, at the same time that Potter speaks.

"You could work on the property angle." Potter flushes and runs a hand through his hair. "I mean..." He trails off.

"No," Draco says. "It's fine. I was going to offer."
"Right." Potter looks frustrated. "Look, we can't let this get weird--" "It's not."

Draco doesn't meet Potter's eye.

Potter snorts. "Come on, Malfoy. We have to work together, and as much as I'd like to fuck you every time you walk in this room, that'll probably be noticed after a while."

"Probably." Draco looks over at Potter. He doesn't bother to hide his small smile. "So what are you suggesting?"

"I don't know." Potter sits on the desk across from him. "Like we said yesterday, no shagging in the office?"

"At least during work hours," Draco says. The odd tightness in his chest is relaxing. It helps to talk about this, he thinks. He feels more normal, less like he's losing his mind.

Potter laughs. "Giving us incentive to work late, are you? That's a motivated team member." "Fuck off," Draco says, but his smile widens. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah." Potter's looking at him, with those bright green eyes that Draco swears can see right through him. "We keep it quiet, we keep it out of this room, we do our work. And then I come over to yours and I fuck you across that big, comfortable bed of yours until we soak your sheets with spunk. Sound good?"

Draco's mouth is dry. He swallows. "It's a start."

"Good." Potter grabs a file jacket off the desk next to him and flips through it. "In that case, get the hell out of here and find me Dolohov's fucking property list, will you? If Bertie suggests it, there's bound to be something there."

Draco doesn't hesitate. He grabs a pad of parchment and a quill. "If you need me, I'll be in Records."

Potter's mouth quirks. "I'll keep that in mind." He spreads his knees wider across the desk, his prick outlined through his trousers.

"Ground rules," Draco says, exasperated. "For fuck's sake, Potter."

Potter's laugh follows him out of the room.

Draco shakes his head, trying not to smile. Potter's a complete and utter arsehole. The problem is, Draco's afraid he's starting to like that about him.

***

Nicola Reece is a beautiful woman. She's also thick as a bloody post, Blaise thinks, although he's rather certain Pansy would protest at him for that generalisation. At least until she talked to Nicola, at which point Blaise is also certain she'd throw her hands up and admit he had a damned point.

"You're certain," he says again, trying to keep his voice light and even, "that you saw two men?" He's cursing himself for taking this interview on. If Hughes finds out, they'll be hell to pay; Blaise had barely managed a decent search of Thomas's house yesterday with the Muggle detective by his side, curious about everything Blaise had written in his note pad. Hughes doesn't want to share jurisdiction, that much is clear. Still, Blaise had talked Potter into letting him call on Nicola this
morning—or at least Potter'd been distracted enough during their weightlifting session, muttering something under his breath about Draco being a bloody tit, that when Blaise had asked, Potter'd just waved him off with a fine, then gone to fix Draco's form before he did something idiotic like break arib.

"Maybe." Nicola tugs at one of her curls. "But I'd had come out back door of the the pub--my ex was there, see, and I didn't want to run into him, right, so Charlie--"

Blaise scrawls the name in his notepad. Probably nothing, but if he has to go back and talk to Charlie from the Crooked Billet, then at least he'll have a reminder. This is what he's good at, drawing out information from people. Draco's too impatient, and Pans prefers the dead to the living. Blaise, on the other hand, has an instinctive ability to unspool a story from someone, whether or not they mean to tell it. He'd learnt it from his mother, watching her put people at ease during her soirees or charm someone into providing a favour--or a wedding ring. He admires her, really. No one knows that Olivia Zabini had been poor when she'd found herself twenty-three, single, and pregnant with Blaise. His grandparents had thrown his mother out; she'd used her skills not just to craft a beautiful nest for the both of them, but to feather it as well. Frankly, as much as his mother drives him round the twist, he loves her dearly.

"The barkeep?" Blaise looks up.

Nicola nods. "He let me out the back, yeah? My ex--Trev--he's a bad sort, especially when he's been drinking--"

Blaise reminds himself that he can't hex a Muggle. Well, he could, but the paperwork would be a sodding nightmare. "The men, Nicola. In the alley?"

"Right." She leans back in her chair. It's a rickety and uncomfortable kitchen sort, with a hard vinyl padded seat and slatted back. Blaise is sitting on its mate, and he's fairly certain a half- unthreaded screw's poking into his left arse cheek through the padding that creaks every time he shifts. Nicola's council flat is small and dark; the narrow window in the sitting room's grimy from the city air, and a plain brown curtain covers part of it, blocking out what little morning sunlight filters through the smudges on the glass. Still, inside, the flat's impeccably tidy, everything put in its place. The kitchen in particular is spotless; the only mess is the two cooling cups of tea on the wobbly metal-topped table between them.

Blaise waits. Nicola rolls a spoon between her fingers, letting it swirl through the half-drunk dregs of her tea. She sighs and pulls her robin's egg blue hoodie tighter around her small frame. She's too bony, Blaise thinks. With her pale skin and her blonde curls, it gives her the look of a fragile porcelain doll. "They all said I was mad when I told them down the station. Don't see why you wouldn't think so too."

"Try me." Blaise thinks she's many things. Mad isn't one of them. The look she gives him is sceptical.

He raises his hands. "I'm from London." "Nutters all of you, living there."

Blaise gives her a small smile. "Can't argue." London's where he was born and raised, and he's quite attached to the city, even on days when he finds it too loud, too exasperating, too wet, too everything. You have to be a bit mad to love London, he thinks. She's as fickle as she is fair.

Nicola sighs again. "I don't know what you want me to say. I saw them both, and they just
appeared, right there beside the skip. One of them was tall and dark-haired and the other was shorter. Had on what looked like those old-fashioned coats they wear sometimes in pantos?"

"DCI Hughes said you called them wizard coats when he interviewed you." Blaise is curious about whether that was an offhand remark or whether Nicola has some experience with the wizarding world. He's fairly certain it's the former, but after Thomas, he's more cautious. Wales is a curious place, to be honest. There's a deep strain of magic woven into the hills and streams and caers. Quite a few of the Muggles are bit touched with magic themselves, he thinks, whether or not they realise it. It's bred into them, even if, in practice, it's disappeared generations back.

"Yeah," Nicola says. "They were kind of like that. You know. Long and dark with all the shiny buttons? And one of them had something weird stitched along the bottom. Swirls or the like. Both looked right nasty, if a bit lush, and they sounded odd."

"What do you mean?" Blaise's pen scratches across his notepad. He almost prefers it to a quill; the feathers make his nose itch.

"Well." Nicola leans forward, her elbows on the table. "The tall one, he sounded posh, yeah? But not like he was all British. Maybe like some foreigner who came to uni here?" She chews on her bottom lip. "The other bloke, he wasn't even speaking English."

Blaise raises an eyebrow. "Do you know what he was saying?"

Nicola purses her mouth at him. "I did French in secondary, not whatever those people speak."

"Those people?"

"You know." Nicola looks uncomfortable. "The Poles." She whispers it, as if someone might overhear her.

Well, that explains a lot, Blaise thinks, trying not to roll his eyes. She's probably a bloody UKIP voter, or would be if she ever made it to the polling station; he recognises the type. His mother's latest Muggle shag is a married UKIP twat with whom Blaise doesn't particularly see eye-to-eye, but he's fairly certain Olivia's getting bored with Nigel, thank Christ.

"So the shorter man was Polish?"

Nicola shifts in her chair; she twists her hands together. "Maybe. From somewhere over there, I think."

Blaise looks up from his notepad again. "Can you describe him?" He wonders if it's worth it to bring an artist out to put together a sketch. It's something to bring up to Potter at some point, he thinks.

"I said." Nicola's starting to sound peeved. "Shorter than the posh one, but taller than me. Wide shoulders—rather fit, really, like one of those blokes from the gym. Brown hair. Face looked like he'd been in a pub brawl once or twice, you know? Kind of smushed in?"

"You saw all this before he disappeared again?"

Nicola rubs at the sleeve of her hoodie, picking at a loose thread in a seam on the cuff. "He looked at me before he did, and he smiled." She hunches in on herself. "It wasn't nice."

Blaise can imagine not. In his opinion no one who's associating with Antonin Dolohov prior to a midday murder is going to be a kind and gentle soul. "And then he just…" He makes a gesture with his hands to indicate the man popping away.
"Not like that." Nicola's fingernails are chewed down to the nub on one hand. "More like there was a swirl of black smoke around him, and it took him away. But he was bloody tamping before he left."

"Tamping?" He frowns. It's a term he hasn't heard before. 

"You know." Nicola gives him that so-very-Welsh look that condemns all ignorant Englishmen to the pits of hell. "Angry. He was arguing with the other bloke."

"About?" Blaise asks.

"How would I tell?" Nicola clearly thinks him a fool. "He wasn't speaking English, but you know when someone's right naffed off, yeah? Anyway, then the other bloke--"

"The posh one?"

She nods. "Yeah. Him. He ran out of the alley and next thing I knew that other man was lying on the ground in the street, and everyone was screaming."

Blaise leans back in his chair. It squeaks beneath him. "So what happened to the posh bloke?"

Nicola looks uncertain. "I don't know. He was there, and then he wasn't." She hesitates. "I was a bit pissed, though."

"In the middle of the day." Blaise doesn't make it sound like a judgment. It's not really. He's been there too, that first year after the war. He'd spent the summer before eighth year tippling from every bottle he could put a hand on, until his mother had caught him and forced him back to Hogwarts with the stern command to stop bollocking up his life. "You've got a Class A drug charge on your record, though."

"I paid my fine," Nicola says. "And went to my counsellor." She sounds defiant.

Blaise doesn't say anything; he just watches her. She looks away. "But do you understand why that might make someone think your testimony isn't entirely solid."

Nicola shrugs and curls her hands around her tea mug. "I wasn't using. I haven't since I was caught. They can think whatever they want, but I bloody well know what I saw. I'm only saying."

Blaise watches her for a long moment, then folds his notepad back up and tucks it in his pocket. He thinks he has as much as he can get from Nicola at the moment. "If I have any more questions can I come back?"

"What's to stop you?" She sounds tired.

"Thanks." Blaise stands. He lets the tips of his fingers rest on her shoulder, and she relaxes beneath his touch. It's the least he can do; one of the few Veela skills he's inherited from his mother's family is the ability to ease someone's stress, to bleed anxiety away, at least for a few moments. He doesn't use it frequently. It feels wrong, somehow, even if the other person knows what he's doing. Still, he thinks Nicola needs some rest. "Go sleep."

Nicola nods. "Yeah," she says, and she yawns. "Maybe."

Blaise lets himself out of the flat. Townhill Estate's a swathe of terrace houses, row upon row up the side of the hill, most with a magnificent view of Swansea Bay on a good day. The rain from yesterday's lifted, and the overcast sky's clearing just enough for the ocean waves rolling in to sparkle a bit as they whitecap. He makes his way down the street, lost in thought. Combined with
what he'd learnt yesterday in Thomas's house, he's certain Draco's bang-on with his theory that Dolohov didn't just reappear for a random Muggle killing. Where it leads them, he hasn't the damnedest yet.

A touch on his arm has him whirling about, hand going to the hilt of his wand in the holster beneath his coat.

"Careful there, lad," an old man says. "Not the place to be pulling that out."

Blaise blinks. The man in front of him is a pile of ratty, filthy clothes that reek of firewhisky, but his wrinkled face is clean and his eyes are bright and blue without any of the cloudiness of a drunk. He frowns. "I've seen you."

"Yesterday." The man scratches at his thick, grey sideburns and grins. "Down the station. Recognised you and your friend as Aurors, didn't I? Watched you at Dickie's house too, after that, but you and old Hughesey didn't see me. Might just be a Squib, but I know a thing or two." He taps the side of his nose. "My mam learnt me, she did."

"Hughesey?" Blaise doesn't bother to hide his amusement. He can only imagine what the DCI would think of being called that. Didn't seem to go with the solid, authoritative presence Hughes is desperate to cultivate.

The man scowls. "Can't get the bastard to listen to me. He thinks I'm a complete nutter."

Blaise can understand why. If he were a Muggle confronted by this man, he'd think him off his nut too. He's not entirely certain he's not, to be honest. "You're a friend of Thomas's?" At the man's nod, Blaise glances around the street. There's no one in sight. "What exactly do you want from me?"

The man sticks out his hand. "John Pridmore, they call me, and Dickie were an old family friend." His grip around Blaise's fingers is tight and firm.

"Another Squib?" Blaise is curious. He can't suss out yet if Pridmore is the real deal or just one of those mad hangers-on that occasionally tumble out of the woodwork on a case, desperate for attention.

Pridmore shakes his head. "Dickie were a proper wizard." He frowns. "Of sorts. Not trained, yeah. No fancy Scottish schooling for Dickie, if you know what I mean."

"I do," Blaise says dryly. His time on the force has introduced him to the witches and wizards who hadn't made the Hogwarts cut. Frankly, he thinks some of them are more talented than a few of his former classmates. Vince, for one, ought never to have been at school, and Greg had barely squeaked by in most of his classes. If it hadn't been for Draco rewriting their essays, they'd both have had a roster full of Dreadful marks by seventh year, with more than one Troll thrown in as well. "Self-taught man?" That would explain the older versions of classic Hogwarts texts in his sitting room bookcases then.

"Mostly. His nan taught him when he was small." Pridmore leans against an ancient, battered Vauxhall. The mirror's taped onto the side. "My mam showed him some things too." He crosses his arms over his chest; the smell of firewhisky fades, but only a bit. Blaise wonders if it's a glamour to keep people away—or to keep them underestimating Pridmore. He suspects the latter. "Look, Hughesey won't listen to me, but maybe you will." Pridmore glances over his shoulder; he looks nervous. "Dickie were into something. Never would tell me what, but you know a man long enough and there are things you understand."
That Blaise agrees with. He's been friends with Draco for fifteen years now, and sometimes he thinks he knows Draco better than Draco does himself. "Like what?" His notepad is in his hand. He flips to a new page, pen tip hovering over the paper.

Pridmore's thick eyebrows draw together. "He were working on things towards the end. For clients, he said, and Dickie'd never had that before. He were good at what he did, though—"

"Which was?" Blaise looks up at the old man. Pridmore's mouth pulls down at the sides, nearly disappearing into his wrinkles.

"Potions and charms with herbs," Pridmore says. "Odd stuff. Not like what my mam used. He'd have to go searching the countryside for his ingredients. In strange places, you know. Off footpaths and through cemeteries."

Blaise's pen leaves an ink blot on his notepad. "Dark magic?" Slytherin or not, that shite makes him nervous. He's not opposed to its use from time to time, if the situation warrants, but he doesn't like being around it much. In his experience, those who play with Dark wizardry start to be controlled by it. Blaise doesn't like magic that toys with people like a cat with a mouse.

Pridmore doesn't answer for a moment, then he sighs. "Grey, I'd say. He weren't the Dark sort. If you knew him, you'd see. But he also weren't unwilling to swing into the shadows sometimes. I think he got over his head at the end."

"With these clients."

"Aye." Pridmore shakes his head. "It wouldn't have been money they promised him, though. He didn't hold with that, but if they'd promised him knowledge…" He shrugs. "Dickie always was a damned fool."

Blaise wishes he had a sugar quill with him. He needs something in his mouth to think properly, and the end of his pen isn't quite right. He taps the cap against his bottom lip. The client must have been Dolohov, or the man with him. Or someone both of them work for. "So you think Dickie was killed because of whatever this was he was working on."

"Only thing that makes sense, yeah?"

Pridmore has a point, Blaise thinks. "But you don't know what it was."

"Wish I did, lad." Pridmore looks frustrated. "Dickie kept to himself the past year or two. Not that I blame him. Don't like socialising myself. But he were different, you know? Distracted and jumpy and wanted me to leave the minute I dropped by."

That fits with the theory that Thomas might have had connections to Dolohov. "I need to talk to my team about this," Blaise says to Pridmore. "How can I reach you later?"

Pridmore gives him an address in Dyfatty. Blaise writes it down and promises to follow up. Whether or not he does will be up to Potter in the end, and he doesn't know how much more useful information they can get from Pridmore. Still, it doesn't hurt to have a contact tucked away.

"Don't be a Hughesey," Pridmore says over his shoulder as he shuffles away, and Blaise shakes his head, tucking his notepad back into his pocket. He likes the odd bastard, he thinks. Doesn't exactly trust him—Blaise has learnt to be careful with witnesses; they can be tricky little shits at times— but his story's at least worth checking out.

Blaise waits until Pridmore rounds the corner, then he pulls out his mobile.
"Guv," he says when Potter answers, "you will not fucking believe what I just heard." Across the bay, the whitecaps glimmer beneath the sunlight.

***

Pansy leans over the high desk in the main laboratory of the DMLE's magi-forensicology office. She's undone an extra button on her blouse; she needs Jones to rush her results, and she's learnt over the years that he's easier to push around when he's flustered and at least halfway aroused.

"You know I'd do it myself if I could, Matthew," she says, resting her tits on her crossed arms. It's a terribly uncomfortable position, but it does put her best assets front and centre.

Jones's gaze dips down. "I've a queue, Parkinson."

"And I've a guv who wants to know who killed this man and how." Pansy tries to look put upon. She's wearing the black lacy bra that Jones seems to like best, judging from the number of times he's tried to look down her top when she has it on. "You know how Potter is."

"I know I've a body in my morgue that didn't come in through proper channels," Jones says. He frowns at her. "Chain of evidence, Parkinson."

Pansy tries not to sigh. "And that's my whole problem, Jonesey. Merlin only knows what sort of contamination's happened to the magical signature with it being held in Muggle custody for two weeks. For that body to be accepted into evidence by the Wizengamot, I need a proper wizarding coroner's sign-off. They won't accept mine."

"As well they shouldn't," Jones says. He runs his hands through his thinning sandy brown hair, leaving it standing straight up, and huffs. "You're bollocking our entire schedule--"

"I swear I'm sorry," Pansy says, hiding her smile. Honestly, Jones is so easy.

His scowl deepens. "I won't have anything for you until tomorrow at the earliest."

Pansy can live with that. She beams at him; Jones looks away. "You're the best." She hands over a file jacket. "This is everything I've come up with on my preliminary testing. I'm certain it matches the magical signature I've been looking at. I just need you to confirm."

Jones flips through her findings and grunts. "Not bad."

Of course it's not. It's bloody perfect--everything he would have done in half the time. Merlin forbid he ever tell her she's done good work, though. To do so might crumble away the few remaining fragments of his masculinity. Honestly. Men, she thinks. So bloody fragile. She grits out a smile. "I have copies; I'll rerun the results myself just to make certain my initial findings are solid."

Also to make certain he doesn't screw her over. She's been burnt more than once by his sloppiness--as well as that of some of the other magi-forensicologists who've thought it perfectly acceptable to fuck her over just because she's Slytherin and a woman. It's not just Draco and Blaise who deal with post-war prejudice against Slytherins on the force, as well as homophobic and racist biases respectively; Pansy also faces this anti-Slytherin sentiment constantly in her work, from the sideways glances when something Dark has to be tested to the willingness of her co-workers to undermine her tests--out of spite or laziness or sheer fucking stupidity, she's never entirely certain. Or maybe just because she's female.

Pansy straightens up; Jones sets the file jacket aside and turns back to his work, dismissing her. It's
the best she can hope for now. With any luck Jones will reach the same conclusions she has and sign off on them so the WPS can enter them into the record.

In the meantime, she has a whole battery of tests to recheck.

The sound of her heels echo in the silence of the laboratory as she strides out, Jones watching until the door swings shut behind her.

***

Draco bends over a parchment filled with lists of known properties attached to the Dolohov family across Europe and the Americas. It's taken him hours to get the information from the Administrative Registration Department, along with a few annoyed firecalls between the International Magical Office of Law and the records office of the International Confederation of Wizards. Still he has it now, and he's spent the past forty-five minutes trying to cross-reference his list of potential Dolohov whereabouts from the whiteboard with family holdings. That list's smaller than he'd expected, to be honest. As in, empty. Null. Nothing.

He sighs and stretches, blinking as his eyes adjust focus from the tiny letters of the parchment to the larger environs of the incident room as a whole, taking in the four desks piled with papers and file jackets. Blaise is hunched over a stack of his own parchments, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, blue sugar quill-stained mouth moving silently as he scrawls across his notepad.

Draco glances over to Potter's half-closed office door. Potter's been in there for most of the afternoon, once he'd set Blaise scouring through Richard Thomas's Muggle records, trying to find a connection between them and any files in the Ministry system. Draco stands up and walks over to the pitchers of water across the room, charmed to refresh themselves every half hour. He pours himself a glass; it's still cool and crisp, perfect against the raw dryness of his throat.

"Found her." Blaise slaps the back of his hand against the parchment in front of him. "Iva Procházková."

"Who?" Draco sets his glass down; it disappears, whisked somewhere into the bowels of the Ministry commissary, he assumes. His shoulders and neck still ache as he makes his way back to his desk.

Blaise's fingertip slides along the parchment as he reads. "Thomas's grandmother," he says, distracted. "The one Pridmore said taught him magic at home. It makes sense, really. He had a shelf or two of old books that looked like they were written in Czech. Magical texts, I mean, or at least some of them were, judging by the illustrations."

"Right." Draco drops into his chair with a grunt. "So she's not a Muggle then?"

"Not bloody likely." Blaise reaches for another sugar quill and unwraps it, still frowning down at his parchment. "She immigrated in late 1945 from what's now the Czech Republic. I've a copy of her entry forms. No husband, just a daughter named Vera." He flips the paper over. "Her father was a Jozef Procházka, so I'm guessing either she never took her husband's name or little Vera was a bit of a mistake if you know what I mean."

"Hard to not," Draco says. Something niggles at the back of his mind. "Procházka? Isn't that a fairly common Czech name?"

Blaise nods. The sugar quill's in his mouth now, tucked into his cheek. "Why?"

Draco picks up his papers again. He frowns down at them. "There's a property in Prague listed here
under an Anichka Procházková Dolohova, wife of Pyotr Dolohov. "He glances up at Blaise,
"Could be unrelated." Blaise shuffles his stack of parchment. "Hold on." A flick of his wand over the papers, and they fly up, circling around the desk as they tap back into the Ministry databases. One swirls into Blaises's hand; the others fall back down into their stack, perfectly ordered. "Iva was born in Prague and had two siblings, according to ICW records. Milos, who died when he was thirty-three from dragon pox, poor bastard, and Anichka, who married a Pyotr Dimitrovich Dolohov." He lowers the parchment and looks at Draco. "So our victim was cousins with the man who killed him?"

"Seems odd," Draco says. He stands back up and reaches across the desks to take the parchment from Blaise. It's a copy of an official family record, the same as the Malfoy one he'd seen more than once when his father had pulled it out of the Manor safe to give Draco a thorough lecture on his genealogy. But Blaise isn't wrong. Iva's on there, with a line down to Vera and no sign of a husband registered. Another line connects her to Anichka and Milos, and one more leads up to Jozef Procházka and a Dagmar Černý. If he scrolls up at the top, he knows the previous generations will appear, up until the time the record was first started within the family's local wizarding community. His finger hovers over Anichka's name; below a record of her marriage date to Pyotr Dolohov appears, along with a list of their children including Yevgeny Dolohov. Antonin's father.

Draco rubs his hand over his chin, a bit of stubble scratching his fingertips. "There's nothing that's indicated Dolohov might be in Prague." He drops the parchment back on Blaise's desk.

Blaise turns in his chair, looking at the list of possible whereabouts. St Petersburg, Oslo, Berlin, New York, Rome, and Glasgow all lead the most recent column of cities where Potter's tracked down vestiges of a magical signature similar to Dolohov's. The closest match to Prague is Berlin, but that'd been two weeks past, just after the murder, and nothing since. Blaise pulls his sugar quill out of his mouth. "Maybe he's lying low in Germany," he says.

"Not using his magic?" Draco gives him a sceptical look. "I can't imagine Dolohov living like a Muggle."

"We've thought him dead for seven years," Blaise points out. "You don't think he's learnt to muffle his magic when he needs to? He hasn't come up on our radar until now."

Draco moves closer to the whiteboards, studying the Muggle photo of Richard Thomas that Potter’d tacked up yesterday. At forty-four, the man had been only eighteen years older than Draco, but his face was already lined around his jowls and the corners of his blue eyes and his dark brown hair had started greying at the temples. He looks quintessentially British to Draco, solid and square-faced, not a trace of Slavic cheekbones. "So, Thomas's mother is Vera Procházková, who immigrated to Britain with her mother at what age?"

Blaise checks his paperwork. "Three. Again, no record of a father, and Iva and Vera settled in Wales. Cardiff. From everything I have, it looks like Iva and Vera disappeared from wizarding life sometime after 1948 when I have a record of a maintenance request for the Floo Network--nothing after that, no tax or voting records in the Ministry archives post November 1948--but Vera shows up in the Muggle records in August of 1960 when she takes a job in the Muggle telephone exchange." He looks up at Draco. "Next thing I have is a marriage certificate from the General Register Office--Muggle again, not ours--six months later between Vera and a Charles Thomas of Cwmbwrla, Swansea."

"Muggle?" Draco leans against the edge of his desk.

"Definitely." Blaise flips through the parchments again. "Everything else is a Muggle record.
Richard's birth, Vera and Charles' death certificates--evidently there was a car accident when Richard was in his late twenties and neither of them survived."

"Iva?" Draco asks.

Blaise chews on the tip of his sugar quill. "You'd think, but I've nothing. There's a Muggle bank account, but it stopped being active three years ago."

Draco glances back down at the family tree on Blaise's desk. "Which would have made Iva seventy-eight."

"She could have died."

"Or gone back to Prague," Draco frowns at the whiteboard. "Is Dolohov's grandmother still alive?"

Blaise shakes his head. "Died in 1996."

"Right around the time the Dark Lord came back," Draco murmurs. He crosses his arms over his chest, tapping his fingers against his elbows. "None of this explains why Dolohov killed his cousin."

"If I had cousins I might understand," Blaise says, and Draco flinches. His only cousin's dead, thanks to their mad, also-dead aunt. He's no right to judge anyone for their dysfunctional family relationships. Which reminds him that he ought to go see Aunt Andromeda and Teddy again in their small Islington house. It's always a little awkward, having tea with his aunt, given the estrangement between her and his parents. Still, he tries to make the effort every so often. Teddy's always quiet and shy around him, and Draco never knows what to say to an eight-year-old boy who's never known his parents thanks to Dolohov and Aunt Bellatrix. Draco never stays long, but he thinks Aunt Andromeda understands.

The door to the incident room flies open, and Pansy bounds in, her loose hair bouncing around her shoulders, eyes bright with triumph. She slaps a file jacket on the desk beside Draco. "Boletus gabretae spores, fuckers," she says.

Both Draco and Blaise just look at her. "What?" Draco says after a moment.

Pansy purses her scarlet mouth. "Jonesey and I both found them on Thomas's hands, on the skin and beneath his fingernails From the Boletus gabretae mushroom. Muggles think it might be extinct, but it's just been protected by ICW law so they don't have access to it. It's a magical species, and its spores can be used in potions, but we're not even supposed to touch them. Not really. They're nasty stuff, used in poisons and potions that can either bring on death or delay it, depending on how they're brewed. And Thomas was handling them at some point on the day he was killed."

Draco bites his lip. "You think that's tied into Dolohov?"

"I don't know." Pansy sinks down into a chair. "All I know is that's what's on his hands, and it's definitely odd. I mean, they don't even grow in England naturally." She glances at Blaise. "You didn't see mushrooms in his house or garden, did you?"

"Not that I would recognise," Blaise says.

Pansy holds up her hands. "Then maybe he smuggled them in somehow. They're only found in the Czech Republic--"
"Really?" Draco's voice rises.

"Yes." Pansy looks confused. "Why?"

Draco and Blaise exchange a look. "I think you need to bring the guy in on this," Blaise says, and Draco nods. He's right. Perhaps it's all a coincidence--odder things have happened in his time on the force--but they can't brush it away. Not without running it past Potter.

He goes to Potter's door and knocks, pushing it open when he hears Potter's voice.

"I'm not trying to avoid you," Potter's saying into his mobile. He's on his feet in front of his personal whiteboard, his back to Draco, and his voice sounds tense and angry. "For fuck's sake--" Potter breaks off, huffing out an irritated sigh and running a hand through his hair. "I'm in the middle of a bloody case, and I've told you already this isn't a good time. You know how distracted I get when I'm working…"

Potter falls silent, and his shoulders hunch like a child being berated. Draco feels odd; he's obviously walked into a personal discussion, but at the same time, he wants to snatch the mobile from Potter's hand and tell off whomever Potter's talking to. No one has the right to make Potter look so small, he thinks. The unexpected rush of protectiveness makes Draco uncomfortable.

"No," Potter says after a moment, and he sighs again. "Fucking Christ, I really don't want to do this right now."

To be honest, Draco wants to stay silent, to eavesdrop on this side of Potter he's never seen. He can't help but wonder who's on the other end. A friend, Draco supposes, but there's a part of him that thinks the conversation sounds more intimate than that, and something unpleasant twists and uncoils deep inside of him at the realisation. He doesn't like the idea of Potter intimate with someone else, so he ignores it. Draco's quite good at doing that. It's how he'd survived most of his relationship with Nicholas, after all. Ignorance may not be bliss, but it's a damn sight better than knocking your head against things you can't change.

"Guv," Draco says, and he taps two knuckles against Potter's door jamb. Potter whips around, his eyebrows drawing together in that way that's meant since their school days that Draco's about to get shouted at. "Sorry. Just something we thought you should be aware of, when you've got a moment."

Potter nods. "Look," he says into the mobile, cutting off whoever's speaking to him. "I have to go. I'll ring you later." He doesn't wait for a reply; he just snaps his mobile shut and tosses it on his desk. "What have you got?"

His voice is still sharp. Draco raises his eyebrows, and Potter flushes.

"Sorry," Potter says. He doesn't meet Draco's gaze. He chews on his lip, his hands shoved in his pockets, eyes fixed on the ground. He looks young and vulnerable; Draco's a bit rattled, seeing Potter shift from a competent arsehole of an Auror into the shade of the unsure teenager he'd known at school. "Personal thing."

"Obviously." Once more, Draco tries not to think about what that might mean. That unpleasant feeling writhes within him again, followed by the odd sensation of protectiveness. He shoves it all back down. "We have a theory, if you want to join us. It seems like our data's intersecting."

Potter follows him out into the incident room, their footsteps muffled on the grey-beige industrial carpet. Blaise and Pansy turn around from the whiteboard.

"You tell him?" Blaise asks Draco. He's already added Iva and Anichka to the whiteboard,
sketching out the family tree between Dolohov and Thomas in his neat, precise handwriting.

"Not yet." Draco glances over at the plain white and grey clock hanging on the wall. It's half-four. Whatever Potter decides about the strength of the connections, they won't get a start today. Perhaps that's for the best. From the look of it, Potter's still sulking for England. "Why don't you explain what you found in the records?"

He watches Potter's face as Blaise lays it out for Potter, making the familial connections and tying in Pansy's findings from the body with her help. Draco can tell when it clicks for Potter, in the way Potter leans forward, listening intently, his eyes searching through the facts scrawled across the whiteboard. This is the Potter's Draco is comfortable with, the sharp, quick Auror who stops Blaise before he finishes and says, "So you think we should check out Prague."

Blaise looks surprised, but he nods. "It might be nothing, but I think we'd be fools not to at least poke our noses in. Too many things seem pointed that way to be entirely random."

Potter rubs the back of his neck, thick fingers dipping beneath his collar, then tangling in the hair that curls over his nape. "We'll have to have Gawain sign off on it. I can't authorise any action outside of Britain without his approval."

"Or without obtaining Czech Auror approval," Draco says, and Potter makes a face.

"That too," he says, "but Gawain can handle the diplomatic requests." Potter glances over at Draco. "You agree with these two?"

Draco thinks for a moment before answering. "I think we should go, yes. It'll probably be a dead end, but we won't know unless we try. The familial connections are worth it at the very least."

Potter picks up the stack of parchment on Draco's desk. "Who inherited Anichka Dolohova's Prague house when she died?"

"Her daughter, Rayna," Draco says. "Married to Sacha Baltalksnis."

Blaise reaches for his papers and flips through them. "Sacha's a Charms instructor at Durmstrang. Stays pretty much off the radar other than that."

"No Death Eater connections then?" Potter asks.

"None that we know of at least." Blaise puts the papers down again. "I mean, we are talking about Durmstrang, so…"

"Viktor Krum isn't a Death Eater," Pansy points out. She looks between them. "Is he? If he is, don't tell me because it'll bugger up my wanking fantasies."

Draco rolls his eyes. "Far too much information, Pans."

"Please." Pansy snorts. "As if you didn't have your hand down your trousers the entire year he was at Hogwarts."

The look Draco gives her is vicious, or so he hopes. "Shut it, Parkinson." He refuses to glance at Potter; his cheeks are already heated.

"No one cares." Pansy hops up on one of the desks, her heels tapping against the sides. "Krum's fit, and I'd prefer him not to be a Death Eater. That's all I'm saying." She sighs. "I can't believe he's already retired from Quidditch."
"Stupid of him," Potter agrees. He seems more relaxed. "He had another ten or more years of fueling wank sessions in him, I'd say."

Pansy raises her hand towards him, and Potter slaps it with his. Honestly, Draco's a bit worried that the two of them might get closer. Circe only knew what would come out of that unholy alliance.

"I never found him attractive," Blaise says. He shrugs. "Quidditch players bore me."

Everyone looks at Draco. "Oh, no," he says. "I'm not admitting to anything."

"I think Parkinson's already let that dragon out of the pen," Potter says dryly.

Draco sniffs. "I've not confirmed anything. " When Potter gives him that wry grin, warmth trickles through Draco. He looks away.

"All right," Potter says. "I'll put a request in to Gawain, and see what that gets us. Parkinson, write me up a report of your results in simple English, please. None of that incomprehensible jargon your lot likes to spew about. Zabini, give me a paragraph about the familial relationships, and Malfoy." Potter turns to Draco. "Find out everything you can about that Prague property and run a risk assessment on it." He digs in his pocket and pulls out a small white card, tossing it to Draco who catches it before it hits the desk. "Use my credentials if you need them for clearance." Potter claps his hands together. "Let's go. I want to get this in front of Gawain before his dinner."

They all start to move, headed for their respective tasks.

"Well done, by the way," Potter says, and he catches Draco's eye. He smiles. "All of you." For the first time, they're a team, through and through, with Potter as their head.

Surprisingly, Draco thinks, it feels good.

***

It's just past half-seven when Draco stops back by the incident room, his risk assessment on the Prague property in hand. Blaise and Pansy have packed up already; the only light on is shining through Potter's half-open office door, a puddle of warm gold that spills from the lamp on Potter's paper-strewn desk.

Potter drops his quill and stretches when Draco knocks on the door jamb. "Report ready?"

"As much as I can get it." Draco hands over the small sheaf of parchments, along with Potter's credentials card which Potter immediately tucks back into his pocket. "We ought to do surveillance on it, if and when we're cleared for Prague. As far as the data we have at the moment goes, it's unoccupied. A solicitor in Munich arranges for quarterly cleaning, but the family rarely uses it, which makes sense if the husband's at Durmstrang."

"Where do they spend their hols?" Potter pulls his glasses off and rubs at his face. There's a streak of black ink on the back of his hand.

"Altai mountains," Draco says. "Or Sochi, it looks like. They've a house there too."

Potter flips through the parchments. "You've a copy of the cleaners' invoice?" He looks impressed.

"I'm thorough." Draco tries not to sound too pleased with himself. It'd taken him twenty minutes
on the Floo, even with a translation charm in effect, to get that information from the cleaning company. "There's an additional cleaning last week, outside the normal schedule. No reason why, and the request didn't come from the solicitor."

"Weird," Pottersays. He lingers on the invoice, frowning down at it. "And Durmstrang's in session now."

Draco nods. "Until mid-June. No reason for the family to be there."

"Not even the wife?" Potter reshuffles the papers and clips them together.

"Could be," Draco admits. "But it's not likely, is it? I suppose she could be having a tête-à-tête or a weekend with her friends, but going by the cleaning schedule, that's not a common occurrence."

Potter slumps in his chair. He pinches the bridge of his nose before sliding his glasses back on. "Yeah." He picks up his quill. "I'll submit it to Gawain."

"Right." That's a dismissal and Draco knows it. At the door he glances back at Potter, who's pulling together his paperwork. Potter looks tired and anxious, Draco thinks. He doesn't know what comes over him. "Have you eaten today?"

It's an unexpected question, judging by Potter's blink. "I got a bacon sarnie and some Chocolate Frogs from Margaret when she brought the tea cart by."


Honestly, sometimes Draco wonders if Potter's actually entered adulthood. "And you're going home to what? Pixie Puffs and Cockroach Clusters?"

"More like Pot Noodle and a can of Boddingtons," Potter says, looking amused.

Draco tries not to let his horror show. "Absolutely not. You're coming to mine."

Potter's eyebrow rises. "Am I?"

"For a proper dinner, Potter." Although Draco won't be sad if he has Potter for afters. "You know the Floo coordinates. File your paperwork with Robards and come over. I'll see what I can whip up in the kitchen."

"You cook." Potter sounds sceptical. Draco doesn't blame him. It's not that Draco's a brilliant cook, but he knows how to pull together a salad and do up a decent steak or chicken breast. In fact, he rather likes cooking at times. If he's in the right mood he finds it rather relaxing.

Tonight, he thinks, he's most certainly up for donning his apron.

"I cook," Draco agrees. "And I'll expect you in an hour, so don't be late." He pauses, his hand on Potter's office door. "And bring a bottle of wine--not that plonk I'm sure you have at home. Something drinkable, please."

As he closes the door behind him, he catches sight of Potter's bemused face.

That's worth everything in his opinion. It's not often he leaves Potter speechless. His step is light as he heads for the lift.
Harry clenches the white marble counter behind him, groaning as Malfoy's perfect mouth slides down his cock bit by bit. His trousers gape open, braces hanging loose at his sides, and his shirt's ruched up, one of Malfoy's hands splayed across Harry's taut belly.

The remnants of their dinner are spread across the centre island of the kitchen, plates smeared with the cream sauce from the chicken and nearly empty wineglasses. Malfoy's a decent cook, Harry's discovered, which had surprised him. He'd have thought there'd be a house elf or two hidden away in Malfoy's flat, but there's not--at least not one who's made his or her presence known yet to Harry, and house elves of all stripes tend to flock to him because of his friendship with Hermione.

Malfoy's tongue presses against the length of Harry's prick, and Harry swears, looking down at Malfoy's mussed, pale blonde head. Fuck, but he's good at cocksucking, Harry thinks, and Harry should know. He's had a few over the past decade. Ginny'd been the first to go down on him, in the Burrow toilet during Bill and Fleur's wedding. It'd been mindblowing, not the least because Ginny's time with Michael Connor and Dean Thomas had meant she'd been far more experienced than Harry and had known how to bring him off--something he'd barely managed to fantasise about at that time. Sex hadn't been something Harry'd been comfortable with as a teenager; there'd been no one for him to talk to, to get information from. Even Ron had been off-limits; Harry wasn't mad enough to ask for sex advice to use on his best mate's sister, after all.

After Ginny'd there'd been a handful of other brief relationships, not to mention the myriad men--and more than a few women--willing to suck Harry's prick in the shadows of a club. Harry'd let them; by that time he'd realised the pleasures of sex and partners who were enthusiastically consenting. There'd been plenty of them over the years, all the way up to Jake now and their on again-off again relationship.

None of them stirred Harry, made him as mad with lust and need as bloody Draco Malfoy does on his knees, bare chested, half-closed grey eyes looking up at Harry as he cups Harry's bollocks, rolls them between his long fingers.

"Fucking hell," Harry says, the words a soft huff. Malfoy lets Harry's cock pop free of his wet and pink mouth, the ruddy, glistening head hitting against Malfoy's cheek in the process and leaving behind a slick streak. God, Harry wants to come on him right then, wants to cover Malfoy's whole face with his spunk and smear it in with the head of his prick until it sinks into that pale, soft skin, marking Malfoy as Harry's completely. He draws in a ragged breath.

"All right there?" Malfoy asks. His middle finger rubs over Harry's slit, the tip pressing into it, spreading it wider. Harry wishes he could suck Malfoy's whole fingertip into his cock itself, wonders what it would feel like to have Malfoy inside of him like that, splitting him open.

"Fuck," Harry says again when Malfoy's tongue slide through his leaking slit. "Christ, Malfoy, no one sucks cock like you." He means that. He's never had anyone who took so much pleasure in Harry's prick, who could do things with his hands and tongue like Malfoy that cause Harry's knees to buckle, that make Harry want to slam his hips forward, nearly gagging Malfoy with the length of his thick cock.

"I am rather spectacular." Malfoy looks up at Harry as he lets Harry's foreskin slide back over the head of his prick. His mouth closes around the soft skin, tugging at it; Harry can only just feel the pressure of Malfoy's teeth through his lip, and he groans.

"Incredibly humble too." Harry's fingers press against the cool marble of the kitchen counter. There's only one light on, right over the island; the rest of the kitchen is in shadows and the
windows are nothing but tall, dark panes. Harry wonders if anyone can look into the flat from outside, if they’d see Malfoy knelt before Harry, his mouth and hands working Harry's cock. The thought makes Harry hard; there's something intensely erotic about the idea of someone observing Malfoy as he brings Harry to the edge. Harry imagines Malfoy with him at a sex club, the two of them surrounded by men and women watching them, seeing Harry come undone by Malfoy's tongue. His whole body shudders, and he grabs the back of Malfoy's head with one hand, fingers tangling in Malfoy's hair, holding him still for a moment, his cock slowly pushing into Malfoy's mouth again, down his throat.

Harry watches Malfoy take him in. "Shit, but you're gorgeous," he murmurs. "Mouth stretched out like that, shutting the fuck up for once--" Harry bites his lip. "Except I like it when you're mouthy to me," he admits. His thumb strokes along the nape of Malfoy's neck. "Turns me on. Gets me hard--" He breaks off at Malfoy swallows around him, putting pressure on the head of his prick. "Christ."

Malfoy sinks back onto his heels, his head pulling back. Harry can't take his eyes off the wet stretch of his cock that's sliding out from between Malfoy's soft lips. It pops free again, and Malfoy's inches away from Harry, his fingers now on his own trouser buttons, pulling them open.

"What's this do to you then?" Malfoy asks. The pink head of his prick pokes out from the waistband of Malfoy's y-fronts, foreskin only just pulled back, the rest of it following as Malfoy pushes the white cotton down, tucking it beneath his bollocks. The whole of Malfoy's cock juts out from the gaping fabric of his trouser fronts, a perfect short and thick mouthful. Malfoy's fingers play across it, tugging at the foreskin, making his entire cock bob in front of him.

Harry's throat works. His own prick curves up, so hard that it's nearly flat against his stomach, his shirt lifted out from his body. The sight of Malfoy barely touching himself makes his bollocks tighten. God, he's never wanted anyone as badly as he does Malfoy. If he lets himself think about it, he's terrified. Harry's always been able to walk away from sex if he wants to; there's always been another willing body waiting around the corner. But it's different with Malfoy. Harry thinks Malfoy will haunt him when whatever this is between them is finished. He can't imagine not having Malfoy's body beneath his, can't fathom not being able to touch him, to have Malfoy's hands and mouth and prick moving across his own heated skin. When he's with Malfoy, he doesn't give a fuck about anyone else; he's a selfish arse who only wants to lose himself in Malfoy's touch.

It's not healthy, he thinks. All his friends would tell him that, and they'd be right.

Harry honestly doesn't give a flying fuck.

"If you don't wank yourself properly," Harry says, his throat raw, "I'll have to come over there and spank the hell out of you."

Something flares in Malfoy's eyes, bright and filled with want, and that sends a fire of lust through Harry's entire body. "Are you threatening to punish me, Inspector Potter?"

Harry's fingers work at the buttons on his shirt. "There is something to be said for proper discipline, Constable." His breath is uneven; his hands shake. He wants to feel the smack of Malfoy's tight flesh beneath his palm; the very idea of seeing Malfoy's skin pinken beneath his hand makes him impossibly hard.

Malfoy licks his bottom lip. His hand moves away from his prick, and his arse hits the grey wooden planks of the floor with a soft thud. "Well then," he says, looking up at Harry with heavy-lidded eyes. "I may have been a terrible underling, sir." His thighs fall wider; he reaches back to hold himself up with one hand, the other resting on his thigh, inches away from his prick. His
back's against the black cabinetry of the centre island; Harry can see the gleam of copper pots and pans through the glass-paned doors as he shrugs off his shirt and drops to his knees, crawling across the floor towards Malfoy, his prick bobbing in the air.

Harry's mobile rings, a metallic trill that echoes loud and harsh in the silence of the kitchen. He swears and Malfoy laughs.

"Going to get that?" Malfoy asks. His fingers slide along the length of his cock, smoothing his foreskin back down the shaft.

"No," Harry says, and Malfoy just raises an eyebrow. He cups his bollocks. "Could be important."

Harry swears again, and he sits up on his thighs, digging into his pocket for the phone. He pulls it out just as Malfoy leans forward, taking Harry's cock into his mouth again. Harry nearly drops his mobile; he catches it just before it hits the floor. Malfoy's crouched in front of him, his nose nearly pressed into Harry's open trousers, his tongue curving around Harry's swollen prick.

As the mobile buzzes in his hand, he can see the active call--Jake's name flashes across in grey block letters--trying to ring him. The little screen on the folded phone is bright in the shadow-filled room. Harry's pulse beats faster as he watches Malfoy swallowing his cock whilst his boyfriend's number lights up his mobile. He hesitates, fingers tight on the clamshell, then he drops the mobile, letting it skitter across the kitchen floor. It lands beneath the edge of the cabinet, then stops ringing. Harry struggles to catch his breath, his choice made.

"They'll leave a message," Harry says thickly, hands slipping through Malfoy's tousled hair, then over Malfoy's shoulders. Malfoy pushes Harry onto his back, his lips sliding off Harry's prick with a loud, wet sound.

"Yeah," Malfoy says, and his voice is breathy. He straddles Harry's hips, his pink-brown nipples hard. He laughs, letting his hands smooth over Harry's chest. "Although I wouldn't have said no to getting you off as you were talking."

Fuck, but the thought of Malfoy's mouth on him as he talks to Jake makes Harry's fingers tighten on Malfoy's hips and his cock to twitch. Harry's a sodding horrible person for that, he thinks, and he's certain Malfoy would loathe him if he knew who was on the other end of the line.

Malfoy's watching him, his blond hair a glimmering halo in the light from the lamps hanging above the island. "That turns you on, doesn't it?" Malfoy's hands slip lower, fingertips brushing the curve of Harry's prick. He drags the back of his thumb along the vein; Harry's not sure Malfoy can't feel the pounding of his heart through the featherlight touch. "Think about it, Potter." Malfoy's voice is low and soft. "Me on your cock, riding you as you talk to someone on your mobile, you trying so hard not to let them know how hot you are for me, how you're about to fill my arsehole with spunk--"

Harry shuts him up with a kiss, pulling Malfoy down against him. He rolls over, his thigh wedging between Malfoy's legs as his teeth nip at Malfoy's lip, his tongue presses deeper into Malfoy's mouth. Harry could get lost in a kiss like this, in the smell and the taste and the feel of Malfoy. His fingers dig into Malfoy's hip, working their way beneath the wool of Malfoy's trousers.

"God, you're awful," Harry says against Malfoy's lips, and Malfoy's hand slide across the bare, heated skin of Harry's back. "With a fucking filthy mouth."
"Oh, it can get filthy." Malfoy turns his head. His breath is hot and ragged against Harry's ear. "I could tell you how eager my arsehole is for you whilst I'm on your cock, how every inch of your prick is inside of me, and it aches, Potter--no, it hurts every time I move on you, because I'm so tight and you're so thick, but I don't care because I'll have your hand on me, and you'll be watching the way my head slides through your fingers, slick and wet and red--"

Harry groans and rolls his hips against Malfoy's thigh. "Christ."

Malfoy's fingers tangle in Harry's hair. "And they'll know something's happening because your voice will get breathless and you'll forget what you're saying because I'll be so close to coming for you--" He writhes beneath Harry, pressing his hard, swollen cock into Harry's hip. "Fuck, don't you want that, Potter? I do. I want someone to hear you make me cry out, to know that I'm begging you to come inside me because I want to feel your spunk leaking out of my hole--"

Harry kisses him again, harder this time. It doesn't stop Malfoy. He arches up against Harry, his bare feet pressed into the kitchen floor.

"God," Malfoy says, and Harry's not certain Malfoy even knows what he's saying at this point. His eyes are wild and unfocussed, too bright and too grey. "You could bury your face in my arse and lick me clean then, and fuck, Potter, it wouldn't matter if they heard us because we wouldn't care, would we?" He makes a soft keening cry that goes straight to Harry's prick. "Potter--"

Somehow Harry gets Malfoy's trousers halfway down his thighs. He flips him, pulls him onto his hands and knees, Malfoy's arse up in the air, and Harry's hand strikes one perfect pale arsecheek, the sound of it echoing in the kitchen along with Malfoy's sharp, high groan, the sting of it fierce against Harry's palm. There's a pink mark on Malfoy's arse. Harry strikes him again, and Malfoy's arse jerks up, his thighs tensing.

"Fuck," Malfoy says. "Potter... It's almost an invocation, Harry's name ending in a soft, muffled moan.

Harry can't walk away from this. He won't. There's too much rawness, too much naked need in Malfoy's voice. Harry doesn't know how he ended up here. It's not just about the sex any longer. Maybe it never was. He presses his mouth to the reddening mark on Malfoy's skin, lets his tongue drag across it, taking away the sting. Malfoy shudders beneath him, and Harry rises up behind him, hands tight on Malfoy's hips. His prick slides between Malfoy's arsecheeks.

He ruts against Malfoy, pressing Malfoy's arse around his cock, sliding over Malfoy's hole until Malfoy's gasping. Harry loves having Malfoy like this, loves knowing he can reduce Malfoy to a trembling wreck just by rubbing up against him. He'll take him again later, he thinks, properly in bed with his prick buried up to his bollocks in Malfoy's slicked-up hole.

For now, however, he pulls Malfoy up against him, one hand splayed across Malfoy's chest, the other curling around Malfoy's hot, hard prick. "Is this what you want?" he says against Malfoy's messy hair. It's thrilling to see Malfoy this far gone, this ruined and undone for Harry.

Malfoy manages a nod.

It barely takes more than a firm stroke or two before Malfoy arches beneath Harry's touch, his head dropping back on Harry's shoulder, his hands gripping Harry's thighs. "Potter," he cries out, and then he's scrabbling against Harry's trousers, his fingers twisting in Harry's loose braces. "Yes--please--"

Harry's mouth catches Malfoy's, swallowing his words in a crush of teeth and tongues. Malfoy tenses, and Harry's fingers tighten on Malfoy's prick, pushing and pulling the soft foreskin up over
the slick, hot wetness of Malfoy's cockhead. "Come on," he whispers against Malfoy's half-open lips. "Let go for me."

Malfoy shudders, his chest heaving against Harry's palm. "I--" He kisses Harry again, desperately, his tongue swirling along Harry's teeth, one hand flying up to rest on the fingers Harry's spread across Malfoy's nipple. "Circe, Potter, I--"

One more twist of Harry's fingers over Malfoy's cock, and Malfoy shouts, his whole body taut like a bow string beneath Harry's hands. Spunk spills over Harry's hand, spatters against the glass and black wood of the centre island, across the pale grey planks of the floor.

Malfoy sags against Harry, gasping. "Oh," he says, and that small, broken breath nearly sends Harry over the edge himself. He rolls his hips forward, pressing his prick against Malfoy's bare arse.

"Christ, you're gorgeous," Harry says against the nape of Malfoy's neck. His teeth scrape against Malfoy's skin; Malfoy shivers, his breath catching.

Harry shifts, lays Malfoy down across the floor, helping him turn to face Harry. Malfoy's legs are cocked out on either side of Harry's hips, his spent prick softening against tight blond curls and the rumpled pleats of his unbuttoned trousers and y-fronts still scrunched down his thighs. "Fuck, look at you," Harry says, and Malfoy gives him a lazy, sated smile as he stretches his arms out above his head, a long, lean pale line of firm muscles and soft skin, smears of spunk across his sharp hip and flat belly, a flush still blotchy over the smooth planes of his chest. Harry wants to bury his face in the dark blond hair of Malfoy's armpits, wants to breathe in Malfoy's smell, the musk and sweat of sex with that crisp, bright scent of Malfoy just beneath it.

"Someone should be touching himself at this point," Malfoy says. He hooks a foot behind Harry's arse, nearly knocking him forward.

Harry wriggles his trousers and pants down beneath his arse. "Should they?"

Malfoy's eyes still have that loose, unfocussed softness about them. "A show would be nice." He drags the tip of his tongue along the curve of his bottom lip, and Harry has the urge to crawl up Malfoy's delicious length and shove his prick into that perfect mouth. Instead, he wraps his fingers around the base of his cock, letting them drift slowly up his shaft.

"How's this?" Harry smooths his thumb over his slit, wetting the tip before he lifts his thumb to his mouth and sucks it clean. It tastes salty and sour. Malfoy's teeth bite his lip, and he makes a quiet, uncertain sound. Harry brings his hand back, wets his thumb again, then presses it against Malfoy's mouth. "Suck." Malfoy's lips close around his skin, grey eyes watching him; Malfoy's tongue licks over the pad of Harry's thumb, curls over the sharp edge of his nail. He sucks Harry's thumb into his mouth, all the way down to the join of his palm, and his teeth graze Harry's knuckle. "God damn," Harry whispers. His thumb slides out of Malfoy's mouth with a wet pop.

Malfoy gives him another smile, liquid and languorous. "Scrummmy."

"Fuck," Harry says, and then he's crawling up Malfoy's body, letting his prick drag against Malfoy's belly. His hands slide along Malfoy's stretched arms, his knees press against the sides of Malfoy's chest. "I think we need to finish what you started after dinner, don't you?" His cock bobs against Malfoy's lips. Malfoy licks across Harry's head, and Harry breathes in sharply.

"Better than an ice lolly." Malfoy's wrists shift beneath Harry's hands. "I always did like dessert best."
Harry wants to laugh. "You can make anything sound filthy, can't you?"

"It's a talent," Malfoy says. He lifts his head, catches Harry's cock with his mouth, dragging his lips along the shaft. "Fuck, you taste brilliant."

Harry groans. It's not going to take him long, that much he knows. He's on a knife-edge of lust and want and shuddering need, and Malfoy knows exactly how to push him, cut him, send him spiraling into that beautiful nexus of pleasure and pain. "Want more?" he asks, and he feels a fool, at least until Malfoy's smile widens and Harry wants nothing more to press the head of his prick into that soft curve of lips.

He does.

Malfoy's tongue slides beneath the edge of Harry's foreskin, flicks over Harry's slit. The intensity of it takes Harry by surprise; his whole body tenses and shivers as Malfoy's mouth works him over, Malfoy's cheeks caving in with each soft suck. Harry holds still, but only for a moment before he gives in, his hips pressing forward, prick sliding deeper into Malfoy's mouth. "God," he manages to get out. Malfoy's incredible at this, and Harry knows it can't be easy for him, sprawled out across the floor beneath Harry, his head cocked at an uncomfortable angle. Harry reaches beneath Malfoy's neck to help. He ought to shift, he knows, to move into a better position for Malfoy, but this feels so bloody good, his prick fucking Malfoy's pink mouth so slowly, nearly gagging Malfoy with each careful thrust.

Malfoy's freed hands grab Harry's hips, holding him in place. He swallows around Harry's cock, tongue pressing against Harry's vein, the head of Harry's prick deep in his mouth. Malfoy likes sucking cock, Harry realises. The way Malfoy's eyes flutter shut when Harry pushes into him, the soft huff of breath through Malfoy's nostrils that warms Harry's shaft, the tightening of Malfoy's fingers against Harry's skin when he doesn't want Harry to move, the shift of Malfoy's hips, the roll of his body that lets Harry know that Malfoy, spent or not, is enjoying the erotic tremble of Harry's thighs, the quick, heavy breaths Harry can't help but take when he looks down and sees his prick slipping between Malfoy's lips.

Harry wouldn't give that sight up for the world. Not even if his career depended on it, and perhaps it does. He doesn't give a fuck who rings his mobile right now, doesn't care what fool choices he's making. When Malfoy looks up at him, eyes dark and bright, mouth working along the length of Harry's cock, the world is reduced to just the two of them, their rough breaths, their hot, prickled skin, the tremors of lust that wrack both their bodies. Right now Malfoy is everything Harry wants. Everything he needs.

A tightness coils deep inside of him, raw and heavy and primal. Harry's fingers flex against Malfoy's neck; his other hand holds himself up as he rolls his hips forward again and again, slow, steady, shuddering.

"Fuck," Harry says softly, and Malfoy's hands move from Harry's hips to the small of his back, holding him still as Malfoy sucks him harder, Harry's prick filling his mouth. It's more than Harry can take, and he throws his head back, groaning as his body strains, aches for release.

And then Malfoy pulls him closer, takes him deeper into his throat, nearly choking on the length of Harry's cock, and the sight of Malfoy like this explodes through Harry, shaking him to his core, what little restraint he has disappearing with a shout as he fills Malfoy's mouth with his spunk, as he watches what Malfoy doesn't swallow down spill over Malfoy's lips onto his own prick, smearing across Malfoy's chin whilst Harry convulses above him, lost in the quick, fiery heat of his orgasm.

Harry collapses on his side, his whole body shaking. The kitchen's a swirl of shadows for a
moment, bright pinpricks of light floating in front of his eyes until he blinks and draws in a ragged, painful breath. He feels boneless, limp, exhausted. A pleasant, prickly warmth spreads from his cock to his legs, and he wonders if he'll ever be able to move again.

Malfoy leans over him, and when Malfoy's mouth meets his, Harry can taste the bitter-salty-sweetness of his own spunk still on Malfoy's tongue. It's unbearably hot, and he's almost relieved when Malfoy pulls back, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"A bit of all right there?" His voice sounds rough and raw, throat abraded from Harry's prick.

"Oh, you definitely are. More than," Harry says, pulling Malfoy back down into another kiss. It's slow and careful, and there's a gentleness to it that Harry doesn't expect from either of them. Malfoy settles against Harry, both of them sprawled across the kitchen floor. Harry's too tired to do anything else. They probably look a sight, he thinks, both of them half-naked, their trousers shoved down past their arses, strands of spunk coating patches of their skin. Harry almost wishes someone would walk in and find them like this, both of them looking terribly debauched. There's a thrill in that thought; Harry doesn't want to consider what it might mean that part of him would be pleased for someone--anyone--to find him exhausted, spent and naked on Malfoy's kitchen floor. This is getting out of hand, and he doesn't bloody care. They lie there for a long moment, silent, Harry's fingers carding through Malfoy's hair, before Harry turns his head and looks at Malfoy. "One of these days you're going to kill me with sheer lust, you know."

Malfoy's hand settles on Harry's chest. His thumb circles around Harry's left nipple, but doesn't touch it. "Not a bad way to go." He shifts, and his hair rumples, a silky lock of it pushing across Harry's face to tickle his nose. "This is all right then."

Harry brushes Malfoy's hair away, smoothing back from Malfoy's damp brow. "Yeah," he says. "Although I'd really love to know who taught you how to suck cock like a bloody champion."

"Nicholas," Malfoy says, almost automatically, and then he stills, his body tensing against Harry's. Harry keeps stroking Malfoy's hair, and he relaxes a little.

"Yeah?" Harry keeps his voice light. Whoever this Nicholas was, Harry thinks he might have done a number on Malfoy.

Malfoy doesn't say anything, then he sighs. "We fuck, Potter. We don't share confidences."

"I know." Harry's knuckles brush the side of Malfoy's cheek. Malfoy's eyes flutter closed. "But you could, if you wanted."

There's no answer. Harry turns his head; Malfoy's watching him, an odd expression on his face. "What?" Harry asks.

Malfoy shakes his head, then looks away. Shadows stretch across his pale face; his mouth tightens. "It was a bad relationship," he says finally. "Nicholas and I. It was fine at first, but..." He trails off, then says "fuck" softly. Malfoy sits up, pushing his trousers and pants to his ankles, then kicking them off. He pulls his knees to his chest; his body is a long, pale curve, lit only by the lamps floating above. Harry follows suit, stripping down and sitting across from Malfoy on the floor, cross-legged. He waits, listening.

"We weren't compatible," Malfoy says after a long moment. "Nicholas was..." His gaze flicks to Harry's, then skitters away. "Controlling at times. It got out of hand at the end."

"He hurt you," Harry says, and there's an anger in voice he doesn't expect. Or perhaps he should. Malfoy
hesitates. "It wasn't like that. Not entirely." He runs his hands through his hair, then
breathe out, letting them fall to his side. "It was complicated. It was good. It was bad. I made mistakes. He made bigger ones." Malfoy chews on his bottom lip. "And he walked out. Well. I told him to walk out, I suppose, and he did."

"How long were you together?" Harry asks. He wants to find this Nicholas and string him up by his bollocks.

"Seven months." Malfoy rests his elbows on his knees. "I was twenty-four and stupid when we met. Not to mention incredibly randy." He gives Harry a sideways look. "The sex was great."

Harry frowns, feeling oddly threatened. "Not as good as ours."

A small smile flits across Malfoy's face. "Well, you've ruined me for life, haven't you?"

To be honest, Harry isn't certain it's not the other way around. He's had a lot of sex over the years. No one's been as good as Malfoy. No one's made him feel this exhilaratingly off-kilter.

"Anyway," Malfoy says. "Nicholas may have been an arsehole, but he taught me how to give fantastic blow jobs."

"Men across the world should applaud him for that." Harry'd like to put his fist in the bastard's face.

"Man," Malfoy corrects. His cheeks flush. "I've only done it on you since, really." He pauses, wrinkles his nose. "Well, and that bloke last week in the club. But mostly just you."

Thatannoys Harry and turns him on at the same time.

"Don't worry, you're better." Malfoy looks over at him, his mouth twitching.

Harry snorts. He reaches for Malfoy's foot, pulling it into his lap as his fingers trace Malfoy's arch. "Damn right, I am." He knows what a confidence this is he's been granted.

Malfoy points his toes, brushing them against Harry's prick. It jumps slightly. "Bigger too." He digs his heel into Harry's thigh. "I'd be more impressed if you cleaned us up, though. Getting a bit itchy here."

"Now you're just being a twat," Harry says. He casts a wordless cleansing charm over the both of them; the stickiness of spunk slips away. Malfoy sighs happily. "Better?"

"Ever so, ta." Malfoy relaxes against the island as Harry works his fingers along his foot. "You're good at that."

"Magic or foot-rubbing?"

"Both, actually, although I'll deny I ever admitted either."

This feels strangely intimate to Harry, sitting here naked in Malfoy's kitchen, their clothes spread across the floor, Malfoy's feet in his lap. For a moment, he almost thinks they could be lovers, the two of them, living a life together, instead of just colleagues who have mindblowing sex every few days. The thought disturbs him a bit, not because it's so improbable but because there's a sense of wistfulness about it that makes Harry nervous. He's tried the boyfriend route with Jake, and it hasn't worked. Even before Malfoy came into the picture, Harry'd been uncertain about what he has with Jake. He likes the sex; Jake's fit and fun and enjoys a rough shag every now and then, same as Harry. But Harry doesn't trust easily, and as much as he likes Jake, as much as he thinks him a decent sort, he's never felt entirely comfortable around him. Not the way he is with
Malfoy, right now, like this, and Harry thinks that might be a problem. His fingers still.

Malfoy doesn't seem to notice. His eyes are closed, his breathing even. The flush has faded from his chest. He looks gorgeous sitting across from Harry. His hair's a complete mess, tangled and tousled, and Harry likes that; Malfoy looks real, not perfectly put together as he usually does. His cheekbones are high and sharp, matching the angle of his jaw, and his lips are just a bit reddened and slightly swollen from Harry's prick. There's a love bite on the curve of his throat, just above his collarbone. Harry's no idea how he put it there. Malfoy's shoulders are wide and strong, the muscles built up just enough, and his chest is smooth save for a bit of pale golden fuzz. Until Harry drops his gaze to the web of thin, pale scars that twist their way across Malfoy's abdomen, curling around his right side.

"Stop staring at me," Malfoy says, and his eyes open, meeting Harry's gaze. "It's a nice picture." Harry lets his knuckles drag up Malfoy's toned calf.

Malfoy purses his mouth; before he can say anything, Harry's mobile rings again from beneath the island. Malfoy reaches for it, glancing down at the screen. An eyebrow goes up, and Harry bites back a *f*uck. He doesn't want to explain Jake to Malfoy. Not tonight. Not when he's feeling curiously fragile about the whole question of his relationship and its demise.

"Robards," Malfoy says, and he hands the mobile over to Harry, who sighs in relief. "You've trapped him into this ridiculous Muggle technology as well?"

"He insisted." Harry flips the mobile open and accepts the call as he pushes himself to his feet. "Gawain. What can I do for you?"

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Gawain says.

Harry watches Malfoy scramble up. "Just a quiet night at home." He doesn't have to mention whose home, after all. "Do you have an answer for me?"

Gawain chuckles across the line. "Always direct, Harry. As a matter of fact, yes. You're a go for Prague with your team, but you'll need to collaborate with the Czech authorities, of course. I have the paperwork set up for you." He hesitates. "There were some concerns."

Harry doesn't like the sound of that. He walks over to the window and looks out onto Malfoy's garden. There's a light or two on in the building across the way. Harry turns his back to the window; he supposes he should be concerned about being Starkers in front of it. Right now he doesn't care. "About what?"

Another pause, then Gawain clears his throat. "Malfoy."

"Right." Harry watches Malfoy; he's gathering their clothes, pulling on his shirt and leaving it hanging open. "What for?" His voice must be sharper than he expects; Malfoy looks up at him, a furrow between his brows.


Harry's irate. "And they know who we're going after?" Christ, people are fools, he thinks. Particularly some of his compatriots in law enforcement, unable to see past their own prejudices and ideologies.
"People aren't always logical, Harry." Gawain sighs. "I've smoothed things over, but Malfoy should be forewarned."

"The other two?" Harry sees Malfoy's frown deepen. He turns away, facing the window again. Harry runs a hand through his hair and scowls at his reflection.

"I don't anticipate any issues there," Gawain says. "There aren't the same types of ties, I'm afraid."

Of course not. Parkinson's family kept a lower profile during the war, and Zabini's mother hasn't any interest in politics from what Malfoy's mentioned. "All right."

"It'll be fine, Harry." Gawain's tone is careful, and Harry knows he's not trying to set him off. "You'll have a day to prepare your team; the Czech Aurors won't expect you until tomorrow night. Report to the station on Bartolomějská by half-seven. You'll be meeting with Inspector Hanka Suková."

"Bartolomějská station, half-seven, Hanka Suková," Harry says. Malfoy's already writing it down on a scrap of paper from the brown wicker basket on one end of the island. "Anything else?"

Gawain's silent for a moment. "Just be careful. All of you. Dolohov's a right bastard--"

"We know." Harry's grateful for Gawain's concern, particularly since he knows it doesn't extend only to himself, the way most of their fellow Aurors would. He meets Malfoy's gaze. "No recklessness." Malfoy's mouth curves up on one side.

"Good." Gawain sighs. "I'd rather not sign off on death or disability benefits for any of you. Come see me in the morning for the paperwork, then."

And he's gone. Harry closes his mobile.

"It's me, isn't it?" Malfoy comes round the corner of the island. He makes quotation marks in the air. "'The other two're fine."

"The Czech Aurors are arseholes."

Malfoy just looks tired. "I'm not an idiot, Potter."

"Never said you were." Harry reaches for Malfoy, pulls him up against him. He likes the smooth feel of Malfoy's warm skin against his. His hand slides along Malfoy's left forearm, over the ropy scars of the Diffindo. He turns Malfoy's arm over so he can see the ravaged Mark. "You did this to yourself. Why?"

He almost certain Malfoy won't answer. Malfoy surprises him, though. "I hated that damned Mark."

"Why?" Harry asks again.

There's a fierceness to Malfoy's gaze. "I tried to be that," he says after a moment. "Don't ever think I didn't, Potter. I longed to be the Death Eater my father wanted me to be." He glances away. "Father says I'm weak. I couldn't stomach what it would take to be in power. He was right on that score at least. You don't know what it was like, watching him--the Dark Lord, I mean-- bring in people to our home, torturing them, hearing them scream--" He breaks off, breathes out.

Harry's thumb strokes along one jagged, thick scar. "That doesn't make you weak."

"I couldn't be one of them," Malfoy says. He's still beneath Harry's touch. "I'm an arse, I'll freely
admit. And I've hated people for ridiculous reasons, treated them like shite because they weren't Our Sort. "The look he gives Harry is sardonic. "I still do. I'm not a nice person, Potter. Not a defanged dragon in any way. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't hold a woman down whilst the Dark Lord ripped her skin away, bit by bit. I couldn't kill on command the way my Uncle Rabastan could. Neither could my father." Malfoy snorts. "But Lucius still wants to have been one of them. He thought he could buy his way in, but all he did was destroy everything he held dear."

"You're not your father," Harry says.

Malfoy pulls away. "I could be."

"You won't." Harry doesn't know how he knows that. Malfoy's right. The spectre of Lucius Malfoy still lurks behind that vicious, bitter smile. Maybe Harry's being idiotic, too much the optimist. Hermione would say he was, and Ron would likely agree. Malfoy'd been horrific back at Hogwarts. What he'd done in school had paved the way for a battle that would ravage the wizarding world, that would leave holes in the lives of Harry and all his friends.

But Harry doesn't see that angry, heartless boy any more. Instead, he's facing a man wracked with his own form of remorse, whether or not Malfoy would ever call it that. A man who'd hated the sight of Voldemort's mark so much that he'd turned his own wand to it with such vicious force that it's left a snarl of scars knotted across his arm. A man who didn't turn into his father, a man with his own conscience. A man who went into protecting people to try and make it right and who stayed because he was good at it.

Malfoy's turned away, his forearm pressed against his chest, covering the other scars, the ones Harry'd left writhing across his belly. "If you'd rather I not go--"

"Don't be a tit." Harry moves behind him. His hands settle on Malfoy's hips. "Fuck the other Aurors. I need you there."

At that Malfoy glances back at him.

"I do," Harry says before Malfoy can protest. "You're a good Auror, Malfoy. If I didn't think so, if Gawain didn't agree, you wouldn't be on this team. It's not just for your brilliant arse, you know."

That coaxes out a small smile. "You're a fucking idiot, Harry Potter. I ought to have you before Professional Standards."

"Probably." Harry rubs a finger over the bumps on Malfoy's spine. Malfoy leans into the touch. Harry presses his mouth along the curve of Malfoy's throat. "In the meantime, you could have me here. I'd really like another chance for a shag across that enormous bed of yours."

Malfoy lifts his chin, letting Harry nuzzle him. "That could be arranged, I suppose." He pulls away, padding across the kitchen in his bare feet. Harry watches him and the way his arse dimples with each step he takes. Christ, but he's off his nut, Harry thinks. It's like he's a bloody teenager again, obsessed with everything about the arrogant tosser. Malfoy looks back from the doorway. "Well, come on then."

Harry hesitates, then sets his mobile on the counter. He doesn't want to be interrupted again. All he wants is to lose himself in Malfoy.

Time will catch up with him soon enough, along with the inevitable punishment for all of his misdeeds with Malfoy perhaps, but Harry couldn't care less. Frankly, sex with Malfoy is the only thing that has made Harry feel grounded these past weeks, if not longer. When it comes to everything else in his life, from work to relationships to his very future, Harry worries and is
unsure; he's plagued with doubts and with second guesses. But lying tangled with Malfoy knocks all of that uncertainty out of his head, demands that he focus on what is happening this instant. Harry never has to ask himself if he wants Malfoy. And he knows he'll do anything Malfoy asks. Almost without question.

His lust for Malfoy is the one constant in Harry’s life. Perhaps it has been since he was a teenager, following Malfoy down darkened Hogwarts corridors, not understanding that the rage and the obsession he felt for Malfoy was desire. Wanting Malfoy feels right, feels oddly safe, even as Harry knows each step he takes towards Malfoy leads him further and further into treacherous waters.

He doesn't give a damn. Right now, Malfoy is all he needs.

Cock already half-swelling, he follows Malfoy down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic! Next chapter will be up between April 14-15! (But it's looking like it'll be a looooooooong chapter, so yeah, there's a good chance it'll be the 15th because I don't want my betas to hate me for dumping it on them at the last minute, LOL.)
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which the team travels to Prague, looking for Dolohov.

Chapter Notes

Again, much love to my betas, noeon and sassy-cissa, who tackled this monster of a chapter with grace and wit and a multitude of excellent suggestions. <3

Five chapters down, five left to go, in this book at least. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Anichka Dolohova's house is hidden along Jakubska Street in Prague's Old Town, charmed to be unnoticed by any Muggles or so the Czech Aurors have told Harry. He'd wanted to come by to scope it out after their meeting; night surveillance is next to useless, of course, but his team hadn't objected. They're tense, and he doesn't blame them. Parkinson hasn't been out in the field for years, and both Malfoy and Zabini know what to expect from a criminal of Dolohov's calibre. Sometimes it's worse to know exactly what kind of prey you are stalking.

Harry doesn't want to run into Dolohov tonight; he just wants a feel of the narrow cobblestone street and the tall, beige and pastel sandstone buildings rising up on either side of them, with their deep red tile roofs and their long, leaded windows. Dolohova's house is behind an arched, wrought-iron gate that shows a glimpse of a small, green courtyard, plants twining their way up trellises pinned to the wall, and a dark blue door. A lamp flickers in the courtyard, casting shadows as the sun slips down below the rooftops.

There's a stretch of Muggle pubs and restaurants along this narrow, mediaeval street, all of them rollicking and bright on a warm Friday evening in late May. Harry and Malfoy have settled at a tall table next to the window of one pub, their liaison Hanka Suková between them. Parkinson had dragged Zabini to the cafe down the street; Harry hadn't been surprised that the other two Czech Aurors--both men--had gone with them. Parkinson was at her most charming tonight.

Malfoy's peering out the window, frowning at Dolohova's house. "No lights in the windows yet," he says, and he takes a bite of the sausage he's been poking at for nearly an hour. The rattle of dishes and the shouts of laughter from the bar behind them are quieted by the muffling charm Suková had cast when they first sat down. It's starting to wear off, though, and Harry's keeping an ear out, waiting for the right moment to cast his own. Malfoy sets his fork back on his plate. "Maybe we're wrong."

"Or he's out," Suková says. She's not what Harry expected from a Czech Inspector; she's only a decade or so older than him, and her curly blonde hair is cut short and chic, falling just below the small sapphire earrings she wears. Like them, she's dressed in Muggle clothes, but, unlike his own jeans, white t-shirt, and red jumper combination, Harry thinks she's actually put thought into what to wear, and the way her well-cut, navy jacket and trousers hang on her whispers of expensive
"Could be charms blocking the light," Harry says. He tucks his feet around the rungs of his chair in a vain attempt to keep his trainers out of sight. He doesn't know why he bothers; it's not as if Malfoy hasn't seen them already and, almost without doubt, judged Harry for them.

Suková shrugs. She stirs her tea with a small silver spoon. "You're certain Dolohov is alive? We're not chasing some koschei?"

Harry gives her a blank look.

"A wizard who's unkillable because he hid his soul," Malfoy says, still looking out the window. Harry can see Malfoy's pale reflection in the glass as the street outside gets darker, a silver-gilt ghost of the man himself. Malfoy turns back to Suková. "Whilst I wouldn't put it past the bastard to follow in the Dark Lord's footsteps, nothing I know of the man would lead me to believe he was that magically competent. Powerful, yes. Technically capable, well. Not to the extent of creating a Horcrux."

Malfoy's nostrils flare, and Harry recognises that look of disdain. He'd had it turned on him nearly every Hogwarts class they'd shared. "Dolohov was far more interested in wreaking havoc for his own benefit than any serious study of the Dark Arts."

"Thank Christ for that," Harry says. He leans his elbows on the small round table they're all perched at, nearly knocking over his Matuška stout. He catches the glass in time, and looks over at Suková. "So tell us about your file on the Dolohov family."

She gives him a tight but nevertheless amused smile. "I don't know that I'm approved for that level of collaboration, Inspector Potter." Her eyes crinkle at the corners, and Harry grins back at her. He's gotten quite good at picking up interest cues from complete strangers over the years. For the briefest moment, he wonders what she'd be like in bed. He suspects it'd be quite enjoyable. Suková strikes him as the type of woman who'd enjoy the pursuit of her own pleasure, and Harry's always been turned on by that. He likes a partner who's willing to boss him around to get themselves off. Still, he can't help but be aware of Malfoy beside her. Malfoy fucks Harry with wild abandon, utterly unconcerned about anything other than what will make them both shudder in delight. To be honest, Harry's not interested in throwing away whatever this is between them now for a one-off with someone new. He thinks that ought to worry him. It doesn't. Not entirely.

That doesn't stop Harry from raising an eyebrow as he leans closer to Suková. He doesn't miss Malfoy's scowl, which is the exact reaction he's aiming for. An irked Malfoy is a devastatingly sexy Malfoy, in Harry's opinion. Harry's hoping Malfoy will take it out on him later. Hermione'd tell him he needs a good Mind Healer. She's probably right. Harry lets his mouth quirk to one side; he's been told his lazy smile's nearly irresistible by people who should know. "Consider it interdepartmental cooperation?"

Suková's laugh is rich and throaty. Malfoy's frown deepens, and then he looks away. Harry knows he'll pay for this later, and that thought makes his cock twitch. "In that case," Suková says, "I can perhaps imply that we do have quite a record of the Dolohov family and their misdeeds. Mostly shared with us by the Russians." She picks her coffee cup back up. "They like us better than they like you."

"Well, they would, wouldn't they?" Malfoy's tone is sharp. "It's not as if your lot hasn't been in their back pockets for years."
"I suppose." Suková doesn't seem annoyed at Malfoy's animosity, which surprises Harry. She blows lightly across her tea. "Although I shan't mention your country and its special relationship with the Americans."

Please don't, Harry thinks, sitting back. Jake instantly comes to mind, and Harry frowns himself. He's still angry about that phone call yesterday. As many times as he tells Jake he needs space, he needs to sort himself out, it's never enough. Harry knows he's being evasive, but he's not ready for any of this. He doesn't want to make a decision, even if he suspects he already has by stalling this long. But saying it out loud makes things real, and Harry'd rather live in this space he's in right now, where the choices he's making don't have consequences--or at least not at the moment. He'll deal with the aftermath later. He just doesn't know how soon that'll be, and he's in no rush to find out.

"That's different," Malfoy says, and then he breaks off when he catches Harry's pointed gaze. Harry shakes his head; Malfoy just rolls his eyes and stabs another slice of sausage with his fork, a quick, harsh scrape of the tines across the plate. He pops the sausage in his mouth; Harry's never seen anyone chew food so spitefully. Suková just looks between the two of them, and Harry's afraid she sees more than he'd like her to.

"Right, so the Dolohovs?" Harry asks. Better to bring the conversation back to something more profitable overall. He feels a bit guilty for flirting with Suková, and he's not certain why. It's not as if he and Malfoy are anything other than a brilliant shag every so often. Well. More often than not lately, it seems.

Suková takes her time answering, setting her coffee cup back down. "Nasty bit of work, the whole family, although your Antonin seems to have been the worst. The others failed to share his ideological bent, or at least the extremism of it. They used Dark magic to gain power in business and other shady ventures. At one point in the 1960s they controlled most of the potions trade in Eastern Europe from their base in St Petersburg--well, Leningrad at the time. They didn't only engage in legal potioneering but also in phials sold under the counter, if you know what I mean."

"Regulated potions like Veritaserum?" Malfoy asks. He looks a bit interested now, if unwillingly so. Not surprising. Malfoy'd always been a potions anorak and not just to win's Snape's favouritism, as far as Harry could tell. Harry suspects the git's just wired that way, and he wonders why Malfoy hadn't gone into potions as a career. Surely it would have been easier than trying to make his way on the Auror force. "Or are we talking about other mind drugs?"

"All of the above and others." Suková pushes her coffee cup away. "Necromancy potions, potions that would let them influence people, even controlled substances that would induce a magical euphoria. The Party was very opposed to any form of potions abuse, but the Dolohovs had a thriving business. When Pyotr died, Yevgeny took over, and things went downhill from there."

Harry nods. This goes along with what the Ministry has on file, even if he didn't know all the specifics. "Yevgeny's not a criminal mastermind then?"

"Or any kind of mastermind," Suková says. "The Dolohovs were pushed out of the market, and other families took their place, like the Abadzhievs from Sofia. They work for other people now."

"That has to rankle," Malfoy says, and Harry can't help but agree.

"Might be why Dolohov's coming out of hiding," Harry says. Malfoy shrugs, and Harry looks out the window again. The house across the street from them is still dark, save for the courtyard lamp. "Or going back in."
"Check in with the others," Malfoy says.

It's what he was about to do. Harry sighs and reaches into his pocket, fingers brushing his mobile. "Zabini?"

"Yeah, guv." Zabini's voice crackles across the communications charm, too loud in his ear. Harry sees Malfoy flinch too. He'll have to work on the volume level, he thinks.

"Anything to report?" Harry asks.

There's a pause, then Zabini says, "Nothing from our end."

"No Death Eaters wandering the city so far," Parkinson says over the charm. "Can we bugger off for the night?" Her yawn echoes. "I'm bloody knackered."

Harry glances out at the dark paved street. It's filled with Muggles laughing, shouting, talking into their mobiles. Dolohov must hate it, he thinks, if he's even around. He sighs. "Let's regroup at the hotel, the four of us. Figure out tomorrow." He turns to Suková. "You and your men are on for the morning?"

Suková nods at him. "Whatever you need. We've authorisation for the weekend."

"Right." Harry reaches for his glass. "Tomorrow then." Christ, he hopes Dolohov shows up. Or he thinks he does. Maybe.

On second thought, he's not entirely sure.

He drains the rest of his beer and stands to pay the bill.

***

Draco leans against the hotel bar. It's trying too hard to be posh, he thinks, with its brass fixtures and plush plum velvet and smoke-darkened wood. He hates it; sham upper-class sophistication always annoys him. Whatever people might think, there's no real charm or comfort in growing up in a manor. He prefers the cosiness of his current flat, if he's honest, not a draughty house where all the velvet furniture's horribly lumpy and covered in Crup hair. His father has three of the little wriggly, yappy bastards, fat and spoiled, all of whom utterly loathe Draco. The youngest, Cronus, had spent most of Draco's adolescence lunging for Draco's calves; his brothers Crius and Coeus just bark at Draco whenever he walks by. Last Sunday dinner Cronus had tried again to snap at Draco's heel; fortunately his eyesight's so terrible now that Draco'd managed to whisk a Jacobean stool in front of him and Cronus had spent a good five minutes gnawing on the oak leg before giving up. His mother will never forgive him, but thankfully she didn't notice at the time. He's expecting a Howler any day; he just hopes it doesn't arrive when they're on surveillance.

Circe, Draco despises that idiotic Crup.

Potter sets his pint down on the bar beside Draco's elbow. "So any questions about tomorrow?"

"What time do you want us downstairs?" Pansy covers a yawn again with the back of her hand. She's working too hard, Draco thinks, but then they all are. And Pansy's never been good at crossing time zones, even if she's just losing an hour. The one time they'd gone to Tasmania for a holiday three years past she'd barely been able to stagger out of bed before noon for days, between the drinking and the time change. Not to mention her penchant for picking up brutally attractive strangers in the bar and shagging them to all hours before shoving them out into the hall, sometimes half-dressed, much to the amusement of the resort staff.
Potter glances at the watch on his wrist. "Let's aim for seven? That should give us time to get back over to Bartoloméjská and meet Hanka and the others."

Draco wants to hiss at Suková's name. He doesn't like Potter's familiarity with the woman; Suková was making it perfectly clear what she was willing to do for Potter, the trollop. Deep down inside, he knows that's possibly—if not probably—unfair to her, all things considered. He certainly can't fault her taste. But he doesn't care whether or not he's being just. Or bloody sodding kind, for that matter. Draco picks up his wine glass and turns his glare on Potter. Only Draco's allowed to be like that when it comes to the bastard. They've an arrangement, for Merlin's sake—or at least they've something that bears discussing and that Draco's quite certain eliminates the possibility of any sexy blonde Czech Aurors ending up in Potter's bed any time soon. Whatever the hell Potter might think.

Pansy's nodding and sliding off her bar stool. "That's me done then. I need my beauty sleep," Blaise is standing too. "I'll walk you up." He glances at Draco; they're sharing a room. "You?"

It's stupid of him, Draco knows, but he wants a few more minutes with Potter. He lifts his glass higher. "I'll finish this first."

"Don't wake me when you stagger in," Blaise says. He points a finger at Draco. "I still haven't forgiven you for Dublin last year."

"Not my fault," Draco says, even though it entirely had been. He maintains one shouldn't be expected to remember things like warding charms when there's been a Guinness-drinking competition with Greg. He'd woken the entire hotel trying to get into the room, then promptly spewed sick into Blaise's open suitcase and passed out. It wasn't one of his finer moments.

"You ought to have known better." Blaise takes the high heels Pansy holds out to him. She'd pulled them off her feet the moment they'd walked into the hotel; Draco'd told her she was an idiot for wearing them on surveillance anyway. "Greg could drink twenty Irishmen under the table."

Draco snorts. "He nearly did that night. Honestly, Draco's just chuffed he'd been able to keep up with Greg until the end. The hangover the next day had been epic, however, despite Draco having sickered up. Multiple times.

"I feel like this is a story I should know," Potter says over the rim of his pint.

"It ends badly," Blaise says. "Mostly with me having to wake Draco and then hold his hair back for hours in the loo."

Potter gives Draco a look; Draco shrugs. He can't argue the truth.

"Enough talk about sick and Draco's low tolerance for alcohol." Pansy slides her arm into the crook of Blaise's elbow. "I'm tired, and I need sleep if I'm to face down some bloody Death Eater likely to curse me to death." She leans her mussed head against Blaise's shoulder. "I think I had too much wine at the cafe."

"And here." Blaise points out. Pansy'd left three empty wine glasses at her stool.

She wrinkles her nose. "True." She blows Draco a kiss. "Tomorrow, darling. You too, guv, except without the kiss. That would be terribly inappropriate."

Draco tries not to flinch at that. He can't look at Potter, although he feels him tense beside him. Instead, Draco gives Pansy his best ironic eye roll back. She has the uncanniest way of saying things without knowledge of the situation that manage to strike awfully close to the truth. Always
has. Perhaps it's what makes her a good Auror, really. Pansy's brilliant at sussing out deception, whether or not she means to at the time.

A wide smile curls Pansy's pink lips, most of her lip gloss having been left on the rims of various wine glasses over the course of the night. Draco likes Pans better this way, to be honest. She's lovely when she's fully made up and fresh at the beginning of the evening, but he thinks her real beauty comes through at times like now, when she's pink-cheeked and in her stockinged feet, making Blaise carry her shoes, and in no way diminished by being disheveled and tipsy.

Potter nods. "See you at seven, then. No sleeping in. I believe we're expected at half-eight in Hanka's conference room."

Draco bristles again at how casually Suková's name slides from Potter's tongue. He's already decided he'll have to go back to London if Potter actually makes a move on her--he has enough pride to make him flounce away in a bloody righteous snit if Potter's that stupid to embarrass him this quickly--although a small voice in the back of his mind tells him perhaps Potter's already made his move, and in his direction.

"I hope the hotel brekkers is worth getting up for," Pans says, and with a wave over her shoulder, she's out of the bar. In the lobby, Draco can see her head up the deep-set, red-carpeted stairs, Blaise trailing behind, his patient expression reflected in the gilt-framed mirrors hung along the yellow damask walls of the staircase. How the man can keep his dignity intact whilst holding the Givenchy stilettos of the pint-sized terror in front of him, Draco doesn't know.

Draco turns his attention back to Potter, who's slouching next to him at the bar, giving Draco a lazy, sleepy smile that suddenly makes Draco's jeans seem tighter. Potter's jumper sleeves are pushed up and his hair is outrageously tousled. As if reading Draco's thoughts, Potter runs a quick hand through his curls and musses them up further.

"So, what do you think our chances are tomorrow?" Potter asks.

Draco lifts his wineglass to his mouth. He takes a sip before answering. "Probably complete shite, knowing us."

Potter laughs, and he runs a fingertip along the rim of his pint glass. "We might get lucky."

"Perhaps," Draco turns on his barstool, resting his elbows against the bar. He swirls his glass, watching the wine slide up the sides. "Are you nervous?"

Potter doesn't answer for a moment. Draco looks over at him; Potter's studying the contents of his own glass. He sighs. "I'm always nervous when I go into the field," he admits. "You never know what'll happen. If someone'll get hurt." He glances at Draco. "Killed."

"We won't." Draco watches the barkeep mix an old-fashioned. He's an older man, with greying hair at his temples and quick, practised hands that expertly muddle the oranges and cherries. "Get killed, that is." He drains his wineglass and sets it down. "Or at least I don't intend to." At the moment he means it. Whether or not he'll be able to keep that promise remains to be seen. Draco knows what Dolohov can do with a well-placed curse. He once watched him slice a man's head cleanly off.

"I'd rather you not." Potter's voice is quiet, a low rumble that dances across shattered Draco's nerves. "Get killed."

Draco doesn't know what comes over him, but he reaches out, brushes his knuckles against the back of Potter's wrist. Potter's hand curves over his, catching his fingers. They sit there for a long
moment, silent, just looking at each other, before Draco pulls away.

"Should we order another round?" Potter asks. His gaze is heated, fixed on Draco's face. Draco's heartbeat quickens. He knows what that look means, and he doesn't trust himself if he has another drink. He wants Potter, but he has to go upstairs and share a room with Blaise, who'll keep him up half the night snoring. Blaise could sleep for England, Draco thinks. Once he's gone, he's dead until morning unless he needs a piss. It's a trait that always worries Greg, who's been known to hold a mirror up to Blaise's nostrils just to make sure he's still breathing.

Still, if Blaise is sleeping, Draco could steal away for a few moments with Potter. It wouldn't take long, really. One touch from Potter and Draco's ready to cream his trousers. It's pathetic how much he wants him.

Refusing to be drawn by that particular heavy--and absolutely idiotic, given the circumstances--undertow of lust, Draco shakes his head. "I think we should probably go upstairs. Seven o'clock will come sooner than we think."

Potter gives him a little half-shrug, smile undimmed. The smug bastard is entirely unconcerned at being knocked back. For fuck's sake, Draco had hoped for more resistance; he's a bit annoyed by Potter's calm. Honestly, Draco thinks he's worth at least a half-hearted attempt at seduction.

With a languid motion of his hand, Potter signals the barkeep, who circles back to them from the polite distance he'd been hovering at. As Potter's signing the slip of paper, Draco shoves off from the bar, running a careful hand across his merino wool jumper to smooth it, and heads for the door, not waiting to see where Potter is. He re-enters the brighter lighting of the crimson and gilt and marble lobby and blinks a little at the shift from the bar's darker, velvety ambience. Potter's next to Draco before he reaches the stairs, a warm masculine presence at his side smelling faintly of the cigarette smoke from the bar and whatever the low notes of cedar in his cologne were.

Draco wants to drop to his knees right here on the staircase and rip Potter's trousers open before pressing Potter's brilliant arse against the plush steps and swallowing him whole, but now, of all times, is not the time, and a team mission to Prague is definitely not the place. What he needs to do is head upstairs and get some actual rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day, and, truth be told, he's a bit fagged out from traveling. His whole body feels off from Portkeying into Prague; his center of balance still hasn't quite arrived, and only sleep can fix that.

They walk upstairs shoulder-to-shoulder to the first floor. Potter's room is before Draco's, at the bend in the corridor. Draco suspects it's one of the larger rooms that face out over the square. Blaise and Draco are in the back, a bit further down, but Draco's happy for the quiet of a courtyard room. At least he'll sleep tonight.

At Potter's door, Draco stops. "Well, good night," he says, the first words he's spoken to Potter since the bar. The silence was companionable enough that he didn't really notice.

"Yeah," Potter says. "Sleep well."

Draco hesitates. He doesn't want to leave Potter here, even if he knows he has to. "You too," He turns to go; Potter's fingers catch his wrist, pulling him back. "What--"

Potter's kissing him then, long and slow, his other hand brushing over Draco's cheek, fingertips sliding into Draco's hair. It's the kind of kiss that makes Draco's knees weak, that makes him sway into Potter, his hands catching on Potter's waist as Potter's mouth opens up to his with a quiet breath. It's a kiss that Draco can lose himself in, a kiss that sends fiery sparks of pure want throughout his body, a kiss that's heated and wet and toe-curlingly fierce.
Somehow, Draco pulls away. He stares at Potter, breathing hard, his lips tingling and warm. "What the fuck, Potter?" Draco's voice is quiet, but he's angry. "Anyone could see us here. Blaise could walk out--or Pansy. Or the bloody Czech Aurors. This is madness, even for us."

Potter leans against the door jamb with that infuriatingly placid smile on his face. Draco thinks it makes him look like an idiot. An idiot he wants to shag bloody senseless. But still an idiot.

"Well, come inside then." Potter raises his eyebrows, and Draco wants to hex him for his presumption. And for the fact that Draco so very much wants to follow him, as utterly idiotic as that thought is.

"I can't." Draco's prick is very helpfully telling him that he could, really, just this once. "Blaise is sharing my room, in case you've forgotten, and I don't think I could explain to him exactly why I chose not to sleep there."

Potter just looks at him. "He thinks we're still in the bar."

"It closes in an hour," Draco points out. "And besides, Potter, it's just not done."

"Well, we can't exactly shag out here," Potter says with a smile, hand rubbing the door handle. "I mean, I'm all for public sex, but that carpet looks uncomfortable and there really aren't any good surfaces to lean against."

Draco tries to stop the shiver that goes through him at the thought of Potter taking him here in the corridor for anyone passing to see. He fails. Completely. It seems his cock's quite keen into the idea of being out in the open, bobbing in the air whilst Potter fucks Draco from behind, not giving a shit who walks by. Circe, but he hates himself. Terribly.

"You're a bastard," he manages to get out.

"Who can have you well-fucked and back in your room before Zabini even notices." When Potter cracks his door, Draco makes out striped curtains and an elaborate headboard in the room beyond in the glow of streetlights. "Besides," Potter says, as if sensing Draco's weakness, "the bed's fantastic. I think it's sixteenth century."

Draco rolls his eyes. As if he hasn't slept in an antique bed for most of his life. They're not that comfortable in his experience. "Fine. I'll come in to see the bloody bed. But I'm going back to my own bed in ten minutes in the commoner's rooms in this hotel."

"Better make it twenty," Potter says as Draco brushes past him. He slaps his palm lightly against Draco's arse. "I've some plans for this."

"You wish." Draco knocks Potter's hand away, but he smiles into the darkness.

When Potter says a quick Lumos and the sconces flare to life, Draco's breath is nearly taken away. The walls of the room are painted a pale, cloudy blue; the floors are dark polished wood with a thick floral rug beneath the enormous bed. The ceiling's enchanted to look like the shimmering night sky and enormous paned windows stretch from the floor to the gilded moldings, reflecting the city lights that glimmer across the square. Potter even has a bloody chandelier hanging in the centre of his room. It's beautiful, something Draco's mother might have put together in one of the smaller rooms at the Manor.

"I wasn't aware the Aurors had this sort of budget," Draco says drily, just to irritate Potter.

"I think the hotel upgraded me when I checked us in." Potter presses his nose into Draco's neck. Goose flesh rises on Draco's forearms. "Sometimes that happens."
Draco snorts. "I'm certain. Must be bloody awful to be the Saviour of the Wizarding World, so famous that you're known even in Prague." He leans into Potter's touch for a moment, but pulls away. He gets caught up in circling the room to look at the furnishings. The bed isn't sixteenth century -- it's more of an early eighteenth century copy, but it's still absolutely stunning, an ornately turned walnut piece with a carved, curlicued headboard. Draco puts a hand on the brocaded coverlet. When he presses, the light duvet beneath is as soft and puffy as angel's wings.

"Should we try it out?" Potter asks, and it's literally the worst come-on line in the history of come-on lines. So why does Draco suddenly have trouble catching his breath?

He attempts a scathing glare at Potter, but he's fairly certain it just comes out as pathetically heated, given the way Potter's mouth twitches to one side. What a bloody arsehole he can be. "I've seen the bed. I'm going back to my room--"

"Malfoy," Potter says, and Draco stops in his tracks. Potter's silent for a moment, his hands shoved in his jeans pockets, his glasses sliding towards the end of his nose. He looks ridiculous--scruffy, untidy, utterly fuckable, Draco has to admit.

Draco looks away. "Besides, it's not as if you weren't making cow eyes at Suková all night." He frowns, recalling the way Potter had leaned into Suková, his hand on her arm.

Potter grins at him. "So you were paying attention."

Draco glares at Potter again; this time's more effective. "The whole bloody bar was, you fucking prick." He doesn't like the jealousy that seethes through him. He has no fucking reason for it, he knows that full well. It's not Suková in Potter's room right now, after all. But still, it's the principle of it. "I don't appreciate being taunted like that."

"I wasn't--" Potter breaks off, running a hand through his hair. "Jesus, Malfoy, I just wanted to make you jealous."

"Well, you didn't." Draco's grateful that he's accomplished at lying. It's a skill that comes in handy at times.

Potter's fingers brush a lock of Draco's hair back behind his ear "Liar." Well.

Most of the time.

"Arsehole," Draco says, beneath his breath. He doesn't like that Potter can see through him like this. Potter makes him feel vulnerable, exposed. Raw, even. It's uncomfortable in a way Draco can't quite explain, this ability of Potter's to slip under Draco's skin, to know Draco better than Draco sometimes knows himself. Only Draco's childhood friends can do that; Potter hasn't known him for years, doesn't have the experience of comforting Draco during his bleakest moments to be able to push past Draco's defences like this.

"It's only you, Malfoy." Potter's thumb slips across Draco's cheek to pull at Draco's bottom lip. Draco breathes in sharply. "I don't want anyone else in my bed right now. Not Suková. Just you."

"You say that to all the boys," Draco murmurs. He nips at Potter's thumb. His hands itch to touch Potter, to feel the firm swell of muscles beneath his fingertips. It's just sex, he tells himself, but Draco can't recall another of his partners who's been able to just touch Draco and make his objections crumble. It's a powerful spell Potter's hands wield, Draco thinks. If Potter'd tried to touch him in school, Draco wonders if he'd have had the courage to resist the Dark Lord sooner. Things might have been so very different for them all.
Potter's palm cups Draco's cheek. "What boys?" Draco's heart stutters; his body feels flushed and unsteady.

"This is a terribly bad idea." Draco lets Potter pull him closer.

Potter nods. "Without a doubt the worst we've had."

"Completely." Draco can't stop himself from reaching out to pluck Potter's glasses off his face. He folds the legs in, then sets them on the glossy surface of the small writing desk. Potter's eyes look so very green in this light. Draco makes his decision. Blaise won't come looking for him for a while--perhaps not at all if he falls asleep quickly. Draco can always say he was drinking with Potter. No one in their right mind would think him stupid enough to shag his SIO. He pulls his jumper off and lets it drop to the floor with only the slightest wince and worry about the knit snagging. He tugs at his tie, loosening the knot. "But then again, bad is what we do well." He pulls the tie off, lets it dangle from his fingertips.

Potter murmurs agreement, moving in closer to take the tie from Draco and toss it onto the writing desk. The length of silk slips off the wood, landing on the floor. Draco doesn't care, all he can think of is Potter and the way his hands slip around Draco's hips, pulling him in. Their lips meet again in a soft, succumbing sigh, and it's everything at once that Draco's been waiting for all day. Potter's grip is gentle, sliding over the curve of Draco's shoulders. Draco senses the power in those hands, and he feels both safe and in danger simultaneously. His lips graze the softness of Potter's mouth, stealing breaths and kisses, before opening up to let Potter's tongue into his mouth. As the kiss deepens, Potter pulls him closer still, fingers slipping to the buttons on Draco's shirt. Potter undoes them one by one, his lips still moving across Draco's mouth. Potter's hands slide over Draco's chest, and Draco shivers, his nipples hard at Potter's touch. The shirt slides off Draco's shoulders; Potter tugs it off Draco's wrists, and it falls to the floor in a rustle of cotton and ragged breaths.

"Christ but you're fucking gorgeous," Potter says against Draco's jaw, and his hands slip back down Draco's sides, around to the small of his back. Potter bites at Draco's throat, and Draco arches his head back. He feels almost boneless, only Potter's hands keeping him upright.

And then Potter presses his hips against Draco's, and Draco groans, his cock swelling against the buttons of his jeans. "Fuck," Draco says, and Potter laughs, warm and soft against Draco's ear.

"Like that, do we?" Potter shifts, and a wave of pleasure shudders through Draco's entire body.

"It's not bad." Draco's fingers twist into Potter's jumper as he rubs himself against Potter, his prick hardening with each roll of his hips, and thinks he might be able to get off just from this, frotting desperately in the centre of one of the more beautiful hotel rooms he's ever seen in a city he's never visited before.

Potter whispers a command against the skin above Draco's collarbone, and the sconces dim. Draco smiles against Potter's hair. "That's quite a trick there."

Potter's only answer is a rough nip to Draco's lower lip that makes its way into yet another kiss. Draco's mouth opens in response to Potter's tongue, and then he's pulling at Potter's jumper, somehow managing to get it off whilst still kissing him. Potter swears and throws the offending garment to the floor, along with his t-shirt, then reaches for Draco's jeans, grazing his knuckles over Draco's achin' prick. Draco lets Potter finish undressing him, pushing Draco's jeans down and off, making him step out of his pants, whilst he chases Potter's mouth, his tongue, teeth grazing lips, then kissing again, skin to skin.
Draco wraps himself around Potter, completely shameless in his burning desire to touch as much of Potter's body as he possibly can. The sensations are bloody brilliant, his prick moving against Potter's toned stomach, his hands tangled in Potter's hair, his mouth meeting Potter's again and again. He knows that this is what he wants from Potter, this mad, intoxicating shudder of their bodies together, perhaps only because it's all of his schoolboy fantasies come to life, or perhaps because he knows he shouldn't and Draco's always been drawn to the forbidden, or perhaps because it's sheer insanity and somehow Draco's lost his bloody fucking mind. But here, now, in this tangle of their limbs and lips, Potter trying to peel off his jeans with Draco plastered against him, it seems mad not to be doing this, not to give in to the waves of heat and fulfillment that threaten to rip him apart.

Potter finally manages to get rid of his slouchy jeans, despite Draco's best intentions to distract him. Teeth nipping at Draco's lip, Potter reaches down and hoists Draco onto his hips, wrapping Draco's legs around his waist as he carries him forward to the bed, strong hands cupping his arse, fingers spreading his cheeks. Draco rolls his hips again, and Potter's breath catches as Draco's prick rubs against his. Draco noses the delicate juncture between Potter's ear and neck; Potter's ragged breath stutters into a moan. He stills just steps from the bed whilst Draco sucks a bruise into the tender flesh.

"Merlin," Potter chokes out. "What you fucking do to me, Malfoy, with that bloody perfect mouth of yours."

Draco just nips harder, purpling the skin. Potter can spell it away later, but for now, for tonight, Draco wants him to wear his mark. "I suppose we'll have to find out, yeah?" He lets his lips drag along the curve of Potter's throat. "You'd like to fuck my mouth, wouldn't you, Potter? Watch me gagging on your prick, sucking at your tip? Don't you want to see your spunk spilling from between my lips?"

"God, you're filthy." Frankly, that doesn't sound like a bad thing, not the way Potter says it. Draco hides his smile against Potter's soft skin.

When Potter tosses him on the bed, Draco remembers just how strong Potter is. Draco's light, but he's taller than Potter, and Potter can manhandle him like no one else ever could. Draco's awash with the awareness of the tension between them, the spikes of their competitiveness lurking just under the surface. If Potter wants to top now, well, Draco'll have to get him back later. He could care less how he comes at the moment, only that he does come, and soon.

As Potter watches him, Draco spreads his legs, giving a bit of a show with his arms stretched above him. His prick bobs against his belly, hard and swollen already, a ruddy, solid curve that makes Potter lick his lips.

Potter shakes his head, eyes dark with desire. "Christ, I should make you wank yourself off whilst I watch. Tell you to stick those lovely long fingers up your arsehole and show me how many you can take."

In answer, Draco circles his rock hard cock with his thumb and forefinger, pressing a bit, then dragging his fingers up, twisting as his foreskin slides beneath them to cover his head. He groans and his hips arch off the mattress. Shit, but that feels brilliant. "Like that?" He lets his whole hand curl around his prick, sliding back down, his foreskin slipping back down his shaft.

"It's a start." Potter's own cock is hard and dusky with blood, a pearl of precome beading at the swollen red tip. Potter touches himself, watching Draco as his fingers drift up his prick, then climbs onto the bed. He knocks Draco's hand out of the way and lines their cocks up, laying himself over Draco and leaning down to kiss him again. It's surprisingly intimate.
"Hey," Potter says, a crooked smile on his lovely mouth. His hand is gently cupping both of their pricks together, not moving, just holding them in place. He's braced over Draco on his other arm, and Draco can smell the hint of Czech brown beer on his breath and the undertone of sweat and something spicy sweet that's intrinsically Potter. Draco realizes he's beginning to relax just from the smell of Potter, beginning to spread his legs whenever Potter comes calling, beginning to let go when Potter touches him, with no concern for anything but these moments between them, these times when their bodies can crash together without anything separating them except air. It should frighten him, this response; he finds it more disturbing that it doesn't.

Draco looks up at Potter, his breath caught. He feels like he's flying, or perhaps sinking into the ground. Potter is warm and solid above him, and Draco wants to snarl, to protect something of himself, to not give in to this so easily.

He knows he won't. He can't. He's caught by Potter, a tiny fly in Potter's intoxicating web. He wants to lie here beneath Potter, to lose control at Potter's touch, to feel the way only Potter's made him feel since things began to go tits-up with Nicholas. Potter lets Draco forget whom he used to be; all that matters when Potter looks at him is who he might become.

"What do you want?" Potter's hand experimentally gives a little squeeze to their cocks.

Draco's back arches. "Circe." He tries to keep his body from shuddering at the touch. "Anything. What are you offering?" His skin is hot all over, and his prick is so hard he might actually die from it.

"Well, I could take care of this," Potter squeezes their pricks again, and Draco does snarl this time. It's almost too much. Potter just looks pleased with himself. "And then maybe fuck you after, if you're up for more."

The slow stroke that Potter takes up is making it hard for Draco to concentrate. He wants Potter inside of him, wants to feel the stretch of his hole around Potter's fat cock, wants the steady slap of Potter's bollocks against his taint. Circe, but he wants to be fucked hard right now, the kind of rough, eager dick that will make him forget his own name and make him sore all the next day, despite the healing spells. "Or you could just fuck me now, you twat, and skip the bloody dithering."

Potter's smirk turns a bit feral at that. "So aggressive, Malfoy. Are you sure you shouldn't be topping me?"

At the image of Potter stretched beneath him, his lush arse pushed up for Draco's pleasure, Draco's mouth goes dry. He'd almost forgotten how much he likes sex during his self-imposed stretch of post-Nicholas celibacy. Potter's brought it back in a rush, that thrill of taking and being taken, of pricks and arses and taut, tight bodies sliding together in sweaty, shuddering heat. Draco loves to fuck and to be fucked, and whatever shame he might still feel at that melts away at Potter's featherlight touch.

He looks up at Potter, lets his fingers slip through Potter's hair. "I want you inside of me tonight," he says, and he loves the way Potter swallows at that, his eyes going dark and wide. "It's what you want, too, isn't it? Your prick pounding my arse until I feel it in my throat?" He pulls Potter down against him, licks a wet stripe along the curve of Potter's neck before whispering into his ear, "Don't you want me tight around you? It was so brilliant when I fucked you, that perfect arse of yours so hot and snug around my cock, watching you come completely undone every time I slammed into you, seeing your prick get harder and harder with every--"

Potter cuts him off with a desperate kiss, a shock of teeth and tongues that makes Draco's toes curl into the mattress, pushing him up against Potter. "You're going to kill me," Potter says into
Draco's mouth. "I am actually going to die of pure fucking lust--"

"There are worse ways to go."

And then Potter has him rolled over onto his belly before Draco can protests. "Let's see if you feel that way in a few minutes," Potter says with a laugh, and his hands are on Draco's arse, rubbing and pulling, spreading Draco's cheeks wide.

"Lube," Draco says, but Potter surprises him by leaning in and licking through Draco's crease. Draco's breath catches, and he groans when Potter does it again. "Circe--"

Potter's fingers tense on Draco's arse, digging into his flesh. He whispers the charms against Draco's skin; Draco feels a sharp tingle go through his body, bright and painful, leaving him empty in its wake. He swears, but Potter has him spread open again, pushing at Draco until his arse is up in the air. His thumb circles over Draco's hole. "Look at that," Potter says. "So perfect and pink, just waiting for me--"

"Fuck," Draco says when the tip of Potter's wet tongue slips into him. He rolls his hips back; his heated face presses into the mattress. It's been years since he's let anyone rim him; there's something excruciatingly intimate about the act, but if Potter moves away now, Draco thinks he'll kill him. He wants Potter fucking him with his tongue, wants Potter to taste him, to feel him. He groans and shifts when Potter's tongue laps around the soft pucker of his hole; the head of his prick slides over the folds of the coverlet, aching and slick. "Potter," he says, and he reaches back with one hand blindly. Potter catches it, their fingers twining as Potter's tongue presses into him again.

"God, Malfoy," Potter says against Draco's crease. "You taste incredible. I could eat you all night-" He turns his head against Draco's arse, nips the tender skin. "The way your thighs shake when I lick you makes me so fucking hard. Can you tell?" He shifts, lets his prick drag against Draco's calf; his free hand slips along the inside of Draco's thighs, fingers brushing along Draco's bollocks.

It's almost too much. "Potter--" Draco clenches Potter's fingers; Potter pulls back to spit on Draco, then he's pressed against Draco's arse again, his tongue lapping across Draco's sensitive skin, circling his hole, pressing deeper into him. He can feel the erratic thud of his heart pulsing through his whole body, drawing him onto his knees, curving him into a tense, tight, thrum of arousal and anticipation.

Potter pulls away. Draco makes a weak protest; his hole is throbbing. He craves more. "Steady," Potter says, and Draco thinks he hears a faint wobble in Potter's voice.

The bed shifts. Draco breathes out, his forehead pressed against his folded arms. He turns his head slightly; he can see Potter digging through his valise, prick bobbing in front of him. Potter pulls out a phial and comes back to the bed, crawling across it to reach Draco.

"Am I that easy," Draco says, amused, "that you'd bring your lube with you?"

Potter smacks Draco's arse cheek. "You're nothing like easy. But I was hopeful. And if you didn't let me do this, I was going to wank myself raw thinking about it."

His fingers, cool and slick, circle the puffy rim of Draco's arsehole as he speaks. Draco shifts his hips and is rewarded with the slip of Potter's fingertip inside. He wants so much more.

"You're gagging for it, aren't you?" Potter continues talking, his fingers sliding in further to breach Draco's body. "Look at you. You look so bloody amazing on your knees for me."

"More fucking, less talking." Draco breathes deeply and pushes back against Potter's hand, taking
one, then two fingers as Potter opens him up.

Potter's mouth slides up Draco's spine, nipping lightly. He twists his fingers deeper into Draco. "You don't want me to tell you how hot and tight you are around me? How incredible it is to watch you fuck my fingers? That watching you like this makes me so damned hard? This sweet little hole of yours--Christ, Malfoy, look at it stretch for me. Fuck, but it wants to be filled by something, doesn't it?"

All Draco can do is gasp and arch beneath Potter's fingers. Potter's cock is wet against Draco's leg, and Draco's own hasn't flagged a bit. He wants this so much.

When Potter removes his fingers, Draco's already a panting mess on the bed, face in the bedclothes, arse in the air. Potter's drawing groans out of him already, and they haven't even started fucking in earnest. "Don't stop--"

Potter flips Draco over onto his back. "Oh, I don't intend to." His hair's curling damply against his cheek, falling into his eyes. He slides off the bed; Draco raises up on one elbow to watch him.

"What are you doing?"

"Hold on." Potter picks up a glass from the sidebar beneath one of the windows. "This'll do," he says, mostly to himself, and Draco frowns.

"Potter," he says sharply, but Potter's scrabbling on the floor for his wand, perfect arse in the air, and Draco really can't fault the view.

Uprighting himself, Potter flicks the tip of his wand against the glass, drawing it around the curve until the glass lengthens, solidifies. He holds it up; it's a near-perfect replica of his own swollen cock, glass foreskin stretched back along the thick glass shaft. "Let's see if you like this."

"You berk," Draco says, laughing. "Where the fuck did you learn that charm?"

Potter climbs back up on the bed, the glass dildo bobbing in his hand as he crawls towards Draco. "Amsterdam. Wizarding sex shops are pretty brilliant there." He pushes Draco back down onto the mattress. "Spread your legs."

Draco does. His cock curves hard and heavy over his belly as he watches Potter slick the dildo up with lube. "You could just use your own prick, you know."

"Could," Potter says. He grins down at Draco. "But I'd rather see your face when I fuck you like this." He presses the cool, smooth tip of the glass replica against Draco's hole. "It's so much better than fingers."

"I'll be the judge of that." Draco tenses as the head slips into him. It's an odd feeling, cold and slick in a way he's not used to. It's not that he hasn't used dildos before, but he doesn't particularly like them. They've always just been something to stick up his arse whilst he wanked himself.

This is different.

Potter's leaning over him, watching as he slides the glass shaft into Draco, bit by bit. It's heavy in Draco's hole, and once he's adjusted to the feel of the cool hardness sliding inside him, he doesn't hate it, he thinks.

"Not bad?" Potter asks.

Draco spreads his thighs wider, relaxing around the dildo that's beginning to warm to his body.
"I've had worse."

That makes Potter snort in amusement. "Perhaps I ought to take this up a notch." He twists the dildo ever so slightly to the left and murmurs, "Rumpendo." Draco gasps as small nubs pop out across the dildo's surface. He blinks up at Potter, who just raises an eyebrow and pulls the textured shaft almost completely out of Draco's arse. The feel of the nubs slipping out of his hole makes Draco shake. "There we go," Potter whispers, and Draco digs his fingers into the coverlet, twisting the fabric around them as he breathes out.

Potter pushes the dildo back into Draco, slowly, slowly, slowly twisting it as it slides in inch by inch. Draco groans and clutches his arse around the raised glass bumps. It's incredible, and he wants more. "Please," Draco says, and Potter pulls the dildo out again, letting the nubs tease the rim of Draco's arsehole. Draco's cock is rock hard now, and he doesn't know how Potter can do this to him, how he can make Draco want him so bloody damn much.

"Fucking hell," Potter says, and the look of pure lust on his face makes Draco want to come right there. "You're delectable, Malfoy. Spread out like this--" He raises up over Draco, and his prick is dark and swollen. He pushes the dildo into Draco in one fluid movement, settling the flared base flat against Draco's arse. Draco's hips come off the bed; he shouts, fingers tugging at the coverlet.

And then Potter's knees are straddling his hips, and Potter's cock is pressing into Draco's as he leans in, catching Draco's mouth with his. His fingers curl around Draco's wrists, and he lifts Draco's arms up over his head as he kisses him. It's amazing, this feeling of being stretched full whilst Potter ruts up against Draco's prick. Draco's whole body feels taut and tight; he digs his heels into the bed, pushing up against the rocking of Potter's hips.

Potter cries out, and he turns his head, burying his face in the stretch of Draco's armpit. The feel of Potter's breath against his skin is almost too much for Draco. He twists and writhes, doing everything he can to slide his cock along Potter's, to make Potter come undone over him. The dildo's thick and warm and heavy inside of him, and he feels incredible. Powerful.

"Malfoy," Potter says. "God, Malfoy--" He lifts his head, looking down at Draco with unfocussed eyes.

Draco shoves his legs over the back of Potter's thighs, pinning them down as he ruts his hips upwards. He wants Potter wild for him. "Don't you dare come, Potter," he says roughly. "That spunk of yours is going to fill me up, do you understand?"

Potter just groans and grabs Draco's hip, steadying himself. His prick is slick and sticky against Draco's. "Fuck, I can't--"

"You better not." Draco's teeth nip at Potter's ear. "Not one bloody drop--"

A shudder runs through Potter. He rolls over, carrying Draco with him. The force of the movement makes the dildo slip further out of Draco's hole, and he groans. Potter reaches down, fingers curling around the base of the dildo, and he pushes it back up before pulling it out again, leaving only the tip in Draco's arse. The glass is warm from Draco's body. "Sure about that, Malfoy?"

Draco arches into Potter as Potter fucks him with the dildo. He's nearly breathless with want. "Fuck," he cries out, and he can't bite back the moans, each rising in volume as Potter slams the dildo deeper into Draco's arse.

"Look at you, you beautiful bastard," Potter says, and it's not an insult, not in that tone. Potter's watching him, his eyes soft, his mouth half-open. "Christ, but you're gorgeous like this. You've no
idea what you do to me. How much I want you, Malfoy." He pulls Draco into a rough kiss, screwing the dildo as far up into Draco as he can get it. "I could get so fucking lost in you."

Draco's on the edge. "Yes," he says against Potter's lips. "I need you…"

Potter groans and he flips Draco onto his back again. "If I don't get my cock in you, I'm going to fucking implode." He pulls the dildo out of Draco's arse and tosses it onto the bed. "God, but you look well-fucked already." He grins. "And bloody fucking loud about it, aren't you?"

"Cast a Muffliato, Potter." Draco looks up at him, breathing hard. His whole body is on fire, and he wants Potter's prick inside of his arse right now. "We don't want to provide a show for any of the other guests."

"Mmm," Potter says, whispering the spell quickly. "I love that you have trouble keeping your mouth shut when you're being fucked senseless." He slaps Draco's hip. "Arse up again. I want to watch my cock going into you."

Draco shivers with lust and the naked intent in Potter's voice as he crawls onto his knees. He barely has time to focus on a rebuttal--pointless anyway because it's absolutely true that he's a screamer when he has the luxury--before the tip of Potter's fat cock is nestled between his arsecheeks, then pressing into him, splitting him open. He has a brief moment where he has to remind his body that this is something it wants, that even if it burns and Potter's prick is enormous, it's going to be so, so good soon. The slide of Potter's cock into him is different from the glass double, rougher and slower, and Draco's not sure he can manage. He takes a ragged breath, and Potter stops.

"All right?" Potter asks, and Draco nods. Potter hesitates. "You're sure you want this?"

Draco looks back over his shoulder. "Potter, if you slide out of me right now, I will find your sorry arse and hex it into oblivion. Are we clear?"

"So that's a yes, then," Potter says with a grin. He swears as Draco tenses his arse around his cock. "Careful, unless you want this over too soon." He wraps a strong hand around Draco's hip and pulls him back as Draco shifts and widens the stance of his knees so that his arse tilts up.

The slow press of Potter's prick deeper into Draco's body feels so bloody incredible. Draco's never had a partner who could read his body language so closely--he's astonished by how closely in tune he and Potter are, but he supposes years of observing and competing against each other have led to this. As Potter slots home, settling deeply and surely into Draco's arse, Draco aches with the burn and the fullness, the promise of pleasure and the agony. Potter's lips are on the nape of Draco's neck, raising shivers as Draco's body adjusts to the feel of Potter inside him.

"Good so far?" Potter's breath grazes Draco's ear. Their bodies are glued together, skin pressed against skin, and Draco could stay like this, just like this, for hours. The more of Potter he gets, the more he wants. Like a snake devouring its own tail, his desire for Potter is an infinite loop of having and wanting, of longing and fulfillment. He doesn't know how it can continue, how much longer this fire between them can last, but he has no doubt what he wants right now. There's no space for anything else but Potter.

"It'd be better if you move," Draco says, but the ache in his voice belies his mocking.

"Needy thing," Potter leans back, and Draco aches for the feel of their bodies together, even as he can't wait for what he knows is coming. Heated desire courses through him, all of his limbs shaking with the need for Potter to fuck him, to spread his arse as wide as he can and cleave Draco's whole self in two.
Potter's first few thrusts are gentle, enough for Draco to stay cheek to pillow, body swaying as Potter claims him. Draco groans softly; Potter's hands smooth across the globes of his arse. It's even better than the dildo; Potter's warm and hard inside of him, and Draco prefers the rough slide of Potter's prick. Draco braces himself on his elbows, body bowing as Potter's pace quickens.

"God, Malfyoy, you are bloody amazing." Potter grits the words out between sharp thrusts of his hips. He has the muscle tone and the stamina to shag Draco utterly boneless, and the entire length of Draco's back shakes with the force of Potter's hips slamming into him. "Your arse is like sodding velvet around me."

Draco privately thinks that velvet would pale in comparison to his arse, but he doesn't argue the point. He can barely speak anyway, with the intensity of the sensations Potter is drawing out of him. He hears himself groaning--not shouting yet--but it's so raw and primal, he's barely aware of forming sound as Potter fucks him open.

Potter pulls Draco back against him with a groan, Draco's thighs splayed across his own, and the shift of his prick in Draco's arse makes Draco cry out. "Oh, God, Potter--fuck--" He reaches up to grip the carved wood of the headboard desperately, scrabbling to find a handhold to keep himself upright. "Fuck me harder, you bastard. Merlin, I need--" A roll of Potter's hips nearly makes him sob. He's stretched so wide; it doesn't even matter that Potter'd prepared him for this. The pain is delicious.

"Tell me you want my cock," Potter says, breathless.

"God, you know I do, you sodding arsehole, and you better give it to me." Draco shoves his arse back to meet Potter's thrust. "I want you to bugger me until I can't walk--" Potter groans against Draco's shoulder blade, and Draco arches his hips backwards again. "And then I want you to spell it all better and do it again because Circe, Potter, your cock drives me fucking wild, and oh God, come on, man. You can do more than this, I know you can, so fucking, bloody well do it--" He breaks off into a sharp moan as Potter slams into him again, nearly pressing him against the carved headboard. "Fuck."

"I think that's the point." Potter's hands close over his, and they're both moving in unison, Draco riding Potter as Potter thrusts into him, his fingers tight on Draco's, pressing them into the ridges of the headboard. Draco's pleasure is wordlessly, achingly, viciously complete as something sparks deep inside his belly and his entire body clutches with a roil of pure pleasure, then once more. He's not coming yet, but he's riding a wave that will take him there as Potter swears and grunts into his ear.

Their bodies slap together, muscle against muscle; the bed creaks beneath their knees, a brilliant cacophony of gasps and groans echoing through the room; and Draco's throat is raw as he breathes quickly, thighs on Potter's thighs, hands under Potter's hands, shoulder blades balanced against Potter's chest. They're joined with same coil, two halves of the same spring. And then Potter's hands drop down to Draco's hip, digging into Draco's flesh.

"Fuck, I'm not going to last--God, this perfect arse of yours--what the fuck am I going to do?" Potter bounces Draco on his prick, angling him for maximum penetration. "I can't get enough of you," he whispers against Draco's heated skin.

Draco clings to the headboard, his body thrumming with need for release. He's grateful for the Muffliato as the wood strikes against the wall with a rhythmic thump and his own voice climbs as his body is pummeled by Potter's. He shouts, his head falling back against Potter's shoulder.

"Come on, Malfyoy. You can let go. I've got you," Potter's voice is low, a rough growl of need into Draco's hair. One hand reaches up to hold Draco's chest, the other curls around Draco's prick,
strok**ing him in rhythm with Potter's thrusts.**

Draco closes his eyes, sinking into the sound of his sharp, ragged keens, then beyond even those into the silence of his own need to fall. His body shakes, then comes apart on top of Potter, his \textit{want} hitting him like a steam train in what feels like an endless shudder of spunk and sweat. His cry echoes in his ears.

Potter thrusts, then thrusts again, holding Draco upright. "Fuck, you're mine," he whispers against Draco's shoulder. "Just mine. So fucking incredible--" He groans, low and deep and rough, his body convulsing against Draco's. "God, you--oh, fuck, Malfoy--" He buries his face into the curve of Draco's throat and shouts.

Together they collapse onto the mattress, bodies shuddering with aftershocks of pleasure.

As Draco comes back into more conscious thought, he realise**s that Potter is draped over him, breath ragged against Draco's neck. Draco's hands are cramped, his knuckles bloodless, and his throat is desperately sore. He unclenches his fingers and leans back, shoving Potter lightly with his shoulders.

Potter leans back, gently leaving Draco's body. Draco's senses a rush of cold and also the slick of lube and come draining from his twinging arsehole, spams still clenching deep within his body. Potter rolls to the side and pulls Draco with him, still twined together. Potter folds a corner of the brocade coverlet over Draco, huffing gently as he settles Draco's weight onto his chest.


Draco hums in agreement, still too shattered to verbalize much more than that. He's knows he'll have to move soon. He needs cleaning charms and healing spells, needs to slide into his own bed before Blaise wakes up and wonders where he's gone, but right now Draco's in an island of warmth in Potter's arms, head buzzing with the echoes of a deliciously astonishing orgasm.

They lie together for what seems like ages, arms and legs tangled. Draco feels safe here with Potter at his back. He wonders what it would be like to fall asleep in Potter's bed. That's something they still haven't done. It's always been Potter slipping out of bed to put his clothes back on, leaving Draco sated but quietly lonely.

The last person he'd woken up beside was Nicholas. There are days he still misses that feeling, the solid presence of someone else in his bed. He tries to remember what it'd been like at the end; how he'd hated opening his eyes to see the dark brown tufts of Nicholas's hair over the crisp white pillowcases. He doesn't like thinking about that.

Draco sits up, pulling away from Potter.

"Where're you going?" Potter's voice is sleepy and relaxed.

"I'd prefer not to be glued to you with spunk," Draco says, and Potter laughs. "I suppose I can't object to that."

"One would hope." Draco slides off the bed. Retrieving his wand, he says the necessary spells, cleaning Potter and himself, then soothing his body from the effects of Potter's fat prick and the delicious violence of the pounding it just received. Still a bit unsteady, he fishes after his clothing, trying to figure out exactly where his pants ended up.

He's surprised to feel a warm hand on his hip, pulling him back. Potter's wrapped a blanket around his waist and is half-naked and warm against Draco. He nuzzles at Draco's nape. "Stay."
Draco shakes his head, arching his neck as Potter bites at the sensitive skin below his ear. "You know I can't. Blaise will find out if I'm not back."

"There's no way he'll be up before six," Potter says, and he has a point. Blaise insists on a good seven hours a night, at least, and it's already almost midnight. "We'll set an alarm, and you can sneak back in. It'll be like we're teenagers again." Potter's arms are strong and welcome around Draco's shoulders, his chest hard against Draco's naked body. It's hard to resist him.

"Had a lot of pretty young things slinking into your dormitory, did you?" Draco relaxes against Potter. He likes the solid, warm feel of him.

Potter snorts. "Remind me to tell you how awful my first kiss was."

"Oh, don't worry. The whole school knew how appalled Chang was with you." Draco turns, letting Potter pull him into his arms fully. "I can report, though, that your technique has improved over the years." Potter smiles, eyes bright and green in the low light of the room. Their lips meet softly, just a light press, then again, Potter's mouth opening to Draco's in a languorous kiss that deepens with a flick of his tongue against Draco's teeth. Draco doesn't know how his body responds after what they've just done, but he can feel his cock filling out again.

In the end, it's Potter's crooked smile that is Draco's undoing. That and the promise he whispers as their mouths meet, then meet again. "Just imagine what we can do with more time."

Draco lets Potter pull him back towards the bed. It's a terrible idea, and he knows it, but he doesn't care. Nothing matters but the feel of Potter's hands on his hips, the press of Potter's prick against his, the slide of Potter's mouth along Draco's jaw.

This isn't something he wants to give up.

Ever.

***

Blaise sits on the edge of his bed, fully dressed and waiting. Early morning sunlight shines through the open curtains, pooling on the bed across from him. His shadow is outlined against the perfectly smooth coverlet, tight shoulders a curved, dark swathe over the taut cream. The bed hasn't been slept in, but then, Blaise isn't really surprised by that, is he? Not after last night.

He'd woken up just a bit after five for a quick slash; he hadn't realised until he was stumbling back from the loo that Draco's bed was still empty. He hadn't been worried at first; for Christ's sake, Draco's a bloody grown man. But after he'd laid back down he hadn't been able to fall asleep again. Every time Blaise would close his eyes, he'd see Dolohov's face, imagine him, wand out, going after Draco, and he'd sit up in bed with a start, heart pounding. Stupid of him, perhaps, but Draco's been one of his best friends since Blaise had sat down next to him after their Sorting. And Draco's complete bollocks at taking care of himself, Blaise thinks. There are moments Draco exhibits a nearly Gryffidorian recklessness that worries Blaise. He wouldn't have put it past Draco to do something bloody stupid like going back to Dolohov's house on his own. He can be an utter twat sometimes.

When he found out what Draco'd actually done, it was worse, at least in Blaise's opinion. More moronic, most certainly.

Blaise had gone to Pansy's room first, letting himself in with the key she'd given him the night before, just in case she didn't wake up on time. She'd been asleep, snoring softly, sprawled across the bed in just a short t-shirt and her knickers, one foot hanging out from beneath the coverlet as
usual. Draco hadn't been there, and Blaise's worry had sharpened. He hadn't wanted to go to Potter's room, but he'd known if something was wrong and he hadn't reported it to the guy that it'd be him swinging from his bollocks, so he'd hurried down the corridor.

He'd almost knocked on the door when he'd heard Draco's laugh. He'd recognise it anywhere, that warm, bright bark that means Draco's truly delighted about something. At first Blaise hadn't realised what was happening. Whatever charm they'd used to muffle the room was only just wearing off. It'd taken a moment before he'd heard the soft groan--Potter, he thinks--and the steady, rhythmic thud of something--Blaise doesn't care to consider what--against the headboard.

It wasn't that difficult to figure out what was going on. Not after Draco'd said Potter's name in that breathless, needy rush.

Blaise had stepped back, nearly stumbling on the carpet. He'd wondered if he should throw the door open, demand to know exactly what the bloody fuck they thought they were doing. He'd already had his wand in hand, ready to cast the Alohomora, when he'd realised how ridiculous he'd look. And so he'd made his way back to his room--no longer his and Draco's. He thinks--and dropped back onto the bed.

He hadn't fallen back asleep.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticks softly; the minute hand slides forward another slot. It's two minutes after six. He wonders how late Draco will push it.

Another few clicks of the clock hand sliding forward, and there's movement in the corridor. With a quiet creak, the door to the room swings open and Draco slips into the darkened room, his shoes and jumper in one hand, his shirt undone. Circe only knows where his tie is. His hair is mussed; he looks well-fucked. He doesn't see Blaise. Not yet at least.

"Potter must be a quite the shag," Blaise says, and Draco jumps, his shoes dropping to the floor with a thud. He stills, like a stag caught in a hunter's Lumos.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Draco drapes his jumper over the chair at the little desk to the right, then turns back to face Blaise.

Blaise snorts. "You're a terrible liar." Draco's not, unless you've known him for fifteen years and realise that when he chews the corner of his lip that way he's considering how best to twist the truth to his advantage.

"I fell asleep on a sofa in the lobby."

For Merlin's sake, he's not even bloody trying. Blaise's irritation flares. "Really."

Draco moves into the room, sliding out of his shirt. There's a fresh scratch, pink and raw, from his shoulder blade to his spine. They'd evidently forgotten that one in their cleanup. "I've the worst crick in my neck--"

"Have you." Blaise curls his fingers into fists, his elbows on his knees. He tries to breathe deeply and relax. It doesn't really work. There have only been a few times Blaise has been this angry with Draco. Once in second year when Draco had copied his transfigurations paper, turning it in before Blaise and causing McGonagall to accuse Blaise of copying Draco's work, once over the summer after fourth year when Draco had repeated something he'd heard that shit of a father say, implying Blaise's mother was nothing but a tramp, and the last two months of sixth year when Draco'd been avoiding everyone, his focus solely on that goddamned Vanishing Cabinet.
This, Blaise thinks, just might trump all three.
Draco looks at him, brow furrowed. "You seem upset."

Blaise stands up. "I am."

"Oh," Draco says, and he drops his shirt onto the untouched bed. He doesn't meet Blaise's gaze.

"I know where you were," Blaise says. Circe, but just saying that out loud makes him angrier. He can't believe how bloody selfish Draco's been, and then lying to him, on top of it. Fucking hell. He can feel the vestiges of his mother's Veela magic quivering around him; it'd take only the slightest flick of his fingers to lash it out towards Draco, slamming him against the wall. It's so tempting.

Draco's eyes flick towards Blaise's clenched hands. He knows full well what Blaise is capable of when provoked. "It's nothing--"

"Don't give me that shit." Blaise's shoulders are tight; he can barely breathe. "Potter, Draco. Have you lost your sodding mind?" Draco flinches and steps backwards. Blaise doesn't give a fuck.

"After everything we've worked for. After everything you've done to prove yourself--everything I've done--everything Pans has done, and you're just throwing it away for a shag. And with your guv?" He's appalled; he's furious; he wants to slap Draco until he comes to his bloody senses. "I don't even understand you. Why? Why would you do something so--" Blaise can't even find the words. He throws his hands up and growls in frustration.

"It's not like that--"

"Just shut up." Blaise presses his fingertips to one temple. His head's starting to ache. "I can't even look at you right now. It's not just your fucking career you're throwing away. It's mine. It's Pansy's. And we didn't make that choice, Draco. We didn't choose to fuck the guv and see what lands where in the aftermath. This--" He waves a hand at Draco. "This will all disappear. You're a good fuck and nothing else, and oh, right, when Robards finds out--or Bertie--or any of the Chief Inspectors--what do you think's going to happen? They'll pat you on the head and tell you good job? No, you pissant tit. They'll slap Potter on the wrist, and send you down the Thames to the shittiest job they can think of--if they don't just sack you outright--and Pans and I'll be on the bloody boat with you, because Christ knows they won't think we knew nothing about it. They'll say we helped you for our own benefit because that's what they think about us, isn't it?

That we'll do anything to leapfrog ahead of them. Doesn't matter how hard we work or how good we are. We're nothing but Slytherin scum to the whole bloody force--"

Draco runs a hand through his hair. "The lads like you--"

"The lads tolerate me," Blaise snaps, his voice rising. "Because I've played the game. I've bought them drinks. I've laddered about with them, but don't think for a moment, Draco, that they think I'm part of their group. I'm a Slytherin, and I'm black on top of that, and that's two marks against me in their books. They'll like me well enough as long as I know my place, but the moment I step a toe out of line, they'll have me back on the worst duties they can think of." He's breathing hard; his hands are shaking. "You never think about anyone but yourself and what you want. This was a good assignment. My shot at proving myself. And the minute they find out Potter has you on your back, everything I've worked for might as well be shit."

"Blaise." Draco looks stricken. For a moment Blaise feels a stab of guilt. He shoves it away. "I didn't mean--"

"You never do, though." Blaise's throat is tight. "Do you?" He can't look at Draco any longer, can't be here in this room with him. "Get fucking dressed," he says, and he strides past Draco,
slamming the door behind him.

Halfway down the corridor Blaise stops, leans against the pale blue floral papered wall. His stomach churns; he feels like he might sick up right here in the potted ficus over in the corner beside the lift. He breathes out slowly. He's still shaking with rage.

Blaise's hand shakes as he pulls out his mobile and dials.

"It's me," he says when his mother answers on the third ring. "I need some advice." If anyone will know how to sort this out, it's Olivia Zabini.

He hopes, at least.

***

Draco hasn't spoken to Blaise all day. Not for lack of trying, mind, but Potter has them scattered along Jakubska and its cross-streets Rybná and Templová, tucked away in cafés and wandering through shops, all whilst keeping up with their monitoring spells that are tracking any iteration of Dolohov's magical signature within a half-mile radius.

Supposedly they've been trading off partners every few hours when their glamours wear off. Draco'd thought he'd have at least one chance to pull Blaise aside and try to explain himself, but every time Blaise has switched off to someone else, easily side-stepping rounds with Draco--and Potter for that matter.

It's infuriating, really, and more than a little unsettling. Draco's never seen Blaise this angry, not even the time he'd insulted Olivia, and Blaise hadn't spoken to him for two weeks back then. If his silent treatment lasts longer this round, Draco hasn't the slightest idea how he'll explain that to Potter. He doesn't particularly want Potter to know that Blaise has caught them out. Knowing Potter, he'll do something stupid, like trying to explain himself to Blaise or decide to be bloody conscientious and call off their delicious bouts of fucking. Draco doesn't really know which would be worse.

His sore arse has an opinion, though, as he shifts on the small chair of the bistro table he's sitting at with Suková. She looks like she's reading the weekend edition of Hospodářské noviny, sipping coffee as she refolds the newspaper's pages.

"Try to look a little less obvious," Suková says, and Draco scowls at her. She doesn't seem to care; her gaze skims down the columns of Czech. "You've been twitching since you sat down."

Draco stirs another spoonful of sugar into his own cup of coffee. It's barely drinkable as is; he can't imagine the sweetness is going to do anything other than make it more cloying. Still, it's something to do, that simple act of circling the small silver spoon through the milky coffee. "I'm fine." He taps the spoon against the rim of his cup, then sets it down. The street around them is busy; Draco can pick out the tourists spilling down the pavement from the square, their cameras and rucksacks bouncing as they walk. His wand lies still and silent in its holster beneath his jacket. If it picks up Dolohov's magical signature, it'll vibrate like mad; Draco'd already tested the charm against Pansy's magic, and his wand had nearly stabbed him through the ribs when it picked her up. She's down the street now with Potter, the two of them sitting on the steps of Church of St James just a few hundred feet away.

Suková sets her newspaper down. "Did you know that on the fifth of March every year a goat used to be dropped from the bell tower?"

"What now?" Draco looks over at her.
"I assumed you were interested in the church," Suková says. "Since you keep staring at it." She picks up her coffee and sips it. "It was a tradition kept alive by the Old Town butchers. They'd drop the goat, then roast it on the steps of StJames. The whole neighbourhood would gather for a bite."

Draco's a bit taken aback. "That's grim."

She shrugs. "My grandparents used to come." Suková watches him for a long minute. "Potter's fine, if that's what you're worrying over."

"I wasn't." Well. Not entirely, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Of course not." Suková leans back in her chair. Her glamour makes her look like an older woman, with short, greying hair. Draco still has a hard time adjusting to glamours; standard Auror charms allow the team to see past the physical shifts, making it seem like a somewhat transparent mask that doesn't quite blend into the face beneath. It's like looking at two people at the same time; Draco finds it disconcerting. He looks away, his head starting to hurt. He wishes Suková would go back to her paper. He's upset and worried, and he just doesn't want to deal with her at the moment. It's enough that he has to decide whether or not he's going to tell Potter that Blaise has figured them out. Merlin.

Draco tugs at his hair; he doesn't like the dark locks on him—they feel unfamiliar and hideous each time they fall into his eyes—but Potter'd insisted his natural hair was too recognisable. It's not his bloody fault the Malfoy men have had pale blond hair for generations.

Suková just watches him, and that makes Draco more anxious. "Can you not?" he snaps, and she just shrugs again.

"You're an odd one, Constable Malfoy," Suková says. "You and Inspector Potter both." She hesitates, then says, "A word of advice, though, perhaps? The way you look at each other is a bit, how do you put it?" She snaps her fingers. "Intense? You act as if you dislike each other, but I know the expression I saw on your faces last night. Not that I blame you. Inspector Potter's quite the attractive man, and should I be in your position, I'd be most tempted myself. Terrible idea or not."

Draco just looks at her, not certain if he should hex her for daring to admit that or for making such ridiculous assumptions. Even if they are bloody true.

Suková sighs. "Look. I understand, I do. When I was starting my career, I had an affair with a superior officer. It left me heartbroken and nearly destroyed my career in the process. I had to transfer departments, and I still hear rumours that I'm only where I am now because of the man I fucked." She snorts. "Rather the opposite, really."

Draco feels his face heat. 'I don't know what you're--"

"Oh, but I think you do." Suková rests her elbows on the tiny table between them. "I don't care what the two of you are doing, but I speak from experience when I advise you to be careful. Relationships like that, between ranks?" She gives him a rueful look. "They never go well, and the only person in trouble is the one with the lesser status. Sometimes it takes years to work past it. Please don't make my mistake. You're a good Auror, and you have so much to lose. You just can't see it right now."

For a moment, Draco thinks about denying it. It'd be easy, and he's unhappy that other people are seeing him and Potter in ways they'd both thought they'd kept hidden away. Foolish of them,
perhaps. Still, Suková's an Auror, and that in itself is a nerve-wracking fact. "We don't want anything from each other." He feels awkward. "Permanent, I mean."

"And if that changes?"

"It won't." Of that Draco's certain. He likes fucking Potter; Potter likes fucking him. That's the extent of it; it's all Draco wants.

Her smile is sweet, but sharp. "Trust me. You want more than you think."

With that Suková turns back to her paper, and the knives in Draco's chest withdraw just a little. His head is still ringing with the shock that now two people know about them, not just Blaise who's still not speaking to him, but also an Auror liaison they don't know can be trusted. Honestly, Draco wonders if anyone can be trusted with this. He doesn't trust himself anymore.

He leans back in his chair, uncertain of what to do.

A voice crackles over the communications charm in his ear, speaking in quick Czech.

Suková's paper drops. She taps the mobile next to her cup, activating the speaking element of her charm. "They've had a sighting," she says just as Draco's wand starts tapping against his holster. He holds it still as he jumps up. "Down Rybná, coming this way." She grabs her mobile, leaving her paper on the table.

"I have him," Blaise says over the charm. "He's with someone else. Shorter, a bit rougher. Looks like a match to Nicola's description of the other assailant, at least to me."

The charm buzzes again, static breaking through Potter's voice. "Follow but with extreme caution, Zabini. Malfoy and Hanka are closest. They'll take point with you and Rohlicek. Watch yourselves, people. We don't want them spooked until we have them surrounded."

Draco's already on the move towards Rybná, his wand in his hand, hilt tucked up in the sleeve of his jumper. Suková's behind him, on his heels, as they make their way through the Muggles. "Careful," she says to him. "I'd rather not Obliviate the entirety of Old Town if we can help it."

"I think Dolohov's more the wild card than me," Draco points out. Potter and Pansy are heading down the street towards them, trying to sidestep a group of British schoolchildren--judging by the nationality of their football-sloganed hoodies and the particular slouch of their shoulders--who are wandering aimlessly along the cobblestones. Draco's fingers slip into his pocket, brushing the side of his mobile. "Where are you, Blaise?"

There's silence over the charm, then Potter snaps, "Zabini. Answer."

Draco picks up his pace, nearly running now around the corner of Rybná, his eyes searching out Blaise's tall frame above the crowd. His fingers are tight on the hilt of his wand; he's not even bothering to hide it now. Suková's right beside him, her wand out as well.

"He just went into an alley," Blaise says, voice low. "Sorry, but his friend was a few feet away."

The throng along the pavement parts for the briefest second, and Draco catches a glimpse of Blaise and Rohlicek. Blaise's head bends towards Rohlicek's; he says something that Draco can't make out. He looks back towards Draco, and their eyes meet. Blaise nods, and then he's around the corner into the alley, like a complete, bloody idiot, and Draco swears, running faster, leaving Suková in his wake.

Rohlicek shouts at him, but Draco doesn't care. He skids into the alley, blinking as his eyes adjust
to the shadows. Blaise is in front of him. He doesn't even look when Draco steps up beside him; he just holds up his hand. "They're both back there," he murmurs, nodding towards the skips along the back of the alley. Clothing's hung on lines that stretch between the buildings a story or two up, dark trousers and brightly coloured skirts, crisp white sheets that billow softly in the faint breeze.

"Risk assessment," Draco says quietly. He looks around. "Only one entrance, unless you count those two doors to shops."

"Probably locked from the inside." Blaise takes another step forward. "Not that it'd stop an Alohomora. Or a Bombarda."

There's a movement in a shadow behind one of the skips. Draco tightens his fingers on his wand. "I'm not sensing any spell interference."

"But you wouldn't," a voice says from behind Draco, in posh tones underscored with just a tinge of Russian. Blaise and Draco turn together; Dolohov's there, behind them, in a neatly cut Muggle suit, his dark beard trimmed, hair shorn shorter than it'd been on the CCTV footage. "Since there's nothing here but mice." He smiles at them, a sharp, fierce baring of teeth. "And the occasional serpent to feed of them, I'm afraid."

Draco throws up a Protego before Dolohov's first strike can hit. "You fucking twat," he bites out, a sweep of his wand sending a Diffindo towards Dolohov. "You might as well give up--"

"Oh, I think not." Dolohov circles them. Another sweep of his wand sends Draco flying across the alley. He blocks Blaise's Killing Curse easily. "But I'm afraid you've annoyed me now. Luka?"

Before Draco can react, Dolohov's companion bursts through the shadows, faster than Draco's ever been. There's a gurgle beside Draco; it takes him a moment to realise Blaise has been hit, that he's swaying on his feet, blood spilling from his throat. Luka's grinning at Draco, a dripping garotte in his hand.

"I think you've other things to do now, young Malfoy," Dolohov says, in an almost friendly tone, and it startles Draco that Dolohov can see past his glamour. "Wouldn't suggest you chase after me any longer. I'll always be a step ahead."

Draco catches Blaise before he falls. "I will gut you," he bites out. "I will gut you and I will use your entrails to strangle your pathetic excuse for a--"

"We'll see, won't we?" Dolohov smirks down at him, just as Suková and Rohlicek run up. "À bientôt, my little dragon." He's gone in a swirl of black smoke before Rohlicek's Incarcerous hits him. Luka disappearing as well with a vicious sneer and a pop that echoes through the dark alley.

Draco sinks to his knees, Blaise in his arms. "You'll be fine," he says, his palm pressed against the cut on Blaise's throat. Blood bubbles through his fingers. "You'll be fine. I promise. You'll be fine." He holds Blaise close, rocking Blaise up against him. "I'm not going to let you go. Don't you dare, Blaise Augustus Zabini. If you leave me, I'll hunt you down wherever your fucking shade goes--" Blaise's hand settles over Draco's. He looks up at him, eyes wide. He tries to speak, but can't..

Then Potter's there, beside him, along with Pansy who shrieks and has to be held back by Suková. "Shit," Potter says, squatting down, his wand dangling from his hand. He bites his lip, and then looks at Draco. His glamour's fading, fast. His ginger hair fades into dark, and the scar on his forehead's starting to show through, a faint slash across his golden brown skin. "Do you trust
Draco hesitates, then nods, quick and sharp. He can hear Pansy behind him, saying something, but he can't make it out. All his focus is on Blaise and Potter.

Potter pulls Draco's fingers away from Blaise's throat. A spew of blood comes out, hitting Potter's jumper, spattering over Draco's jeans. Potter's wand is at the wound, and he's singing something softly, beneath his breath. The skin knits up, but barely. Blood still seeps from the site, but it's slower. Blaise's eyelids flutter closed, and Draco draws in a sharp breath.

"It's okay," Potter says. "He's in bad shape, but I'm going to put him in a stasis charm, all right? Then we'll Apparate him to St Mungo's, but I'm going to need your help. I can't do it alone." He's looking at Draco, both of them kneeling on the filthy alleyway, Blaise's blood streaked across their skin. "You can do that, yeah?"

"He knew me," Draco says, his voice flat. "Dolohov. He saw past my glamour." Potter stills. "He couldn't."

"He called me Malfoy, after...." The words catch in Draco's throat. He looks down at Blaise's greying face. He feels numb, almost as if he's out of his body. This is shock, he recognises. He hasn't felt it since the war ended. It'd been an almost daily experience from the time the Dark Lord took over the Manor though, and Draco hates how familiar the sensation is. He's almost afraid that the Dark Lord's hand will settle on his shoulder. When one of the Czech Aurors shifts, his boot scraping the cobblestones of the alley, Draco flinches.

Potter's hand brushes Draco's. "You all right?"

Draco swallows. "Yeah."

"Good." Potter casts the stasis spell, and Blaise stills beneath Draco's hands, his body cooling almost instantly. Potter catches Draco's terrified look. "He's fine. Look. The blood's slowing down, yeah? His whole body's just moving infinitely slower than ours." Potter glances back up at Suková. "Can you get Parkinson to St Mungo's in London?"

It's only then that Draco notices Pansy, almost collapsed against Suková's side, cheeks pale and tear-streaked. "I'm all right," she says, but it's obvious she's not. She can't stop looking at Blaise's motionless body.

Suková's arm tightens around Pansy's waist. "We've got you, miláčku." She looks over at Potter. "We'll find you there."

Potter slips his hands beneath Blaise's body. "Ready?" he asks Draco. Draco doesn't think he can be, but he mimics Potter's movements. Together they stand, Blaise cradled between them, heavy in their arms. Potter's gaze holds Draco's. "You can do this. We're going to Apparate to Casualty, yeah? St Mungo's. London. You've got that?"

Draco nods again. He does, he thinks. Everything feels removed. Blank. His throat is tight and raw; he can barely breathe. He watches Potter's mouth move as he counts off.

"One. Two. Three--"

The swirl of darkness takes him.

It's almost a relief.
Harry's slouched in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs that line the corridor outside the St Mungo's Auror ward when Hermione takes the seat beside him. He rubs his stubbled face and tries to sit up; his back protests. "Hey."

Hermione hands over a file jacket, the front covered with inky black stamps from the Department of Mysteries warning of dire consequences if any unauthorised individual should open the file. Harry looks askance at them. "Don't worry about those," Hermione says. "I took the curses off already. How long have you been sitting here?"

"They brought him out of theatre just after midnight." Harry shifts again. He's changed his bloodstained clothes for a pair of green scrubs the casualty mediwitch had offered him. "What time is it now?"

"Nearly eleven." Hermione glances towards the open door of the ward. Zabini's the only patient in there right now; they can hear the quiet beeps and rumbles of the monitoring charms. "Where are the others?"

"I made them go get food. Mostly to keep them from hanging over Zabini's bed." Harry flips open the file jacket. Luka Abadzhiev's face glowers up at him. "This is everything you have?"

Hermione nods. "And it wasn't me who passed it over, if anyone asks. We've been studying the Abadzhievs for a while now. This one's the only Luka I had cross-referenced with Dolohov's known associates. Is he the one?"

"Yeah." Harry closes the file. He'll look at it later. "That's him."

They sit silently for a moment before Hermione bumps her knuckles against the back of his hand. "You allright?"

"I will be." Harry doesn't know how to explain what it feels like to see one of your team bleeding out in front of you. It'd been his fault, he thinks. He ought to have just Apparated there, the Muggles be damned. He could have done something--anything--to stop it.

Hermione just gives him an even look. "You did what you could." "You know I hate it when you poke around in my mind," Harry says.

"Didn't have to." Hermione crosses one leg over the other. She's dressed casually, in jeans that highlight the length of her legs and a loose tunic top printed in an orange, blue and white floral pattern that looks fantastic against her dark skin. It's her Sunday marketing outfit, which means she'd gone by the office as soon as she'd received his owl asking for her help. "It's written across your bloody face, Harry."

He sighs and rubs at his face again. He's exhausted; he hasn't slept at all. The on-duty Healer had given Malfoy and Parkinson a quaff of calming potion after Zabini'd been installed in the ward, but Harry'd refused. It was his responsibility to be alert if anything happened. He'd be the one at Olivia Zabini's doorstep, after all.

So far it hasn't come to that. He assumes someone's told her about Zabini, once he'd reported it to Gawain when Zabini'd come out of theatre. There are protocols in place for notifying family, after all.

"How is he?" Hermione asks. Her hair's a loose, dark halo around her head today. Harry likes it like that, when her curls are going every direction. It reminds him of their first few years at school,
when things had been happy, and the two of them found themselves discovering an entirely new world of magic, their delight in the quotidian details of the wizarding world met with perplexed amusement on Ron's end.

Harry pulls his glasses off and rubs at one of the lenses with the edge of his scrub top. A few specks of Zabini's blood are still flecked across the bottom. "They're still waiting to make sure he's stabilised. The garotte was cursed, so it took a while to break that. Every time they'd close him up, the blood would start seeping again. They're fairly certain they found the counter-curse, though, but he was under stasis so long that they're not certain if he'll wake up."

"That happens sometimes," Hermione says. "The cells can't resume their normal speed."

"Yeah." Harry slips his glasses back on. "They said I did the right thing, though."

Hermione slips her fingers through his and squeezes. "You did."

Harry looks over at her. "I know you don't approve of my team--"

"They're your team, Harold." Hermione rubs her thumb over Harry's knuckle. "I know how you feel about that sort of thing."

A mediwitch walks by with a tray of potions floating beside her. She nods at them but doesn't stop in Zabini's ward. Harry sighs. "Malfoy and Parkinson are a mess."

"Which means you need to make certain your head's in the game," Hermione says. "They need you more than ever--not just to lead them but to keep them from doing something idiotically stupid out of revenge." She sits up, her hand sliding away from Harry's. "You've just proven Dolohov didn't die seven years ago, Harry. We can get him now, and I promise you, I'll do everything I can to help from our department. But you can't fuck this up. None of you can."

Harry knows she's right. "We'll find him."

"I know you will, love." Hermione leans over the arms of their chairs and kisses his cheek. She smells like lavender today, crisp and clean. "Look at the file. It's everything I have right now, which isn't much, but I'll go through the hits wizard records first thing in the morning. If I find anything else, I'll bring it up to you. For now, cross-reference it against the Auror database and see what comes up, yeah?" She stands up.

"All right." Harry glances down at the file jacket in his hand. He shouldn't have it out in the open, that's for certain. With those forbidding stamps across the cover, this file's near the top of the classified pile. Hermione could get into serious trouble if they find out she's given it to him. "Tell Ron I owe him supper some night. The Cannons beat the Pride."

Hermione wrinkles her nose. "Trust me, I've heard. All bloody week." She ruffles Harry's hair. "Come by and see us when you can, yeah? I know you're worried about the case." Her gaze flicks towards the ward door. "And Zabini. But you do need to eat at some point. And give your mind a rest."

"I know."

Harry watches Hermione walk away, her low heels clicking against the tiled floor. He feels a bit guilty, really. She'd be furious with him if she knew what he's been doing with Malfoy, and she'd be right. He's making a terrible mistake. He just doesn't really care to stop.

With a sigh, he opens the file on Luka Abadzhiev and begins to read.
The tea in the St Mungo's tea-room is terrible. Weak and watered-down, it tastes as if someone just dunked a tea bag in it once or twice before pouring it into a cup with a dollop of milk.

Still, it's tea, and Draco's British enough to want a cuppa right now.

He sits down at a table with Pansy. Potter'd ordered them to go eat; neither of them wants to. Pansy has a tea of her own and a half-eaten pasty that she pushed towards him. He breaks off a bit of the crust and chews. It's dry and tasteless—or maybe it's just him. Draco's still worried, whatever the Healers may say. "He'll wake up," he says, more for his benefit than Pansy's. She hasn't really spoken to him since she'd arrived at St Mungo's, clutching Suková's arm.

Pansy stirs her mug of tea. "Yeah."

They're silent for a long moment. The tea-room's nearly empty; it's not quite time for lunch. Draco's glad of that. He feels ill, and he's achingly tired. The hour or two he'd managed to doze in one of the ward chairs had been needed, but not even a calming potion could keep him down for long. He sighs and takes another bit of the pasty crust, shredding it between his fingertips.

"Blaise told me," Pansy says out of nowhere, and Draco looks up at her. She won't meet his gaze. "About you and Potter."

Draco's heart flips. "Oh." He presses a pasty crumb into the table; it shatters into dust beneath his thumb. "When?"

"When we were on round together yesterday." Pansy takes a sip of tea and grimaces. "Before he switched to Rohlicek." She sets her mug down. "He was pretty naffed off."

She still isn't looking at Draco. "Pans," he says.

"Don't, please." Her voice is silkenly quiet. Draco doesn't like it when she's like this. He'd rather her rant and rage at him. Throw things even. At least he knows she'll get over that anger. This? He's not so certain.

Draco cups his mug between his palms. It's warm at least.

"When did you start fucking him?" Pansy asks. She brushes a limp lock of hair off her cheek. She still looks wan and worn out, but her anger is a vibrant chord within her.

"Which time?" Draco wants to laugh—not out of joy or amusement, but out of the sheer absurdity of it all. "Back in February when he fucked me in the training centre showers, or just before the team formed when I fucked him in the loo at the Thestral's Wing before taking the sergeant's exam?"

"Circe, Draco." Pansy looks at him then, and Draco wishes she hadn't. Not with that disdainful scowl that lets him know exactly how much she disapproves. "And you've kept on, even though he's your SIO now."

He doesn't know how to answer that, so he shrugs and glances away, towards the bored, green- haired cashier at the end of the cafeteria who's flipping through the latest copy of Witch Weekly.

Pansy just presses her lips together. She's worn off her lipstick hours ago; there's only the faintest rim of a faded red feathering around the edges of her mouth. "I don't know what to say. I don't know that there's anything I can say, Draco, for fuck's sake."
"It's nothing, Pans." Draco runs a hand through his hair. It's back to blond now, thank God. He'd let the lingering remnants of the glamour drop the instant his feet touched the floor of the casualty department. Merlin, he can't believe it hasn't even been twenty-four hours. It feels like he's lived a lifetime since then. He still doesn't know how Dolohov saw through his glamour. He can't even think about it, really, without getting upset. He's better than that. Or at least he'd thought he was.

"Nothing?" Pansy shakes her head. "Nothing, you say, and yet you kept it from me. For months. From Blaise too. You shagged Potter on a bloody mission, Draco--"

"Lower your voice." Draco looks around. It doesn't matter that there are only a couple of Healer trainees across the room and they look too tired to care about eavesdropping. Potter's name turns heads, and Draco doesn't want to end up on the frontpage of the Prophet, whatever protection Barnabas Cuffe might give Potter in the press.

The look Pansy gives him is scathing. "Right. Because God forbid anyone know. Shouldn't that have told you right there, Draco? If you're shagging someone your best friends can't know about--"

"I don't know every arsehole you bring home from the club--"

"Because they're bloody one-night-stands, you tit!" Pansy leans back in her chair, the back of her wrist pressed against her mouth. She breathes out. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter. "If I shagged someone more than once, you'd know it. If I were shagging our bloody guv, you'd know it. It's not fair to us, Draco. You can't do this to our team. You're either fucking Potter, or you're working with him. You can't do both. When you do, we get hurt." She looks away. "Blaise might not wake up--"

"That has nothing to do with me and Potter," Draco says sharply.

Pansy reaches for her mug. It trembles in her hand. "Really. You honestly think that? Explain to me then how someone who's brilliant at dueling, who's faster than either you or me with his wand in combat, was distracted enough that a bloody idiot could get a drop on him." Her eyes are bright and furious. "Answer that, Draco."

He can't. It's the same question that's been swirling around in his brain all night. He'd argued with Blaise; Blaise was now in a St Mungo's ward, a cursed wound only just closing up along his throat. It's his fault. He knows it. "I'm sorry," he says, and he can barely get the words out. "Pans..."

She's there then, crouched next to him, her arms around his waist. He buries his face against her neck, breathes in the musty, faintly floral scent of her unwashed hair. "You're an idiot, Draco," Pansy says, but her voice is gentler. He nods, and she pulls back. She brushes his hair back from his forehead. "You can't keep doing this. Not with him."

But I want to, he wants to say. I need to. I can't stop, not with Potter... Instead he exhales and looks away.

"He's our guv, Draco," Pansy says. "And we need this chance--all of us."

"I know," Draco says again. He's being a fool, he's certain of that. But he doesn't know if he can go back to the way things were. Potter's like the sun to him, warm and bright, pulling him into his orbit. Draco can't imagine how grim his life will be when Potter's turned away from him, when whatever they have here is done. He knows his friends are right, but Draco can't imagine not being near Potter, not seeing that slow, small smile when Potter's pleased, not feeling the prickle across his skin when Potter brushes past him. Draco needs Potter, needs Potter to need him, and
that thought is terrifying.

Pansy looks defeated. "I can't force you, Draco. I know that." She sighs and stands up, holding out her hand. "You'll figure things out eventually. I just hope it's before it all implodes on us."

Draco's fingers curl around hers; he lets her tug him to his feet. "It's not going to be like that, Pans."

"We'll see." With a flick of her wand, Pansy sends the tea mugs floating to the dish bins. Another swish and the crumbs disappear. "Do you think that counts as having eaten?" she asks.

Probably not in Potter's book, Draco thinks. He just shrugs, though. "Good enough." He doesn't want to eat; his stomach's too twisted up about all of this anyway.

They make their way back to the lifts. Neither of them speak as they go back down to the fourth floor, stepping out into a nearly silent corridor.

"I don't like this," Draco says. There should be more movement in a hospital. Pansy already has her wand out. "Dolohov wouldn't be stupid enough--" "He might."

They turn the corner onto the Aurors ward corridor. Potter's chair is empty. Draco and Pansy exchange a glance. Pansy nods with her chin towards Blaise's ward; Draco presses his finger to his lips. There are voices coming from just inside the door: Potter's familiar rumble and another, louder and a bit more irritated, that Draco thinks he recognises. He lowers his wand and pushes the door open.

Olivia Zabini turns towards him, an irate look on her face that smoothes away when she realises it's him. "Draco, love." She holds out a bare, dark brown arm, and Draco lets her pull him up against her. Her perfume is heady and musky-sweet. "I've been in Rio this week. What have they done to my boy?"

Potter looks horrible, Draco thinks. "Mrs Zabini, as I said, the Healers are doing everything they can--"

Olivia turns a sharp eye on Potter. Draco almost feels sorry for the bastard. "You. Out. I don't care for Gryffindors on my best of days, and at the moment, Inspector Potter, I find your platitudes particularly irritating."

Potter holds his hands up and leaves, with a frown and a pointed look at Draco. Pansy holds the door for him. Draco's surprised she doesn't let it hit Potter's heels. When he's gone, Olivia turns to both of them. "Tell me what happened. The complete truth, if you please. I've no patience for Auror double-speak today."

Pansy does, leaving out Draco and Blaise's fight, thank Circe. With a studied grace, Olivia moves over to the other side of Blaise's bed, looking down at his still-ashen face.

"A stasis spell, then." Olivia's fingertips brush over Blaise's brow. "However idiotic Potter might be, he did well in this case." Her dark hair is a gossamer cloud around her exquisite face. Her full, rosy-pink mouth purses. "This was Dolohov's doing?"

"Not that we're spreading that about," Draco says, "but yes. Or an associate of his, at least." Olivia nods, her gaze fixed on her son. "You'll find him."
"We'll try," Pansy says.

"You will," Olivia says, looking up at them both. "You'll find them both, and they'll pay. Promise me that, Draco Malfoy."

Draco hesitates. "I promise," he says after a moment.

It seems to satisfy Olivia. "Whatever I can do to help, I will." It's a promise Draco knows she means. Olivia has a multitude of powerful contacts she can make use of whenever she pleases, men and women who think of her fondly—or, much to their chagrin, owe her a favour. "You'll let me know if you come up against any immovable force, bureaucratic or otherwise."

Her offer's clear. It's not one Draco wants to present to Potter, not unless it's necessary. Olivia often works outside the confines of legality, a fact her son turns a blind eye to. Draco doesn't blame him. Olivia's formidable. "I'll keep you in the loop," he says finally.

"I expect nothing less," Olivia takes the chair beside Blaise's bedside, sitting in it like a queen in her throne. "Right now, however, I'd like to be alone with my son."

Pansy slips out of the room. Olivia makes her nervous, Draco knows.

Draco hangs back. "I'm so sorry," he says after a moment. "I ought to have been more…" He doesn't know what to say. He swallows past the tightness in his throat when he looks at Blaise, lying so still in the hospital bed. "It's my fault he's there." It should have been me. He rubs his thumb over his knuckle. "I'm sorry," he says again. There are no other words to express his grief and his guilt.

Olivia tilts her head in his direction, a quiet acknowledgement of Draco's culpability. She gives him no absolution; Draco didn't expect her to. He's not certain he wants it, even if it had been on offer. He needs to feel this responsibility, needs to hurt, to take it on, to be held liable. Pansy's right, he thinks. If it hadn't been for him, Blaise wouldn't have been angry, wouldn't have been distracted. He might have seen Luka before he attacked. He might have brought Dolohov down.

The might-have-beens are a crushing weight on Draco's heart.

"Draco," Olivia says before he reaches the door. Draco looks back at her. She's watching him, her expression enigmatic. "My son rang me yesterday morning. About you and Potter, actually."

"Oh." Draco studies his feet. There's still Blaise's blood on his shoes. He's in Healer's scrubs and he's sure the green's terrible on him.

Olivia doesn't say anything for a moment, then she sighs. "He's worried that you're being a fool." She picks up Blaise's hand, curling her long, dark fingers around his. Her nails are sharp and deep scarlet; three diamond rings sparkle on her hands.

"He mentioned." Draco feels small and young the way Olivia's looking at him. She's always left him anxious and tongue-tied, this beautiful woman who has no tolerance for idiots. Draco's certain she thinks him to be one.

"I can imagine." Olivia smiles faintly down at her son. "It comes from a good place, though. Blaise would rather you not get hurt. Or himself, to be honest, but one can't blame him for a smidgeon of self-interest."

Draco nods. He crosses his arms over his chest, his shoulders hunched. Olivia studies him. "I think he's wrong, though."
That surprises Draco. He looks up at her and blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"He's wrong to worry." Olivia raises a shoulder in a small shrug. "Don't get me wrong; I think it's entirely mad that you're sleeping with your superior. That never leads to joy, my dear, and I think it's short-sighted and potentially the most ill- advised action you've taken since the whole Dark Lord fiasco. Outside of becoming an Auror of course, but you all know how I feel about that." They do. Olivia had made her feelings on the subject perfectly clear when Blaise had first told her he was going into training. "But it's your decision, not anyone else's, and there's nothing that says you shouldn't enjoy a forbidden relationship. I certainly have from time to time. I can't understand the attraction, mind. Potter's ungodly patronising in the stupidest of ways, but what can you expect from a Gryffindor, particularly one of your age. No offence, of course."

"None taken." Draco's a bit on his back foot with this. "But thank you, I think."

"Blaise is hard-headed," Olivia says. "But he won't stay angry for long, you know that." "I know."

Olivia smooths a palm over Blaise's head. "Go do what you need to do to find Dolohov. I'll be with Blaise; I'm not going to leave him alone."

"Thank you," Draco says, and she nods, not looking at him. With one last glance towards Blaise's silent bed, Draco closes the door behind him. Pansy's standing beside Potter, attempting not to seem awkward. She's failing. They both are. Circe, Draco thinks. He doesn't know how he's going to tell Potter that Blaise, Pansy, a Czech Auror, and now Blaise's mother all know about them. It's going to bollocks everything up, and Draco knows it's his own damned fault. He doesn't care what Olivia says. Not entirely. His friends are right. He's been selfish; he's put his own desires ahead of what's best for the team. Not that Potter isn't at fault as well, but Blaise and Pansy are his friends, and he ought to have looked out for their welfare.

Not the pleasures of his cock.

"So that's Zabini's mum," Potter says. "She's a bit of intimidating."

"Olivia's not bad once you get used to her." Draco pushes his hair back from his forehead. He's tired and sad and wants nothing more than to climb into his bed and lie there the rest of the day, feeling sorry for himself and agonising over all the people who now know what a complete tit he's making of himself over Potter. Instead he glances over at the man himself. There's a file jacket stamped with the direst of curse warnings in his hand; if Potter were anyone else, Draco would wonder where he got a file that classified from, but only the Unspeakables use that restrictive of a curse stamp. Granger must have handed it over. "What do you want us to do, guv?" It's easier to call Potter that, to slide away from the familiarity that brings such guilt and into the formality of their working relationship. He can tell by the look on Potter's face that he notices. And that he doesn't like it.

Well good. Maybe Draco needs to be making some changes between them. Whether or not he wants to.

"Sleep first," Potter says. He hands the file jacket to Draco who takes it gingerly. Nothing starts smoking, and he doesn't break out in boils, thank Circe. Potter rolls his eyes. "It's clean, Malfoy. Completely unhexed. What I want both of you to do is to comb through the file. See what you make of it, what you find useful, what you think is rubbish. I want a report on my desk tomorrow morning."
Draco's fingers tighten around the file jacket. "What is it?"

"Something we don't have," Potters says. He looks between Draco and Pansy. "Whatever happens in that room, we'll deal with. All of us, together as a team, all right?" He waits for them both to nod. "In the meantime, we're going to do everything we can to find Dolohov and that bastard Luka. I don't care what we have to do to bring them in, but we're going to, because no one--and I mean no one touches a hair on my team's heads." His eyes glint fiercely behind his glasses. "Am I clear?"

"Crystal, guv," Pansy says. She sounds bored; it's her way of dealing with her grief publicly. Pansy's always been like that. She'll shout and scream until it's too personal, too private. Then she shuts down. Puts on her stoneface. It worries Draco.

"Right," Potter crosses his arms. "Then get out of here. We've found the knobhead once. We can do it again."

A wave of exhaustion rolls over Draco. He wants a shower, then a bed more than anything. Still, he glances at Pansy. "My place tonight? We can order in lo mein and look at this." He holds up the file jacket. She needs to be with him, he thinks. She needs a safe space to rant and rage and let the tears she's keeping so tightly at bay spill over.

He needs that too, if he's honest.

"Throw in a bottle of wine and I'm there," Pansy says. Maybe she's forgiven him, at least a little. She turns to Potter. "What about you?" She's polite, but there's an edge to her voice that makes it clear Potter's not really wanted.

Potter looks grim. "I'll have to speak to Gawain," he says. "It's protocol when an Auror goes down."

Draco wouldn't want to be in Potter's shoes. He's in for a bollocking, he suspects. This was a public incident, and, frankly, Draco wouldn't be surprised to see something in the Prophet about a disturbance in Prague. He lets the back of his hand brush Pansy's. She looks over at him, and, even though her blank expression doesn't change, she curls one finger around his.

Maybe things will be okay.

Potter walks them to the lifts. "I want you rested, and I want you read-up," he says as the doors slide open. He's in full Auror mode, curt and sharp, and Draco can almost see Potter's mind darting to their next steps. It's disconcerting and abrasive, and there's part of Draco that wants to get furious with Potter, to shout at him that they've just gone a man down, that he and Pansy are worried about their closest friend. Draco doesn't. He thinks, perhaps, that this is Potter's own way of grieving. Still, he looks away, irritated, when Potter says, "We need to be twice as ready next time, but we can't do that if we're tired."

He understands Olivia's annoyance at Potter's bloody platitudes.

"Yes, guv," Draco and Pansy echo in unison. Neither of them sound like they mean it.

The lift doors start to close after them, and Draco realises that he's waiting, perhaps subconsciously, for Potter to ask him to stay behind. But he's not going to ask this time, that much is clear.

Perhaps he won't ask ever again, and that thought bloody well stings.

The last thing Draco sees before the doors slide shut is Potter's solemn, angry face, turning away.
Merlin, but Draco doesn't know what the fuck he's going to do now.

***

Harry stands before Gawain's door, trying to gather his thoughts. The Ministry is near-silent tonight; only the night porter and a few skeleton staff are in this late on a Sunday evening. He'd made certain Zabini had been officially ruled stable before he came over, waiting down the corridor from the ward until the Healer came by to take Zabini off the more rigourous monitoring charms and doing his best to avoid interacting with Olivia Zabini. The one time she'd brushed past him on her way to the tea-room, she'd given him a withering glare that'd made Harry quite aware of how difficult she could make his life. He doesn't quite understand why she can't stand him--and she can't, she's made that clear--but every instinct he has is telling him not to engage with her, even to find a common ground. Olivia Zabini is a dangerous woman with a son who's gone down on his watch. Perhaps that, in and of itself, is enough to earn her antipathy.

He bites back a yawn. Before Harry left St Mungo's he'd tried taking a reviving potion one of the Healers pressed upon him, but his exhaustion's more than bone deep. Something inside of him feels numb. This isn't how he'd seen his first mission going, with Zabini nearly dead and some strange tension developing between Malfoy and Parkinson. What that mess is he doesn't know, and he thinks it best not to pry, at least not yet. Perhaps it's their grief over Zabini coming out. If it doesn't settle, he'll broach it. Until then, he'll let them sort themselves. Slytherins can be so damned tricky.

Squaring his shoulders and gathering his courage, Harry reaches a hand up to rap on the door, but he hears a sharp *Come in, Harry* before his knuckles even strike the wood.

Gawain's chair is turned away from Harry as Harry slips into the office, shutting the door behind him. Gawain looks out the window into the courtyard below; he doesn't bother to look back at Harry. His elbow is perched on the arm of his chair, and his hand is pressed to his mouth. He looks thoughtful and, perhaps, a bit perturbed. Never a good sign, in Harry's experience.

Harry clasps his hands awkwardly before the enormous mahogany desk and waits. His head's a whirl of fears and misgivings. He thinks of Draco, pale as he had left him, uncertain, Parkinson hollow-eyed and mute by his side. He thinks of Zabini’s mother and the watch she’s keeping by her son's bed. She'd been livid when the Healers tried to tell her she couldn't stay the night; Harry doesn't blame them. He wouldn't want Olivia Zabini peering over his shoulder at half-three in the morning either. But she's refused to leave Zabini’s side.

With a sigh, Gawain swivels in his chair. "Well, don't you look a fright." The Head Auror settles his wrists on his overflowing desk. His sleeves are rolled up and his Auror coat is hanging on a hook near the bookcases. He looks shrunken to Harry, diminished somehow. He doesn't motion for Harry to sit, and Harry doesn't presume.

"How is Zabini?" Gawain knows, of course, but he's gauging Harry's reactions.

"Better. They've stopped the bleeding with charms. He seems to be coming out of stasis now, but it was touch and go there for a while." Harry doesn't like to think how close to death Zabini had come. How close he might still be, if they're not lucky tonight.

"That's some stasis charm you've got," Gawain observes. "It probably saved his life."

Harry nods, looking down at his feet. He hasn't changed his blood-stained boots since Prague, and he's still in the ridiculous scrubs the Healer had given him. He needs to go home and take a hot bath with a bottle of whiskey, no glass needed. He doesn't know if he can wash or drink this away
but he can damned well try.

"They think it interacted with something either Dolohov or his associate, Abadzhiev, had cast, possibly on the garotte or during the fight. It might have killed him. Several things might still, actually." Harry runs a hand through his hair. "Zabini's lucky to be alive."

Gawain nods. "Let's hope that luck holds. They think the curse is inert?"

"For now," Harry says, an ache in the pit of his stomach about the seriousness of the situation. The Healers were almost ready to call it at one point. Harry was so glad he'd sent Malfoy and Parkinson home. That's not something he would have wanted them to see. Harry's still praying to every bloody deity he doesn't believe in that he won't have to show up on Malfoy's doorstep to tell them Zabini is gone. "And if he pulls through, we'll need to see if there's any spell damage. Or cognitive effect."

Gawain sighs. "This is a right sodding mess you've all made, I must say. I had to promise Barnabas Cuffe a feature on Wrightson's latest illegal potions bust to keep the disturbance in Prague out of the Prophet." Gawain scowls at a stack of paperwork. "Which means Wrightson's going to be bloody wretched to deal with for the next month. You know what a self-righteous twat he is when his name gets in the papers."

Harry nods, biting his lip. "I'm sorry, sir." He also knows how much Gawain loathes Cuffe and any sort of focus on his department in the wizarding press. It'll cost him a lot to make this gesture for Harry's team.

"And don't even get me started on the Czech force," Gawain says. "Do you know how hard it was to get your team over there in the first place? You alone, it would have been fine. Even Parkinson or Zabini. But with Malfoy?" Gawain sighs again. "They're furious about the whole thing. And I'm fairly certain I've used any and all favours I might have once had in those quarters, at least for a few more years."

"I'm sorry," Harry says again.

Gawain shakes his head. "What's done is done, lad. At least Suková spoke well of you all, even if she did think your team to be a bit green for that sort of mission."

"She's not wrong," Harry admits. Suková has a good eye, and he trusts her judgment. Still, there's no way to break a team in other than to throw them up against the impossible. Or so he hopes. He's not entirely certain his team's going to make it through this mishap. "We'll be better next time." He looks at Gawain. "If Zabini is alright. And if you'll allow us to continue."

Gawain leans back in his chair and studies Harry. "You have a good Auror severely injured from your first mission, Harry. And you still might lose him to spell damage. That's not reflecting well on your leadership." He steeps his fingers. "Suková was also concerned that there might be tension between you and Malfoy."

Harry frowns at that. "Sir?"

"All I know is what was mentioned in her report." Gawain drops his hands. "It was an aside in a very complementary paragraph on Malfoy's skill. But it does concern me. If you can't work with your team--"

"I can," Harry says fiercely. "We'll pull through this, sir. I want Zabini back—we'll get him back as soon as the Healers clear him, and I'm certain Malfoy and Parkinson would agree." Harry refuses to admit the possibility of any alternative.
Gawain's silent for a moment, and then he nods. "You'll have them looking into the Abadzhiev files?"

Harry doesn't bother to wonder how Gawain knows. Hermione's always been a bit vague about how much influence the Department of Mysteries has on other Ministry officials, but Harry expects it runs fairly deep. And if Gawain knows, then Hermione's gift of the Abadzhiev file wasn't all that risky. There's something the Unspeakables want them to do with it. That should annoy Harry, to be used as their pawn, but right now he doesn't give a fuck. He just wants Dolohov and Abadzhiev brought in, alive or not. He shoves his hands in the shallow pockets of the scrub trousers. "We've got a lead from the Unspeakables, and we'll be following everything we can document from the Czech side once they release the records."

"See that you do. I want regular updates." Gawain pauses, and his face softens. "Also on Zabini's status. He's a damn fine Auror, and it's a mercy he's a fighter."

Something inside of Harry crumbles. This really happened. Zabini was harmed on his watch and is fighting for his life. Harry can't bear that thought. This is his fault. He should have been in the alley; he should have done a better risk assessment; he should have run faster, should have Apparated, whatever the fucking Statute of Secrecy might say. Maybe then Zabini would be on his feet in the incident room, laughing at some idiot joke Malfoy's made as he unwraps a fresh sugar quill. It's almost unthinkable that he's not, and Harry can't imagine how Zabini's friends must feel. Harry's only worked closely with him a few weeks, and he can't stomach the thought of walking in tomorrow without Zabini there, his feet propped up on Malfoy's desk. Harry almost offers Gawain his command, but he doesn't know how it would help now, and he needs to be strong and try to mend what he can. By bringing Dolohov to justice.

"You can go," Gawain eyes him. "You need rest." As Harry turns, Gawain says, "Oh, and Harry." Harry looks back over his shoulder.

"Well done." Gawain's face is inscrutable. "If nothing else, you found the damned bastard." Harry nods. This doesn't feel like progress. It feels like the utmost failure.

The shadowed silence of Auror headquarters nearly overwhelms him as he lets himself out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic! Next chapter will be up between April 21-22!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which discoveries are made, hospitals are visited, and Kreacher brings more whisky.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was supposed to be quite a bit shorter than the last one, but, er...well. It turned out a wee bit longer. Sorry! But not! Except maybe, because, hey, babes, this last half's going to be a wild ride... /O/

Huge thanks again to my betas, noeon and sassy_cisa, and special kudos this week to Cissa for beta'ing this while she was packing for a trip. <3 <3 <3

Hold on to your hats, loves. Let's get this baby fired up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Is this all of it?" Draco squats beside a stack of six plain white cardboard boxes, all of them neatly labelled with the Dolohov case number and the room of Anichka Dolohova's house the contents were taken from. Each one has been sealed with a security charm for transit; as best he can tell none of them show any signs of tampering.

"Everything that hasn't been put aside for the lab." Arcturus Lipman, the sergeant in charge of the evidence room, flips through his sheaf of parchments. His thick head of bushy white hair falls over his ruddy forehead as he stops on one page, eyes scanning down it. He pushes up his black glasses. "Looks like Parkinson's supposed to come down for those later today."

Draco stands up. He hasn't really seen much of Pansy, not since she'd been over at his flat on Sunday night, going over the Abadzhiev file. They'd drunk nearly two bottles of wine, spilling half a glass over the file, which Draco had just managed to rescue, only the edges getting soaked-- thank Circe it was a pinot grigio--then a pissed Pansy'd shouted at him whilst angry-crying for a good fifteen minutes before falling asleep on the sofa in his sitting room. He'd tucked a blanket around her before going to lie in his own bed. He hadn't slept, not much. Everyday he'd managed to doze off, he'd dream of Blaise falling to the cobblestones of a Prague alley, Draco unable to reach him in time.

It hadn't been a good night.

He'd left Pansy sleeping in the morning to go run. When he'd returned, sweaty and breathless, his mind still swirling with worries about Blaise, the sofa had been empty, the cashmere blanket folded along one arm. There'd been a pot of coffee still warming on his counter, along with a plate of buttered toast and a scrawled note that'd just read Eat this, you fucker, xoxoxo, P. Even when she's furious with him, she still worries about him taking care of himself.

In the past thirty-nine hours, Draco's seen Pansy once since, for a few brief minutes in the incident
room Monday morning before Potter’d sent her back to her lab. The look of relief on her face had made his heart twist. She still blames him for Blaise; he knows that full well.

" Doesn’t seem like much for such a big house," Draco says. He sneezes and brushes bits of dust off his trousers; the evidence room floor needs a good sweeping, but Arcturus isn’t likely to do it. Draco likes him, rather a lot to be honest, and mostly because Arcturus refuses to do anything that isn’t directly delineated in his job description. It drives the other Aurors round the bloody twist, but Draco can respect the man’s need to draw a damned line somewhere. Particularly given the amount of wheedling thrown at him on a daily basis. Wrightson in particular is known for expecting Arcturus to do the majority of the evidence sorting and cataloging on his case files, and arguing that point with Arcturus was how Draco’d spent half his time on Wrightson's team. Or pretending to, at least. Frankly he’d got bored with it after the second or third time Wrightson had sent him down here. It was just easier to do the work himself, and let Arcturus brew him a cuppa in the meantime. Besides, Arcturus keeps a decent stash of ginger nuts and lemon drizzle biscuits in his desk drawer.

"It’s what the Czechs sent over," Shah says from the other side of the stack. He’s propped against a metal shelving unit that’s half-filled with boxes from other cases, a cup of coffee in one hand. "That Suková lass signed the paperwork herself."

"She did," Arcturus agrees. He hands the sheaf of parchments to Draco along with a quill. "Speaking of signing."

Draco scrawls his name. He hands the quill and papers back. "Has Potter seen Suková’s report?"

Arcturus taps his wand against the parchments; a copy appears in mid-air with Draco's signature a dark scribble across the bottom. "Don't know yet. Viola's got it now up in the Head Auror's office." The copy folds itself into a tight rectangle and flits over to Draco, who tucks it into his pocket. With another flick of Arcturus's wand, the original sheaf flies across the room to file itself in an ancient, moulding file cabinet. Draco wonders if he could coax one of the Manor elves to come over on a weekend and give the whole room a good scrubbing. Not likely, though. His father would have a fit, and the elves are still too terrified of Lucius to do anything for Draco that he might dislike. "All yours," Arcturus says. "Don't lose any of it or the WPS'll have my sodding head later."

"Not to mention Professional Standards, yeah?" Shah pushes himself off the shelves and grabs the top three boxes. His coffee cup floats along beside his shoulder. "Wouldn't want what happened to Cassius Grant."

They all flinch. Grant had misplaced a whole box of evidence in an investigation against Bourgin of Bourgin and Burkes a few years back. Everyone knew it was just that Grant was getting too old for the job and his memory was sliding, but it hadn't mattered to Professional Standards who'd accused him of being on the take. They’d had him in Azkaban for three months before they’d released him. He hadn’t been the same since.

Draco stoops and picks up the last three boxes. They're charmed to be extremely light. "I'm fairly certain Potter wouldn't stand for that."

"Yeah, well, you'd hope. " Shah follows him out of the evidence room. "But I heard Robards gave him a right bollocking over the whole Zabini incident--"

"It wasn't an incident," Draco says with a sideways look at Shah. His shoulders tighten, the way they have every time someone mentions Blaise to him. He'd spent two hours at hospital last night with Olivia, watching Blaise's bedside. She'd made him go home at last, telling him he'd be better off finding the shits who'd hurt Blaise than sitting beside him, flagellating himself. He'd gone
home, but once again he hadn't slept, choosing instead to get up, dress and come back into the office to spend half the night pouring over the Dolohov and Abadzhiev files, trying to find something, anything, that might be a lead to where the bastards had disappeared. "He was harmed in the line of duty--" "The whole force knows that, mate." Shah shifts his boxes to his hip. His coffee cup bobs along between them. "I wasn't saying anything different. But Viola says Robards is naffed off, yeah? Something about the Czech Head Auror being furious you lot fucked up in the middle of the city centre."

Draco tries to tamp down his irritation. He's tired of the rumours; he's been hearing whispers since he'd walked back into the office on Monday morning. "For fuck's sake, it was a bloody alleyway. No one was around--" He breaks off in a huff. He knows the Czech Aurors are just trying to cover their arses, and to be honest, he doesn't blame them.

Shah shrugs. "Whatever."

Draco turns the corner a bit too sharply. He slams into another body; two of his boxes go flying across the corridor, landing with a loud thump on the nubbly carpet. Shah's coffee draws up short, only sloshing a bit over its rim. If a white pottery coffee cup can possibly look offended, it does.

"Watch yourself," Althea Whittaker snaps, and Draco curses his luck. Althea's been out in the field for the past week or so with Wrightson, tracking down an illegal potions ring; Draco hasn't had to worry about Her Royal Bitchiness for days.

"Sorry, Althea," Draco says tightly, summoning the other boxes back with a flick of his wand. He waits for her to abrade him for being a fool, an idiot, a bastard, or a clumsy oaf-cum-Death Eater, not in any particular order.

To his surprise, Althea just shifts from one foot to the other, looking supremely uncomfortable. Her dark hair's braided down her back, and she's in Muggle clothes rather than her uniform. Draco's never seen Althea dressed down like this, long and leggy in jeans and a pale yellow shirt, the first few buttons undone to expose the pale, nearly flat plane of her chest. She looks almost approachable for once. "It's fine," she says after a moment. "Just get the hell out of my way."

Draco steps aside, the boxes back in his arms. He exchanges a glance with Shah, who just shrugs again at him, his back against the wall just out of Althea's firing range. His coffee cup hovers at his shoulder, handle tucked away.

Althea brushes past Draco, then hesitates. They're both of a height, and Althea is eye-to-eye with him when she looks over. "I'm sorry about Zabini," she says, and Draco's taken aback a bit. Althea bristles at his expression. "Look, I may think you're a fucking, untrustworthy twat who oughtn't be here, but he's your friend and your teammate, and no one should have to watch someone on their team go down." Her jaw tightens just a bit, and Draco remembers that she lost her partner a year or two ago on a mission to take down a forger of magical artefacts. Forney had been hit by a stray Diffindo the suspect had been trying to cast on a door hinge and had bled out in the middle of an Ipswich shopping centre.

"Thanks," Draco says, but she's already on her way, disappearing around the corner he and Shah had just come from.

"Weird," Shah says. "She didn't even wish it'd been you on the wrong end of the garrote."

Draco just looks after Althea, frowning. "You don't think someone got her with an Affable Jinx, do you?"
"Fuck if we'd be so lucky, mate." Shah starts off down the hall again. "Maybe Maxie's been a good influence on her? He's a bit of a twat, but not a horribly bad sort. Or it's Wrightson, yeah? You were with him before Potter."


Draco feels his face heat. "Wrightson's not hugely fond of me." He stops outside of the incident room. "I mean, he doesn't hate me, but I wasn't one of his favourites."

"Let's be real, yeah?" Shah nudges the door open with his foot. "Only person who's Wrightson's favourite is Wrightson."

Draco can't really argue with that.

The incident room's empty. Pans is still in the lab, and Potter's fuck only knows where. He and Draco have been side-stepping each other as well for the past day, primarily because Draco hasn't wanted to talk. Potter's let him be, for the most part. There'd been the one attempt on Monday near teatime when Potter'd come out of his office, leaned on his door jamb, cleared his throat, and asked Draco if there was anything he needed to discuss. Draco had just looked up at him and calmly said no. Potter hadn't pushed, thank Circe. He hadn't been happy, that much had been clear, but he'd just gone back into his office and left Draco alone. Even this morning, Potter'd just told Draco to go collect the Prague evidence when he had a chance, and then he'd walked out of the incident room. Draco hasn't seen him since.

He tells himself he's fine with that. He needs space from Potter, a bit of time to recuperate.

Shah drops his boxes on one of the desks. Blaise's, to be precise, and Draco feels a spike of pain jolt through him. He doesn't like looking over there and seeing Blaise's chair empty, his files stacked neatly, two sugar quills on top, waiting for him to get back.

Draco looks away. He sets his stack on his desk and upwards the security and tracking charms on the boxes, one by one. They're mostly filled with papers, along with a few objects d'art that Draco doesn't have to wonder why Suková included. The essence of Dark magic just rolls off them in waves. He closes the lid to that particular box and pushes it away. Time to deal with that later. He's not in the mood to sort through Dark charms. Not yet at least.

Shah already has half his boxes unpacked when Draco turns around. "What are you doing?" Draco asks, frowning. "I'm going through those first--"

"And I'll be sorting through this lot, won't I?" Shah sits down in Blaise's chair; Draco bites back his protest. The coffee cup's settled on Blaise's blotter, and Shah looks up at Draco. "Too much for you all at once, and I've nowt pressing today, yeah? So bag it, Malfoy, and let me help. I'd be a shit mate if I didn't."

There's no sense in arguing, Draco realises, so he nods and swallows past the tightness in his throat. "Thanks," he says. It's been years since he's started a new friendship. Outside of Bertie, and perhaps Potter--and if he's honest both of those relationships whatever they might be are not the norm for him--everyone he's close to he's been friends with since childhood. This is a new feeling for him, uncertain and strange. He isn't entirely convinced he likes it.

Shah turns back to his pile of papers, and Draco takes a deep breath, picking up the next of his boxes and setting it down in front of his chair. At least this feels like something productive to do.
They've been sorting through the piles for an hour when there's a knock on the incident room's door jamb. Bertie peers in, one of his bushy white eyebrows rising. "Didn't expect to see you here, Shah."

"Nowt better to do, so I thought I'd come down and help." Shah sets aside the notebook he's been flipping through. "Would love to know why the fuck Suková thought we'd be interested in some Czech gran's recepsthough."

"Hand it here," Draco says with a frown, and, with a flick of his wand, Shah sends it flying across the room to Draco. He catches it just before it zips past him, pages ruffling. It's old and a bit battered, and it falls limp in Draco's hand. He turns to the front. "It's Anichka Dolohova's," he says. "Maybe she thought there'd be some connection to Richard Thomas. So far it's about the most interesting thing I've seen."

"That bad?" Bertie asks.

"Boring as all hell. I'm not certain what we're expected to find in this shite. I hope Pans is having better luck." Draco lays the notebook down in the centre of his desk in the pile to look at later before glancing over at Bertie. "Coming to check in on me?"

Bertie gives him a half-smile as he sits on the edge of Pansy's desk. "Thought I'd see how you were doing. It's hard to have someone in hospital."

"Yeah." Draco sinks into his chair.

"How is Blaise, lad?" The look Bertie gives him is kind, and a tight pain fills Draco's chest.

Draco doesn't answer for a moment, then he sighs. "Still hasn't really woken up." He chews on his bottom lip. "His mother said he's come close. Made a few noises, like he's feeling something unpleasant, even though the Healers say that the potions he's on won't let him sense any pain."

"Sometimes they don't know a damned thing," Bertie says. He leans forward, elbows resting on his knees. "What's the prognosis?"

"Better." Draco rubs his thumb along the edge of his desk. "His body's healing at least." Bertie nods.

"And you?"

Draco picks at a splinter at the desk corner. It breaks off and falls onto the floor. "I'm fine." Shah snorts at that, and Bertie glances over at him. "You disagree?"

"He's dead mardy," Shah says, and he points a finger at Draco. "Don't you be saying otherwise, mate. I know you. You ain't been throwing a strop or scriking today, but your head's been running about on itself all morning, far as I can see, and that's well bad, innit?"

Draco doesn't know how to argue back, so he just raises a shoulder in defeat.

"Come on, lad," Bertie says gently. "Blaise'll be fine."

"Will he though?" Draco looks up at that, a spike of anger going through him. "Everyone keeps saying that, but he might not be. And it's my fault--" He looks away, breathing out.

"Don't be bloody daft," Shah says, and Bertie nods.

"Our Mancunian friend here has a point," Bertie says. "You're not to blame for Abadzhiev's
actions."

Shah claps his hands. "Agreed. Besides, what you lot did is bloody brill, innit? Proving Dolohov's alive? Fucking Bates is naffed as hell about that, let me tell you." Shah sounds quite pleased with this fact, and Draco can't help but smile a little. Shah's dislike of Bates is legendary. "McKenna's being decent, though."

Bertie looks over at Draco. "You oughtn't be beating yourself up like this."

Draco wishes he could tell them both the whole story, that they could see exactly how much of a prick he truly is. He's certain if they knew about him and Potter, if they'd any idea that Blaise went down because he was angry with Draco, because he was distracted by what a fool Draco was being... well. They wouldn't be so quick to soothe him, now would they?

He looks down at the papers spread across his desk. "It's hard," he says after a moment. He can't say that his guilt is a tight ball in the pit of his stomach, twisting and churning even now. He can't tell them that his best friend can't be near him right now, that she'd shouted at him on Sunday night, half-pissed on wine, tears streaming down her face, telling him that this was his fault, that his prick had got them all in this mess, that she didn't know if she could forgive him. It'd been a relief when she'd curled into the corner of the sofa and fallen asleep, honestly.

Pansy'll forgive him at some point. Draco knows that. He knows that her anger is based in her fear, that she's terrified of losing Blaise, and Draco knows there's a part of Pansy that's always been a bit in love with Blaise, all these years, whether or not she'll admit it, and she's frightened and hurting, and Pansy's way of dealing with that has always been to lash out.

But he also doesn't think she's entirely wrong.

And so he's been keeping his distance from Potter, pushing him away, refusing to even look at him when they're in the room together. It's been awful. He hates it. He'd rather be lying against Potter right now, feeling Potter's fingers smooth his hair back, hearing Potter tell him he's not to blame.

Perhaps this is his penance, of sorts.

"Lad," Bertie says, his voice warm and careful, and Draco blinks back wetness. Damn it.

He takes a deep breath and meets Bertie's gaze. "I'm fine," he says again, his voice only slightly wobbling. It's the best he can do, but he won't let himself fall apart. Not here. Not like this. He'll wait until he has a bottle nearby, and he can ease into the analgesic of alcohol.

Bertie just looks at him, his eyes searching Draco's face, and then he sighs and stands. "You know where to find me," he says.

Draco nods.

Bertie's hand settles on Draco's shoulder. He squeezes gently. "Let me know if there's anything I can do with this mess," he says, gesturing towards the boxes. He glances over at Shah. "I suppose you've enough eyes on them already."

"Probably." Draco feels the tension in him start to ebb away, replaced with a deep tiredness. "But if Potter feels otherwise, I'll let you know."

"Good lad." Bertie nods at Shah and then he's gone.

Draco rubs his hands over his face. When he drops them, Shah's watching him, a frown between
"You're a liar, Draco Malfoy," Shah says. "Fine, my arse."

"There's nothing to say." Draco meets Shah's gaze.

"Bollocks," Shah says, but he reaches for another stack of papers.

Draco turns back to his own box. If nothing else, he can lose himself in this for a few more hours. It's better than being left alone with his thoughts; that's never a good thing.

He shuffles through loose parchment, cursing the entire bloody Dolohov family.

***

Pansy carefully blots at her forehead with a sleeve of her pale green lab coat, eyes fixed on fibres in the bath bubbling in her tempered glass cauldron. Whilst iron, pewter, or copper are more traditional, Pansy prefers less reactive cauldron substances for wetwork on organic materials. Other lab techs may use steel or special alloys, but Pansy loves being able to see the colour changes more clearly.

Shifting her safety glasses, she murmurs "Specialis Revelio" whilst rapping her knuckles on the lab bench. Nothing happens.

"Well, it's always worth a try," she says to herself. Nine times out of ten, that one won't work, but when it does, it saves an immense amount of time.

With a wave of her wand Pansy summons the magical chromatography apparatus and sets it gently in its hook over the bench and then up across the wall. The fume spell has been dissipating the gases, so she recasts it not to interfere with the analysis. In principle, she should be unaffected by the potion, but she puts on a Bubble-Head Charm just in case. It always makes her face itch, but she'd rather not end up with fume poisoning, ta never so.

She lets the analysis start and uses a transcribing spell to keep the results in her log. The fibers disintegrate and the shavings of metal melt; their components are augmented magically by the potion ingredients and split into component parts. There are no further curses, hexes, or jinxes, but there are some very odd colours coming up in the gases.

After half an hour, when the substance is near evaporated, she halts the fire under the cauldron and uncasts the Bubble-Head Charm.

Taking her log to the desk in the corner, she looks at the components and the labels her spell analysis had fixed to them.

The log shows a mixture of inorganic and organic compounds. Pansy can see the signature of *Datura stramonium* in rather large quantities, as well as some sort of unidentified compound that looks for all the world like the sodding mushroom data she's been gathering. She frowns at that, tapping one fingernail against the edge of her desk. Odd, but she's fairly certain of the results.

She'll need to run a spore test on the remaining fibres, and confirm the botanical variants by other means, but she's got more now than St. Mungo's had.

Going back over the notes, it makes so much more sense. The garrote that had so injured Blaise had been composed of metal wrapped in *Datura stramonium*, more commonly known as Devil's Snare, and saturated with another organic compound that may be fungal in nature if her hunch is correct. Blaise's bleeding reaction had likely been due to large amounts of the Devil's Snare entering his
bloodstream, and Pansy wonders about the delivery method. Perhaps there's both a
substrate and another soaking or impregnating potion that had helped to strengthen the reaction. She'll need to see if there was only one *Datura* variant or perhaps two closely related ones that had synergistic effects.

It's a nasty business, and no mistake, but for the first time since Prague, she feels a sense of relief to overtake her. At least she can puzzle out the details in her lab, and in turn, this may help Blaise get better sooner. After days of helplessness and fear, she finally thinks she's turned a corner. She'll need to have Jonesey verify her results, of course, but she'd probably better bring them to Potter before then. She's been grateful that he's let her escape here; she doesn't know what she would have done if he'd kept her cooped up in the incident room where she's bloody useless eight times out of ten.

And, of course, there's the other Hippogriff in the room. Pansy honestly still can't believe Draco would be so idiotic to risk everything for a cock up the arse--even Potter's--although she can't blame him at the same time. Potter's well fit, and she of all people knows that Potter's been the sum total of Draco's impossible-to-shag-but-what-if-I-had-the-chance list since at least sixth year, as much as Draco wants to deny it at times. She's been there when he's been pissed enough to admit it. And as she knows from experience, it's well nigh bloody impossible to resist something that feels like it's meant to be. Still, she's also learned that sometimes getting what you think you wanted is the worst thing of all. She still misses Tony some nights, with such fierce desperation that she wonders at times if she might actually die from the pain of a broken heart. But they'd been horrible for each other, or at least she'd been horrible for him. And his marriage. It doesn't mean, though, that she doesn't lie awake, stretched across her bed, wondering what it would be like to firecall him, to ask him to throw everything away again just for one more night entangled together.

She breathes out, letting that ache slip away.

It had been good to get drunk and sleep on Draco's sofa again. Pansy's missed that, missed their closeness, missed bendering their heads over that damned file together. As furious as she is--and make no mistake, she's bloody, fucking livid with the bastard--she'll forgive him eventually for this insanity. Mostly. It's not as if she hasn't done similarly bad things herself.

But in the pit of her stomach she knows it can't end well. For any of them. Blaise nearly paid a fatal price for it this time. Even if it wasn't directly Draco's fault, who's to say that the hubris of what he and Potter are doing isn't invoking bigger and worse evils that might beset them at any time. She has no idea what those forces of nemesis will look like, but Pansy didn't make it this far in the Auror force by not looking over her shoulder. And she's no intention of letting Draco's idiot mistake bring her career down. She'll do what she can to protect him, but there's only so far she's willing to bend. Even for her best friend.

For now, though, she wants to find the bastards who took Blaise down.

Reflexively, Pansy glances over to the Dolohov pieces on the further bench. Well, there's a pile of evil that'll have to wait, whatever Potter might want. First, she wants to finish the part that pertains to Blaise. That sixth sense deep inside of her, the one she's learnt to listen to over the past few years, is telling her there's something more in the data she'd wrangled out of her sources over in St Mungo's. Whatever took Blaise down--that's important. She needs to know more about it before she focuses on the phials and pots Arcturus Lipman had handed her.

With a small sigh, she turns back to her notes.

***

Harry strides through Auror headquarters, trying his best not to meet anyone's eye. He doesn't want to get into the purported condolences from his fellow Aurors about Zabini; they know as
well as he does that they're nothing but a play to get more gossip that can be spread throughout the office. It's times like this that Harry hates being back in London. At least in Luxembourg and New York no one gave much of a damn who he was, unlike here, where he has to get used to the gazes that follow him through the Ministry and the ducked heads, trying to hide the whispers, as he walks past.

Being the goddamned Saviour of the bloody Wizarding World is shite, in Harry's opinion. It's never brought him much of anything other than annoyances. He knows Malfoy would scoff at him, but frankly, Harry's sure Malfoy would have been able to handle the headache of fame better than Harry was ever prepared for. Whatever Malfoy might think, Harry doesn't care to be the centre of attention. He's got used to it over the years, and he's even learnt how to use it to his advantage from time to time. But Harry'd rather just do his damned job than play the politics of it all, even if he's forced into the latter on a daily basis.

He's managed to stay out of the office for most of the day, running small, insignificant errands that he ought to have put on Malfoy or Parkinson, like tracking down Muggle banking records for Richard Thomas to see if there'd been any odd transfer of funds to his account from Prague—or any European city for that matter—in the past year, as well as making firecalls from his library hearth in Grimmauld Place to various contacts of his in the ICW to see if he could shake down any more information about the Abadzhievs that hadn't been in Hermione's file. Not really, it seems; Hermione's intelligence had been quite thorough, but Harry'd read enough between the lines when talking to people to realise that the Abadzhievs had a great deal more political influence than even the Unspeakables thought. Things were carefully said, in ways Harry recognised as indicating that, even among Harry's political acquaintances, the Abadzhiev money held a certain amount of sway. Harry'd managed to track down a few financial records of donations to various wizarding political parties over the last decade. Even in his paltry data collection the Abadzhiev name popped out over and over again, usually in the more conservative elements.

It's not a fact that makes Harry comfortable, particularly not with Dolohov attached to Luka's side.

He's grateful for the distraction, though. Malfoy's been so bloody distant since Sunday, barely even looking Harry's way. Harry knows Malfoy's worried and grieving and angry with himself for some inexplicable reason that he's too damned stubborn to talk to Harry about—either as his lover or his superior officer. Harry's worried about Malfoy—and Parkinson too for that matter. He feels as if his team's slipping away, small rifts beginning to crack between them that Harry can't seem to smooth over. He finds it frustrating; this is the part of teamwork that Harry's never been that great at. Even in school, leading Dumbledore's Army, Harry'd relied on other people to bind the group together. That's what Ron had been brilliant at, really, and there are moments when Harry wishes Ron hadn't left the Aurors, that he'd stayed alongside Harry, helping Harry not muck up every bloody personal relationship he has with people who aren't a Weasley. Or Hermione.

Gawain's office door is closed; his assistant Viola looks up at Harry when he walks in. Harry likes Viola; she's in her late thirties and is one of the most no-nonsense people in the entire bloody Ministry, or so Harry thinks.

"He's not available," Viola says before Harry can open his mouth. She looks a bit peeved, and her brown hair's starting to slip out of its usual neat chignon. "It's the weekly department heads meeting down in the WAS, so he won't be back before end of day, I reckon, and he'll be in a shit of a mood if Mulgraves is on his usual rampage."

Harry frowns. The head of the Wizengamot Administrative Services is a complete tosser who thinks he's in control of the Auror force, regardless of the fact that wizarding law requires separation between the two parts of the DMLE. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about that."

"Sorry about that."

"Sorry about that."

"Sorry about that."
"Not your fault, love." Viola sends a stack of file jackets flying across the room and into the long row of cabinets that line one wall. The drawers slam shut with an echo. "Although I'm glad you're here; I've a copy of Hanka Suková's report for you and Gawain didn't want me to send it via interoffice memo, of course. Because that'd be too easy, wouldn't it?"

"Should I come back later?" Harry asks, taking a step back. Viola and Gawain have a somewhat volatile relationship at times, and Harry's guessing that Gawain did something to nark her off before he escaped to his meeting. The scowl Viola turns on him makes him certain of that. She sighs and the furrow between her brows smooths away.

"Just wait here," Viola says. "He had it on his desk this morning." She stands and walks over to Gawain's door; the back of her blue linen robe is crumpled and crushed from her chair. "I'll only be a moment, if I can find the damned thing." She disappears into the inner sanctum.

Harry waits, his hands shoved in his trouser pockets. Viola's desk is a mess of paperwork, from resource requests to timesheet approvals. In the corner, though, Harry sees a neat stack of parchment that he recognises from his own experience with the sergeant's exam. Looking around quickly, he grabs the stack of exam results and flips through them, stopping when he reaches the one marked Malfoy, Draco, Auror Constable first-class. He hears Viola swear from inside Gawain's office, and he pulls out his wand, tapping the tip against Malfoy's scores before shuffling the parchment back together and setting it on the corner of Viola's desk again. It only takes a moment to find a blank piece of paper; a flick of his wand copies Malfoy's exam results onto it, and Harry's shoving the folded parchment into his jacket pocket as Viola comes out, frowning down at a sheaf of papers in one hand. Harry slides his wand back into the holster before she looks up at him.

"This is it," Viola says. "Unabridged, mostly, except for a few things the Unspeakables wanted redacted before it was filed." She hands the report over; Harry flips through it, the words mostly a blur. The rustle of Malfoy's exam results in his jacket makes Harry nervous. He doesn't quite believe he's stolen them like this, and he hasn't the foggiest what he'll do with them. He's not speaking to Malfoy, so it's not as if he's going to hand them over, is it? And what good would that do anyway? Malfoy'll find them out soon enough. If Viola has them, then the results should be posted next week.

"All right there, Harry?" Viola's giving him a curious look.

Harry's fingers tighten on Hanka's report. He doesn't expect it to be groundbreaking, although he's curious about the so-called tension she reported between him and Malfoy. "Fine," he says, his eyes seeking out that section. It's on the second page, down towards the bottom, before she switches into a discussion of the items removed from Anichka Dolohova's house.

My one concern about Constable Malfoy's presence on the team is the tension that seems to exist between himself and branch leader Inspector Harry Potter. Whilst Potter and Malfoy appear to work in solidarity, I do have some concern that Malfoy's unique skills and talents might be overlooked by the British Auror force due to interpersonal conflicts that may arise. I would urge Head Auror Robards to keep this in mind should such tensions spill over and affect team dynamics.

Harry frowns. What the fuck is Hanka on about? He and Malfoy had been mostly pleasant to each other in public. Well. There was that first night when Malfoy'd been jealous and Harry hadn't bothered to diffuse it. Until later at least, and Christ, but Harry hasn't been able to get that out of his mind. Malfoy spread across the hotel bed, legs wide whilst Harry rammed that brilliant dildo up his lovely arse. A hot prickly rushes across Harry's skin at the thought. What he wouldn't do to have Malfoy beneath him again. It's been torture, really, giving Malfoy the space he so obviously needs. Harry wants nothing more than to shag him rotten, to kiss away that grim furrow between
Malfoy's brows.

"Harry," Viola says again, and Harry looks up at her. One eyebrow's raised; her arms are crossed over her chest.

Harry clears his throat. "Sorry." He folds Hanka's report back up and tucks it in his pocket along with Malfoy's exam results. "Got a bit distracted."

"Slightly." Viola sits back at her desk. She reaches for the stack of exam scores.

"Those coming out soon?" Harry tries to keep his voice light.

Viola smooths her palms over the top sheet of the stack. "Monday. Gawain needs to sign off on them and prep the Promotions Board for the interviews." She looks glum. "By which I mean I have to sort through everyone's bloody files and make a dozen copies each. It'll take me the rest of the week, I'm sure."

Harry nods. "I shan't keep you then."

He's fairly certain she's watching him as he walks off; he tries to keep his head down and his stride even. It's only when he turns the corner into an empty hallway that he draws to a stop, pulling out Malfoy's results. Fuck, he hopes the scores are good. Malfoy'll throw a bloody strop if they're not.

They are. Top-rate, actually, even better than Harry's had been years back. Harry doesn't even realise he's been holding his breath until he exhales in relief. With this result, Malfoy should be a shoo-in for sergeant, if he doesn't bollocks up the Promotions Board interview. That might get a bit dicey, but Harry'll talk to Gawain once the results are officially released. They'll find someone to interview Malfoy who won't judge him for his past or for the mangled Mark on his arm.

Harry folds the paper back up and tucks it back into his pocket. That's one worry off his shoulders.

For now at least.

***

Everything hurts.

Blaise lies still as the world comes to life around him. It's less like waking up from a dream and more like sinking into one, slowly, silence fading into a steady, thrumming beep.

He opens his eyes. The light's bright at first, a white glow that settles as he blinks into wide white tiles on a ceiling, the folds of a curtain hanging around his bed. He tries to say something, but his throat's dry and rough. He coughs instead, and there's a noise from his side like the scrape of a chair against a hard floor.

Blond hair hangs over him and he can hear Draco saying his name over and over again.

Fuck, but his head hurts. Badly.

Blaise closes his eyes and slips back into the silence.

When he wakes up later his mother's on his other side and an unfamiliar face hovers above him. He starts to close his eyes again, and his mother snaps, "Don't you dare."

Blaise doesn't. He knows that tone in her voice; it brooks no disobedience. He forces himself to
stay this time. It's easier. His throat's not as sore, and the Healer's hooking him to a potion bag, letting whatever's in it drip into Blaise's bloodstream through a tiny needle in his forearm. The pain's easing away; he's starting to feel more alert. His head still aches, though.

"You're all right, lad," the Healer says. He's an older man, most likely in his late fifties judging by the grey hair and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "We just let you stay under to get all sorted, didn't we? This'll fix you right up."

Under his mother's watchful eye, Blaise doesn't panic. He's never been the sort to willingly take a potion unless he knows its specific provenance. Growing up in a long line of poisoners makes one a bit more circumspect in what one ingests. But if Olivia's allowing it, then Blaise doesn't mind. She'd never let them put anything into his system that she wasn't entirely fine with.

The Healer--Blaise discovers his name's Irskine--helps him sit up, leaning against a stack of pillows. Blaise feels oddly weak.

"It's all right," Irskine says. "A few more days in hospital, and we'll have you right as rain, won't we? You just need a little more rest and some potions to restore your strength."

Blaise glances at his mother; she tilts her head in agreement. "You're already looking better," she says, brushing her cool fingertips across his forehead. He winces a bit as the ache in his head swells. It fades when she drops her hand.

Irskine putsters around the bed, adjusting charms and adding more potions bags to the hook that's levitating over Blaise's bed. Blaise swallows again; it's getting easier. The potions are warming him up, pushing back the wave of exhaustion that had threatened to pull him back down under.

"Draco," Blaise says. His voice is rough and thick. He takes a deep breath and coughs; his mother holds him steady. "Draco was here."

"He and Pansy have been by most evenings." Olivia's hand settles over his. "But, yes, you saw him Wednesday night before you went back under. He came and got me."

Blaise nods. "What day is it?" The words catch in the back of his throat; they feel odd in his mouth.

"Friday." Olivia hands him a small glass filled with water. Blaise drinks it gratefully. "Afternoon." She takes the glass back. "Potter's been by a few times as well."

Oh. Blaise hadn't really expected that. He coughs again, and the Healer tuts.

"Nothing to worry about there," Irskine says. "Just clearing out some of the mucous that built up." He beams. "Bodies are wonderful things, aren't they?"

Not really, Blaise wants to say, but he's too polite. Besides, Irskine looks positively ecstatic that Blaise is producing sputum. He rests his head against the pile of pillows. "I'm tired."

"You will be for a bit." Irskine's wand is flitting over Blaise, dipping through the air to check basal temperature, blood pressure, all the standard readings. They print out onto a roll of parchment via a charmed quill that evidently records the data from his wand. Irskine stops to check the log every few seconds. "Good, good," he murmurs, mostly to himself.

Blaise lets himself relax as the Healer bustles around his bed. His mother stays close by, and he's vaguely aware of other people coming in and out, with potions and charms and all sort of what-not. He dozes a bit; he never goes as deep under as he could.
He doesn't know how long it takes for the potions to truly kick in, but when they bring a tray, he's awake again and hungry enough not to turn up his nose at the meat broth and early summer fruit jelly. He eats them as if they're the best thing he's tasted in days since, in fact, they are.

"Slower," his mother says as he spoons the wriggling red jelly that smells of strawberries. "You're not at full strength yet."

Blaise feels the fog in his head clearing as he eats, though the ache's still there, right at the edges of his perception. His throat still hurts a bit; he supposes a garotting will do that for one. His mother's promised him that the scar will fade. She's insisted that the Healers treat it with dittany from the moment it closed up. Blaise touches the bandage wrapped around his neck and winces. He doesn't want the scar to go away completely, if he's honest. It doesn't hurt an Auror to have a visible reminder of his wounding. In some circles it's a bit of a status marker. Not that he'll say that to Olivia, mind. He thinks she might smother him with a pillow if he did.

He's only just starting to get worn out when there's a tap on the door and Draco comes in, a hesitant expression on his face. "Irskine said--" And then he falls silent, just looking at Blaise.

"I'll give you both a moment," Olivia says. She touches Draco's arm as she sweeps past him in a rustle of turquoise silk.

Draco still hasn't said anything by the time she closes the door behind her. Blaise just raises an eyebrow at him. "Well?"

"You're really awake," Draco says quietly. He walks up to the bed; his hands settle on the thin railing meant to keep Blaise from rolling out. "Pans and I were worried…" He trails off, and Blaise can see him swallow as he looks away.

"You can't be rid of me that easily." Blaise feels oddly better with Draco next to him. "You twat."

Draco chokes back a wet laugh. "Fucking wanker." He drops into Olivia's chair. "Circe, you had us scared."

"Well, I had a nice sleep, didn't I?" Blaise nudges Draco's knuckle with his thumb. Draco's skin is almost translucent pale in contrast to Blaise's dark hand. Blaise wonders if the idiot's been sleeping any. He takes in the purplish circles under Draco's eyes and the limp blond hair that Blaise isn't certain has been washed in a few days. "You look like shit."

"One of your best friends being a death's door will do that to you," Draco says, and Blaise snorts.

"You weren't that worried." There's a part of him that's pleased Draco's been so upset. He'd rather that than his friends go about their business without giving a shit.

Draco flicks his thumb against Blaise's wrist. "Tosser." He falls silent for a moment, then he sighs. "Look, I know I upset you before--"

Blaise holds up a hand. "Stop. It's fine." It's not, and they both know it, but Blaise doesn't want to continue their argument. His mother had told him when he'd rung her that day that he was being a complete tit about Draco and Potter. He'd been so angry with her and the way she'd taken Draco's side over his that it'd thrown him off for the rest of the day. Frankly, he blames her in part for his landing in hospital. Not that Draco's not part of it as well, but Circe's tits, his mother knows just how to set him off. But now, well. He doesn't quite agree with her, but he understands what she meant that perhaps it's not the end of the world, Draco shagging Potter. He still doesn't like it, but he understands better. A little bit, at least. He sighs; his head's starting to hurt again, and he's feeling fuzzy around the edges. "Let's just say I think you're making a mistake and leave it at that,
all right, old man?"

That makes Draco smile a tiny bit. "I could do."

"Good." Blaise lies back against the pillows. "So have you caught the bastards that did this to me yet?"

Draco frowns and rests his elbows on the bed railing. "No. We do have a file from the Unspeakables though on one Luka Abadzhiev." At Blaise's blank expression, he adds, "garrote bastard."

"Ah." Blaise reaches up and fingers the bandage around his throat. He's surprised that the Unspeakables are working with them, but he supposes Potter's pulling strings with Granger. "Tell me."

"Nasty family," Draco says. "Worse than mine, and you know what it costs me to say that. His father makes Lucius look like bloody Father Christmas all merry and fucking bright."

Blaise grimaces. "They're criminals, yeah?" It's starting to come back to him now; he's fairly certain Potter'd mentioned the last name back at the hotel bar in Prague. Fuck but that feels an eternity away.

Draco nods. "Bodgan Abadzhiev ran the family businesses until he died two years ago. His widow Elena's taken over since. According to the Unspeakables, she's more vicious than her husband, and he had a penchant for the Killing Curse. Liked to use it on people just walking past if he was in a fool temper."

"Merlin's tits," Blaise says. "How can she be worse?" He doesn't like the look on Draco's face. "What?"

"The Unspeakables think she's made at least one Inferius out of the leader of a rival criminal family." Draco's mouth twists in distaste. "Possibly uses him as a slave."

Blaise is horrified. "At least one," he repeats.

"Probably more." Draco looks a bit ill. "As Dark wizarding families go, they're really not our sort at all."

"I'll say." No one in their right mind touches necromancy. Playing with death magic warps the soul, Blaise's mother has always told him that. Makes one less than human, in a way. It's why she refused to support the Dark Lord, that and the fact that she'd been married to more than one Muggle. Sometimes Blaise has suspicions about his own paternal parentage. His mother has always said his father had been a wizard, but Blaise wonders. He doesn't care; he never has. It's just something he'd not have shared in the Slytherin common room. None of the kids with any whisper of Muggle heritage had, mostly because of Draco, Vince and Greg, if he's honest. Blaise wonders if that's changed now; he certainly hopes it has. He knows Draco's opinion on the subject's much different. Same for Greg, really. They've grown up, stopped listening to the shit conversations their parents had raised them with around the dinner table, started thinking for themselves finally. Amazing what a change proper sense can make. He looks over at Draco. "So where does that leave us now?"

"Sorting through the detritus Suková sent over from the Prague house mostly." Draco runs a hand through his hair. "Shah and I have been going through the papers since Tuesday, and Pans is testing artefacts and potions in the lab. Potter's checking financials for Dolohov and for Thomas. He can't touch the Abadzhiev accounts; Gringotts has them locked up on the Continent, but he's
trying to track payments made into Thomas's Muggle account back to Dolohov's Gringotts account, as well as any large sums that may have come into Gringotts from the Continent."

Blaise considers. "He thinks Dolohov's been paid by the Abadzhievs."

"He's pretty certain of it," Draco says, and Blaise wonders if there's a tinge of pride in that statement. He can't tell. Draco's mostly keeping a flat affect when it comes to any discussion of Potter. "The Unspeakable file has some redacted comments where the context surrounding them appears to imply that might be the case."

Blaise feels tired and overwhelmed all of the sudden. He closes his eyes for a moment, then sighs again, before opening them up. Draco's looking at him, his worry written across his face.

"Are you all right?"

"A bit worn out." Blaise folds the sheet between his fingertips. "My head still gets a bit wobbly."

Draco looks appalled. "I ought to have thought--" He stands up. "We shouldn't be talking about work. Potter'd have my hide anyway, if he knew I was saying anything about the case without a Muffliato."

"It's fine." Blaise doesn't want Draco to go. As much as he loves his mother, she's starting to get on his tit; he'd been grateful she'd stepped out for at least a little bit. Olivia Zabini can be a bit overwhelming, even on her best days. "Let's just talk about something else. Fill me in on Quidditch."

"Near mortally wounded or not, I refuse to tolerate you pontificating about Duncan bloody Inglebee," Draco says, and Blaise smiles. "Besides, the sodding Cannons beat my beloved Pride last week, and I just can't deal with the humiliation. And I owe Shah ten Galleons because who would have thought those orange twats would have been able to pull that particular save out of their arses." He looks devastated, and Blaise fights the urge to roll his eyes and point out that Draco'd be better off supporting Pudd United or some other proper team rather than one that could be whacked to the bottom of the league table by the Cannons.

"Office gossip then?"

Draco purses his mouth. "Well. Althea's being decent to me all of a sudden. I think she feels sorry about you having your lazy arse in hospital, so I ought to say thanks for that."

"I accept all monetary tribute," Blaise says lightly. He shifts down into the pile of pillows. "Tell me more."

As Draco launches into his tirade about how Althea's obviously lost her damned mind, but whatever, Draco'll accept it as long as it favours him, Blaise relaxes, letting his mind drift into the soft haze of Draco's voice. It feels soothing. Gentle. The ache fades a little.

He closes his eyes and listens, his thoughts only just starting to circle around garrotes and Inferi and Althea Whittaker.

Before he can catch himself, he tumbles into sleep.

***

Draco sings along loudly to the dulcet tones of Celestina Warbeck emanating from the WWN. He's having a night in and cooking himself spag bol—at least his version of it which is more garlic, onions and meat and less tomato sauce and basil. A good bottle of Montepulciano is out on a
cutting board, and he reaches for the rest of his second glass, swigging a fruity mouthful in the song's bridge section, then setting it back down carefully. He loves his kitchen and its wide expanse of white marble counters, even if they are a showing a bit of wear around the edges. It's one of the best features of his flat.

The chorus kicks up, and he's just hit the high note at the end of *hot, strong LOVE* when he hears what he thinks is a knock at the door. Swishing his wand to take the pan off of the hob, he wipes his hands on a dishtowel, sending another spell to take the volume of the radio down. The knock sounds again, and Draco frowns. He lives in the garden apartment of a wizarding walk-up and although he uses the central foyer to leave in the mornings when he's going out for a run, no one-- but no one--ever knocks on his door. His friends all use the Floo, as does his mother. He's fairly certain his father's never stepped foot in his flat. Lucius prefers to make people come to him instead.

Wand out, Draco walks through the sitting room to the recessed alcove at the end. Frowning at the mess of trainers along the wall--he really needs to get a new shoe cabinet, they're piling up here again--he steps onto the knotted jute mat and peers through the door with a quick charm, looking up first to the ancient foe glass inherited from his grandfather to make sure the fluid bubble at the top is not red.

What he sees through the dark wood has him wrenching the door open almost without thinking.

"Potter, what the hell are you doing in my hall? Get in before the neighbours see you." Draco's voice is low and pitched not to carry. Frances Rosetree down the hall works in Magical Games and is a known busybody in the Ministry. And it's not as if Potter is easy to hide. He pulls Potter into his flat with a quick glance around to make certain there's no *Prophet* photographer lurking outside the outer glass-paned door in the hallway. One can never be too careful when it comes to Potter. The stupidest pictures of the twat show up in the media at times. Draco closes his door as quickly as he can, then turns around to look at his guv.

"Should I ask why you're on my doorstep at half seven on a Saturday?"

Potter's in Muggle clothing, of course, having probably walked all the way here, knowing him. He's wearing his usual sturdy brown boots with pale grey trousers and a navy collared shirt that he hasn't even bothered to tuck in, the uncouth berk. His eyes are bottle green in the shadows of the alcove. "I was in the neighbourhood?"

"Not bloody likely." Draco turns away. "I need to check my dinner." He's lying. He knows it's off the hob. "Come through if you'd like a glass of wine." He waves a hand over his shoulder airily, trying to act unconcerned. "Take your boots off. I spent all afternoon on cleaning spells, so if you track dirt onto my floors, I'll hex your feet to your shoulders." Which, he thinks, might actually be an interesting position, should Potter be nude at the time.

Draco hears Potter removing his boots as he retreats into the kitchen, two faint thumps on the parquet. Draco leans with both hands on the island, marble cool beneath his outstretched fingers, trying to gather his thoughts. He's successfully avoided Potter most of the week and had reached Saturday evening with nary a thought of the man in his head--all right, that's a bit of a bald-faced lie, and he knows it, but Draco at least feels confident in the *spirit* of the statement--and now here Potter is, in the flesh, and Draco's attention is mercilessly drawn in his direction.

One glass of wine and then Potter's on the street. Draco thinks. It's a courtesy, and that's all. Nothing more. Anything further is off the table.

Draco tries to focus on images of Blaise lying grey and weary in his hospital bed to strengthen his resolve, but only manages to summon the mocking laughter Blaise had greeted him with this
morning after the Pride's second ignominious defeat last night, this time by the bloody Wasps. Blaise is well enough now to keep up with the fixtures, and Olivia reads the Prophet to him also, much to Blaise's annoyance, since he points out that at twenty-six years old he's bloody able to read the damned newspaper himself, thanks ever so. He's regained enough strength to object to Olivia's mothering of him, which is a relief to Draco. There's nothing more worrisome than Blaise not batting his mother's hands away or telling her he can fucking take care of himself, god damn it, and can she just bugger back off to that twat Nigel and leave him be? Draco had thought Olivia was going to burst into tears of relief the moment Blaise had snapped that at her. Honestly, they have the strangest relationship, Draco thinks. Still, the Healers are pleased enough with Blaise's progress, as well, though not pleased that he plans to come back to the Aurors as soon as physically possible. Good luck with that, Draco thinks. Blaise does whatever the hell he wants.

Draco looks over to his pot of noodles, now abandoned. He flicks his wand to set the lid on and start a stasis spell, though that never really works and he's certain he'll have to boil a new pot when Potter leaves, then he plucks another glass out of the crystal cabinet and levitates the wine over to the centre island. He steadies the bottle over the lip of the glass, gently pouring a decent measure in. If all goes well, his dinner will still be warm when Potter leaves. The pasta will be mushy and vile, but he supposes that's the price he'll have to pay.

"Hey." Potter's voice from behind Draco nearly makes him spill wine onto the floor. Potter's snuck up on his stocking feet and is rather closer than Draco expected.

Draco takes a breath, holding the bottle perfectly poised, then resumes pouring without looking. "A moment, if you will." He splashes a bit more into his own glass, then sets the bottle down. Draco plucks the glass from the counter, nodding to Potter to take the other.

Draco braces his hip against the island. "Have you important news then?" He sips without really looking at Potter. "A Dolohov sighting in yet another Continental capital? Circe, but I do hope it's Paris this time. I'm running low on good verveine-citron soap."

Potter takes a drink, then puts his glass down. Draco hears a crinkle in Potter's pocket. "I know you're naffed off, Malfoy, but I wanted you to have these."

Draco glances down at the rumpled parchment Potter has extended to him, then takes a shocked breath as he recognizes the official Auror letterhead, DMLE seal and all. Belatedly, he sets his glass down and takes the document from Potter's hand. It's been folded and creased more than once, but it's still clearly legible.

"How in Merlin did you get these?" Draco stares. He hasn't checked the numbers yet, but he knows what Potter's handed him. Given the cheap, too slick texture of the paper, this is a hasty copy, not the official results that will come by owl or interdepartmental memo, wrapped tight in a neat little scroll.

Potter has a guilty smirk on his face, his hands now shoved into his pockets, shirt ruched up over them. He shrugs. "I happened upon them and thought you might like a copy. They'll be out Monday officially."

"Happened upon them, my arse." Draco shakes his head. This is a new level of brashness, even for Potter. "You know Viola will have your bollocks for this." He can't help but add, "Lovely though they are."

With a quick huff of a laugh, Potter says, "Go on. Look at the scores then. See if they're worth being made a eunuch. I was going to make you wait, but it's been a such a shit week across the board that I thought you might like to have them in advance."
Despite his best intentions, Draco finds himself barely breathing. "I'd say," Potter lifts his glass. "Here's to Sergeant Malfoy."

Draco lets himself clink his wineglass against Potter's. "There's a pretty brutal interrogation waiting between me and that title," he says. Still, he's pleased. His marks were closer to perfect than he expected, and it will be harder to deny him an interview now. He feels good about that.

"They'll have to give you a fair shot now," Potter says, echoing Draco's thoughts. "Although they will be rough, I don't think it's anything you can't handle. Bertie and I can help you prepare." He takes a sip of his wine. "You should be happy though. You've a higher score on that exam than I had when I took it."

The corners of Draco's mouth turn up at this, and his chest swells with relief. He's not a failure. He didn't embarrass himself, or any of the other Slytherins trying to make it up the ranks. He finds he can breathe again, and his whole body feels light. He gulps down wine gratefully, something like joy rising in his heart. "I do have a few more years of practical experience on me," he points out. "You were what, nineteen, when you took it?"

"Nearly twenty-one," Potter says over the rim of his wineglass. He sets it aside. "I'm also more than happy to give you another blow job before your interview, you know." His wine-wet lips curve in a wicked smile Draco didn't know Potter was capable of. "I'm sure that helped your written performance." The look of smugness on Potter's face is almost criminal.

Draco snorts, annoyed that his body's already responding to the cockiness of Potter's tone. "Oh yes, all of the months of preparation and study were nothing compared with being blown by the Saviour of the Wizarding World in the loo." Despite the snark of his comments, Draco relaxes, letting his hair fall in his face and letting himself nudge a bit closer to Potter. He's not entirely certain Potter's wrong. Having Potter on his knees in a filthy toilet stall, swallowing down Draco's spunk, had been a powerful rush, one that had most definitely taken his mind off the worries of the exam. Perhaps it had helped calm him down, in its own way. "Although I will allow it may have made me less anxious about my test performance by increasing my utter terror at being caught with your mouth on my prick."

"Terror, was it?" Potter sets his glass down roughly. "I seem to recall it being a bit more…" Potter hesitates. "Primal than that?"

"Perhaps our memories of that night differ," Draco murmurs. His heart pounds against his chest. That look on Potter's face—Merlin but Draco knows what it means now. Naked, raw, wanting… Draco could have Potter on his knees again, right here, right now, and he knows it. That thought still surprises him, even after the past few weeks. Potter wants him as much as he wants Potter, perhaps even more, given what Potter potentially has to lose, and that's a powerful aphrodisiac. "Potter," Draco says, and it's a soft huff of breath and need.

Potter reaches for Draco's hips, scanning his face for a moment before he pulls Draco closer. Draco barely has time to place his own wine on the island before Potter's lips are on his. There's no moderation or gentleness to Potter's gestures: the full force of his desire is upon Draco before he can even think.

Despite his best intentions, Draco finds himself wrapped around Potter, returning the heat of
Potter's lips, the mercilessness of Potter's mouth, the press of Potter's body. He loves kissing Potter, loves the shiver of excitement that goes through him when Potter's mouth opens to his.

Merlin, Draco had almost forgotten what this was like. It's only been a week since Potter had him on that hotel bed in Prague, his arse in the air, thighs shuddering with each long, careful lick of Potter's tongue against his hole, but that feels like forever, what with all that's happened in between. Draco's body is like a parched river bed, and Potter's touch is a torrent of sensation flooding through him. Draco barely notices Potter shrugging off his shirt, then reaching to remove Draco's, hands fumbling over the buttons in their eagerness. Draco nips at everything he can reach, Potter's ear, his chest, the solid curve of his neck. He smells warmth and Potter and desire, and Draco wants everything he can take from Potter. Fuck. He wants to drop to his knees and swallow Potter whole right now.

Potter's lips are against Draco's hair, his warm breath coursing over Draco's ear, raising shudders. Their bare arms are entwined, the firm muscles of their chests meeting. Draco's pale skin a sharp contrast against Potter's golden brown sheen. "Should we use that bloody big bed of yours now," Potter murmurs, "or would you like me to defile you on your sofa?"

Draco pushes against Potter then, trying to keep him an arm's length away. He utterly fails. "You philistine, the upholstery's vintage Morris. And the frame would never hold." Not the way he wants Potter to fuck him, hard and fast and breathless. The sofa's for slow, gentle sex, for Potter kneeling on the floor, between Draco's knees, Draco's long fingers tangled in Potter's thick hair.

The smile Potter presses into Draco's collarbone is enough. Draco realises belatedly that Potter knows exactly how to wind him up. "Bed it is, then," Potter says, and without further ado, he hoists Draco up and over his shoulder. Draco beats his fists rather half-heartedly on Potter's back. He could get out of the hold, he realises, but he also knows he's rather enjoying this display of possession on Potter's part, which, frankly, ought to disturb him. He also ought to be dismayed that Potter knows exactly how to get to Draco's bedroom now.

"I'm not just some hussy you've captured, Potter," Draco protests as Potter kicks the door open with one stockinged foot. Although on second thought, Draco's not entirely sure this isn't exactly what he is. He wishes he minded more.

Potter thwacks Draco's arse to get him to stop pummeling him, then tosses him inelegantly on the bed. His hands are already on Draco's flies, pulling them open, then stripping Draco's trousers from his legs in one fluid movement. Fuck, but that's hot, Draco thinks, as Potter tosses them to the floor. Draco slouched backward onto his elbows, watching Potter take off his own trousers. He loves seeing Potter like this, his body muscular and lean, his thick, blood-filled cock curving away from his flat belly. He looks spectacular, and Draco wonders once again how many people have seen this side of Potter, naked and open, lust for them writ large across his gorgeous face. Draco finds that he's pressing the heel of his hand into his own swollen prick. He's so close just from looking, and this lack of resolve where Potter's concerned makes his body heat with desire and shame.

Draco'd meant not to do this again, not so soon at least. What had happened to Blaise had shaken him up, had made him have second thoughts about Potter and himself. How could it have not? His best friends are angry at him, and whatever Olivia Zabini might say, Draco finds it upsetting that Blaise and Pansy both think he's lost his damned mind. He knows they're right. He knows this is fucked up, knows that Potter is the worst thing possible for him at this time of his career, knows that Potter won't ever be able to give Draco what he wants: stability, a relationship, a life that exists outside this mad little world of lust and lying they've created for themselves.

And yet when Potter's next to him like this, naked and gorgeous, with his fingers dragging along his own cock like he's doing right now, all of Draco's resolve disappears.
He's definitely going to do this again, and as soon as bloody possible. He needs Potter inside of him, and now. Or vice versa. Draco's not fussed about who gets fucked as long as they do it immediately and he gets off.

Potter crawls next to him, with a grin almost feral as he looks at Draco. Draco shivers involuntarily, skin prickling with something like fear, but not the same at all. He opens his mouth, tipping his chin back to look at Potter. "Scared, Potter?" he asks.

"Oh, don't you fucking wish, Malfoy," Potter says, voice low and rough, and his mouth captures Draco's again, tongue sliding deep against Draco's. He pushes Draco back into the mattress, his body shifting over Draco's, cock pressed into Draco's hip. It's almost too much, and Draco's nails scrape over Potter's muscular shoulders as he groans into the kiss.

Potter pulls his mouth away for a moment to summon the lube Draco keeps in the side table, and Draco's body is twitching with the presumption of Potter's spell, both the certainty that Draco will open up for Potter and the intimate knowledge that Potter has of Draco's bedroom.

"You could ask, you know," Draco says, and he's breathless already.

Potter just raises an eyebrow and catches the lube in one hand before it flies past. Bloody show-off. Still, he'll let Potter fuck him, of course. He wants it desperately, and if the fierceness of Potter's manner is any gauge, Potter does as well. "Want to fuck, Malfoy?"

God, yes.

"I haven't prepared," Draco says. He sounds like an idiot, he thinks, but he wasn't expecting company tonight. He looks towards the en suite and is suddenly uncertain.

Potter says the spells without even pausing, his body pressed to Draco's, fingers clutching the lube. It is rather impressive how quickly and thoroughly he can rattle them off. And wandlessly of course, the sodding bastard. "That better?"

Draco lets his breath out, shifting his hips a little. He always dislikes the odd, empty, fizzy feeling that comes with the preparation spells, as much as he's grateful for them. It's not quite as effective as skipping a meal, not to mention the other prep that comes with proper bottoming, but he'll take it for now.

"Yes." Draco looks up at Potter leaning over him, glasses perched on the end of his nose. Draco plucks them off and tosses them to the other side of the bed. He hopes Potter has a protection charm on them; it'd be a shame to shatter them with a misplaced thrust. Potter looks gorgeous above him, all stubbled chin and messy hair. And those eyes. Merlin. Draco could get lost in Potter's eyes. He clears his throat, letting his legs spread out across the coverlet. God, but this bed's seen more action in the past two weeks than in the entire year before; Draco'll have to have the coverlet cleaned by one of the Manor elves. The amount of spunk he's spilled into it lately is embarrassing. There's only so much his pathetic cleaning charms can do. He licks his lips, reaching up to smooth his palms over Potter's shoulders. "It'd be better still with your cock in me."

"I suppose that's a possibility." Potter's left hand circles the base of Draco's cock, whilst the fingers of his right explore Draco's crease, smoothing slickly over his hole before one presses the slightest bit inside. Draco spreads his thighs a little, more desperate than he wants to admit for Potter's touch. The pressure on his cock is not nearly enough. "If you want."

Draco does. So fucking much.
Potter's finger slides in further, up to the knuckle. "That's it," he says as Draco groans and presses
back. Fuck, Potter feels so good inside of him.

"Another," Draco chokes out, and Potterslips another finger in, then another. Draco swallows and shifts; he loves the feel of Potter inside of him, stretching his hole wider.

"Shit," Potter says. "Fuck, but you're good at this. Look at you."

The brief words of praise make Draco feel wanted, safe, and he leans back a bit, spreading further for Potter and letting him ease yet another finger into his arse. He feels full and yet open at the same time, Potter's whole hand pressing deeper into him, his thumb circling lightly across the stretch of his taint.

Potter groans. "Jesus, Malfoy. If they gave a practical exam in being fucked, you'd definitely win top marks."

Draco's arse clenches around Potter, heat pooling in his belly at the image of himself spread out for Potter in an examination room, being fucked senseless whilst the others stand around them, giving Draco points for presentation and style.

"Oh you like that, don't you?" Potter twists his fingers further inside, their thickness spreading the furls of Draco's arsehole. "You'd perform well for me, wouldn't you, especially if you were being fucked in front of everyone?" He's watching Draco with heavy-lidded eyes, his fingers so fucking deep inside Draco's body. God, Draco can feel every inch of them. "That makes you so bloody hard, doesn't it, Malfoy? Thinking about them watching me fuck you?"

Draco's throat is raw, breath heavy. His prick aches so much; he wants to touch it, to wank himself raw with Potter's fingers shoved up his arse. "Yes." He arches his back, hips flying off the bed when Potter's fingers stab upwards and graze his prostate. "Oh, God, Potter." His hands clench the coverlet, pulling at it.

"I'd fuck you so damned well," Potter says, pulling his fingers out just enough to drip more lube over his knuckles, then pressing them up into Draco's arse again until Draco groans with need.

"How well?" Draco pushes his feet into the mattress, trying his best to fuck Potter's hand. It's not as easy as it might seem. "Come on, Potter. Tell me." He rolls his hips down with a gasp.

Potter twists his fingers. His breath's coming in ragged little huffs; Draco can feel the slick head of Potter's cock against the inside of his calf. "Yeah? You want to know how I'd let everyone watch? How I'd bury my prick inside of you, tell them how fucking tight your perfect little arse is, how good you feel when I fill you, how the moment I slide in I want to fucking come and it takes everything I have to hold my god damned spunk back."

Draco can't manage to bite back his whimper.

"God," Potter says, and his fingers are deeper into Draco than they've ever been. One more twist and the tip of his thumb breaches Draco, and Draco cries out, his body shaking in the sharp, bittersweet mix of pain and bliss. "You'd get such high marks if they could all see you with my cock in you, Malfoy. You take it so well." He moves his hand again, and Draco can barely breathe, his entire body shuddering around all of Potter's fingers.

Draco's nearly blind from lust, his imagination and his fear both cutting him like knives, leaving behind tattered strips of pleasure mixed with shards of shame in their wake. He wants to spread his legs wide for Potter here, anywhere, in the middle of the sodding Ministry Atrium if Potter desires. He wants to let Potter fuck him, let him claim him. What he most fears is also what he most desires: he has become nothing but Harry Potter's fucktoy. In this moment, Potter has possessed
him more than if he had Imperiused him, and Draco doesn't care. All he wants is to be filled with Potter's cock, to ride the waves of lust that are pushing him higher, his body taut and heated, thighs trembling with his need, prick swollen and hard and leaking against his belly.

"Is that what you want?" Potter says against the sharp jut of Draco's hipbone. Draco's cock aches so badly at the soft huff of Potter's breath across his skin. "My prick in you, fucking you so bloody hard until you're screaming for me, begging me to let you come for them all? Is that what you want?"

"Yes," Draco breathes out, and he arches up, his eyes fluttering shut. He can see it now, Potter slamming into him as Draco's swollen prick spews spunk across his skin, everyone watching him, waiting until the moment they can lean in and lick him clean. God, he wants that. His hand smoothes over the back of Potter's head, moving him closer, and when Potter's mouth brushes the head of Draco's cock, Draco shudders. "Please."

Potter's still whispering along Draco's shaft as his fingers slide out of Draco's spread arse, slowly, one by one. Potter's mouth brushes along Draco's hard prick; he tells Draco how brilliant he is, how good he makes him feel, and Draco laps it up gratefully, no longer resisting. He feels so fucking empty without Potter in him.

And then Potter pulls away, settles his knees between Draco's thighs. Draco looks up then, watches as Potter's chest heaves over him. Potter's cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright and wide. He's the picture of the Angel of Lust, Draco thinks, in perfect pre-Raphaelite form, all musshed hair and gleaming skin, his cock a ruddy swollen curve jutting from his flat stomach and chiseled hips. They should frame him and hang him over the bloody mantelpiece.

He's sodding gorgeous.

Draco hooks his legs over Potter's shoulders when Potter grips his ankles, pushing Draco's knees nearly to his chest. It hurts, but Draco doesn't care because Potter's prick is at his slick, shivering hole now, sticky head pressing against it. Draco turns his head to the side. It's nearly too much, this.


Draco does, and Potter draws in a ragged breath, fingers tightening around Draco's ankles. "I'm going to fuck you now, yeah? So fucking hard because you're so fucking good, Malfoy. Yeah? That's what you want? My prick pinning you to this bed, slamming into you, fucking you until you shout for me--Christ!"

Draco cries out when Potter enters him. It's a rough thrust, and Potter is merciless, sliding deep into Draco in a single movement. Even though the five fingers he'd had up Draco's arse were more than adequate preparation, Draco's still not mentally ready for how full and thick Potter's cock feels, how his arse burns when Potter pulls back and thrusts into him again.

"Shit!" Draco's fingers twist in the coverlet, and his whole body clenches. "Potter--" He digs his heels into Potter's shoulders, his toes curling in pain.

Potter talks him through it, stroking his chest gently as his hips roll back, then slam into Draco's arse once again. "That's it, Malfoy. You've got this. Push back."

Draco's not a virgin in any way, but Potter makes him feel like this is the first time his arse has been fucked open, the first time he's taken a cock. It's awkward and difficult and unpleasant and almost too rough until it's suddenly not at all.
All at once, Draco’s body glows from the fullness of it all, from the dragging stretch of his arse around Potter’s prick. The negative sensations switch polarity in one thrust, Draco's body shifting into blinding, glowing, welcoming heat under Potter's. He arches his back and his hands flatten against the mattress. "Fuck," Draco chokes out. "Keep doing that, Potter--oh God, yes, you twat. Harder!" He twists his hips, one foot sliding off Potter's shoulders, dangling over Potter's arm.

Potter braces himself on strong arms, biceps straining, and thrusts hard with his hips, leaning down to bend Draco's knees closer to his shoulders. The mattress squeaks beneath them, bounding them back together with every slam of Potter's cock into Draco's arse. "Yes, yes. You've got it. Fuck, Malfoy. You're fucking incredible," Potter huffs as his hips pound into Draco's body. "Shit. You feel so good--" He groans, his head falling forward. His face is flushed red, sweat's dripping down the side of his cheeks.

Draco's never had a fuck like this, so hard and fast; he can barely keep up with Potter. His hands reach blindly for Potter's arms, slipping over his damp skin, nails scraping over taut muscles. His whole body aches and shudders; the slap of their skin, of Potter's bollocks smashing against Draco's arse, the grunts and gasps as Potter takes Draco harder than he's taken him before.

It's glorious.

Potter starts to clench first, his body rigid and his mouth tight, face indescribably constricted as he tips over with a shuddering shout, spilling into Draco's body with rocking, pumping, thrusts.

Whilst Draco's still shaking from the force of Potter's climax, Potter pulls out of him abruptly, then slides down, stuffing three fingers back into Draco, whilst swallowing Draco's cock to the root. The change in pressure and sensation leave Draco stunned with sensory overload. With a cry, he thrusts his prick into Potter's mouth, his arse on fire from the fullness and the depth that Potter is reaching. Potter's spunk squelches messily between them as Potter pumps his fingers in and out of Draco's slippery hole, his mouth hot and tight around Draco's aching cock. When he comes, Draco nearly blacks out for a moment, all sensation lost in the wordless violence of his orgasm, his body shuddering out of control around and over and in and under Potter. Potter splutters, choked by the force of Draco's spunk, and Draco slumps back to the bed, boneless with pleasure as Potter coughs and wipes his mouth.

Draco drapes an arm over his face, his body unpleasantly sticky, limbs loose. His body is relaxed, but an uncomfortable awareness burns in the pit of his stomach. He's never felt this raw, this exposed with anyone before. It's a horrifying feeling, one that he hates.

Potter settles beside Draco, his hand resting on Draco's stomach. He presses his mouth against the curve of Draco's shoulder. "Okay?"

No, not really. Draco's whole body aches; he feels as if Potter's reached inside of him and ripped his soul apart. He draws in a shaky breath, then lets his arm fall to his side. The charmed constellations on his ceiling glint and glitter down at him. How is he doing this, he wonders. He feels as if this connection between him and Potter is tenuous at best. Most certainly one-sided, in his opinion. It's always Draco who has to give way when Potter's turned on; it's always his flat they fuck in.

"We never go to your place," Draco says after a moment.

"Is that a problem?" Potter asks. He leans his chin on Draco's arm; Draco wishes he wouldn't. "Your flat's nicer. Bed's definitely better."

Draco thinks that's a shit excuse, really. He wonders how badly he's screwing up here, with Potter. He looks away, something deep inside of him is restless, on edge. He rolls onto his side,
his back to Potter. His arse hurts, the last faint remnants of his pleasure fading into a dull throb of misery. Par for the course with Potter, really. He loves the high he gets from Potter's touch, from Potter's attention. But his friends are right. This is so very fucked up, and he knows it. He's addicted, the same as if he were hooked on a potion. Draco's strung out, dependent on Potter, needs him, would ruin his entire bloody life for Potter at the moment, and that's a problem.

Even in the midst of his deepest craving, he knows that.

"Hey," Potter says. "You don't seem all right."

Draco's silent for a long moment, staring across the room at his half-opened wardrobe. He can see his face in the mirrored door, pale and furrowed against the dark blue coverlet. It frightens him a little, makes him remember what he'd looked like before Nicholas had left, how shattered and broken he'd become.

He doesn't want Potter to do that to him. He can't go through it. Not again.

When Draco speaks, his voice is low, quiet. "You know we're not good for each other, don't you?" Draco doesn't know what demon has possessed him; maybe something of the Gryffindor entered him temporarily with Potter's spunk, but he has a strange urge to tell Potter the truth. He'd never done that with Nicholas. He'd lied up until the end when he hadn't been able to lie any more. Draco can't do that this time. He breathes out, his stomach twisting at Potter's silence. "This isn't really a healthy arrangement."

Potter doesn't answer.

"You know it's not," Draco says. He won't look over his shoulder. He can feel the tension in Potter's hand, still splayed across his hip. "We can't tell anyone about this--"

"No one needs to know," Potter says, and his fingers tighten on Draco's flesh.

And that's the problem, isn't it? Draco knows Potter's right, but there are so many secrets he's kept over the years. It's too much sometimes, the way they twist and roil within him. Draco grew up with secrets, his own and his parents' and their friends. He'd been too young to carry that burden for them. He's too tired to keep this up, too tired to keep hiding from everyone. Even though Blaise and Pansy know about his whatever-this-is with Potter, he'll still have to lie to them if it continues. He knows that. He can't have Potter and not lie to his best friends at the same time. Draco doesn't know if that's what he wants.

"Malfoy," Potter says, and his voice is far too gentle for Draco to handle right now. His body is still leaking Potter's spunk, and he feels weak and needy and vulnerable. Every self-protective instinct he has is telling him to resist this, not to give in now. He wants nothing more than for Potter to take him into his arms, to tell him everything will be fine. Potter would if Draco asked him, Draco has no doubt, and he'd mean it, and he'd believe it because Potter can't fully see the darkness in any one, not even himself.

Draco knows that darkness oh so well, and he knows it's always better to face it and say its name, even when it's leading you astray.

"I think you should go, Potter," he whispers, and the tight turmoil of his heart feels like it's shattering into a thousand tiny, glittering shards.

Potter stills. "Did I do something wrong?" he asks, and Draco shakes his head. His throat's too tight to speak. For a moment, he thinks Potter's going to protest, and then the mattress shifts as Potter slides off it.
"I'm sorry," Potter says, but Draco can't look at him.

Draco hears Potter gather his things from the floor, then pad out into the hall. The last thing he hears is Potter's voice, grimly calling the coordinates to Grimmauld Place.

And then Draco's alone and naked and empty and shaking. He curls into a ball under the spunk-covered coverlet, willing himself to be calm. This will pass. He's strong enough to get through this, to get past Potter. But right now it feels like going through a withdrawal, and he is so bloody weak.

Happy fucking sergeant's exam, Draco thinks bitterly. Why not just get a commemorative tattoo, this time on your face, that says Potter's Fucking Idiot, let the whole bloody world know what a damned fool you are. Congratulations, Draco sodding Lucius Malfoy, on yet another excellent self-sabotage.

He lies awake for a long time, unable to sleep.

***

It's just gone nine when Harry stumbles back into the Floo at Grimmauld Place, his shirt untucked and his trousers only just done up; he hasn't even bothered to put his boots back on. Why, after all? He's only Flooing from Malfoy's bloody flat into his own house, and Malfoy'd been clear that he wanted Harry out fast enough. Harry'd just grabbed his boots from beside the door and gone to the Floo. He still doesn't quite know what happened. One moment Malfoy'd been begging him to fuck him, the next he'd been icy cold and pushing Harry away. It's not that Harry doesn't expect it; Slytherins are volatile, after all. It's more that he hadn't wanted to leave Malfoy alone. He'd wanted to comfort him, to ease him through whatever headspace he'd gone into.Harry's seen this before, after a rough shag or a play session; he's experienced that overwhelming rush of emotion himself that sends you skittering into a corner, unable to be touched by anyone.

He shouldn't have left, Harry thinks, catching himself on the corner of the mantelpiece. He swears at the stab of pain in his palm. A flash of green light illuminates the library, reflecting off the tall, paneled windows on either side of the room, and Harry wants to throw himself back into the Floo, tumbling back into Malfoy's flat, just to pull Malfoy into his arms and tell him it's going to be all right. He can't, though, and he knows it. Malfoy's put up a boundary, and it'll cost far, far more for Harry to cross it without proper cause. He's already used a fake reason to get in tonight; there's no call for him to have passed Malfoy his exam results, not when they're coming out on Monday.

The bright green embers of the fire sink back into a soft red-orange glow that barely lights up the library, but as Harry turns away from the hearth, a lamp flares to life next to Harry's favourite leather chair.

"Hello, Harry," Jake says, and Harry's stomach twists.

Jake's sitting in front of him, one long leg crossed over his knee, a glass of firewhisky in one hand. He's only a little rumpled; the top two buttons of his shirt are undone, and his short, golden blond curls look as if he's run a hand through it more than once. His eyebrows go up. "Surprised?"

That's a fucking understatement, but Jake's always been good at those. Sometimes Harry finds them amusing. Tonight, not so much. He drops his boots on the hearth. "How'd you get in?" He tries to keep his voice even. Jake knows Harry keeps his wards up at all times; only Hermione and Ron can get through them, and even then Harry asks them to ring the Floo first. He'd never had privacy of his own when he was a kid, at Hogwarts or Privet Drive. It's important to him now, and his friends respect that.
"Your elf opened the door when I knocked." Jake swirls the firewhisky up the side of his glass. "Kreacher rather likes me, or have you forgotten?"

It's true. Jake's only been here a few times; they've mostly conducted their relationship outside of London, which Harry prefers. He doesn't like being followed by journos from the Prophet or Witch Weekly, not when it comes to who he's fucking on a regular basis. Malfoy's an exception to his no-relationships-in-England rule, but then, Malfoy's a fucking exception to everything it seems. Still, Kreacher's always looked kindly on Jake, and Harry's fairly certain should Jake take up residence at Grimmauld Place, Kreacher would cheerfully toss Harry over for a more appropriate master. Not that Harry would care. He and Kreacher exist in an uneasy detente most days lately; Kreacher's angry with him once more for not opening up the house for visitors now that he's back in London, despite Harry's insistence that he doesn't want a bloody stampede of people he barely likes going through his house just to appease his damned house elf's sense of propriety.

Harry walks over to Jake and plucks the glass out of his fingers. "What are you doing on this side of the Atlantic?" He drains the firewhisky in one gulp. Fuck, he needs more. "Kreacher," he shouts, and in an instant the elf's at his elbow, scowling up at him. Harry holds up the glass. "Another drink, please."

Kreacher looks sceptically at the glass, but he pops out of the room, then back with an opened bottle of Ogden's and another glass that he hands to Jake. He scratches his hip, his tea towel rising a bit too high for Harry's comfort, then pours them both another few fingers of whisky. "Is the master wanting anything else?"

Yes, Harry thinks. A sodding good reason why you let my god damned boyfriend-not-boyfriend into the house without my fucking permission. He doesn't bother. Instead he drops onto the sofa and lifts the glass to his mouth. The firewhisky burns the whole way down, settling in his stomach and making him feel hot and unhappy. Well. More unhappy than he already is. He didn't want to go from Malfoy shoving him out of bed to facing down Jake within ten minutes of each other. Christ, but he wants to be pissed off his arse right now. He holds his glass out, and Kreacher refills it, giving Harry a decidedly disapproving look.

"Don't make me give you a sock," Harry says, even though both he and Kreacher know he never truly would. Kreacher sniffs haughtily and pours a splash more firewhisky into Harry's glass.

Jake just watches him. "Thank you, Kreacher," he says. "I think we're done for the night. You can leave the bottle."

Kreacher sets it on the side table, next to Jake and not him, Harry notes, and then shuffles out the half-open doorway, his ears flopping with each step. He's muttering something beneath his breath, and Harry's quite certain it's about him.

"I thought we should talk," Jake says after a moment. "And since you're dodging my calls night and day..." He shrugs, and Harry looks away. It doesn't matter that Jake has a point. "What other choice did I have than to show up unannounced?"

"Leave me be for a bit," Harry says. He knows he sounds belligerent. He doesn't want to do this. Not right now. Not with the smell of Malfoy's spunk still lingering on his skin and the creeping fear that he did something to bring on Malfoy's ire tonight, that everything may have changed between them and Harry has no idea why. It upsets him, that thought.

Jake sets his glass down. "I did leave you alone, Harry. For weeks. I did every goddamned thing you wanted me to. I didn't even object when you wanted to come back to London. It was too much, maybe, asking you to move to New York, but it's what I thought you wanted at the time."
"Was it?" Harry snaps. He's annoyed that Jake's so calm and collected, and he knows damned well that's a fault of his, not Jake's. But it makes him feel young and childish, as if he's something to prove. "You pushed and pushed until I didn't have a bloody choice--"

"You've always had a choice." Jake still doesn't lose his temper. It's one of the things Harry'd liked about him at first. He was always even-tempered. Steady. Harry could rage around him, and Jake would be his anchor, pulling him back from the unexpected fury that crops up in Harry from time to time. It's only been lately that Harry's been resentful of that. Even now he wants Jake to shout back at him, to tell Harry how foolish he's been, what a bloody twat he is. He needs Jake to be angry as well, to be vicious and sharp, to push Harry back.

But that isn't Jake, is it?

They look at each other. Jake's face is half-shadowed by the lamplight, and Harry feels a twinge of something deep and raw and broken, a complicated wave of affection mixed with intense guilt and frustration. He knows Jake deserves better than him; Jake's decent and kind and, at thirty-four, a bloody damn grown-up, which Harry feels so far from being, especially tonight.

"Why are you here?" Harry asks again, and Jake glances away, picking up his glass and refilling it with firewhisky.

"I'm posted for three weeks to the British Ministry," Jake says. "I'll be conducting training for the new Unspeakers and picking up a few other assignments as your Minister sees fit." He takes a sip of the steaming whisky. "Before you complain, let me just say it wasn't my idea. Graves thought it'd be kind, giving me some time to see you again." He laughs, but it's a harsh, bitter bark. "Little did he know."

Harry finds it hard to believe that the American Head Auror would be that generous. Tom Graves is a bit of shit, in his opinion. Harry hadn't been able to stand him. It'd been another reason he'd been grateful to come back to London. Gawain can be difficult at times, but he's not an utter arsehole. Besides, Graves hates Harry, so Harry's pretty bloody certain there's something else Graves wants out of the trade. "That's not what I meant, and you know it." He sounds peevesh, which annoys him even more.

Jake stands up and walks over to the hearth, his glass of firewhisky still in his hand. He studies the Black family tree hanging over the mantelpiece, bits of the tapestry still burnt off, despite Harry's best attempts to repair it. "I did give you your space, you know. Let's be honest about that."

"It hasn't even been a month," Harry says. "I told you--"

"I know what you told me." Jake turns to look at Harry. The embers of the fire pop and spark behind him. He's tall and muscular and bloody well fit, and for a moment Harry's prick twitches. He and Jake have always been good in bed; Harry likes the broad planes of Jake's shoulders, the lean line of his hips, his stamina, his inventiveness when it comes to sex. "But I call bullshit on it." Jake sighs and lifts his glass to his lips. He drains the whisky before he sets the glass on the mantelpiece next to the thick silver candlesticks that Kreacher hasn't polished in ages. Harry's starting to think Kreacher's forgotten they're there. "You can't just say 'I need to go back to London' and expect me to not ask a few fucking questions at some point."

Harry looks away, his elbows on his knees. He takes a drink, guilt roiling through his stomach. This is the man he'd thought he might possibly fall in love with. One day. "I know," he says after a moment. "You're right." He owes that to Jake at least.

"You've been blanking me, Harry James." Jake walks back over, sits beside Harry on the sofa. He's a big, warm presence, and Harry remembers what it was like at the beginning, how Jake
made him laugh for the first time in years, how he'd felt comfortable, cared for. Jake nudges him with an elbow. "Look, it's not that I don't know how fucked up you are when it comes to interpersonal relationships. I mean, Christ, no one who went through what you did as a kid wouldn't have issues and neuroses out the ass. I get that. Still think you ought to see a Mind Healer about some of it, though. You don't have to keep suffering just because some no-nosed jackass decided he wanted to go through you to rule the world."

Harry tries not to flinch. Jake's big into self-improvement and self-discovery, like all the Americans had been. The three months he'd spent in the New York office had been filled with water-cooler discussions about therapy sessions and the latest books on how to pull one's life together. Harry's too bloody British to be comfortable with that level of oversharing.

"But, Jesus, Harry, you can't keep shoving people away like this. Like me. Even Hermione's been worried about you."

"I didn't realise you were talking about me," Harry says, trying not to let his frustration show. He doesn't like it when his friends go behind his back; he knows he has problems trusting people, but frankly, this is part of the reason why.

"Not often, and I'm the one who firecalled her when you started not taking my calls." Jake clasps his hands between his knees and frowns at them. "Look, I'm just trying here," he says after a minute.

Harry knows he is, and he feels a shit.

They're silent. The fire crackles in the hearth; Harry can hear Kreacher's tuneless hum coming from the kitchen down the hall. He always does that when he's nervous or tense, which makes Harry certain Kreacher's eavesdropping.

"I don't even care," Jake says finally. "Whoever he is you just came back from fucking, I don't care." He looks over at Harry. "I've never cared. You know that."

Harry breathes out. He does. Jake's made it clear the entire time they've dated that it doesn't matter to him if Harry fucks around. As long as they're not in the same country, that's what their rule had been. Anything goes. Use the proper protection spells, keep it to yourself, don't fall into emotional ties, no harm, no foul. But Malfoy's felt different, this whole time. Malfoy's not a quick shag in the club loo, whatever this is between them might have started out being. Malfoy's got under Harry's skin, wormed his way into Harry's mind. It's not the same as what Jake expects it to be, and Harry knows it.

"Just don't fucking shut me out," Jake says, and he's leaning into Harry, touching Harry's cheek with warm fingers. "You owe me that at least."

"Jake," Harry says, and he turns towards him. There's so much he feels right now. Most of it's not bad. "I--"

The kiss is soft and warm, and Harry wants to pull away, but it's the familiarity of it that he sinks into. It'd been good with Jake in the beginning, and it's not Jake's fault, none of this is. It's all Harry and his sodding, unhealthy obsession with Draco fucking Malfoy.

Jake's hand slips into Harry's hair, fingers tangling in his thick curls, as he kisses Harry, pulling back ever so slightly between breaths before leaning in again to catch Harry's mouth with his. This is easy, Harry thinks, shifting closer, letting Jake push him back against the arm of the sofa. It always has been with Jake. Safe. Uncomplicated. He doesn't object when Jake ruches the hem of Harry's shirt up, his palm smoothing across Harry's heated skin. No one in his life would object to
Jake; no one would tell him he's lost his damned mind.

Maybe this is better for them all, Harry thinks. Maybe Malfoy's right. They're madness together, a violent, brutal collision of self-destruction and self-loathing. He closes his eyes as Jake kisses his way down Harry's throat, unbuttons Harry's shirt. Jake's conversant in Harry's body; after nearly two years he knows the precise touch that makes Harry's breath catch.

"There we go," Jake says against Harry's jaw, and Harry lets himself give in to the shudder that ripples through him. Being with Jake is effortless, the way it's always been. Perhaps it's what he needs right now. Perhaps it's always been what he needs. No complications. No angst. He doesn't need to think.

Harry sinks into the softness of Jake's kiss.

It's better this way, he tells himself.

He pretends he can't feel the lingering echoes of Malfoy's touch across his skin.

***

Late morning sunlight streams through the long, narrow-paned windows of Harry's bedroom. He winces against the brightness and rolls over.

Gold-blond curls peek out from beneath the duvet, and for a moment, Harry thinks it's Malfoy beside him in his bed, and he expects that plummy posh voice to tell him to stop tossing about, for fuck's sake, and to go back to bloody sleep. With a smile, Harry raises up on one elbow, that bubble of happiness popping when he sees a stubbled square jaw and broad muscular shoulders. He stills, last night coming back to him in a rush. Jake's hands on him, his mouth sliding over Harry's prick, his fingers digging into Harry's hips as he'd pressed him into the mattress, his cock sliding between Harry's thighs.

Fuck.

Harry falls back onto his side of the bed rubs his hands over his face. Fuck buggering wank. Christ, but he's a right bastard, isn't he? There's something tight and hard in his chest, a rough ball of self-hatred that's banging about inside him, letting him know exactly what a wanker he's been. He's angry with himself, with his weakness the night before. He'd thought this might fix things, that sleeping with Jake would bring him to his fucking senses, that he could shatter this mad infatuation with Malfoy.

It obviously hasn't, judging from his waking reaction. *Fuck*. He's no idea how he could mistake Jake for Malfoy. They're nothing alike, and what does that mean about his fucking psyche? God, Jake's probably right, as much as Harry's loath to admit it. He's nothing but a shitty mess of fucked-up neuroses, a veritable writhing mass of inhibitions and delusions with an utterly unhealthy dollop of obsession for a certain blond arsehole of an Auror. Harry throws off the duvet and sits up, shifting to the edge of the bed. He hunches his shoulders; his fingers grip the mattress tightly. How can he be so lost over someone who tells Harry flat-out that Harry's so bad for him?

He swears beneath his breath and reaches for his trousers. He shoves his feet into the legs, then stands and pulls them on in one smooth movement.

"Harry," Jake says from the bed, his throat thick with sleep.

This isn't what Harry wants, as much as he should. He's known that since he showed up in New York. He and Jake were great when they weren't living together, when Harry didn't have any expectations on him. Harry's not boyfriend material. Maybe he never has been. There's a string of
failed relationships behind him, after all, and he's not even twenty-six. Ginny'd been the first to tell him he was a shit boyfriend in her own gentle way. She'd been right. He'd loved her, or he'd thought he had at least, but he'd panicked at the idea of settling down, the way her family had thought they should. Harry doesn't do well in relationships, and he's even worse with shoulds. They terrify him, make him feel trapped. He's never lasted long in a relationship, not once they turn serious.

And he's angry, he realises. Not at Jake, not really. More at himself. He'd liked what they had in Luxembourg, the casual dating, the great sex. He'd only agreed to try out New York because everyone had assumed that was the obvious next step for them. Even Ron and Hermione'd agreed, urging him to go, telling him he'd regret it if he didn't make the attempt.

What Harry truly regrets is giving in to all of them. He regrets not listening to the anxieties that kept popping up every time he thought about uprooting his life for Jake, waking him up in the middle of the night with the worst panic attacks he'd had since the end of the war. He regrets ignoring the worries that made him do something utterly bloody mad like shag Malfoy in the Auror showers because he was looking for a way out.

"Fuck," he says, out loud this time, and he hears the rustle of sheets as Jake climbs out of bed. "Hey,"

Jake says, and when he puts his arms around Harry, Harry steps away.

"Don't." Harry still isn't looking at him. He doesn't want Jake here, he realises. Not in his house. Not any longer. What they'd done last night, well. It'd been a mistake. He's furious at himself now, in the light of day. He'd let his prick make decisions for him, and that's never a good thing. Look at where it's lead him, with Malfoy turning away, telling him they've an unhealthy arrangement.

Christ.

But he's not wrong, Harry thinks. An SIO and his junior officer. If Malfoy were a woman and anyone found out about them, Harry'd be called up before Professional Standards in a heartbeat and asked to turn his warrant card in. Why should it be any different because both of them are queer? Harry's overstepping his bounds as an inspector, and he bloody well knows it.

Malfoy's right. This isn't healthy.

Jake drops his arms to his sides. "All right," he says. "Do we need to talk?"

Harry knows he's a shit. He does. Everyone tries to wave his arsehole behaviour away, to justify it somehow. His friends, his superiors, the bloody fucking Prophet. They always have, because no one can think of their goddamned hero being broken the way Harry is. Even his best friends make excuses for him, tell him that he's just tired or worn out or dealing with the shitty hand life dealt him. Poor little orphaned boy, destined to die early himself, raised by family who hated and abused him, oh how terrible an existence he must have had. God, but Harry despises that narrative they've all bought into. That's why Malfoy's so intriguing to Harry. Malfoy's never tried to explain away Harry's being a prick. He just calls him a sodding git to his face and expects Harry to get over himself.

He craves Malfoy's scorn, Harry realises, and how bloody fucked up is that? There's the sign of a healthy relationship, yeah? He has a brilliant man standing behind him, telling him he wants him regardless of how much of a tit he's been, and what does Harry do? Decides it's better to be idiotically preoccupied with someone who thinks him the very definition of a fool, with someone who he knows he hasn't the slightest chance of a happy future with, someone who's just all-but told him he's toxic, someone Harry damned well knows he has power over, whether or not he wants to admit it. But the more Malfoy shoves him away, the more Harry wants him. Harry wants to laugh, a sharp, raging shout of bitter amusement that would shake the very foundations of this.
fucking house.

Instead he stares out the window onto the unkempt garden, filled with wild masses of peonies, pink and white and red splashed across the thick green lawn. If he had the slightest bit of common sense and self-preservation, he'd turn around and take Jake back to bed. He knows this. It would be smart thing to do. The responsible thing.

Harry can even hear Hermione's voice in his head, telling him not to play silly buggers, to do the right thing.

So he does.

"You need to find a hotel," Harry says, voice quiet. "I can't do this any more." Jake stills behind him. "Are you breaking up with me?"

Harry turns at that. Jake doesn't look angry; he looks sad and a bit worried. There's a part of Harry that thinks he's lost his mind. This man's been good for him in so many ways. His friends are going to hate him for this. But there's an odd freedom to saying, "Yeah. I think I am. I'm sorry." He's needed to say the words for weeks now; hearing them out in the open, hanging between himself and Jake, feels almost surreal. "I should've told you sooner, but I'm telling you now."

For a moment Harry thinks Jake's going to argue with him, then Jake sighs. "Is it the guy from last night?"

Yes. No. Not entirely. Harry doesn't know what to say. "I'm not ready for this," he manages instead. "Settling down. It's not me--"

"It could be," Jake says. He picks his clothes up from the floor between the bed and Harry's wardrobe. "You're just too scared."

"Maybe." Harry looks away as Jake dresses. For all his Gryffindor bravado, he's fairly certain Jake's right. Harry's more than able to stare down the wand of an evil twat like Voldemort; he's bloody terrified when it comes to the thought of spending his life with someone else.

Jake buttons his shirt. "Intimacy issues, Harry." His smile is wan and faint. "I'd hoped you'd learn to get over them."

Harry wants to apologise. He doesn't. It wouldn't be right, he thinks.

He lets Jake kiss his cheek. "I'd say adieu, Harry Potter," Jake murmurs. "But for now I'll leave it at à bientôt, mon ami."

Harry's throat hurts. It's what they'd always said to each other when leaving one another in Luxembourg. "À bientôt," he whispers. Christ, in the end this hurts far more than he thought it would.

Jake steps back. "My bag's still in the hall downstairs," he says. "I think it's better if I see myself out."

Harry nods. He watches as Jake strides out of the bedroom, his booted steps echoing down the corridor, then the staircase.

It's only when Harry hears the front door clang shut that his knees go out and he sinks to the floor, his head in his hands. He knows he's made the right choice. At least for now. Whatever anyone else might think. Their opinion on what's right isn't necessarily right for him, but he doubts Ron
and Hermione will see it that way. Harry doesn't care at the moment. He couldn't keep going on like this, couldn't keep promising Jake something he doesn't think he ever truly felt.

Still, it aches deep down inside.

"Master Harry," Kreacher says from the doorway, and there's a kindness to his croaking voice that Harry seldom hears. "Is you needing anything?"

Harry shakes his head. "I'm fine, thanks." If he says it with enough conviction, perhaps it'll be true.

Kreacher gives him a long, searching look, then he pops away. He's back a moment later with a steaming teacup in a saucer. He sets it down next to Harry on the floor, then he backs out of the room, silent.

"One of these days I really am going to give you a sock, whether you like it or not," Harry murmurs, but he picks up the teacup and blows across it. He can smell the firewhisky already; Kreacher doesn't believe in doing things by halves.

He takes a sip of the tea, then leans his head against the wall. At least it's only Sunday. He glances at the clock on his dresser. He has a full twenty-one hours to work himself into a raging hangover for the morning.

Harry lifts the teacup to his lips again.

Best get started now.

***

Draco's been in the incident room alone for half an hour before Potter shows up, looking like something one of the Manor Crups had chewed on then vommed back up on the sitting room floor. Draco's surprise at how shit Potter looks--or at least how much more shit than normal--startles him into talking to Potter, regardless of his resolve to continue his campaign of ignoring the twat. "What's up with you?" Potter just holds up a hand and winces. Draco only feels a bit sorry for him. "Haven't you ever heard of a hangover potion?"

"Didn't have any in the cupboard this morning," Potter says in a loud whisper. Even that makes him press his fingertips to his temple. The dark circles under his eyes are enormous. "Bloody hell."

Suppressing a wave of irritation at Potter's man-baby helplessness, Draco digs around in his desk drawer and pulls out the phial of hangover potion Pansy'd passed to him through Blaise two weeks ago, back when they weren't even certain they were going after Dolohov or a lookalike. "Drink up." He tosses it to Potter, who barely catches it. Draco frowns. It must have been some drinking session last night for Potter's Seeker reflexes to falter. "How much did you have?"

Potter quaffs half the phial in one gulp, then wipes the back of his hand across his mouth. "Never mix vodka and firewhisky is all I'll say." He drops the phial back on Draco's desk with a grimace. "Wretched stuff."

"It'll kick in soon enough." Draco wonders who Potter was drinking with. A frisson of jealousy shoots through him before he tamps it down. He doesn't give a fuck, really, and even if he did, Potter was probably drinking down the Leaky with Granger and Weasley. Draco wonders sometimes if Potter has any other friends.

Pansy wanders into the room, looking a bit more well rested than she had when Draco'd left the
office on Friday night. He suspects she's finally sleeping now that Blaise is awake. She drops into her chair and swivels it around to face Potter. "You look like complete Crup shit, guv," she says. Bless her and her tart tongue. She's always been Draco's favourite.

"Hangover." Draco ignores Potter's scowl. "Stupid prat drank vodka on top of his firewhisky."

"I did that once," Pansy says. She gives Potter a sympathetic look; Draco rolls his eyes. He remembers that night, and frankly, he thinks Pansy deserved it for being that stupid. Not that he'll ever say that, of course. He's not a fool. "Fucked me up for two days straight."

Potter just groans. "Don't tell me that."

The door to the incident room opens again; they all turn towards it.

"Well, look at the lot of you lazy sods," Blaise says from the doorway, leaning on a crutch. "Bloody wankers not able to do a damned thing without me?"

Pansy's already on her feet, flying across the room to throw herself against him. Blaise grunts and wobbles a bit. "You utter arsehole." She wraps her arms around his waist, holding him steady. "You shouldn't be here. What are you doing, you idiot? God, I missed you."

"Fuck that shit," Blaise says. "Didn't care what the Healers whinged about; I was going entirely mad in hospital. Between them hovering over me and my mother..." He shudders. "I couldn't spend another day there, so I insisted they release me this morning."

"You could have gone home to rest," Potter says, his voice dry.

Blaise grins. "They all may have thought I was on my way there. Mother'll probably have kittens when she realises I'm not going to show up." He lets Pansy help him across the room; when he drops into his chair, he grunts and leans the crutch against his desk. "Can't say I'll last the whole day, but I wanted to know what you've got. Also, is it me or does the guv look worse than I do?"

"It's you," Potter says.

"Sure about that?" Blaise eyes Potter. "From this angle it looks like Dolohov came back for seconds."

"You're a tit," Draco says. He's glad to see him though. The incident room's been too quiet, too different without Blaise in it.

Blaise rocks back in his chair, then winces, his hand going to his temple. "Okay?"

Pansy asks. The furrow between her brow deepens.

"Just a headache that doesn't entirely seem to want to go away." Blaise lets his hand drop. "It'll be fine. So fill me in. I think I've about an hour before Mother shows up in a fury, demanding to get past the front desk." Potter looks horrified by that, to Draco's grim pleasure. Blaise picks up a sugar quill and unwraps it, sticking it in his mouth. "I'm a blank slate, guv. Toss your shit theories my way."

Draco snorts. "Blank slate, my arse. I've already told him about the Abadzhiev file." "Read it, too." Blaise looks smug. "Potter brought it by on Saturday."

Potter shrugs when Draco glances over at him. "He was bored. I had a copy on me."
Draco shakes his head. "You're both fucking mad." He means it too, but his voice is a little sharper than he'd like. Pansy looks over at him, taking stock. Draco glances away. The last thing he wants is Pansy demanding to know what's up his arse today.

"I'm okay with that," Potter says lightly.

There's something off about him today, but Draco doesn't quite know what. It's almost as if he's happy, which annoys Draco, but there's a deep undercurrent of sadness as well. It's odd. Draco wants to pull Potter aside and demand to know what the hell he'd done on Sunday night to get so bloody blotto, but he doesn't think he has that right. Not after Saturday. Perhaps not ever. It's for the best, he tells himself. He almost believes it.

Potter walks over to the whiteboard and studies it. "So what we know now is that Dolohov and Luka Abadzhiev killed Dolohov's second cousin for some unknown reason."

"Looking for that," Draco says. He taps the stack of documents on his desk, ones that both he and Shah found worth looking into a little more deeply. "I'm hoping to uncover some deep family secrets this week."

Pansy snorts. "Good luck with that." At Potter's raised eyebrow, she shrugs. "I haven't found anything of note yet in the items Jonesey and I are testing. The potions are boring as fuck so far. Mostly remedies for the elderly, which I suppose makes sense if the house was Anichka Dolohova's. Trust me, there's only so many jars of Star Grass Salve I can validate."

"How many?" Potter asks. Of course he'd want to know, Draco thinks. Only Potter could find salves for the elderly interesting. A rush of bittersweet warmth goes through him, before he shoves it away. It won't do to feel attached to Potter. He's trying to break that addiction after all. Draco can't detox immediately, not whilst he's on the team, but he can at least build up walls. Draw boundaries, even if they're only for himself.

"Six so far." Pansy pulls her hair up from the nape of her neck and twists it into a loose knot, securing it with a hair tie from her wrist. "Honestly, how many sores was the old lady dealing with?"

Potter frowns, but he writes it down on the whiteboard. "It might be significant down the road."

"I bloody doubt it," Pansy says. Draco agrees. "Of more interest is what I found from Blaise's medical records." She looks over at Blaise. "Abadzhiev's garrote appears to have been made from cuttings from Devil's Snare wrapped around a razor wire, which would explain how he could attack with such precision. Even detached from the plant source, the cuttings still retain the magic that lets them tangle around human appendages. Nasty thing, especially since the garrote seems also to have been covered with some sort of paste that included spores from the Boletus gabretae mushroom." At Blaise's blank look, she sighs. "The shit Richard Thomas had on his hands."

"Oh." Blaise's hand goes to his throat. He's wearing a high collared jacket today, despite the warmth; Draco's certain he picked it to cover the scab that has to be still healing. Even dittany takes some time to work; he knows that from personal experience. "So you think they're harvesting it to use as a what? Poison?"

Pansy shifts in her chair. "I don't know. Maybe? Or he could have used it to clean the garrote. Or it could be nothing. I've no real data yet, just the connection between the spores on Thomas's hands and the spores St Mungo's flushed out of your wound."

Potter draws a line from the photo of the mushrooms to Blaise's name, which he's just written alongside Thomas's. "It's something to follow up on, I think." He nods towards Pansy. "See what
you can do, but get through the rest of the items from the Prague house first. Let's focus on that this week. I want anything that can give us even the faintest clue either of what these fuckers are up to or where Dolohov might have buggered off--"

"I still think he'll be under Abadzhiev's protection," Draco says. He's argued this with Potter before.

"And he probably is," Potter runs a hand through his hair, leaving it almost standing up on end. He looks idiotically attractive like that. "But we can't touch them yet, so I need hard evidence. We know Dolohov's working with the family, probably as some sort of enforcer." He turns back to the whiteboard. "So let's do the shit part of Auror work, yeah? Find us something--anything--that we can use to make a case for prying into the Abadzhiev organisation. We'll be working against what the Unspeakables want--they're running their own investigation, so our interference will be frowned upon--as well as the interests of countries where the Abadzhievs may have curried favour and influence with governmental agencies that could block us. The Czechs are already pushing back against our further involvement."

They all exchange a glance. "I still think Rohlicek was shady," Draco says, and Pansy shakes her head.

"You're mad."

Draco just shrugs. Something about the stocky Czech has stuck in his mind. He doesn't like that it'd taken Suková and Rohlicek so long to come down the alley behind him and Blaise. They'd only been a few steps behind; how hadn't they managed to stop Dolohov in time?

There's a knock on the door, and Bertie sticks his head in. "Mind if I borrow Malfoy?" he asks, and Draco glances over at Potter, feeling oddly uncertain. He doesn't want to leave; even with the tension between him and Potter, Draco feels safe in this room. Comfortable. He can tell by the look on Bertie's face that something's worrying him, and that unsettles Draco more than he'd like to admit.

Potter looks at Draco, eyebrow raised. "Fine by me."

Bertie jerks his head towards the hallway. "Come on then." He steps back, letting the door close behind him. Draco wonders what's going through the Auror office today; everyone seems to be a bit on edge. Except for Blaise, but he's just bloody thrilled to be back on duty, Draco thinks.

"We'll continue this," Draco says, standing. "I just think it's something to consider." "I'll put it on the whiteboard," Potter says with a half-smile as Draco passes by.

Bertie's waiting in the corridor when Draco closes the door behind him. He has a small rolled scroll in one hand, and he thrusts it towards Draco. "Walk and talk with me," he says. "Robards wants to see you."

Draco's stomach flips. That's never really been a good sign for him. He follows Bertie down the hall as he unrolls the scroll. It's his official exam results. Wax seal and all. Robards' signature is scrawled along the bottom.

"Congratulations," Bertie says, then he looks back at Draco. "Although you don't look surprised."

"I had a heads-up over the weekend," Draco admits. He's not about to tell Bertie from whom, but Bertie narrows his eyes at him, and Draco's fairly certain he has a good suspicion. He skims the rest of the parchment, his eyes widening. "They're giving me an interview at the end of the week." Shit. That hadn't been on Potter's copy. He'd thought it would take longer to schedule.
"Well," Bertie says, "good for you. Top of the scores, really. Only Althea and Michael Jungbluth ahead of you, which is pretty damn solid, boy." Bertie looks pleased. "Let me tell you, that was noted in our chief insep meeting this morning. Don't say anything to the others, though. The rest are finding out later this morning. I just asked Robards if I could tell you personally."

"Thanks," Draco says. He feels a bit guilty for not being more excited; he suspects Bertie wanted more of a reaction from him. "What about Shah?"

Bertie doesn't say anything, and Draco's heart sinks. He wants Shah to be in his sergeant's cohort. He needs a friend with him; he can't do this on his own. "Shouldn't say," Bertie says finally. "But yeah. He made the cut."

Relief sweeps through Draco. He hadn't realised how much he needs Shah at his side. Not until just now.

Bertie turns the corner; Draco follows. "Here's the hard part, lad." Bertie gives him an even look. "The Promotions Board isn't easy. They won't put you forward unless they think you deserve it, and there are Aurors on it who won't be supportive of your application. You know that, well as I do."

Draco nods. It's what wakes him up at night, stomach roiling. He knows one bad interview could tank his career, at least for a few more years until he's allowed to go up for a promotion again. "You'll help prep me?"

"I'll do what I can." They're almost at Robards' office now. Bertie draws up short, a hand on Draco's arm. "But you'd best be careful when you go before them. They're taking extra precautions with you." He looks almost angry.

That worries Draco. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see." Bertie starts towards the Head Auror's office again. "Just be prepared for anything."

Viola nods at them when they walk past her desk. "He's waiting for you," she says, and Draco can't help but wonder what the fuck's going on. He's nervous; he doesn't quite understand why he's being called in like this.

Bertie pushes the door open, but he doesn't go in. "Be careful," he says again, and there's a warning glint in his eye.

Draco steps into the Head Auror's office.

"Mr Malfoy," Robards says, and he stands up behind his desk as Draco comes closer. "Please, take a seat." He gestures towards the one empty chair in front of his desk; the other's taken by a man Draco doesn't recognise. He nods at him anyway.

"Sir." Draco sits on the edge of the chair; it's not very comfortable. He thinks Robards likes it that way.

"Congratulations on your test results," Robards says. He leans back in his chair, hands steepled, fingertips pressed against his mouth. "However, there's something the Promotions Board asked me to discuss with you when your name was put forward. Hence my calling you in before the others find out their results."

Draco shifts in the chair. There's no padding in it. He glances over at the other man; he's tall, with blond curls and broad shoulders. "Sir," he says again.
Robards clears his throat. "As you know, candidates for the rank of sergeant go before the Promotions Board in an interview. Part of the requirement for doing so is the need for the candidate to take a dosage of Veritaserum during part of the questioning. Not a large dose. But enough to last the final five minutes or so."

Draco relaxes. He knows where this is going now. He thinks, at least. "Yes, sir."

"Forgive me for being so blunt, Constable Malfoy," Robards says, "but I believe during your Veritaserum questioning after the war, it was discovered you have an allergic reaction to the potion?"

"Yes, sir." To say the least, Draco'd puffed up like a bloody hedgehog with the worst rash he'd had since infancy. They'd had to rush him to St Mungo's for an antidote, which had irritated the hell out of the Wizengamot barrister taking his deposition. "I believe it's in my file now."

Robards nods. "The Promotions Board has suggested that, given your allergy you be subjected to a Legilimins instead." The Head Auror looks apologetic, and Draco understands why. No one else would be asked to do that. Their interview would just be conducted without the use of any truth serum at all. It's a minor part of the process, not something to be reproduced by other means. Annoyance flares up in him, but he ignores it. This must have been what Bertie was worried about. Draco's not, not really. He's a damned good Occlumens himself, thanks to Snape and dear old Auntie Bella, a note of which has most definitely not been placed in his file. Draco's kept that particular talent quiet, the entire way through his Auror training, even going so far as to bollocks it up when his group had been exposed to a Legilimins in the classroom. Draco's not even certain Bertie knows, which would definitely explain his concern in the corridor.

"I think I could accept those terms, sir," Draco says, and relief flits across Robards' face.

"Good, good." Robards nods to the man in the other chair. "Jake Durant. He'll be your Legilimens for the interview."

Durant holds a hand out. "Hello, Constable Malfoy," he says in a decidedly American accent. It has a faint drawling lilt to it. "Nice to meet you."

"And you." Draco shakes his hand. He has a firm grip. Solid and strong. "I didn't realise we'd be going outside of the Ministry for interviewers, though."

"Jake's here to work with the Unspeakables for a few weeks," Robards says. "But I thought it might be good to pull him in for you. He's a damned good Legilimens. Has done work around the world, haven't you, Jake?"

Durant tilts his head; Draco gets the strong impression he's a bit embarrassed. "I've done a bit, sir." He glances over at Draco. "I do my best to be discreet and respectful with all my subjects. You don't have anything to worry about."

Ironically, Draco's not at all. He'll let Durant see just enough to satisfy him, but Draco's been trained by the best. He can hold an Occlumens for as long as he needs to. He'd had to, after all, to survive that year with the Dark Lord. That's why his aunt had trained him in the first place. Whilst Snape thought it was better to keep his adolescent brain as silent as possible around that megalomaniacal arsehole, Aunt Bella'd just wanted him, for the most part, not to humiliate her in front of the Dark Lord. Plus, they'd both promised his mother they'd teach him. Evidently no one around Draco thought he could manage to keep his thoughts under control. Then again, he was only seventeen and completely stupid, at that. Thank Circe the Dark Lord'd never found out about his wank fantasies over Potter. All hell would have broken loose in the Manor.
"Thanks," he says. Durant seems decent enough, he supposes, if a bit too familiar in that way all Americans seem to have.

Robards leans forward, his elbows on his desk. "I've filled Jake in on your special circumstances." At Draco's raised eyebrow he says, "Your war background."

"I assumed." Draco turns back to Durant. He supposes he ought to be irritated, and he is, slightly. Still, it's not as if his stint with the Death Eaters will go unremarked upon in his interview. He's not that bloody lucky to begin with, and if Bertie's to be believed, at least one of the five-member Promotions Board'll want him sacked, if not them all. "I hope that won't be an issue for you."

Durant doesn't seem fazed. "You were young and stupid. We all did crazy things when we were teenagers. I grew up in New Orleans. You wouldn't want to know the sort of things we played around with in summer vacations. Let me just say you don't want to piss off a rougarou."

Somehow Draco doesn't quite think that equates to blindly supporting a prick of a Dark Lord, but fine. He'll let the Yank think he can relate to Draco. Durant's more bloody earnest than Potter, which is disconcerting in a way. At least Potter has a bit of an arsehole edge to him. This bloke's too nice, Draco thinks. He's practically a Hufflepuff; it'll be ridiculously easy to pull the wool over him.

He looks back at Robards. "Was there anything else, sir?"

"Just my congratulations," Robards says. "I like to give it personally to the top five candidates." He smiles at Draco. "Of which you are one."

The praise feels good; Draco gets it so seldom. He wonders if this is what it's like for Althea all the time, with the higher-ups constantly praising her devotion to the job. No wonder she's a fucking twat. Draco thinks he might be too if people didn't call him a conniving shit most of the time. Maybe he should be grateful for that; a little bit of verbal abuse each week keeps him grounded and stable. He wants to laugh, but he doesn't dare.

"Thank you, sir," Draco says, and he stands up. "If I may?"

Robards waves him away. "Off with you, lad. I'm sure your team needs you at the moment."

They probably don't, but Draco feels as if it might be imprudent to point that out. He nods to Durant. "I'll be delighted to be working with you." Again, a bald-faced lie, but he might as well be polite.

Durant smiles, and his bright blue eyes crinkle at the corners. He's attractive, Draco thinks, in a very in-your-face way. He's not quite Draco's type, but Draco also doesn't think he'd kick him out of bed at the same time. "I'll try not to probe too deeply," he says, with a quick wink, and damned if Draco isn't quite certain that the man's flirting with him.

It throws Draco off for a moment, and he feels his face heat.

Robards saves him, "Thank you for your time, Constable. I believe your letter has the date and time for your interview."

"Friday morning, yes." Draco turns his attention back to Robards. It's hard; there's something rather magnetic about Durant that makes it difficult to look away from him. It's not Veela blood like Blaise; it's something Draco doesn't recognise, but he finds intriguing.

"Excellent," Robards says. "I wish you luck then."
It's a dismissal, that much is clear. Draco risks one last, lingering look at Durant, then he turns on his heel and makes his way out, closing the door behind him.

"All's well?" Viola asks, and Draco nods. She grins at him. "That Yank's easy on the eyes, isn't he?"

Draco feels a bit disloyal to Potter, but he nods. "If you go for blonds." Viola's teeth flash at him. "Oh, but I do, Constable Malfoy. I very much do."

Her laugh drifts behind him as he sets back towards the incident room. He's feeling light on his heels today, his heart buoyed in ways it hasn't been in days. Things might be off with Potter, but he has Blaise back by his side and a sergeant's interview a few days away.

Life, he thinks, is definitely on the mend.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic! Next chapter will be up between April 27-28!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Blaise is tired of everyone fighting, Harry and Ron catch up, and Draco has a formal interview with the Promotion Board. With Legitimacy, of course.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter is a GIGANTIC 31K. I know I left you all on a cliffhanger, but this one turned out to be a bigger ride than even I expected. The rollercoaster is careening downhill. Please buckle in! (Also a warning for brief mentions of past child abuse.)

Huge thanks again to my betas, noeon and sassy_cissa, for the ridiculous amounts of time they spent helping me get this whopper of a chapter ready for you wonderful people. <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Blaise walks into the incident room on Wednesday afternoon, it's immediately apparent that Pansy and Draco aren't speaking. In fact, they're sitting on opposite sides of the room, Draco messaging about with a box of evidence whilst Pansy fiddles with her mobile, flipping it open and closed and looking anywhere but over at Draco's paper-strewn desk.

Blaise resists the urge to roll his eyes, mainly because his head hurts too damned much. He's just had Healers poking and prodding him for hours, only to suffer that bastard Irskine telling him that the pain's just a side effect of the materials and spells he was exposed to and he should get better soon. But of course, they've no idea if that's actually true; Blaise could tell by the way Irskine's gaze slid to one side when he was talking. He's just glad he'd forbidden his mother from coming along this morning. She'd have had Irskine's bollocks served up on her best bone china for his vague attempts at soothing Blaise's worries, and Blaise really doesn't want to have to arrest his own mother for assault on a Healer. She'd never forgive him for one, and he knows damned well how long Olivia Zabini can hold a grudge.

He drops into his chair with a sigh. At least he's been relieved of using that stupid crutch. "You do realise," he drawls, "the two of you are acting like my mother and her fourth husband. You really should stop." He sprawls back in the chair, in a vain attempt to relieve the pressure in his head. "It's beyond tedious."

They both look at him then, Pansy with a guarded but amused quirk of her eyebrow, the expression on Draco's face still a bit outraged-tosser-arrogant at first, then fading into a fond, if faint, smile. Merlin, but if Blaise knew that being wounded in the line of duty would give him carte blanche to say whatever the hell he felt like to his best friends, he might have thrown himself in front of a curse or two long before last week.

"Wasn't the fourth one the diamond dealer who found himself floating face down in a canal?" Pansy asks delicately. She's aware that Blaise can be, shall we say, a bit sensitive about the details
of his mother's rather complicated personal life and the questionable manner in which some of her relationships have ended, and he applauds her caution.

"No, that was Uncle Johan." Blaise shakes his head, then regrets it immediately as his brain protests. "Mother never married him." Thank Circe. Johan had been a bit of a drunk, which was how he'd ended up in the canal anyway, or so the Amsterdam Aurors had determined. Mother swore she had nothing to do with that one, and Blaise tended to believe her. Johan wasn't incredibly popular with some of his more unsavory acquaintances. "I was thinking of the actor, Russell Bell. They were always shouting at each other, then disappearing for hours for Merlin only knows what--and neither do I because no one wants to think of what their mother might be getting up to on her own." He points a finger between the two of them. "You know this trouble isn't going to last, so why not stop faffing about now?"

"How is your mother?" Pansy sits down in the chair next to him, eyeing him. "Is she still in a suite at the Beaumont?"

Draco doesn't say anything, but he rolls his chair a bit closer as well, a sheaf of papers in his hand, and Blaise supposes that's progress. Honestly, the two of them can be such stubborn idiots. Pansy'll get over herself, and so will Draco, once he pulls his head out of his arse and realises that Pansy's only worried about him, even if she has a shit way of showing it.

"Yes, and she's being a bloody nuisance," Blaise says, glancing at the door to make sure it's shut. He doesn't want anyone to know he's being disloyal, least of all Olivia, and she has spies everywhere. The number of political connections his mother maintains is ridiculous, even if they do come in handy from time to time. "She won't let me go back to my flat. I'm to stay where she can hover over me at all times until some unspecified date in the future."

"Rough luck," Pansy commiserates, looking faintly envious. He feels a twinge of guilt. Pansy's relationship with her parents is difficult at best. They'd wanted a polite, proper daughter to marry off into another pureblood family--preferably the Malfoys, like that was going to ever happen even if Draco wasn't bent as a butcher's hook--and ended up with a brilliant, beautiful hellion who refused to be controlled by them. Fuck the Parkinsons, he thinks, if they don't know how incredible their girl is. Wankers. Pansy brushes a lock of hair back behind her ear. "That must be horrid," she says, "what with the in-room from the grill and the spa services."

"I'd rather be home than with Mother in Mayfair. I miss my flat. And my peace." Blaise considers. "Although the shoulder massages have been rather spectacular. And I'm allowed fish now--the kitchen does a brilliant salmon."

Pansy's reply is lost in the slam of the door against the wall--Blaise raises a hand to his head reflexively as he winces at the bang--and Potter bursts into the room. As his team watch him, heads carefully cocked so as not to miss a detail of what promises to be an epic Gryffindor snit, Potter tosses a file jacket across one of the empty desks. It skids off and explodes into papers that drift to the floor in slow arcs. Potter throws himself into the nearest chair, legs wide, muscular arms folded tight across his chest. He's fairly fuming, fury radiating off him in waves.

What a twat, Blaise thinks. No different from the Harry Potter they'd known at Hogwarts, a loose cannon ready to go off at the slightest provocation--usually instigated by Draco, if Blaise is honest. Really, the two of them have been circling each other since first year; Blaise supposes he shouldn't be surprised that they'd finally ended up shagging each other senseless. Greg'd predicted it years ago, but they'd all laughed at him, poor bastard. Blaise reminds himself to send Greg a decent bottle of whisky later. He bloody well deserves it for that bit of divination. For the nonce, Blaise risks a glance at Draco, who's back to studying his papers, rather than Potter. Blaise frowns. That's interesting as well.
"Wrightson's a sodding enormous arse," Potter informs the room and anyone who might be listening down the hall. Draco stands and pointedly closes the still vibrating door with a disapproving scowl on his face. Potter ignores him in favour of slumping in his chair, swiveling it back and forth in a way that makes Blaise a bit nauseous to watch.

Pansy waits a beat. "Did Robards take the case from us?" Blaise sits forward with a frown. This is news to him. He hates that his daily visits to St Mungo's keep him further out of the loop than he'd like.

Potter snorts. "No. Not that Wrightson didn't try to get him to. He's having bloody kittens about-- how did he put it? 'A bunch of sodding Slytherins going after one of their own.'" Potter makes air quotes with his fingers as he speaks, his voice rising. "And for fuck's sake, Gawain, are you mad? They're obviously biased and incapable of conducting a proper investigation, Potter's questionable leadership be damned. The WPS agrees." Potter bares his teeth. "Wanker."

Blaise sits up, ignoring the rush of dizziness in his head. "What the fuck?"

"My reaction exactly," Potter says. "Although I'm sure he has at least one of the WPS barristers on his side. He wouldn't have said that to Gawain if he didn't. Christ, they're all stupid fucks." He catches himself. "Bulstrode excepted."

"She's on defence," Pansy says. "But I'd guess it's Carstairs or Oliver backing that arsehole up. Millie says they're awful."

"Did Robards actually listen to that drivel?" Blaise is outraged. Not that he should be surprised, he supposes. Wrightson really is a right arse, everyone knows that. Especially with the recent *Prophet* feature on the potions busts. It happens every bloody time. A bit of publicity and the next thing you know he's swanning about, acting as if he's Robards' heir apparent. The shit. And of course he'd want a high-profile case like this now. If they hadn't found Dolohov alive, no one would even look twice at it, but they had, and now Wrightson obviously wants a Death Eater capture to his credit.

"Not entirely." Potter's thick fingers drum against the arms of his chair. "We're still in charge of the case, but now we've got to share our evidence and our reports."

Draco starts. "What?"

Potter looks at Draco then, and the look on his face is, for the briefest moment, wide-eyed and open, like a nocturnal animal unexpectedly caught in the flare of a Lumos. Whatever's going on between them right now, Potter's still hung up on Draco, that much is clear. Blaise can see everything he needs to see, and he feels a bit sorry for the guy. When it comes to Draco, Potter's in over his head.

Potter looks away again, this time at the pile of papers on the floor, his mouth twisted. "Wrightson's going to have his team go over the material evidence and look for related crimes, see if they can scare up anything we might have missed. If they don't find anything, they're to move on to cold cases."

"When do we have to share?" Blaise asks.

"Monday. Everything needs to go back to Lipman in Evidence to be logged by then. Files, artefacts, even our reports." Potter shifts in his chair and glances over at Blaise. "I'm afraid the details of your attack and medical treatments are going to be included. I'm sorry."

Blaise waves a dismissive hand, mirroring a gesture he's seen his mother perform hundreds, if not
Blaise only realises the immense inappropriateness of that comment when he looks into the green eyes of Harry James Potter, Official Saviour of the Bloody Damned Wizarding World himself, and thinks, shit, this is the guv. His gaze flicks to the scar on Potter's forehead. Rumors have it he was supposedly a Horcrux, too. Of the Dark Lord, or so Rita Skeeter's reported more than once. Really, Potter's all but confirmed it, back in their first discussions of Dark magic as a team, and don't think all of them haven't filed that bit of information away. Not many other ways to interpret him saying he'd spent years with the Dark Lord in his head, Blaise thinks. Fuck. And here Blaise is cracking jokes about it like an insensitive twat.

Potter surprises him by bursting out laughing. "Good one." He regains his composure, clearly ruffled but less angry now. The tension's gone out of the room, just like that. Blaise feels Pansy and Draco relax at his side. He's missed this, missed them all, even missed bloody Potter. The pounding in his head fades, for a moment, and Blaise thinks maybe it's all going to be all right. Potter sits up, his elbows on the desk in front of him. "Anyway. Shared files and all that tripe. If nothing else it'll shut Wrightson up for a bit. Remember, though, you lot are the primary case Aurors. Don't let anyone on his team act otherwise. If they do, I want to know." He looks at each of them. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, guv," Pansy says, and Potter nods.

"And fuck them," Potter says bluntly. "It's our case. We're going to bring Dolohov in, and Wrightson can take his sodding prejudices about Slytherin House and stick them up his arsehole for all I care. You're still my team." He glances at Draco. "All of you."

Draco just looks away. Blaise has a distinct urge to slap him with a file jacket, just for being a twat. He represses it. Potter and Draco can work their shit out themselves, he thinks.

"Where are we on the active traces?" Blaise hasn't seen any of the new material since the Abadzhieff files. They were talking yesterday about something involving Prague and the Czech Auror records, but he doesn't remember the details. Things are still a bit fuzzy from time to time. Irskine says that'll fade too within some unknown and indeterminate schedule, which only makes Blaise want to deck him. He knows it's unreasonable--Healers always hedge their bets with vague predictions about patient progress--but he doesn't really care.

"According to the shared MLE reports from Luxembourg, there've been reported sightings all over Europe," Draco says. He tilts his head; the faint purplish shadows under his eyes become more noticeable at this angle. He's not sleeping well, Blaise thinks. Draco's always had a touch of insomnia when it comes to stressful events; he hadn't slept at all for two days before their OWLs. "Several of them are impossible, of course, on the level of the Quibbler article about the Dark Lord herding reindeer in Lapland."

"That picture had far too many nostrils in it not to be faked," Pansy says, and the Slytherins all trade amused looks whilst Potter quirks a smile. It's good to be able to laugh, Blaise thinks. It's not really that funny, but they find humour where most people would find devastation. You have to in this line of work. It's the only way to keep going on sometimes.

"But the reports from France seemed credible, as did the Amsterdam sighting," Draco says. Potter's eyes follow Draco, who looks away, covering his face with a fall of blond hair. Potter's expression is shuttered, difficult to read. Still, his gaze lingers on Draco a bit too long. Blaise wonders if Draco's told him that they know about the two of them, or if Potter's just unconcerned about being discreet. It must be the latter. Potter's too much of a Gryffindor not to challenge them.
if he thinks they're aware of this—Blaise hesitates to call it a relationship. The last one Draco'd been in had been shit, after all. They don't talk about Nicholas, any of them, but his memory lingers, like the stink of rubbish on a hot day. Whatever Draco and Potter are doing is different, Blaise thinks. He worries, of course he does. And he thinks it bloody fucking stupid of both of them. But no one who looks at Draco the way Potter does is going to hurt Draco like Nicholas did.

Or at least Blaise hopes not. He doesn't want to have to punch Harry sodding Potter in the face, after all. That'd look bloody brilliant in the Prophet, wouldn't it? He'd have a snowball's chance of his own future promotion then.

But Draco's also being determinedly difficult this week when it comes to Potter, and Blaise has been on the other end of that icy dismissal before. To be honest, it's hard not to empathise with the guv, even though he's being a damned fool in Blaise's opinion. Hell. They both are.

"Wasn't there also something about Frankfurt, or did I dream that?" Pansy slouches a little in her chair. Blaise can tell she wants to get back to the lab. She's been unsettled in every team meeting they've had since he'd come back. He supposes it's because of whatever's going on between her and Draco. He's getting tired of all of them, really. His head aches again, and he wonders if shouldn't just bag it for the day and go home. Except home's not an option, thanks to Olivia, and as much as he loves his mother, he can't bear to stay the whole day in her hotel suite. He doesn't want to end up smothering her with a bathrobe, even if the Beaumont's are delightfully plush.

God, they're all driving him around the twist. Every last one of them.

"That one wasn't likely," Potter said. "The source had called in a false report before, and it was only a partial anyway. Nothing substantiated according to the German force." Potter turns to Draco directly. "What have you got, Malfoy? Anything we need to take care of this week for you?"

The unspoken assumption hangs in the air that Draco will be focusing on Friday's interview. Blaise can't tell how Draco's feeling about that, although his prickliness suggests he's getting nervous. Good, Blaise thinks privately. It means Draco won't go in too cocky and bollocks the whole thing up the way he sometimes does when he's certain he has it in the bag. A nervous Draco is a cautious Draco, and to be frank—and a bit selfish—Blaise can't afford Draco to have a poor showing. He aims to be next after Draco's tested the waters, and Draco's overconfidence could wreck both their chances.

Draco holds Potter's gaze for a moment, then looks aside. "There's nothing important. I do have some things to show Pansy—little things that could be relevant."

"Well, what do you have?" Potter's calm tone is belied by the stiff way he's holding his body. A muscle in his jaw clenches.

Draco stand up and walks over to one of the side desks, taking a box from the table and opening it up. "Honestly, the most interesting was this book. When I look at it, it seems squidgy. I'm sure it's Dark."

He pulls out a small, leatherbound volume that Blaise immediately knows is old—the gold is worn and the spine is all but illegible. Blaise gets an odd sort of premonition as Draco is talking, as if he knows what's in the volume already. But that's nonsense—he ascribes it to his headache, or perhaps the potions they'd given him forrecovery.

"I can't tell what it's written in—I can't read it." Draco holds the book out, open. "There are margin notes in what looks like Czech, but the main text is terribly odd. Hebrew, maybe? Or some sort of
Runes? I know it's not Cyrillic."

Everyone leans forward cautiously, peering into the thin ivory pages with odd black scrawled letter forms. Blaise has a flash of recognition.

"That's Enochian, Draco." Blaise feels the hackles on the back of his neck rise. "May I suggest that you put that damned thing back right now?"

Without hesitation, Draco settles it back into the box carefully, looking at his hand, then wiping it on his trouser leg. Thank Merlin.

"Should I ask how you know this?" Potter eyes Blaise speculatively.

"It's the language of angels," Blaise says. "Or so some claim. John Dee among them." Potter frowns. "The necromancer?"

"Paying attention in History of Magic, were you?" Blaise's tone is sharper than he means it to be. He can't help himself. The sight of those scribbles set him on edge. "My mother knows how to read this; she has a book or two in her library written in it. I can make out some words, but she's pretty fluent at the language." He doesn't add that she was trained in it as a young child and had only taught him a handful of vocabulary for protective purposes, as a caution against potential necromancy. There are some things about his mother's family he'd rather not share.

Draco and Pansy are trying not to show alarm, to no avail. They know what his mother's specialties are like, and none of them are for the uninitiated. Blaise thinks they have a failure of imagination. He adores his mother, but she's not someone to cross. None of his relatives are. Blaise worries sometimes that he's going to turn into one of them. He's a bastard, sure. He's willing to accept that. But he won't be like them. He can't let himself.

Potter nods. "Parkinson, please take the book to the lab and make sure it's free of curses and the like. We'll ask Olivia Zabini for help after you've examined it." Draco wraps the book in an evidence bag and puts it back into the box that he then seals shut. Potter glances over at Blaise. "If you've no objections?"

Blaise shrugs. "We have to do what we have to do, I suppose. Mother'll be fine with it." He hopes at least. She's never been thrilled with the Aurors, for good cause. He thinks he can get her to help for his sake, but knowing his mother, she might refuse flat out. Whatever. He'll cross that bridge if they have to.

Pansy takes the box from Draco gingerly. "Right, guv. I'll have a report by tomorrow, sooner if there's anything big."

After she walks out of the incident room. Draco turns and faces Blaise. "You all right?" Blaise waves a hand again. "I'm fine."

Draco doesn't look convinced, but he glances at the clock on the wall and swears. "I'm expected in Bertie's office."

"Off with you then," Potter says, but he's pulling together the pile of papers from the file jacket he'd thrown earlier instead of looking at Draco.

For a moment, Blaise thinks Draco's going to protest, but instead he stands up and grabs his jacket off the back of his chair. "I'll be back later."
"Whenever's fine." Potter flips open the file jacket and starts sorting the contents into it. "Your interview comes first. We'll handle things here."

Draco walks out, his back ramrod stiff. Well, that's not a great sign, Blaise thinks, particularly when Draco slams the door behind him. Blaise winces again. Fuck, that hurt a bit.

Potter sets the file jacket down, frowning at the door. It takes him a moment before he seems to realise Blaise is still sitting in front of him. He looks back over, and his scowl deepens. "And you," Potter says. "You really shouldn't be here, you know. In the office, I mean. You need more rest."

Blaise clutches at his chest, miming being wounded. When Potter looks alarmed, he stops and straightens up. "I really am fine, guv. I need to talk to Shah about what the other Aurors are saying--it might help us suss out Wrightson's next move."

Potter heaves a sigh, reluctance written across his face. "Fine. Permission granted. But please go home soon. Your mother's fucking terrifying, and I don't know if she'll take kindly to me wearing you out."

Blaise hides a quick grin. He doesn't envy Potter, that's for damned certain. He wouldn't want to lead a team of Slytherins, particularly with Draco narked off like this. A sullen Malfoy is dangerous, Blaise knows from personal experience, particularly when Draco's so obviously conflicted about whatever bloody feelings he's experiencing--whether about Potter or the coming interview. Blaise isn't sure it matters. Draco's not the most stable when he's uncertain. Blaise wishes Draco would talk to him—or Pansy even. Anyone. It's clear he needs to, but Draco can be a stubborn prick when he wants to be, and Blaise suspects Draco's convinced himself that Pansy's furious with him and that Blaise needs to be coddled, so he'll manage this quagmire of emotions on his own. Idiot.

As for his own mother, Blaise wouldn't want to face down Olivia in Potter's shoes. If she gets angry, he's going to wish he'd fallen in the Battle of Hogwarts. Nice, easy death in combat is great compared to what Olivia Zabini is capable of. Blaise holds his palms up in surrender. "Just a cuppa or two and a chat, and then I'll leave for the day. Promise."

He leaves Potter in the incident room, lost in his own head. So that's how it is, Blaise thinks, and he's just as glad he hasn't had to see things between Potter and Draco unravel this past week. No matter how unpleasant St Mungo's was, this is worse.

There aren't any potions for a broken heart, after all

***

Pansy's just finished checking the protective spells on the box of materials from Anichka Dolohova's house that Draco'd handed over in the incident room yesterday afternoon when a dry cough comes from behind her, near the doorway.

"Give me a moment, Jonesey," she says without looking up from the heavily annotated, oddly printed book in her hands, the one Draco'd shown them yesterday and Blaise had identified as being in Enochian. There's still something about it she doesn't trust; she's in gloves and glasses with a Protego up and ready to activate if anything funny happens. "But keep behind the blast zone this time, please."

"It's just me," Draco says, and Pansy looks over. He's hovering by the door as if unsure how to read her.
Good, Pansy thinks, let him wonder. It's not that she's truly furious with him--they've been friends too long for that and each done too many awful things to count. It's more that she's horribly disappointed in him for his persistently terrible taste in men, although she's not allowed to talk on that front either, if she's being honest. Not after her disastrous affair with Tony. But still, Potter, of all people? Draco's always been more than a bit self-destructive in the relationships he seeks out, if this one can even be called that. From all she can tell, Draco's just fucking Potter, nothing more, and that's what Pansy bloody well objects to. If it's just sex he wants, Draco could get himself off with anyone. Choosing Potter as a fucktoy puts them all in danger, most of all Draco himself, which makes Pansy want to throttle him. Draco's better than that, for Circe's sake, whatever he might think.

She shakes her head slightly, pretending to be focused on a line of scraggly Czech writing scrawled beneath a photograph that's taped across the page. "What do you want?"

"Potter asked me to check in." Draco moves closer, carefully, as if she's a Hippogriff he doesn't want to spook. "How's things?"

Well, if he wants to play it professional, Pansy can do that. "Fine." She glances at the artefacts spread across her bench. "You were right about most of these. The measurements of Dark magic were off the scale for some of them." She holds up the book. "This even shows high traces, which is odd. I haven't been able to find any hexes or curses on it."

Draco eyes the photograph on the page. "Is that Scotland?" His voice is low, pitched carefully in case anyone else is listening in. It's a habit they all picked up in the Slytherin common room that tends to come in handy whilst working in magical law enforcement. Really, Wrightson and his lot are complete morons, Pansy thinks. The best Aurors don't come from bloody Gryffindor House, Potter potentially excepted. She's still on the fence about him at times.

Pansy looks down at the volume in her hands, letting her eyes focus on the stretch of shimmering water between two sloping mountainsides. "Loch Leven, if I'm not mistaken. The one near Hogwarts, not Kinross. Remember that awful walking tour Mother made me do in summer to get ready for school? She was certain I'd wander off the grounds and get lost in the Highlands."

"Not taking into account your aversion to any place that doesn't have proper plumbing." Draco smiles at her, and when Pansy glances over, she is momentarily disarmed. He looks tired, dark circles under his eyes ill-concealed by charms. He has the too-bright aura of sleeplessness about him. Draco always gets more focused, more alert and sharp without sleep. It's not good for him; it never has been. He winds himself tighter and tighter until he finally snaps, taking out most everyone in his general vicinity.

"Nature's quite overrated. I'd prefer a cosy hotel with a decent bar, any day." Pansy's never told Draco that her mother's worry was mostly that Pansy would lose her temper and run away again, the way she had twice the year before Hogwarts. What Camilla Parkinson hadn't taken into account was that Pansy was running from her more than anything else, and once she'd settled at Hogwarts there wasn't any need to escape. She had friends to assuage her loneliness and a gulf of nearly five hundred miles between school and her Norfolk home. For the first time in years Pansy'd been able to calm herself, without the scoldings and disapproving frowns. Even now she keeps her distance from her mother. It's easier, she thinks.

Pansy flips to another page in the book. There's what looks like a crude map at the top of one page, then paragraphs of Enochian scribbling before a sketch of a small eight-faced object, tilted on its axis.

"This is what I think is strange."

"I'll bite." Draco nods towards the picture. "Any clue what that is?"
"Actually, yes." Pansy reaches along the line of artefacts spread in front of her and picks up a small obsidian stone, turning it between her gloved fingertips. It glints and gleams in the light, deep scores etched in its surface. "This was in one of my evidence boxes, and I think it matches it." She holds it against the sketch; the angles line up. "No idea what it actually is. Could be just a bauble of some sort, but I haven't gotten around to testing the magical signature to see if it's putting off anything Dark. Probably won't until tomorrow, if I have to sort through all this shite." She sets the stone back down and looks mournfully at her bench. "The problem is I can't verify what might have belonged to Dolohov himself or to Anichka and her family." She glances over at Draco. "You know at some point we're going to have to release some of this back to the daughter and her husband. Arcturus has already had a complaint from the Czech authorities on their behalf."

"Potter can deal with that," Draco says absently. He studies the stone, eyes flicking back to the book. "When are you going to call Olivia in? I'd like to know what that says."

Pansy closes the book. "Like the guy said, when I'm certain she won't be affected by it. I can't believe you just had it sitting in a box on your desk for a week." The look she gives him is pointed. "Bloody mad idiot."

"Half the Manor would have broken your instruments," Draco points out. "Besides, I kept the sealing charm on the box while it was on my desk."

She knows he has a point. Still, there's protocol to be followed. Pansy sets the small, well-used volume carefully within the lower half of a large, black shielded case, then waves her wand. "Colloarcus." She removes her glasses and sets them near the buckled case, then faces Draco again, leaning slightly on her lab bench.

"So why'd you really come down here?" Pansy keeps her voice neutral, watching the movements of Draco's face carefully. "You could have just waited until our meeting this afternoon."

Draco shifts and sticks his hands in his pockets. He's too thin, she thinks, his cheekbones more strikingly angular than usual, his jaw sharper. She can understand why Potter is willing to break several rules for him: Draco is absolutely stunning in an odd, quirky way, and he really has no idea exactly how ethereal he is. But Pansy only sees her old friend standing in front of her, looking nervous and awkward and so very, very tired, and she can tell he's more worn out, more worried than usual. The last remnants of her anger at him slip away.

"Out with it," she says with a sigh. "There's something you need to talk about."

A faint smile quirs Draco's mouth. "Can't put one past you, can I?" He seems to relax a little.

"Not really, no." Pansy eyes him, then glances back towards the office she shares with Jones. "Is it something you can talk about here?" Draco's hesitation is her answer. She strips off her gloves and bins them. "All right then. Buy me lunch and we'll talk. I'm feeling the need for a falafel mezze from the Trafalgar Square Pret." It's their favourite lunch spot outside of the Ministry, only a few streets away but virtually isolated from most of their co-workers who'd never consider venturing into the Muggle shops circling Nelson's Column for food. Ironic, Pansy thinks, given the fact that the Slytherins are usually the ones accused of hating Muggles.

It only takes her a moment to change out of her scrubs and into a white silk blouse and dark trousers still hanging in her locker, both of which are appropriate enough to stroll down Whitehall without bringing on too much notice. She leaves her hair twisted up. It's easier than fussing with it.

"Back soon, Jonesey," she shouts into their shared office. Jones doesn't even look up from his microscope; he just waves her away.
Draco's silent until they're well shot of the Ministry, walking down the wide, flat pavement. Whitehall's filled with Muggle civil servants hurrying past on their lunch break and tourists snapping photos as the red, double-decker buses roll by. It's a glorious day, a perfect start to June, unusually bright and cloudless, and Pansy lifts her face up into the warmth of the sunshine.

"They're going to have a Legilimens on the exam tomorrow," Draco says finally, strolling along beside her. "Because of my reactions to Veritaserum."

Pansy stops in the middle of the pavement, causing a group of small Scottish schoolchildren to stream by them on both sides, chattering on about devolution. "Oh shite." She can't think of anyway to be polite about it. "You're buggered, aren't you?" At Draco's elegantly arched eyebrow, she adds, "I mean, more in a professional than a literal sense. But seriously, if they see that you're covering for--"

"They shouldn't." Draco starts walking again. Pansy follows him. "Not if I'm careful."

Pansy allows herself a head shake, mainly because she's still a bit behind him and he won't see. "Draco, you're not registered as an Occlumens, are you?" She lowers her voice, just in case. "I mean, it's nowhere in your files, the training?"

He looks over then, grey eyes narrowed. "Do you honestly take me for a fool?"

"Stop being a tit." Pansy gets so irritated when he willfully misunderstands her. "I mean, they're going to know one way or another. They'll either know you're blocking and that you're an Occlumens, or they'll find out about Potter and well, that won't be pretty either."

"Or they're going to think I'm a secret Death Eater, sent to disrupt the Ministry." Draco cracks a wry, chilly smile. "There's always that possibility as well."

She waves the darkness of that thought away. "Oh they already think that, darling. About all of us. You know it as well as I do."

Draco rubs at his arm then, the one he'd defaced where the Mark had been. Pansy doesn't think that he knows he does it, but it's one of his tells. His sleeves are rolled down today, silver cuff links closing them off at his wrists, but she knows exactly where the scar tissue is, those long, slick stripes that mar the smooth skin of his forearm. "'No one is going to find out anything I don't want them to," Draco says firmly.

Pansy's sceptical about that; Draco sometimes thinks he's far more capable of controlling the unpredictability of life than anyone actually could be. "Who is this Legilimens? An Unspeakable? Because if that's the case, you ought to put in a complaint." She's upset, more than she's letting on. A Legilimens could be biased, could entirely make up what they find in Draco's warped little mind, and she wouldn't put it past anyone the Unspeakables would send. Pansy's learnt not to trust anyone, particularly most of her colleagues in the Ministry. She's spent too damned many years ignoring their barbed comments and sly glances. "They could be setting you up--"

"He's American." Draco cuts her off. "His name's Jake Durant. Idon't know anything about him, really." He gives her a quick smile, one Pansy knows is meant to reassure her. "He's fit, and he flirted with me, or at least I think he did."

"I suppose you think that's good?" Pansy side-steps a mother with a pram who looks utterly terrified by the traffic circle across from the square. Circe, but she hates tourists. "Look, I know Snape and your mad auntie trained you, but are you certain your Occlumency is good enough for this? What are you going to do if he pushes just a little too much in the wrong direction?" She frowns at Draco. "Can I Obliviate you? Would that help?"
Draco rolls his eyes. "Don't be a daft cow. And thanks ever so for believing I'm actually capable of blocking him. It's not as if I managed to keep the bloody Dark Lord at bay for two whole years, after all."

"There's a big difference between a Dark Lord who thinks you're a child who's on his side," Pansy says bluntly, "and a Leglimens whose entire job is to catch you out in a lie because the men you work for think you're a fucking Death Eater still."

For a moment, their conversation's broken as they dash across the zebra crossing towards the tall white plinth that Nelson's statue is perched on, the base flanked by bronze lions. With a blare of a horn, a black cab nearly hits Pansy; if there weren't so many Muggles about, she might have flicked her wand at it, blowing a tire. Instead she constrains herself to swearing as she hops the kerb. Draco steadies her elbow.

"All right?"

"I'm fine," she says. She's only a bit shaken, but it's enough to rest against the stone base of the monument and look back down Whitehall as she catches her breath. Draco settles next to her. She looks over at him. "Have you told the guv?" Traffic rumbles around them.

"No," Draco says. His jaw tightens into a stubborn set that Pansy knows she shouldn't argue with. At the moment she doesn't give a damn. "And I'm not going to. I do know what I'm doing, Pans."

"But what if you don't?" Pansy can tell he doesn't like her questioning him. Tough, she thinks. The problem with Draco is that he's certain he knows exactly how a situation will play out, and then when things go tits up because he's forgotten to take one small detail into account, he gets into a bloody awful mess that he's no damned idea how to get out of. Case in point, the entirety of their sixth year. "How will you know until it's too late?"

Draco hesitates. "It's a game, really. Misdirection. Lead him into other parts of my mind. Snape taught me that. Hell, if Potter appears, or Durant's getting close to anything like that, I can always travel into memories of Nicholas."

Pansy leans back against the warmth of the stone, crossing her arms over her chest. One of the lions snarls above Draco's head. She can't get away from Gryffindors even here. Nelson would probably Sort into that bloody house; she's certain of it. "That's a truly idiotic idea."

"It would work." Draco's staring to sound sullen. Good. Circe, he can be exasperating sometimes.

"Only because they don't half look alike." Pansy knows she's being a bit cruel now, and she feels guilty. Still, she presses on. "Tall, broad-shouldered, dark hair? One would almost think you had a type."

"I do not." Draco glances away, a tight, pained expression crossing his face, one that Pansy recognises.

Pansy thinks she's a terrible friend. But, even a year later, she hates what the bastard's done to Draco. Nicholas hadn't hit Draco, at least as far as she knows, and frankly Pansy wouldn't put it past Draco to keep that quiet from her and Blaise and Millie and Greg lest they band together and hex the twat into oblivion. But what he'd done was worse, in Pansy's mind, at least. Once the first flush of their romance had worn off, Draco had never been good enough for Nicholas, had never said the right things, been the right person. Nicholas had picked at Draco, ridiculed him, and in the end had isolated him from all of them, from the tight-knit circle of friends who wanted nothing more than to protect Draco, not only from Nicholas but also from himself and those vicious beliefs about his self-worth that his shit of a father had instilled in him and that Nicholas was toying with,
like a feral cat with a petrified mouse. And then the fucker had walked out, telling Draco it was his own fault Nicholas had grown bored with him. It'd taken Pansy and Blaise a fucking month to convince Draco otherwise, and Pansy suspects Draco sometimes still blames himself for driving Nicholas away.

If she ever sees that prick again, she intends to punch him in the bollocks. Hard. Nicholas is why Pansy's so worried about Potter, if she's honest. She can't bear to see Draco hurt again, to know he's being used by another man who doesn't give a toss about him, even if that man is her guy. She's not just angry about Draco throwing his career away. She's bloody terrified that Potter's going to devastate Draco, to rip his heart into shreds in a way that not even Nicholas could manage. Draco forgets she's been his friend since before Hogwarts, and that she, of all people, knows that this obsession with Potter's a decade old, if not more. Pansy's well aware that Potter's the reason Draco'd discovered he's bent. She can't imagine what it must be like to find oneself in bed with the object of one's teenage lusts and fantasies. Not after all these years. It has to be overwhelming.

And that makes her very, very afraid.

"I know you don't like talking about this," Pansy sighs and watches a group of Brazilian tourists stop to point up at Lord Nelson, perched above them with his tricorn hat and his sandstone sword. "But the fact is that you're going to be laid bare on Friday, by people who don't love you, and I'm worried."

Draco pushes his hair back off his face with both hands, still not looking over at her. "I'll be fine." He lets his hair loose; it drifts back down, tumbling over his eyes in a gilded fall. "I'm not going to cock up."

He doesn't sound entirely convinced.

Pansy reaches between them, lets her hand rest over Draco's. "Okay," she says after a moment. Draco needs her to believe in him, she thinks, and she looks over at him, trying to smile. He chews his lip between his teeth. "How've you been practicing?" She hopes to Circe he has been.

The furrow between Draco's brows smoothes out, just a little. "Bertie's helping me," he admits. "He's not the best at Legilimency, but I can at least make sure my blocking skills are up to snuff."

He's going to need a hell of a lot more than that, Pansy thinks. She keeps it to herself. She knows Draco well enough to realise that, whether or not he'll admit it, he's scared out of his mind. As well he should be, really. Merlin only knows what he's going to face in that room on Friday morning.

She looks him up and down, takes in his dark circles and hollow cheeks. "You haven't been sleeping though." Not surprising. She slept on the common room sofa more than once with him when he was going through a bout of insomnia in school. A lack of sleep sets Draco on edge, makes him too sharp, too cocky, too quick to make that one fatal mistake.

Draco looks away. The sunlight catches his hair, and his pale blond highlights gleam like spun silk. She envies him his locks; she always has. "I took a potion last night."

Pansy nudges him with her elbow. "You're talking to me, Malfoy. I know sleeping draughts don't work that well on you." He hates them, in fact, because they make him nauseous and never fully bring him to sleep, just that twilight edge between rest and wakefulness. She's heard him bitch for years about them.

He sighs. "I was fine on Monday. Happy even. Except for you and me, everything seemed better,
you know, and even that I was hopeful for." Draco squints into the sun. Behind them the fountains splash and children laugh over the rumble of the traffic. "And then I did a round of training with Bertie that afternoon, went home, and had a bloody panic attack about all of this."

"The interview?" Pansy asks gently.

Draco nods. "That and Potter and, well, everything."

Pansy wishes she had a cigarette right now. She doesn't indulge that often, not any more at least, but this is a conversation she'd rather have with a lit fag clenched between her fingers. She glances over at Draco. He looks miserable. "Babes," she says, and Draco shakes his head.

"I'm fine," he says. That's so obviously a bald-faced lie that Pansy just laughs, and that coaxes out a faint quirk of Draco's mouth. "Or I will be." He draws in a shallow breath. "Look, you don't have to worry about Potter. We're done, he and I. Saturday was the last time--" His voice breaks a bit; he covers it with a cough. "So yes. I'll be fine."

Shit, Pansy thinks. Not that it's not what she wanted. And she's glad in a way. But that's not something Draco needs added onto him right now, not with the interview hanging over him. "I'm sorry," she says after a moment.

"Thanks." Draco pushes his hair back from his face, tucks it behind his ear. He gives her a wan smile. "I just need to get through tomorrow."

"Pity you called it off with Potter," Pansy says before she thinks. "You always did better on your exams after a good shag." The look Draco gives her is scathing, and she holds up her hands. "I'm just saying. A bit of endorphin rush helps, yeah?" It also puts Draco right to sleep, or so she'd heard from common room gossip, and frankly, Draco could do with a good night's rest. "Wouldn't have to be Potter, would it? You can't tell me you couldn't walk into a club looking all waifish and Percy Bysshe Shelley like you do and not pull two or three twinks by the time you've downed your first drink."

Draco looks a bit pleased at that. "I'd rather think I'm Byron, thanks."

"Absolutely not." Pansy pokes a finger at him. "Potter? Definitely a Byron. All sulky and reckless and likely to get himself killed in a Greek war."

"I'm fairly certain it was a fever that took him out," Draco points out, and his dry tone makes Pansy feel better. That's the Draco she knows and loves. "Shelley drowned in a boat accident, which seems far more stupidly Potter to me."

"Idiots the both of them. And you." Pansy pushes herself off the column's base. "Lunch first, then you can tell me what I can do to help for tomorrow."

The shadow of a smile passes over Draco's face, quickly suppressed, like sunshine peeking from behind a stormcloud. "You're going to make me pay, aren't you?"

"I'm all out of Muggle dosh, darling," Pansy says. She slides her arm beneath Draco's elbow. "And I know you keep a few notes in that wallet of yours, if only to irritate your father."

"Wretch," Draco says, but his voice sounds lighter. Pansy's glad.

The chance that it's all going to go up in flames by the end of the week's almost inevitable. Particularly with their luck. But Pansy's tired of arguing with her best friend, tired of watching him struggle with this on his own. If Draco goes down over this, then she'll go with him, whatever Robards might say. Pansy loves him too much to leave him standing alone.
Madness, perhaps, but they're Slytherins, for Circe's sake. They'll make the best of whatever's coming, all of them together. She, Draco and Blaise. Unuspro ominibus, omnes prouno, after all.

It's the only thing they can do.

***

When Harry walks into the warmly lit restaurant, a stone's throw off of Islington High Street, he sees Ron waving from the back, or rather, he sees a waving hand and a cloud of red hair that can only be a member of the Weasley family. The "oi, Harry", audible as he approaches, only confirms his identification.

Harry stops a few paces away from the table in the side niche to ruffle the misty rain out of his hair. It'd been gorgeous all day, warm and sunny, but then a quick rain had blown up just as Harry'd stepped out of the Ministry, and he'd bloody well forgotten to Impervius his glasses again, hadn't he? He wipes them on his untucked shirttail. When he puts them back on, he can see Ron more clearly.

"Hey, sorry I'm late." He slides into the dark wood chair, noting that Ron already has a large spread of antipasti in front of him. Harry must have taken more time walking to the small restaurant than he realised. The fairy lights hanging from the ceiling give the old brick walls of Antonio's an almost golden glow. It's been too long since he's been here, but the tiny Italian place is one of Ron and Hermione's favourites, and Harry always meets them here at least once or twice during his stints in London.

"No worries," Ron says, cutting off a piece of grilled portobello and popping it into his mouth. "I was famished, so I ordered us starters." He gestures at the spread of roasted artichoke hearts, olives, mozzarella and tomato and basil, and bread with garlic oil. "Have at."

Harry gives Delia his drink order (house pinot grigio, as usual, and a bottle of San Pellegrino for the table), then takes up a fork.

Ron's already drinking red, so he's thinking steak or eggplant parmesan, Harry wagers. He likes it, this routine. He knows what to expect when he's with Ron. If Antonio's isn't the height of restaurant chic, it's a dependable, comfortable place where they can usually get a secluded table and the food is quite a bit better than either of them were raised on. Not to mention it's mostly Muggle, even though Antonio himself is a Squib, so the occasional wizarding family wanders through. Still, it's better than Diagon, where Harry's recognised in every restaurant and has to endure people interrupting dinner to speak to him--or worse, staring at him from across the room.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asks through a mouthful of tomato. It's sharp and vinegary, perfectly balanced by the creaminess of the fresh mozzarella and the aromatic summer basil. He reaches over to spear another slice.

Ron doesn't answer, and Harry glances up at him. He's twisting his wine glass between his hands, looking supremely uncomfortable. "She's not coming."

"Work?" Harry gets the distinct feeling that's not it.

"Yes and no?" Ron sighs. "Christ, Harry. I hate it when I have to go between the two of you."

Harry puts his fork down. "I haven't done anything," he starts to say, but the look of exasperation Ron gives him makes him break off. "What?"

Ron drains half his glass before setting it down with a thump. He leans forward, his elbows on the
wooden tabletop. "Jake."

Shit. Harry slumps back in his chair. Shit, shit, shit, shit. Of course he wouldn't get off easy, would he? Jake's working with the Unspeakables. Hermione adores Jake. Harry'd been too damned caught up with the case, not to mention agonising over Malfoy and his complete avoidance of Harry, to even think about what would happen when Hermione and Jake caught up over the damned tea cart on Monday. "She knows."

"Not only does she know that you broke up with the only person outside of Ginny she's ever approved of you dating." Ron says, "but she's also informed him that he's not staying in a hotel, whatever the fuck you might have told him." Ron frowns at Harry and reaches with his fork to spear an artichoke heart. "So now your recent ex-boyfriend is sleeping in my spare room and probably right now at this very moment drinking a bottle of wine with my wife, watching fucking Torchwood on the telly, and complaining about what an arsehole you are." Ron looks up at him. "Which I have to agree with, given that you fucked him then tossed him out on his ear." He pops the artichoke heart into his mouth and chews. "Ever classy, Potter."

Harry buries his face in his hands, his glasses pushed up on his forehead. "Goddamn it." Delia puts a glass of wine and the bottle of sparkling water down in front of him. "Thank you," Harry mumbles through his fingers.

Ron sighs again and thracks a menu against Harry's forearm, and Harry drops his hands. "Stop it with the fucking dramatics and pick a bloody main, will you?" He looks up at Delia. "Sorry. He's having a case of the I've-been-a-complete-fucking-twats."

Delia shrugs, her pencil hovering over the pad. "It happens." She looks at Harry. "Food? I'd recommend it if you're going to drown yourself in wine."

"Sea bass," Harry says. "And you might want to bring out a bottle of the house white?"

"I opened a fresh bottle for you, love," Delia says. "I'll bring the rest." She looks over at Ron. "You?"

"The usual," Ron says, handing over both their menus. "And I apologise in advance for Harry's superior twatish behaviour. He's the Twat of All Twats, His Lord Supreme Twatiness--"

"Fuck off," Harry says, and Ron grins at him. He spears two olives at once and eats them. Delia rolls her eyes and goes back into the back.

"As long Jake's sleeping at my flat, I get to hold it over you." Ron pokes his fork towards Harry.

"Ronald," Harry says, "I spent months in that bloody tent listening to Hermione rail about what a twat you were. Don't even start."

That only makes Ron snort. "Ooh, getting a mite defensive, are we? Trying to pull out the Forest of Bloody Dean to save us from our own bad choices?" He puts his fork down and looks over at Harry. "Seriously, though, you never said why things were this bad. Jake's a good sort. I mean, if I swung that way, I'd give him a second look."

Harry tears off a piece of bread and dunks it in oil. He chews it slowly before swallowing. "He didn't tell you?"

"Just that you'd sent him to a hotel." Ron studies Harry. "Which Hermione's appalled at, by the way."
Appalled, his arse, Harry thinks. She's probably incandescent about it. "I told you things weren't great. I don't know why she's so bloody surprised." Except he does.

"Hermione didn't think you'd actually go through with it," Ron says. "Well, honestly, I didn't think you would either. You and Jake are good together, and you deserve to be happy, Harry."

Harry wants to say Jake doesn't make him happy, that he never did, but that's not entirely true, is it? Instead he swallows a sip of wine and sighs. "It wasn't working."

"So you said." Ron leans back in his chair and waits. Harry knows he's giving him space to talk, to say whatever he needs. Or just to be bloody silent if he wants. Harry'd prefer that, to be honest.

The rattle and clank of dishes, the soft hum of conversation, all of it wraps around Harry, almost cocooning him in this moment. He breathes out. "There was someone else," he says finally.

Ron's still, his hand resting on the base of his wineglass. "Jake cheated?"

"No," Harry says quietly, and he can't look up from the crumbs of bread and smears of oil on his plate. He knows what Ron thinks about infidelity. It's not something he can comprehend. Harry wonders if that's because he's been in love with Hermione for years, if it has anything to do with him being lucky enough to find the love of his life in school. Harry envies them both. It's always been Ron and Hermione, he knows that. Even when Ron was following Lavender around, making cow eyes, and Hermione was trying to convince herself that McLaggen wasn't a complete prick. Harry? Well, he's always been on his own, hasn't he? Cho and Ginny were there, for moments. Then a string of good fucks and delightful shags up until Jake. And Harry knows--he bloody well knows--that he's a fool for tossing Jake aside.

But he can't shake the thought of cool grey eyes and long pale limbs spread beneath him, even if bloody Malfoy's barely speaking to him as it is. He'd do anything for Malfoy right now, absolutely anything, and he thinks that should frighten him. It doesn't.

Ron lets out a soft breath. "Harry."

"I know." Harry circles his thumb over the rim of his glass. "I really am a twat. But that's why I knew it wasn't going to work." He's tried to argue with himself that he didn't cheat, not really, that he and Jake have an arrangement that works for them, that Jake knew Harry might fuck someone else in London. He knows that's complete shite. When he came back to London for Malfoy, when he sucked him off in a club loo, when he took Malfoy on his fucking goddamned desk at work, he'd cheated. Whether or not Harry wants to admit it, the sex between him and Malfoy's always meant something. What, Harry's no damned idea. But he can tell himself until he's blue in the face that it wasn't really cheating, that he and Jake have an arrangement, but if he's truly honest with himself, he knows that's a goddamned lie, a way to feel better about what's he's done. What he still wants to do. Christ. And Malfoy doesn't even know about Jake, has no clue he's even in the picture. That's what makes it worse, Harry thinks.

"Who was it?" Ron asks.

Harry shakes his head. "Just someone," He's no intention of outing Malfoy. There are things he's willing to share with his best friend, and things that he thinks are too damned private, that he wants to keep close to his chest. It's better that way, to be honest. He doesn't have it in him to justify whatever's been happening between him and Malfoy to Ron--and later, to Hermione, since Ron will tell her.

"Come on, Harry." Ron's watching him closely. "That's not like you. You wouldn't throw over a good thing like you had with Jake for just a shag. I know you. If you cheated with someone, then
"Not to him it didn't," Harry says, and he can't keep a tinge of bitterness out of his voice. "It was just sex." That's the implication anyway, isn't it? Harry doesn't know if he believes that. He's watched Malfoy beneath him, seen that soft, unfocussed look on his face when Harry's prick has been inside his arse. It's not just a rough shag. Not for either of them. It goes deeper than that, leaves more of a mark. But Harry hasn't any right to point that out to Malfoy, really. It is what it is, and Malfoy thinks what he thinks.

Ron's quiet for a long moment. "But for you..." he says finally, his voice soft.

Harry raises a shoulder. "It's nothing right now. Honestly. And even with it ended, I still broke up with Jake because I knew as much as everyone liked him, and thought he was right for me..." Harry huffs a wry, savage laugh. "Jake wasn't ever going to be this other person, was he? And I didn't want to ask him to have to live up to that. It wasn't fair, but I couldn't be fair. I suppose that was the problem."

"Yeah," Ron says. "I get that, I think."

The silence between them stretches, broken only by Delia putting their plates in front of them. They're hot, and Harry was right--Ron's plate is filled with a thick, bloody steak.

"Thanks," Harry says to Delia, and he gives her a small smile. She disappears, then comes back with a bottle of pinot grigio, topping Harry's glass up in the process.

"Drink," she says. "You look like you need it."

Christ, does he ever. He nearly downs the glass in one gulp, then pours more. Ron just watches him from across the table, chewing slowly on a bite of steak, his knife clutched in his right hand.

"So what are you going to do now?" Ron asks, and Harry shrugs again.

"Go on, I suppose." Harry toys with a piece of sea bass, splitting it with the tines of his fork into small flakes. What does one do when one's been shagging a junior officer under one's command? Pretend there's nothing wrong? That whatever this was between them meant shit? That's what Malfoy wants, Harry thinks, and maybe he's not wrong. "It'll be fine." The more he tells himself that, the less he believes it.

Ron shakes his head. "You're still not going to tell me who it is?" He sounds a bit hurt. Harry knows Ron doesn't like it when he keeps secrets. It's too much like the old days, back in school, when Harry kept things close to his chest, shutting his best friends out of his pain.

"Maybe when we're old and wrinkled, watching your kids play Quidditch in your back garden." Harry says with a small smile, and Ron relaxes a little. "But for now, I don't really want to talk about it, mate. Just know I made the right decision for me, whatever Hermione thinks, yeah?" Christ, Harry hopes he's right.

"All right." Ron reaches for his wine. "But you're going to have to deal with Hermione sooner or later, you know. She's not keen on talking to you yet, but once she settles down..."

Harry sighs. "I know." He owes that much to her, he thinks. Fuck, but when did life get so bloody damned complicated? It's his life, but his friends act as if they own it as well, as if he can't make his own choices, as if he's too stupid to know what he should want. He knows they mean well, but sometimes he just gets fucking tired of it all.

Then again, they're not wrong. Look at him here. He's fucking everything up, and for what?
Draco fucking Malfoy, who's made it clear he'd like nothing better than for Harry to sod off. Christ.

"Let's talk about something else," Harry says. His chest hurts; his throat's raw; his skin feels too damned tight. He looks up at Ron. "How's the shop?"

Ron's almost through a tale about George's latest mad invention when Harry's mobile buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out, flips it open. There's a text, from Malfoy's number, and Harry's breath catches.

_Meet me @ Threstral Wing tonight? Drink on me._

Harry bites his lip, trying to hold back a smile. He's really got to teach Malfoy how to use a bloody mobile properly. Something warm and soft unfurls inside of him. He knows he's been so tightly coiled for days, but it's only when that tension's slipping away that he realises how hard it's been. He's missed Malfoy, and he's hated the distance Malfoy's put between them. Maybe it's not just one-sided, this thing between them, and that thought makes Harry's heart stutter with a feeling he doesn't want to look at too closely.

"So, anyway, long story short, George is a complete wanker, but we all knew that, yeah? I think I'm going to have the tiramisu," Ron turns the small dolci menu over to look at the dessert wine list. 
"Although the creme brulee's damned good as well. Hermione had it last time, and she only let me have a spoonful, the cheeky cow. What do you--"

Harry puts his mobile in his pocket and motions to Delia for the bill. "I've really got to go, Ron. I'm so sorry. Make it up to you later, yeah?"

Ron nods, caught in mid-sentence. It's not as if Harry has done this before on Auror business, but this time, he has the sense Ron can tell that it's not really work. "Okay." Ron attempts a laugh, but his gaze is troubled as he watches Harry stand. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do and all."

"Thanks, mate," A wave of fondness for his oldest friend wells up in his heart. "Enjoy dessert. And hey? Dinner's on me."

He leaves Ron cursing his treachery in their continuing game over who can get to the bill first as he intercepts Delia, hands her a stack of Muggle notes, and heads for the door.

If Malfoy's already drunk texting him, there's little time to be lost.

***

Draco regrets the text the moment he sends it. He obviously wasn't actually typing the message with his cock, but he might have well have been. Also, when he looks at it again, he thinks that his cock really can't spell at all. _Merlin._

He's only had a Boulevardier and a half, but he hasn't been eating or sleeping well for days, and that's never good to mix with alcohol, at least not for him. Draco knows that Pansy is right—the stress of the interview is getting to him. He always tries to put it off and prep like a normal person, but then his heart rate starts going up and he gets twitchy and then he forgets meals and bedtimes and terrible things happen. Like texting Potter on the stupid bloody mobile Draco really hates using.

Fuck.

Draco sets the mobile face-down on the bar and picks his drink back up. He's had something to
eat today, he thinks, but he can be damned if he can remember. Lunch, yes. A cheddar and pickle baguette from Pret, and then halfway through the afternoon Blaise had put something in his hand to eat, probably from the pasty cart. And he'd had tea. Plenty of tea. That counts.

He looks out over the glittering pink and purple lights of the club floor and sucks on his lip meditatively. For a Thursday evening, the crowd's not bad, but there are not as many people as a normal weekend. The music is calmer tonight, fewer beats per minute, more moody vocals and the occasional drum beat. He's no idea if it's trance or trip hop night or some other variant, but he likes the vibe, even if it does remind him of his third-cousin Luna. The dreamy quality is soothing and keeps him from thinking too much. Draco really doesn't want to think right now. When he does, he panics, that awful tightness constricting his chest, making it almost impossible to breathe. He's always been anxious; he doesn't think it's possible to grow up with both Malfoy and Black genetics and not spend great swathes of time in the loo trying to force yourself to breathe. Draco's learnt ways to keep it control, but on nights like tonight it's nearly impossible.

Which means he'll do anything to shut those whirling thoughts up, to flip the off switch on whatever fucked-up part of his brain won't spin down, letting him rest, keeping him sane.

Even ring Potter like a bloody damned fool..

Draco glances over his shoulder at his mobile lying on the dark marble of the bar. He's not sure, but he thinks he'd get a light or a buzz on the front screen if Potter rang him back. Or texted. Maybe they could have phone sex. He's heard that's a thing that people do, although no one he knows of course. Except maybe Potter. He thinks he remembers Potter saying something about it recently. So yes. Potter definitely knows how to do phone sex, but then Potter knows how to do every kind of sex Draco's ever fantasised about, doesn't he? He's terrible, and Draco really, truly likes that about him.

But tonight Potter's doing the sensible thing and ignoring him. Draco scowls a little, finishing his drink. Trust Potter to be bloody responsible when Draco doesn't want to be anymore. So rude.

Of course, Draco thinks, swallowing the last bitter mouthful of his second drink and letting the tang of Campari rise into his nostrils, he doesn't exactly need Potter. They're not like that. Draco just needs Potter's cock. Or Potter on Draco's cock, actually. Either one would be lovely. Draco glances reflexively over to the far side of the dance floor, where the loos are. He remembers going through a much more crowded club barely a month ago, if that, following Potter's invitation to find him on the night before the written exam. He closes his eyes, thinking about Potter's mouth on his cock, swallowing him whole, and the filthy look in Potter's eyes as he knelt on the piss-stained floor, letting Draco fuck his throat. Merlin. Draco's harder than ever now, and, if he's honest, he's feeling more than a bit petulant.

Fuck Potter. He'll need to go home and wank himself raw, all on his own, because Potter's clearly not coming. The barkeep's hovering close by, waiting for Draco to set down his glass. He really shouldn't have a third. Draco knows that would be one too many, and he needs to be lucid enough tomorrow to face down a Legilimens. He wonders what Durant will be like, how it'll feel to have him in his head. Legilimency's horribly intimate. Draco'd hated having Snape prodding around in his mind, turning over loamy memories that Draco'd thought well-buried. It'd been humiliating, and Draco doesn't want to put himself through that tomorrow. Fuck, but he ought to have told Robards no. He'd have survived the Veritaserum, he thinks. St Mungo's surely wouldn't have let him die. They hadn't the first time, after all.

No more alcohol. Draco's already feeling the effects of the two drinks a bit much, if he's honest. He'll switch to water if he stays any longer. Which he won't. Because he has an interview tomorrow and he needs to sleep. A bit of sleeping draught might help.
Fucking hell. Who's he kidding? He'll probably drink another Boulevardier. Bugger the sleeping draught; they never bloody work anyway. When his anxiety ramps up this much, his mind just won't shut down, not without a good fuck or enough liquor to fell an Erumpent. Pansy'd already tucked a good supply of hangover potion into his satchel on his way out of work in the hopes that he'll, as she put it, find some hot little arse to shag in the club. He'll still manage to be ready for tomorrow morning.

Draco's mourning his sexless fate, when, as if on cue, he catches sight of what most definitely looks like Potter at the entrance to the club, coming down the stairs like some sort of rumpled Adonis, shoulders broad, hair tousled and perhaps a bit wet. Draco's not sure he isn't imagining what he wants to see, so he swivels his stool back towards the bar and puts his glass down. He really has had enough for tonight if his libido is manifesting Potter now. Merlin but he wants the bastard so much that it's overriding his common sense.

He jumps when a warm breath comes from behind him, ghosting over his ear. "So, how pissed are you, Malfoy?"

And if the room spins a bit when Potter turns him on his stool, well, Draco thinks that's probably the blood rushing to his cock, not just the effect of the alcohol and several sleepless nights.

"You came," Draco says, like a complete idiot. Potter quirks a curious eyebrow at him, and it makes Draco feel like more of a fool. "Please. I'm not that pissed." He thinks maybe he is, although that's ridiculous. Two Boulevardiers do not a drunk Draco make. Tipsy, yes. Bladdered, not a bloody chance. "I'm just tired. And wound up."

"We can't have that, can we?" Potter steps into Draco's space, standing close to him, so close, but not touching. He smells sharp and clean, like a good French soap, and there's the faintest hint of wine on his breath. "Not the night before your interview."

"Well." Draco glances over to see if the barkeep is within earshot. He's not. Draco lowers his voice still. "I do believe someone promised me a blow job before my interview tomorrow." That memory heats his cheeks, makes him look away. Saturday feels so long ago, with Potter standing in his kitchen in stockinged feet, watching Draco with those shadowed eyes as he'd handed over Draco's exam results. Draco wonders if he should have done things differently that night, if he ought to have let Potter stay afterwards instead of sending him away. He hadn't been able to put into words how he felt, not properly, not in any way that Potter would have comprehended, but what if he's wrong about that? What if Potter might have understood how hollowed out and vulnerable Draco'd been? It bothers Draco that he wants Potter to have known, to have realised what was going on in Draco's overwhelmed mind.

Potter nods, an odd look flitting across his face. Is he thinking back to that night? He must be. Circe, Draco hates that he finds Potter so attractive. "Did someone promise that?" Potter asks at last. A lock of hair falls into Draco's face, and Potter smooths it behind Draco's ear, taking his hand away before Draco can turn his cheek into it. "Malfoy, we can't," he says and Draco's heart stutters. Potter catches his look and adds, "I mean not here."

Draco puts his most effective sulky on, the one Pansy swears could stop even a Dementor in its tracks. Potter's hair is awash in purple and pink from the lights and Merlin's bollocks, Potter is standing in front of him, looking bloody gorgeous, and Draco is the randiest he's been in days. Since the last damned time Potter touched him, in fact, and he wants nothing more than for Potter to shove his hand in Draco's trousers right now. The club be damned, and that draws him up a bit short. Whether it's that last Boulevardier or Potter or both of them, he doesn't quite know. He drags the tip of his tongue along his bottom lip, enjoying the way Potter's eyes darken. Oh, there's so much more Draco wants to do than that, Potter. "Why the hell not?"
Potter's leaning back, an easy smile on his face that Draco knows is intended to make their conversation look casual to anyone who might notice. As if they would. The joy of the Thestral's Wing is that everyone's too intent on their own pursuit of pleasure—whether liquid or physical—to even look their way. "Because," Potter says as if he's talking to a small child, "we're surrounded by wizards, and, let's be honest, Malfoy, there's no bloody way we're lucky enough to get away with me sucking you off in the loo here twice without someone stumbling in on us."

Draco shivers at that thought. He almost wants someone to catch them, to see Potter on his knees with Draco's prick fucking that pretty mouth of his. God, he thinks he'd come so fucking hard for that. It takes him a moment to catch his breath. His cock's already swelling in his trousers; he wonders if Potter notices. It's all he can do not to hook a foot around Potter's hip and draw him closer.

"Look," Draco says hotly, "I haven't slept in days. Pansy always says I get a bit mad when that happens, and she's right. I'm not being outrageous when I say the only thing that can make me really sleep is a cracking good orgasm, so if you won't shag me, I'll find someone else here." He pretends to peer over Potter's shoulder, towards the dance floor, then returns his focus to Potter's face.

The fierce look that comes into Potter's eyes is gratifying, as is the slight edge to his tone when Potter says, "No. No, you won't."

Draco gives Potter a sly, come-hither smile, letting his hair fall in his face again. "And what do you suggest I do, then?"

"Oh, I'm going to blow you, you twat," Potter says, and a shudder of electric lust goes through Draco's whole body. "Just not here." Potter puts an arm under Draco's and pulls him off the stool, gently but firmly. "Let's go to mine."

Draco blinks at him. "We don't go to yours." The feel of Potter against his side is almost overwhelming. He wants to wrap himself around Potter, to press his mouth against the stubbly skin of his jaw, sucking his own mark onto Potter's perfect body.

Potter gives Draco a crooked smile. "I believe that was one of your recent complaints, yeah? Never seeing my bed?"

"I hope you've clean sheets," Draco murmurs. He's a bit taken aback, but curious. There's something a bit different about Potter tonight, something more relaxed, like he's not holding the worries of the world on his shoulders. He's been that way all week, though, even when Draco knows the case must be bothering him. Something shifted in Potter after Draco threw him out on Saturday night, and Draco finds that more than unsettling.

And then he's walking next to Potter to the bar's public Floo, up the stairs in the foyer, just past the bored security wizard, keeping an arm's width of distance between them. Potter makes him repeat the coordinates to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place twice, to make certain Draco's not too pissed to land in the right wizarding house. Draco tries to tell himself it's only out of curiosity that he goes along, but that's ridiculous and even he knows it. He wants to go to Potter's, wants Potter to spread his thighs wide and suck his prick down. He's not tipsy enough that he can call this a drunken shag. He's so tightly wound, so anxious and desperately tired that he knows that this is the only thing that will give him relief. And if he's honest, which he doesn't often dare to be, Potter is the only one who can give him the respite he craves. He'll think of what that means tomorrow.

Draco steps through the green glow of the Floo and lands on an patterned carpet. The house smells musty, disused, almost like one of the closed wings at the Manor. The furnishings are stately, but dark, and there's little else Draco can tell in the shadows. He'd like to see it in daylight,
he thinks. He's curious to find out how Potter lives, what he's done to the former family home of Draco's mother's cousins.

Potter's standing close by, haloed by a small island of light from a lamp on a side table. In the sudden silence of being alone, away from the thrum of the club, Draco's nerve fails a bit. He's losing his Dutch courage, or whatever it was, and he thinks perhaps this might not be a good idea. He's supposed to be angry with Potter. What the hell is he doing here begging Potter to shag him? But his cock, which is straining against his flies, instructs him to shut up and go with it. It's just a shag. Nothing more.

As if echoing his thoughts, Potter asks, "Malfoy, are you sure you're up for this?" His arms are crossed over his chest, not exactly welcoming, but his face is softer than his words would imply.

Draco rolls his eyes, making his decision. He's not going to have Potter think him a coward, after all. Not again. "Potter, I am telling you, with absolutely one hundred percent certainty, that you can do whatever the goddamned fuck you want to me, as long as I get off. Within reason, of course." He purses his lips, taking in the almost stunned look on Potter's face. "This doesn't change that fact that I'm furious with you--" For what, Draco's almost starting to forget. "--and I think what we're doing is mortifyingly stupid." Oh Circe, it is. It's more than stupid. It's reckless and moronic and Draco doesn't care because he's going to do it. He'll just regret it all later, he's certain. Or he won't, and then he'll regret that. "I'm just choosing to ignore it because I'm intense and I can't sleep and if I come in your mouth, or your arse or your hand or where-the-fuck-ever, I'll be better tomorrow." He hopes that's true. "So I'm willing to use you."

Potter's mouth opens, lush and pink. He licks his lips. "I'm all right with that." His voice is a bit breathless. "But I just want to be completely clear. Are you sure you want this?"

Draco steps closer, close enough to put his hands on Potter's shoulders, running his thumbs over the smooth muscle under the blue cloth of his shirt. He leans up to nip at Potter's jaw. "Yes, damn you," he murmurs against Potter's skin. "I'm very, very sure. Please, Inspector Potter, I want you to suck my prick until you make me scream." He's making a stupid choice, he knows. He doesn't give a damned fuck.

Potter's hands come under his elbows and Draco's pivoting, the leather of a chair hitting the back of his legs, and he's sinking into the chair as Potter drops to his knees between Draco's spread thighs. It's all so simple, after all, Draco thinks as Potter unbuttons Draco's flies with quick, sure fingers, pulling the wool of Draco's trousers open to reveal a swollen white triangle of damp cotton. He wants Potter, Potter wants him, and there is nothing more complicated or more straightforward than this. Easy is the descent to hell, he thinks. The terribly hard part is leaving.

Potter's thumb smoothes along the soft cotton of Draco's pants, and Draco breathes out in a soft rush. His whole body's attuned to Potter's touch now; Draco's spoilt for it, and he doesn't know how any other man is going to turn him on like this. One brush of Potter's knuckles against his skin and Draco's on bloody fire.

"Fuck," Draco says, and Potter laughs softly.

"Have I ever told you," Potter says, hooking one finger under the waistband of Draco's pants, "how bloody gorgeous your prick is?"

Draco watches as Potter slides his pants over the head of his cock, letting the leaking slit peek out. "You may have mentioned it. Once or twice."

Potter pushes Draco's foreskin up over his swollen, ruddy head, then lets it slip back. Draco bites his lip at the sensation. "The thing is," Potter says as he tugs Draco's pants and trousers down
fingertips

"It's hands enough. " Potter's gaze is fixed on the curve of Draco's prick. "And when it gets pink and hard and wet like this..." He swallows. "Fuck, Malfoy, you've no idea how much I love sucking you."

He doesn't. Potter's an enigma to Draco sometimes, and Draco can't believe Potter wants him. He worries that he'll wake up from this lurid dream, back into a world where Potter doesn't even look at him, much less reach for his prick like this. However big a mistake he might be making at the moment, he'd be devastated to realise it came only from his own lewd imagination.

Draco groans as Potter's thick fingers curl around the base of his cock. The sight of Potter's mouth closing around his cockhead is almost too much for him to bear. He threads a hand through the mussed curls of Potter's utterly impossible hair, resisting the urge to pump his hips to get more of Potter's mouth faster.

He wants this slow, drawn-out. He needs it to be. Potter brackets Draco's thighs with his forearms, using his mouth to slip Draco's foreskin up over his prick before letting it slide free. Circe, but Draco loves the way Potter teases him, circling his tongue roughly around the swell of Draco's head, then sliding it into Draco's dripping slit.

Potter pulls his mouth free with a pop, and Draco can breathe for a moment. "God, how you taste," Potter says. "I could suck your prick for days." He rubs Draco's slick cock against his cheek, breathing him in. "I was meant to, I think. The way you fit in my mouth like this--fuck, Malfoy." He looks up at Draco, his pupils blown wide. "I could come just from sucking you."

Draco whimpers at that, watching Potter's tongue circle his swollen head, Potter's mouth wet and plush and promising. "Oh, Circe," Draco whispers. It's everything he can do not to push his hips up, but he wants to, oh, fuck, he wants to. Instead, he takes Potter's glasses off and drops them on the side table next to the chair. Potter's eyes are dark green in the lamplight, and Draco doesn't think he's seen anything more gorgeous than Potter looking up at him from between his thighs, his tongue slipping down the length of Draco's heavy shaft. When Potter takes Draco deep into his mouth, almost gagging on the fullness of Draco's prick in his throat, Draco glides his fingers over Potter's face, feeling the swell of his cock through Potter's cheek.

Fuck, but he nearly comes right then and there.

And then the soft, damp heat of Potter's mouth is gone, and Draco can't stop himself from a faint mewl of protest before Potter's rearing up on his knees to kiss Draco with a rough and savage grace, his mouth bitter with the taste of Draco's precome. His hands are on Draco's shirt, unbuttoning it, pulling it off Draco's shoulders, down his arms. The cuffs catch; Draco pulls at his cufflinks, letting them fall into the chair beneath him. Potter pulls the shirt away, tosses it on the floor as he kisses Draco still, his hands coming back to settle on Draco's hips, his body pushing Draco's thighs wider. Draco rubs his aching cock against the fabric covering Potter's flat stomach, desperate for friction, for touch. Potter's tongue is deep in his mouth and Draco can't get enough of either sensation. It's amazing, and it's not enough.

"Potter," he gasps out, groaning as Potter's fingers slip over his chest, thumbnails scraping over the hardened nub of a nipple. "Oh, God, I need--" He breaks off, his body twisting beneath Potter's, his hands clenching the arms of the chair.

"It's all right," Potter says. "Come on. Tell me." His other hand curls around Draco's prick, fingertips brushing over the soft fuzz of Draco's bollocks.
"Fuck." Draco breathes out. "Fuck, I want to be spread out for you. I want you to lick me, God. Potter--I want your tongue in my hole--" He groans, and Potter strokes a firm hand along Draco's length, milking drops out of the sensitive head of his cock whilst they both watch. Draco throws his head back, baring his throat. He's almost reduced to begging. He's tense and in his head, and he wants out. He needs this more than he's needed anything, but he feels so trapped in his own thoughts. He rocks forward a bit on the leather, frustrated and furious and needy. "Potter, if you don't make me come and soon, I don't even know what I'll do."

Potter yanks Draco's trousers and pants down to his ankles. He manages to get one leg over Draco's boot, the other he gives up on, leaving it to pull Draco's knees up over the arms of the chair, holding him in place with both hands. Draco cries out when Potter's tongue slides over his hole, followed by a single wet fingertip.

"Is this what you want?" Potter asks, and all Draco can do is clench the chair and moan as Potter's hot breath puffs across his slick skin. Potter's mouth catches Draco's bollocks, sucking at one, then the other whilst his finger probes deeper. Without lube it burns a bit and Draco can feel Potter crook his finger just enough to make him gasp and tense.

"Potter," Draco cries out, and he shifts beneath Potter's hands and mouth, trying so hard to keep still, but he can't, not with Potter's tongue sliding back down to replace his fingertip. Draco flails out, his hands reaching up behind him to grab at the back of the chair. "Oh, God, you bastard, don't you dare stop--"

The soft, wet noise Potter makes against Draco's skin sends a shudder through Draco's whole body. "Fuck," Draco whispers. "Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck..."

Potter pulls away; his finger slips back into Draco's hole. "You okay?" he murmurs, looking down at Draco splayed open for him, utterly naked whilst Potter's still fully dressed. Draco doesn't care. His prick is hard and slick against his flat belly, the swollen head a ruddy-purplish curve along his pale skin.

Draco just smirks at him and lowers his head, swallowing his prick almost to the root. Draco's head hits the leather of the chair back. "Shit," he says. Potter is sucking Draco's entire length, and it's nothing short of bloody amazing. Draco lets his hips pump gently, pushing deeper into Potter's mouth, and Potter lets him, does nothing to stop the slide of Draco down his throat, and really, Draco thinks, Potter's lack of gag reflex is nothing short of dead impressive.

Potter swallows around Draco's prick, and Draco digs his fingers into the leather of the chair back so he doesn't grab Potter's head because that would be terribly rude. But he longs to. Instead, he opens his eyes to see Potter's head sinking down, down on him, his thighs spread as wide a possible, Potter's finger slipping deeper into his hole. Draco shifts his hips, causing deep sensations along the length of his rock-hard cock. He's so fucking close, and he still can't let go.

"Fuck, you're so good at this," Draco manages to get out. "Circe, no one's sucked my prick like you. I need your mouth on me, God; you've no idea. I've spent all week wanking at night, trying to get myself off like you do, but I can't because fuck, Potter, I--" He breaks off into a deep moan, his arse coming off the seat of the chair. "Oh, Christ."

Potter pulls back, mouth circling the rim of Draco's cockhead. He pops the ring of his lips over and back and over until Draco's coming out of the chair with want, the circle of Potter's fingers tight at the base of Draco's aching shaft.

When Potter pauses to spit into his hand. Draco almost snarls at him because Potter's lips leave his
cock, then Potter's spit-slicked fingers are pressing behind his tight balls and Potter's throat is swallowing him down, his lips an airless seal sucking Draco into oblivion. Potter's finger slides back inside the rim of Draco's arsehole, teasing at it, knuckles pressing into his taint, and Draco tips over the edge with a shout, all of his thoughts and worries, all of his anger and his fury, all hope for self-preservation, everything pouring forth in a rush as Potter swallows him down until his body is an empty warm husk of sticky, sated desire and he's slumped in Potter's chair, boneless, with Potter's cheek on one still-spread thigh.

Draco smoothes his hand over Potter's face, pushing Potter's hair back from his forehead. "Fuck, you must be so damned hard," he murmurs, and then he's pulling at Potter's shirt, tugging him up until Potter's leaning over him, knees on the seat of the chair between Draco's thighs.

"You don't have to," Potter says, but Draco bats his hands away and pulls Potter's trousers open. He loves the feel of Potter's prick in his palm, hot and heavy and hard, and Potter hisses when Draco drags his fingers up along the curve of his shaft.

Draco angles Potter's cock against his slick spent prick. He looks up at Potter who's watching him, his eyes bright and heated, his cheeks flushed. "Use me," he whispers, and Potter groans, his head dropping forward.

"Malfoy--"

Draco rolls his hips forward, his breath catching as Potter's prick slides over his, the slick head hitting against Draco's hipbone. "Come on," he says. "I want your spunk on me, Potter." He licks his lips. "Don't you?"

Potter swears beneath his breath. "This was about you, not me."

"Getting you off is about me," Draco says, and he tugs Potter into a kiss. He can taste himself on Potter's tongue, bitter and salty-sweet, and it turns him on, makes him wrap his legs around Potter's arse and pull him closer. He nips Potter's lip. "Nothing like a good rut every now and then, you know."

"Really." Potter laughs against Draco's ear. "God, terrible aren't you."

Draco drags his lips along Potter's jaw. "You're not complaining."

"I wouldn't." Potter turns his head, catches Draco's mouth again. His tongue presses against Draco's, his hips shift forward, sending his prick sliding across Draco's stomach. Draco shudders in delight, his head dropping back against the chair.

"Oh," Draco says, eyes fluttering closed. He loves the feel of Potter's cock on him, the hot press of Potter's flesh, the scrape of Potter's buttons with each roll of Potter's hips. "That's nice." He wonders if he can come again. Probably not. His body's already getting that lovely, limp feeling.

Potter's breathing hard against Draco's ear. He's moving faster, his prick pressing against Draco, his hands gripping the side of the chair.

"God, you're perfect," Potter says against Draco's hair. The chair groans beneath them, scraping across the floor with each snap of Potter's hips. Draco wraps his arms around Potter's neck, holding on against every thrust. "The feel of you, Malfoy--Christ--"

Draco turns his head and kisses Potter again. He wants to taste Potter, to feel him, to hold him tight and hard as Potter shudders against him. "You want me," he murmurs.

"Fuck, yes." Potter's gasping now. "Fuck I want you, Malfoy. I've always wanted you and this
"gorgeous body of yours, and fuck, I'd do anything..."

Potter's body tenses over Draco's. He throws his head back, neck a long, corded line. When Potter shouts, Draco can feel the hot rush of spunk against his skin, painting his chest and hips, and the trembling shudders that wrack through Potter's arms and arse.

And then Potter falls against him, breathing hard. "Christ. That was amazing," he manages, face pressed against Draco's hair.


Draco hears Potter laugh, and he wonders if he can slide off the chair and lie on the floor. He's no idea how he's going to make his way home. Not like this. But then Potter's cleaning him off and then lifting him up, leaving Draco's clothes in a pile on the library floor.

"Where--" he says sleepily as Potter slings him into his strong arms, Draco's legs dangling free, his feet still socked.

"Upstairs," Potter says. "I'll wake you in time to go to yours to get dressed, but you're sleeping here tonight."

"And if I object?" Draco rubs his face against Potter's shirt. He won't, and they both know it. Potter's chuckle is a warm rumble against Draco's ear. "I don't think you want to, Malfoy."

"I could, I suppose," Draco murmurs as he's being carried up the stairs and dropped onto a bed. Potter tugs Draco's socks off and tosses them to the foot of the mattress. The sheets are cool and soft against Draco's heated skin. Draco presses his face into the pillow and breathes in the faint scent of lemongrass and musk that lingers on the soft cotton.

Potter shucks his clothes off and crawls into bed behind Draco, spooning him. He nuzzles the back of Draco's neck, drapes one arm around his waist, pulling Draco back against him. "Comfortable?" His fingers slip over Draco's hipbone, tracing tiny circles across Draco's skin.

"This is delicious," Draco mumbles, muffled by the pillow. He loves the feel of Potter against him, warm and strong and solid. He leans his head back against Potter's shoulder. "Merlin, I want you to fuck me in this bed." He yawns. "Or I could fuck you."

"I think that could be arranged." Potter's thumb slips over the base of Draco's prick. His teeth nip at Draco's earlobe. "Fuck, I wouldn't mind your prick in my arse."

Draco shifts, turning in Potter's arms to face him. "Wouldn't you?"

"It's not like I haven't already let you," Potter points out. "First time in your bed, yeah?"

"That was a good night," Draco says. His thumbnail traces the angle of Potter's collarbone. He shifts against Potter, his cock warm against Potter's hip. "I should sleep."

"You should," Potter agrees. His gaze doesn't leave Draco's face.

Draco just watches him, in the moonlight from the window. Potter's all dark hair and golden skin against the rumpled white sheets, as lithe and gorgeous as a Michelangelo sketch. "Potter," Draco whispers, and then Potter's kissing him, his mouth soft and warm and wet, and Draco arches up against him, their bodies tangling together beneath the sheets.
"Fucking the knuckles hands puckered but Draco pushes two fingers. "Show me?"

"God, bright wandless" Fuck, Draco says. "I'm going to finger fuck you," Draco says. "Yes?"

badly one tumbles "Accio Potter's Draco's Potter never been His own cock's fattening.He

"Lube," Draco manages, and his fingers are already curling around Potter's prick, stroking him lightly. His own cock's fattening up at the thought of being inside Potter again, and he can't believe it. He doesn't know what Potter does to him, how he can make Draco want him so damned badly. It's never been like this with anyone before, this insatiable lust.

Potter shifts and rolls beneath Draco, reaching for the drawer in the side table. He can't quite make it, and he swears.

Draco's thumb slips over Potter's foreskin. "Are you a bloody wizard or not, Potter?" He tugs hard at Potter's prick.

"Accio lube," Potter chokes out, and the drawer flies open, a small, half-empty phial of lubricant tumbles across the bed, landing at Potter's hip. Draco grabs it, twisting the pointed silver cap off with one thumb. He tips it over, letting the remainder of the oil coat his fingers, before the phial drops back onto the bed. It'll stain the coverlet, but Draco doesn't give a fuck. He wants to be in Potter's arse too badly to mind.

"I'm going to finger fuck you," Draco says. "Yes?"

Potter twists under Draco. "Spells, Malfoy. I wasn't expecting to be fucked--"

Draco raises an eyebrow. "My wand's downstairs."

"Fuck," Potter says, and then he lifts his arse off the bed, saying the spells himself. The thrum of wandless magic sparking between them turns Draco on, making his swelling cock rock-hard in an instant. "You don't need to use your fingers," Potter says with a groan. He looks up at Draco, his eyes bright in the shadows. "You can just fuck me."

"God, Potter." Draco's breathless. He feels like he's going to explode. "Do you know what you do to me?" He raises up, the sheets falling off his hips to pool on the bed behind him.

"Show me." Potter hooks his arms behind his own knees, spreading himself open for Draco's touch.

Draco pushes two fingers into Potter's arse, twisting them roughly, and Potter's hips jerk up. "Fuck, but you're so tight," Draco says. He looks down at Potter, at his fingers sliding deeper into Potter's pink, puckered hole. He can't help but shove another finger in, not bothering to be gentle. Potter groans, and his hands tighten on the backs of his thighs, leaving small white marks on the skin beneath his fingertips.

"You like that," Draco says. He twists his fingers to the right, then back again, nearly up to his knuckles in Potter's tight heat. He lets his thumb drift down Potter's taint, then back up, brushing against the back of Potter's sac. Draco leans down and lets his tongue drag across Potter's left bollock, feeling the skin slide beneath his lips before pulling back. "Merlin, you gorgeous thing," he murmurs.

"Fucking hell, Malfoy." Potter's rolling his hips up, spreading himself wider for Draco's fingers.
Draco pushes his fingers deeper into Potter's arse, crooking them upwards, searching the slick heat of Potter's depths. Potter hisses when Draco finds the right spot, his hips coming off the bed with each twist of Draco's fingers. He swears again, and Draco laughs.

"That's it then." Draco presses his fingers into Potter again and again until Potter's reduced to a begging wreck, hands moving to catch the headboard above them, his knees spread wide, his feet thrashing in the sheets.

"Oh, God," Potter says, his head arching back, his neck a thick, corded stretch that Draco longs to bite and suck. "Fuck, Malfoy. God, yes, fuck my arse harder, please, fuck--" He breaks off into a cry, his body tight and shuddering around Draco's fingers.

The power sings within Draco. He knows he could make Potter come like this, knows that Potter would let him do anything right now to get him off. His own cock bobs between them, red and heavy again between the stretch of Potter's thighs. He gently slides his fingers out with the soft squelch of oil against skin. Potter's breathing hard, his chest pink, and he's definitely relaxed enough now to be fucked. Draco has no intention of making him wait.

He leans over Potter, strokes Potter's face with slick fingers still warm from Potter's body. "Tell me you want my prick."

Potter groans and tries to nip Draco's fingertips. "God, yes." He shifts his hips, opening them wider. Potter's cock lays curved and hard against his belly, swelling up from the thick patch of dark curls, crisp across his bollocks. He looks delicious, and Draco can't believe Potter's spread out beneath him like this, a veritable erotic feast waiting to be consumed. "Merlin, Malfoy I want to be fucked," Potter says, a quaver of desperation in his voice, and Draco's breath catches.

Draco lines his prick up against Potter's crease, letting his head rub up against Potter's soft pucker as he drips the last of the oil from the phial over them both. Potter bites his lip and reaches for Draco's hips.

"Please." Potter's face is flushed and he's breathless, eyes closed, lashes dark against the heated skin of his cheeks. Draco looks down to where Potter's loosened hole is waiting for him and with a gentle forward motion of his hips, settles his prick at the rim of Potter's arse. "Fuck, Malfoy, don't stop there," Potter says, his face a disaster. He looks sex-drunk and perfect.

Leaning forward just enough, Draco presses into Potter in a slow, achingly good slide. When he slots home, Potter breathes out a ragged huff. Draco moves Potter's legs, draping them over his forearms, bracing him open. "You all right?" Draco asks, and Potter nods, his eyes still closed.

Bending Potter nearly double, Draco feels his bollocks slap against Potter's cleft. "God, you're amazing," Draco says. He leans down and kisses Potter, lips soft and warm against each other, their bodies tightly interlocked. Potter opens his mouth to Draco, greedily swallowing Draco's tongue, moaning around him as Draco rolls his hips forward again, pressing deep into Potter before he pulls back, breaking their kiss.

Potter grunts, and his eyes flutter as he looks up at Malfoy. "God," he whispers, and Draco gives him a small smile, rocking into Potter's arse.

"I've been called worse," he says, and Potter snorts.

"Tosser."

Draco leverages himself as best he can, holding himself up, Potter's knees at his shoulders, watching Potter push down on him with hands braced on the headboard. Circe, but it's a glorious
sight, his cock sliding deep into Potter, his unfurled hole stretched wide around Draco's prick.

"Christ, do I have to beg you to fuck me harder, Malfoy?" Potter asks breathlessly, but his face is absolutely wrecked with pleasure. He arches into Draco's thrust, pushing himself down on Draco's prick. "Am I not enough for you here?"

"You could try a bit more," Draco manages to get out, his hips slapping against Potter's arse. He moves faster, balanced awkwardly on his knees, his hands pressing into the mattress on either side of Potter's shoulders. The bed creaks and shifts under the motion of their bodies. Draco's so bloody hard; it almost feels like he's never going to come. He can feel the hot prickle of his arousal dancing across his slick skin.

Potter swears as he thrusts up, and he does it again, and again, moaning under the rough assault of Draco's cock. Draco's pulse is pounding in his throat, his breath a series of ragged gasps with each slam of his hips against the muscular plane of Potter's arse. God, but he loves fucking Potter like this, loves seeing Potter spread out beneath him, desperate for Draco's prick. Draco could lose himself in Potter, he thinks, and suddenly his body is tensing against Potter, clenching, his hips pumping, shuddering. He shouts, his fists shoving into the mattress as he grinds himself against Potter, the world greying out around him for a moment. It's almost as explosive as his first orgasm, and it leaves him trembling in its wake.

"Malfoy," Potter says, and his eyes are wide and bright. "Malfoy--" He jerks against Draco's body. "Please--"

Somehow Draco pushes himself up, leans on his left arm. He manages to push his hand between them, curling his fingers around Potter's dripping cock. He strokes Potter ruthlessly, his fist tight and hot and quick, each tug of his fingers along Potter's prick making Potter shake and press up, his lip caught between his teeth. Draco holds Potter's gaze. "Come for me," he says, voice sharp and commanding. "Now."

"Fuck--oh--" Potter's whole body jerks beneath Draco, and he cries out, tipping his throat back, thick strings of spunk shooting from his cock, sticky and hot across Draco's fingers. His hips press up; his feet dig into the bedsheets before he falls back, breathing hard. "Malfoy," he whispers, his body limp beneath Draco's. "Christ."

Draco collapses gently to the side, completely wrung out. He wipes spunk across Potter's stomach. "You're going to have to say the cleaning spells," he says against Potter's shoulder, kissing his skin.

"Give me a minute," Potter has an arm over his face. He's breathing hard.

"Are you all right?" Draco asks, worry racing through him that the Saviour of the Wizarding World might be having a heart attack beneath him. That would be just his sodding luck, wouldn't it?

Potter laughs. "Yeah. I'm good. You?"

Draco relaxes a little. "Quite relaxed, thank you."

"That's a relief, yeah?" Potter rolls over towards Draco, saying the spells with a sweep of his hand over their bodies. Draco shivers as the wandless magic sparks across his skin. He wonders if he'll ever get used to that, if it'll ever cease to get him hard. His prick twitches. Evidently not. "Think you can sleep now?"

Draco curls up against Potter, feeling strangely, fiercely protective of the bastard. He bites back a
yawn, presses his face against Potter's shoulder as Potter cards fingers through Draco's hair. "Maybe."

Potter kisses the top of Draco's hair. "I'll wake you in the morning."

Draco's last thought before he passes out, surrounded by the lingering smell of spunk and the faint whiff of lemongrass on his pillow, is that Potter's bed is nowhere as bad as he claimed. It's almost as comfortable as Draco's own.

And for the first time in three days, he falls into a dreamless sleep.

***

Pansy takes the last curve at breakneck speed, her ponytail slapping against the back of her sweaty neck, her breath coming in rough, brutal gasps. Potter's just ahead of her, running at an easy speed, and she's determined to push past him, whatever it takes. She pumps her arms and throws herself forward, knees rising high with each step around the track in the training centre gym. One more burst, and she's past Potter, slowing down only for the steps that lead her onto the sparring floor.

"Yes," she chokes out, and she falls onto the solid mat, her chest heaving in her tight, black sports bra, arms and legs splayed out. Potter jogs up beside her and looks down. Pansy raises an arm weakly. "Beat you. Finally."

"Because I let you," Potter says, and Pansy flips two fingers at him.

"Doesn't matter." Pansy closes her eyes against the bright morning sun streaming through the small, high windows. She's the only one who'd showed up for their training session; Blaise has another check-in with the Healers, and Draco ought to be on his way into the Promotions Board interview just about now.

The mat shifts as Potter drops down beside her. She opens one eye; he's shirtless, towel-sweating off with his balled up tee. Frankly, she can see why Draco's attracted. Potter's more than well fit with his taut, tight muscles and his flat stomach, broad across the shoulders and narrow in the hips. It must be like fucking a brick wall, she thinks, hard and firm and capable of throwing you up against the headboard with just the right amount of force to make you want to come. If she didn't adore Draco, she'd try out the guv herself, she thinks. Ginny Weasley's probably cursing herself for letting him go now.

"You're getting faster," Potter says, dropping his shirt between them.

"I am indeed." Pansy nods in agreement. Her breath's starting to slow down. To be honest, she's taking this physical prep more seriously now that Blaise went down. She's not the best dueller on the team or the most likely to notice a lurking Dark wizard. She wants to be more than a lab rat; she wants to be quick and fast with her reflexes, but she doesn't have the benefit of Draco's years as Seeker or Blaise's skill with duelling. So Potter's wretched regime it is.

Potter summons his holdall from the side of the room with a snap of his fingers. Bloody show-off. He's in a good mood this morning, better than he's been in a week. Fuck, Pansy thinks. He's probably shagged Draco then, and that'll require another torturous conversation to get Draco to admit it, since Pansy expects Draco was pissed at the time which will, in turn, mean he'll be horribly embarrassed by whatever they did.

She sighs.

"What's wrong?" Potter asks. He digs through the holdall, then pulls out a bottle of water, draining
most of it in one long swallow. Pansy looks away; there's something terribly decadent about watching him like this.

"Nothing," Pansy says. She sits up, stretching out her back. "Just worried about Draco."

Potter's gaze flicks over to the clock on the wall. It's a few minutes after ten. "He ought to be called in soon."

"He's nervous." Pansy tugs her hair tie out of her ponytail and pulls it back again, wrapping the tie tighter. Her hair brushes against the sweaty nape of her neck, the ends sticking to her damp skin.

"I know," Potter says without thinking, and that's Pansy's answer there, isn't it? She doesn't know what to think. As much as she's certain Draco's throwing his whole life away for a shag or twenty, she's also hated seeing him so miserable this past week. Even if part of it was her fault.

She leans forward, her hands curling around her ankles. God, but it feels good to stretch. "I think it's the Legilimens that's worrying him the most, honestly. I mean, don't get me wrong, he's a brilliant Occlumens but--"

"The Legilimens?" Potter asks, and there's a sharp note in his voice that makes Pansy turn her head. She eases back out of her stretch, eyeing Potter curiously.

"Yeah." Pansy frowns. She's surprised Draco hasn't told Potter, if they did actually fuck last night, but she supposes it might have slipped Draco's mind in favour of other more important things, like sucking Potter's cock or whatever. She brushes a stray wisp of hair away. "Robards arranged for it since Draco's allergic to Veritaserum--"

"That's fucking ridiculous," Potter snaps. "They don't even function in the same way."

Pansy holds up her hands. "Don't yell at me, guv. The Promotions Board insisted. Besides, Draco's a damned good Occlumens, so he's not that worried--"

Potter gives her an even look. "Occlumency isn't in his file."

"Obviously." Pansy hates it when Potter thinks she's thick. "No one knows, but he was trained in the war by Snape and his mad Aunt Bella." She can't suppress the shiver; Bellatrix Lestrange had always frightened Pansy, even as a young girl.

"That'll give him a leg up, at least," Potter murmurs. There's an odd glint in his gaze, but perhaps that's a trick of his glasses. "If they don't know..." He trails off, and his eyes narrow. "Which Unspeakable is testing him? Does he know?"

Pansy shrugs. "Some fit bloke from America, is all I know. Draco said he was a bit flirty when he met him--"

"America?" Potter's very, very still. Something about his face draws Pansy up short, and she knows he's suddenly furious. She's seen the guv angry, obviously, but this is different. His jaw shifts. Clenches. A muscle jumps in his cheek. And yet he still seems far too controlled, which somehow scares the bloody hell out of Pansy.

She nods and scoots away, just a nudge. Potter's holdall is trembling a bit, and she's not certain his magic's not going to go full Vesuvius on both of them. "That's what Draco said. An American. His name's Durant--"

Potter swears, a string of vicious curses as he jumps up that sends Pansy skittering back even more,
her body tense and tight. He sounds like her father in a tirade, and she hates that her heart's
slamming against her chest in response. Potter's hands are clenched tight; his face is a snarl that makes Pansy realise how terrifying it would have been if Potter hadn't been on the side of the angels. She's heard about this Potter, people have whispered about how he'd looked, facing down the Dark Lord, but she hadn't been there. She'd been the one to try to hand him over, and then she'd ran, scared witless, and this? This had been why.

"Guv," she says breathlessly, her eyes fixed on the smoking handle of his holdall. "Guv!"

And then Potter sinks back into himself, his rage still there, vibrating under the surface, but it's not quite as overwhelming. "I'm going to kill him," Potter says, mouth a thin line.

"It's not Draco's fault." Pansy's on her feet, facing Potter. It takes every ounce of courage she has not to run for the door. "He didn't--"

"Not him," Potter snaps. He looks at her then, actually sees her, and his face softens, only slightly. He grabs his scorched holdall, pulls out a shirt and shrugs it on "It's fine, Parkinson. It's not Draco I'm angry with."

And then he's gone, striding out of the gym, his shirt still open, joggers still on, holdall clutched in one hand. Pansy sinks back to the mat, her hands shaking. She's no idea what's about to happen, but she's certain it can't be good. She can smell the awful scent of burnt leather.

Fuck, she thinks.

Just fuck.

***

The Promotions Board isn't located in the Ministry proper, but rather in a tall, narrow grey stone building in Pall Mall proper, smushed between a small alley and a wider, tall grey stone building with elaborately leaded windows. The Muggles passing by don't even notice the slick, black door set into the stonework arch or Draco standing in front of it in full Auror uniform, grey-lined constable's cloak and all, his stomach twisting nervously.

He's not tired today, and perhaps that's from the adrenaline pumping through his body at the thought of facing the interview panel, but he's more certain it's the fact that he actually slept through the night, curled up in Potter's bed of all places, Potter a solid, warm presence beside him. It'd been just past dawn when Potter'd woken him with a soft kiss, letting Draco stretch and curl against him in the grey light until Potter'd shaken Draco again and told him it was time to get up and fetch his robes from home. Draco hadn't wanted to leave the warmth of Potter and the bed, but he'd done so, albeit crankily. Potter'd fed him and made certain he'd been dosed with hangover potion before kissing him at the Floo in a way that still makes Draco's toes curl at the thought.

Last night was mad of him, Draco knows, but he doesn't regret it. Not really. It complicates things, and he's not certain where they'll go from here--or even if they will go anywhere--but he feels more grounded than he has in days. Weeks maybe. His head is finally clear.

He draws in a deep, steadying breath, smoothing the line of the jacket beneath his cloak, and walks up the steps, pushing the door open, and stepping into a wide, marble-floored hall.

It's busy, filled with wizards and witches bustling past, arms filled with parchments and thick tomes. The Crickerly Building's used for Ministry office overflow now, but Draco's never really needed to come by. The older Ministry archives are on the third and fourth floors, with record collections that stretch from the Victorians all the way back to the Domesday Book. It's the sort of place his father would love; Lucius would lose himself in the certain pile of Malfoy marriage
Draco takes the wide, curving staircase up to the first floor. The Promotions Board office is at the end of the hall, behind a small glass-fronted door. Draco slips in, nodding at the young witch at the front desk, who looks harried already.

"Draco Malfoy for a ten o'clock interview," he says, taking his cloak off and draping it over one arm.

The receptionist flips through an oversized ledger with a frown, then she stops on one page, her finger finding Draco's name. "Here you are." She points down the corridors. "Room five, just on the left. They'll be with you shortly."

Interview room five's small, nearly filled by the long table with four seats that stretches along one side. Facing it's another chair, decidedly meant to be uncomfortable, Draco's sure. He sets his satchel down and drapes his folded cloak over it before straightening up and tugging at his jacket cuffs. He wonders what it would be like, exchanging the grey of his constable's piping for sergeant's white. Draco wants it so badly, more than he'll admit to anyone else. He's done his best to seem above it all, but he doesn't know what he'll do if he fails this interview. He's not certain he can stay a constable his entire career. That's not for him, and he knows it, deep down.

Draco sits on the chair and tries to calm himself. He clears his head, the way Snape had taught him all those years ago, focussing on one small memory--himself with his mother in the garden of the Manor--and letting everything else slide back into the compartments of his mind. He imagines locking those other memories away, blocking them off.

"You'll be fine," he murmurs, and for a moment, he truly, deeply believes it.

The door swings open. Two men and a woman come in, talking amongst themselves. The only one Draco recognises is Durant, who nods and smiles at him. He has a binder in his hands, and he's flipping through it as he takes his seat.

"Constable Malfoy," the women says. She's tall and statuesque, with silver-grey curls piled on top of her head. She slides a pair of tortoiseshell glasses on and peers at him. "I'm Chief Inspector Persephone Abbott of the DMLE Promotions Board, and I'll be leading your interview today. I understand you've met Mr Durant, your Legilimens?"

Draco nods. "Head Auror Robards introduced us, ma'am."

"And you're comfortable proceeding with Mr Durant rather than attempting Veritaserum?" Abbott takes the centre seat at the table between Durant and the other man, short and thin with a definite receding hairline that makes Draco worry about his own. She opens a file jacket with his photograph on it.

"Yes, ma'am."

Abbott makes a note in the file jacket. "Excellent. Your other interviewer will be Inspector Michael Polley." She glances at the thin man, then back at Draco. "For the record, this interview is being conducted with Constable Draco Lucius Malfoy, first-class, to determine his readiness to proceed to the rank of sergeant. Constable, do you agree?"
"I do," Draco says. His palms are sweaty, but he doesn't dare wipe them on his trousers. He's certain Abbott would make note of that as well. He keeps his back ramrod straight, thanking his mother for the posture lessons she hounded him into as a child. It helps to keep him calm and centred.

"Right then." Abbott flips a page in the file jacket. "Constable Malfoy, I understand you're currently assigned to Special Branch 74A, under the charge of Inspector Harry Potter, yes?"

Durant shifts in his seat with a sharp intake of breath that he covers with a cough, and Draco glances over at him. There's a curious expression on Durant's face, but he doesn't say anything. Draco wonders if it's the first time Durant's encountered mention of Potter since he's been here. He turns his attention back to Abbott.

"I am, yes."

Abbott gives him a thin smile. "Then shall we begin?"

Draco takes a deep breath and exhales.

***

"Harry," Viola says as he brushes past her, fueled by pure, righteous fury. "You can't go in there-- Harry!" She rises out of her seat, her voice sharp. "Inspector Potter!"

She doesn't deter Harry. He slams the door to Gawain's office open, rattling the books on the nearest bookcase. Harry's barely bothered with his clothes; he'd switched his joggers for trousers and buttoned his shirt, but it's untucked and he's still wearing his trainers as he strides in, his magic crackling around him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Harry spits out, as Gawain glances up, his brows drawing together.

Bertie Aubrey and Antigone Halliwell turn in their chairs to look at Harry.

"Inspector Potter," Gawain says in a quiet voice. "Do you have a meeting scheduled with me?"

Harry's too angry to care. "I bloody well do now."

Gawain holds his gaze for a long moment; Harry refuses to look away. Gawain sighs. "If we could continue this later, Bertie and Antigone," he says, his voice sharp, "I would be quite grateful."


Gawain waits until the door closes behind them before he stands. "Inspector Potter," he says, and Harry knows he's in trouble if Gawain's using his proper title. He still doesn't give a shit. "What is so damned important that you feel the need to interrupt a meeting in this manner?"

"Jake bloody Durant is what." Harry moves closer to Gawain's desk. "And let's start with the very fact that you put a Legilimens on Malfoy's interview panel--"

"At the request of the Promotions Board," Gawain snaps. "And might I remind you, Malfoy agreed to it--"
"He wouldn't!" Harry's almost shouting now. "You know he wouldn't--not without pressure--"

"Inspector Potter." The command in Gawain's voice draws Harry up short. Gawain points to a chair. "Sit down, and shut your bloody gob."

Harry drops into the proffered chair, letting his holdall fall beside him, and scowls at Gawain as he takes his own seat again. Gawain sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"As I understand it," Gawain says after a moment. "You're objecting to Constable Malfoy undergoing a Legilimency session as part of his interview."

"Obviously." Harry doesn't bother to hide his disdain. Fuck, but he's been around Malfoy too long. "Not to mention the fact that said Legilimency is my sodding ex-boyfriend, Gawain."

Gawain leans back in his chair. "That does complicate things."

If he only bloody knew, Harry thinks. He runs a hand through his hair, huffing out in annoyance. Jake's a fucking good Legilimency. World-class. One of the absolute best in the field, and Malfoy's going up against him. Harry doesn't give a shit if Snape trained him. Fuck, Snape tried to train Harry in Occlumency and see how well that worked.

Harry wants to sick up. It's all going to come down around them, everything. He's been such a fucking fool. He doesn't even care about his own career. Fuck it all. He's enough money tucked away from his grandfather's Sleek-Easy Potion and from Sirius, and Harry doesn't live wildly. He'll be fine. But Malfoy? Christ. Harry can't send him back to the Manor, not to the poison fog of Lucius Malfoy.

"You knew about Jake," Harry says after a moment. "You knew there'd be a conflict of interest."

"I didn't know you'd bloody broken up with him." Gawain presses a knuckle to his mouth. He swivels away from Harry to scowl out the window onto the Atrium below. "When the request came in for a Legilimency, I thought Durant would be a good choice. That he might protect one of your team who might be in a vulnerable position." He frowns back at Harry. "I also thought that you'd be told about the procedure after my meeting with Constable Malfoy. The fact that I'm only just finding you in my office, during Malfoy's actual interview, suggests otherwise."

Harry leans forward, his hands on his face, elbows on his knees. "Parkinson just brought it up." He drops his hands between his thighs and stares at the carved mahogany edge of Gawain's desk. "Malfoy didn't bother." Fuck, but that hurts.

Gawain sighs again and falls silent. He turns back to Harry, studying him. "This, Harry," he says gently, "is what concerns me more than anything. Your team should trust you--"

"You ought to have discussed it with me first." Harry sits up, his voice rising. "As SIO of the 74A--"

Gawain slams his hand down on the desk, sending a quill flying across the room. It lands nib down in the plush carpet. "As SIO, you should have been someone Malfoy felt comfortable coming to with any worries about his interview."

Harry looks away. He knows Gawain's right. Malfoy should have trusted him. For Christ's sake, Harry had Malfoy's prick in his mouth last night, not to mention Malfoy buggering his arse, and Malfoy still hadn't told him about Jake. His jaw clenches, and a heavy ache settles in his stomach. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "I should have been."

The silence between them stretches. Harry can hear someone in Viola's office say something
before she hurries them off.

"You're new at this," Gawain says finally. "It's hard to lead a team, Harry. People are difficult, foolish, even. It's your job to bring them together and to make them gel. They ought to respect you and trust you, and if they don't..." He holds up his hands. "I think you can do this, but, if you'll take my advice, you need to pull your head out of your arse, lad."

Harry chews on his bottom lip. "I know." He looks up at Gawain. "You can't stop the interview, can you?"

"No," Gawain gives him a sympathetic look. "And I wouldn't. However, should you choose to discuss Malfoy's case with Durant before he enters his final report with the Promotions Board, well." He clears his throat. "I would be inclined to look the other direction."

It's a terrible idea on so many levels, least of all the ethical considerations that Harry knows Gawain ought to pay mind to, though he's grateful for the offer. Still, Harry doesn't know what else he can do. He nods, slowly. "If I did something so out of protocol, sir, I'd be sure you weren't involved."

"That would be appreciated." Gawain summons his quill, frowning down at the broken nib. "You know, Harry, you're going to need to separate your personal feelings and professional behaviour with Mr Durant now. I know you're young, but that's one of the perils of workplace romance, and why they're frowned upon in most quarters. You need to be able to work with said individual afterwards, and in my experience, these sorts of affairs rarely end in true love." The look on Gawain's face makes it clear just how foolish he thinks that is. "Just something to consider."

Harry wants the floor to open and swallow him whole. If Gawain only knew about Malfoy, he'd have his guts for garters. Harry's cheeks feel like they're on fire and he prays that Gawain doesn't notice. He's certain every lie he has ever told is written across his face. "Yes, sir." Harry presses his lips together then sighs. "I'll work on my professional conduct. Thank you for the advice." He hopes he sounds sincere.

Gawain eyes him, then he lays his quill next to its holder. "See that you do."

Harry stands up, desperate to escape. He's no bloody idea what he can do now, but he's going to gather his thoughts on the way to the Crickerly Building. He can't stay here waiting for Malfoy to come back. If he even does. Christ. Harry runs a hand through his hair. He wishes he could go back to last night, lying in bed with Malfoy curled beside him, hair rumpled, snoring softly. Everything had seemed so right then, the two of them alone, surrounded by moonlight. Now in the cold, harsh light of the day, Harry realises what a damned fool he's been.

"Inspector Potter," Gawain says, not looking at him. "If you ever, and I mean ever come into my office like that again, I will have you in front of Professional Standards on insubordination charges in a heartbeat. I don't give a fuck if you're Harry Potter or not." He looks up then, his face grim. "Do I make myself clear?"

Harry swallows through his tight throat. "Crystal, sir."

"Then get the hell out of here." Gawain flicks his wand and the door to his office flies open.

Harry belatedly remembers to grab his holdall as he's leaving Gawain's office. As he passes through the outer sanctum, he sees Viola's face, silent and eyebrows nearly at her hairline. He nods farewell but doesn't stop.

It's only after he's punched the button for the lift that the enormity of what he's done, of what's just
happened hits him. Although he's not entirely sorry, not under the circumstances, he's also appalled that Robards had to see him like this. And then remembers Pansy, and the fear on her face. He knows he needs to apologise to her, but first he has to talk to Jake, even if it makes things worse. He's no idea what he's going to say, but, if nothing else, he has to try his best to save Malfoy.

***

The air in the small, oddly lit room is humid with all of the breaths that have been expended, by Draco and his inquisitors, and Draco senses that tempers are wearing thin after the short break. Certainly his own is. Chief Inspector Abbott appears as crisp as when she began, although her voice has taken on a sharpness that cuts through his skull when she presses him further in questioning. Draco has no sense of time any longer. It could be noon, it could be two, it could be bloody Saturday by now. He honestly doesn't know.

So far, he's managed to keep his composure, but Abbott and Polley keep circling around the Mark and what it means to Draco now, what it meant back when he'd been idiot enough to take it.

Abbott looks over to her colleague, then to Draco. She sighs. "Constable Malfoy, please lead us back to the night that you received the tattoo on your left arm, now obliterated. What do you remember feeling when the Dark Lord gave you his mark?"

Polley is hunched across the table from Draco and looks much worse for the wear, his buttons undone at the neck and his hair askew. He's sweating, and the bags under his eyes aren't flattered by the sickly quality of the light hovering overhead. There's a hatred on his face that's almost feral; strangely Draco is reminded of Peter Pettigrew, though he's fairly certain that Polley was on the right side of the War or he wouldn't be here now.

Or perhaps Polley's a better liar than Draco thinks.

Draco swallows, his throat dry. He'd like another water, but he doesn't dare ask for it. Besides, he'd just have to piss. He'd downed half the pitcher outside in the hallway during the break. "Terror, Chief Inspector. Abject terror is what I remember. I was so very afraid of the Dark Lord. I'd seen what he could do, what he would do if anyone angered him. I was mortally afraid for my own well-being, and I took the Mark because I was afraid he'd kill me or someone I loved if I didn't." He doesn't bother to say that the Dark Lord had pointed his wand at Narcissa and given Draco a choice. Marked or responsible for his mother's murder. Whether he would have actually done it, Draco doesn't know. He'd like to think Aunt Bella would have stopped the Dark Lord, if only out of affection for her sister. He also doesn't tell them that part of him had hoped his father would be proud of him if he was Marked as well. It'd been a foolish hope.

Durant watches him with a carefully composed face, his quill tapping lightly against the edge of his binder.

"Why would you be afraid, as the son of his chosen henchman?" Polley's almost spitting. He definitely lost someone, several someones perhaps, Draco thinks. "You-Know-Who was a family friend, was he not?"

Draco pauses and breathes. He finds it curious that Polley still uses that name for the Dark Lord. He'd thought it'd gone out of fashion upon Potter's triumph. "I don't think that he had friends, Inspector. Subjects or minions, yes, but no friends."

"But why would you think that you personally were in danger? Had you done anything to counter his ambitions?" Polley's eyes flash at him, sharp and bright and bitter.
"No, sir." There's a clutching sensation in Draco's chest, and he recognised it as shame, mixed with a huge spike of anxiety. He doesn't like this confrontation. He wipes his palms along the wool of his trousers as discreetly as he can. He catches a look from Durant, who misses almost nothing, Draco thinks. The American's too quick. Draco draws in another breath, trying to calm himself. "I did nothing to oppose his ambitions." The admission makes Draco even more uncomfortable. He's agonised over that choice for years now, forced to defend it over and over again. "I was entirely subservient; I had been trained to accept his will, and I was afraid to oppose him, even though I loathed him. Once again, sir, I was afraid that he would kill me or my family."

Dark images swirl at the corners of Draco's mind, and he tamps them back down. He's been through this before, at least dozens of times. And yet, every time, if he's not careful, he feels the ground erode beneath his feet. Even though he saw the Dark Lord die with his own eyes, he's still waiting even now for the consequences of his disloyalty. In his darker moments of despair, he believes that this lurking fear will be with him forever.

Perhaps he deserves it.

"Why should we believe you?" Polley sits forward with a thud, his chair skipping on the wooden floor. "What proof do you have that you were not ideologically aligned with the Dark Lord? You grew up with him; your father supported him; you took the Mark. How can we know you've changed your stripes?"

Draco's so tired of having these questions thrown at him. He wants to stand up and scream at them all, to tell them that he's not that boy any longer, that he's grown up, that he's changed, that he's not bound by choices he made when he was bloody seventeen years old. Instead he squares his shoulders and looks Polley in the eye. "I have done everything since that day to prove that I am a better man than my father," Draco says quietly. "Although I didn't oppose the Dark Lord whilst he was in power, I have seized every opportunity thereafter to change my fate and the fate of those harmed by the Dark Lord, by my father, by my family's complicity."

"It's not enough, Constable Malfoy." Polley's face is shattered. "It can never be enough for those who died. You can never do enough to undo--"

A gentle cough interrupts Polley's barrage. Polley turns, as does Draco, to look at Durant who's flipping through his binder.

"I apologise for interrupting you, Inspector Polley," Durant says easily, and it's immediately clear to Draco at least that he's not sorry, that he intends to break Polley's soapbox moment. Durant holds up the binder. "I think the results of Mr Malfoy's trial after the War are here, and, as far as I can tell, those questions were answered satisfactorily in front of the full Wizengamot." Durant sits back, point made.

Polley's shoulders drop a little from his stiff, aggressive stance. He starts again, but has clearly lost his momentum. "Well, Constable Malfoy, I hope you've given it some thought."

As if he hasn't given it hundreds of hours of thought, Draco thinks, but he nods. "Thank you, sir." He doesn't add you miserable berk the way he's tempted to. If there's one thing Draco's learnt in growing up it's that being circumspect does have its value.

With another look to Durant, Chief Inspector Abbott says, "Perhaps we should wrap up this line of questioning now. It's been a long morning, and Mr Durant's here to assist with the final questioning under Legitimacy, as previously agreed to by Constable Malfoy with Head Auror Gawain Robards."

Although he's well aware Durant's sympathetic interference could be just a tactic to get him to
relax and thus catch him off guard, Draco has an odd urge to trust Durant somehow. He knows it's not going to be easy to go under Legilimency, particularly with what he has in his head, but he experiences a strange sort of gratitude that he'll be under Durant's probing and not someone like Polley. Still, Draco braces himself internally, willing into place that small, crystalline memory of his mother in the garden that grounds him and closing off the deeper chambers of his mind.

Inspectors Abbot and Polley sit back, their work done. The remainder of the interview, Draco knows, is Durant's to conduct under their witness. He hopes it will go as smoothly as possible. He can't believe he's almost done.

Durant leans forward, forearms on the table. "Constable Malfoy, I'm going to be concluding your interview under Legilimency. In particular, I'll be looking at your memories concerning your parents' activities and their known associates. Understood?"

Draco nods, appreciative of the fact that Durant explains what he is doing.

"And do you consent to being questioned under Legilimency?" Durant opens his binder again.

"I do." Draco lets himself relax a fraction, breathing to let his body centre itself and his mind come into wholeness. Durant's accent is lilting and has unusual--to Draco's ears--patterns of emphasis. Draco finds it oddly soothing.

Durant clears his throat. "My first question, Constable Malfoy, is what do you remember about your father and his relationship with the Dark Lord?" Durant focuses intently, a calm focus that greys out everyone else in the room. Draco breathes. At this range, he can tell that Durant's eyes are blue flecked with gold. He's terribly attractive, Draco thinks, and he sees an answering smile quirk the corner of Durant's mouth. Draco lets his mind shrug a bit, and Durant's smile widens.

It's odd feeling someone else pressing into your mind. Draco'd almost forgotten how simple it can be when going up against a skilled Legilimens. Bertie'd been rough and uneven this week; it'd felt like a troll stomping about, easy to evade and ignore. This is different. Durant slips through the threads of Draco's memories with surgical precision, pushing away the detritus of Draco's daily existence, the coffee he'd shared with Blaise this morning in the incident room, his lunch yesterday with Pansy, the boredom of sorting through the Dolohov files with Shah. None of that's of interest to Durant; Draco can sense Durant glancing at them, then pushing them away.

Draco wills himself to remember the memories that he wants Durant to see, the ones that answer Durant's question. He closes his eyes, lets his mind drift into scenes of Lucius cowering before Voldemort, Lucius drunk and snarling, Lucius rejoicing with the Death Eaters in the Manor but running from Hogwarts after the Battle, Draco and his mother at his side. Draco has no intent of pardoning his father--that's not his goal here. Everyone knows, he most of all, what a shit his father is and that the only reason he's not in Azkaban is because he is a weak-willed, spineless, cowering twat. That and Potter owed Draco's mother a favour, one that Narcissa's never been willing to discuss. Durant pushes deeper, and Draco lets the pain of being Lucius Malfoy's son rise to the surface. He wants Durant to see the moments when a drunken Lucius struck him, when his father commanded the impossible of him, ordering him, a mere child, to follow the Dark Lord's instruction to kill Dumbledore. Draco lets the pervasive atmosphere of disappointment and distrust wash over him, and he clenches his hands, fingernails digging into his palms, his knuckles pressed against his thighs. It's almost too much to bear, this grief at what Draco's lost, at an adolescence ruined and warped by a war that had drawn children into its cold, bittter touch.

Durant takes a deep breath, and the memories fade back into the grey mists of Draco's mind. Draco's left shaking, but it could have been so much worse, he knows. Durant's touch in Draco's mind is clear and unthreatening, which is not something Draco normally associates with Legilimency. He appreciates that Durant is a professional, that he respects the raw emotion of Draco's memories.
"What was your relationship like to your mother and her family during this time?" Durant asks quietly.
"What do you think of when you think of her, of them?"

A wave of deep love floods through Draco, along with memories of his mother caring for him, pulling him aside in a Manor filled with Death Eaters, warning him to be careful. He shows her own careful dislike of the Dark Lord, her anger at her husband, how she protected Draco as best she could from his own stupid mistakes. Through carefully chosen scenes, he narrates a mother who is kind and strong, a mother who protects him, even though she is herself at risk. He misses his mother, wishes she had the courage to leave his father behind, but she loves him too much, even with all his faults and idiocies. Draco hates that there's a distance between them now because of Lucius, but he doesn't know what to do, doesn't know how to fix what's been broken.

Durant probes deeper, pushing past the more recent memories of Sunday roasts at the Manor to focus on Draco's Black relatives. Not that he knows them well. He's made an effort with his Aunt Andromeda in recent years, and his cousin Teddy, but it's not an easy relationship. The shadow of his father stretches out even there. Aunt Bella is different. She'd been welcome in the Manor, along with that snivelling shit of a husband, and as much as Draco'd been intrigued by his aunt, she'd terrified him as well. It's when he is thinking of his Auntie Bella and the Manor that Draco makes his fatal mistake. Durant's pushing into memories of Bellatrix and her madness, her slavish devotion to the Dark Lord, and Draco's fear of his aunt as she trained him in Occlumency. Then, unbidden, as Draco thinks of the House of Black, the image of Grimmauld Place comes into his mind.

In his mind's eye, Draco sees the Black family tapestry hanging in Potter's library. He'd passed by it only this morning, curious about the burnt, blackened spots on the fabric. There's another smaller one in the Manor, an edited copy, Draco knows, that had been a gift to his mother on her wedding day. He's there on the tapestry, his woven face floating on a tree branch, same as he is on the tapestry over Potter's mantelpiece. Draco tries to close off the memory, but he feels Durant pressing deeper, his interest piqued. It's only then that Draco realises how powerful Durant is as he picks the locks on Draco's memories, as quickly as Draco can slam them shut.

And then Draco sees Potter's bed in his mind, sees the very pillows he slept on last night, a fuzzy vision of Potter spread out underneath him, his head tipped back, no features visible yet. Desperate to cover the memory under Durant's fierce, probing scrutiny, Draco quickly splices in a similar image of Nicholas, of one of the few times when Nicholas had let him fuck him--Nicholas usually made him bottom, he said he didn't like giving up control. Nicholas' bed wasn't too different from Potter's; his sheets had been similar and the dark curls and look of abandon were almost the same, really. Draco swaps one vision of dark hair and spread legs for another, substitutes one scene of pleasure and of fulfillment for an earlier one. If Draco's honest, what he wanted from Nicholas was nothing like what Potter makes him feel, and in juxtaposing them, he notices how threadbare his passion for Nicholas feels. Still, it makes an excellent double for last night, and Draco is grateful for the cover. It's terribly intimate to be laid bare to Durant, showing him these private moments inside of his head.

To Draco's horror, the substitution doesn't take.

Durant blows through his covering memory like it's nothing but a cobweb, as if he knows exactly where to push to keep Draco from distracting him, exactly what thread to tug to cause Nicholas to unravel, disappearing into a wisp of grey mist. When Draco stops, uncertain, he suddenly sees Potter's bed again, Potter splayed out before him, now almost recognisable, the sheets reforming in his thoughts. It takes him a moment to realise whilst he's viscerally standing in a memory of Grimmauld Place, he's not in his own head any longer. He tries to break free of the image, but he can't. Anxiety swells in him, making his stomach roil and burn, tightening its grip on his chest.
This isn't right--this isn't coming from him any longer. How does Durant know what Potter's
It's secluded now and very recognisable and very aroused Potter
waiting in bed and pad down the hallway. Memory-Draco turns his head and sees himself--but not
himself--he sees the reflection of Jake Durant in the hallway mirror, Jake Durant about to fuck Potter in
the bed Draco slept in last night. In horror, Draco watches himself as Durant return with a new phial of
lubricant, watches Potter's body spread out beneath Durant's, his hands gripping Durant's hips as Durant
fucks him.

In shock and in recognition, Draco's entire body jolts. He cries out, and he understands what this means,
that Durant isn't planting a new memory, but showing Draco his own memory as Potter's hands slide
down Durant's body, pulling him closer, arching up against him. Goddamn it, that's the same fucking
phial of lube Draco used. When did this happen?

Under this onslaught, Draco's mental defenses fall completely apart, leaving him cowering on the floor
of his mind, his whole psyche howling in grief and anger. He's amazed that the entire fucking ceiling
doesn't come down on his head, although it feels like it does inside of him, a physical and psychic shattering that leaves Draco stunned and reeling. He lets Durant in all the way to this room in his mind,
to Potter spread out beneath him, begging him to fuck him, to the mad urges and fierceness of their
coupling, the shuddering abandon of Draco's orgasm, to Potter painting both of their bodies with spunk.
Draco feels incredibly raw as Durant plunges into the bed where Draco slept with Potter, Draco's body
curled up against Potter's warmth. Durant pushes and pushes again, ripping apart every thread of Draco's
soul, and Draco shows him everything.

When Durant pulls away, Draco's shaking, his breath coming in tiny, shuddering hitches. He feels empty
and broken, his entire being hollowed out.

"I think I have what I need for my report." Durant's voice is clipped, still even but less easy than before.

It's a shock to hear Durant's voice out loud. Draco still feels the resonance of Durant in his mind. He
hears his own breath, loud in his ears. Otherwise, there is silence in the interview room. He has a fierce
headache coming on, and his insides feel bruised and raw. Draco breathes out and tries to suppress the
waves of nausea, fury, and humiliation trying to rip him apart.

Draco glances up at Durant. Their gazes meet and hold. Durant's face is closed off. Inscrutable. Draco
looks away first. He thinks he might sick up right here, all over his perfectly polished shoes.

How foolish he was to think that Durant would be easy. If he had it in him, he would laugh at the
insanity of that supposition. But the soft center of Draco's psyche has been hollowed out and he knows
he has to leave as soon as possible with whatever tattered shards of his psychic defenses he can
maintain. He's utterly gutted by being exposed and perhaps more, by seeing what Durant had shown
him. He feels naked and alone and incredibly naive. It's hard to imagine anything more appalling
than this outcome. Blaise and Pansy have been right all along. He's been such an idiot. Draco wants to
put his head into his hands and sob. Instead, he looks up and meets Abbott's curious gaze.

"Are we done?" he asks quietly.

She nods.

***

It's just struck noon when Blaise makes his way over from Whitehall. Draco won't be out of his
interview for another half hour or so, but Blaise wants to be waiting for him at the Athenaeum
when he's finished. He's no idea honestly if Draco will make sergeant this round--his gut says it's too early, that Draco might get held back for another go later. But, Draco's exam scores were bloody damned excellent, good enough to make Althea turn up her nose when it was announced that he was with her in the top five. Shah'd narrated some brilliant things about the look of horror on her face when the results had been posted outside Viola's office. It has to stick in her craw that Draco's up there with her. Shah also mentioned that Althea's also quite creative with her swearing, it seems, but Blaise can't hold that against her. Honestly, Draco's deserved to be called some of those names over the years, and Blaise can't help but respect a woman who can take him down. Even if he doesn't like her.

Blaise walks through the arched, pillared walkways to the Horse Guard Parade ground, noting that the red sand's still hard-packed from the rain the night before. It's quite warm now, and the foliage on the edge of St James Park is lush and green. The sun makes Blaise's head hurt, and he shields his eyes with a hand. He knows it's mad, he's out in the open, but he keeps feeling like someone is following him. He slows his steps twice and then speeds up, not catching anyone out. He's bloody mental, of course. There no one around but a Muggle or two. He sighs. He'll have to mention this to the Healers, and that'll worry his mother, although she might be delighted to have a bit of paranoia be a side-effect for him. She's always told him he's a bit too trusting for his own good. As if a Slytherin could be, for fuck's sake. He's not a damned Hufflepuff, except to hear his mother tell it.

He's just reached an arched metal fence on the way to the Duke of York column when a cold hand grabs him by the neck, unspeakably fast, and drags Blaise into a small side pathway shaded with foliage. Blaise doesn't even have time to get more than a hand on his wand hilt before he's looking square into the face of his most recent nightmares.

Luka Abadzhiev grins, a vile, vicious sneer on his face. "Why, Mr Zabini, whatever are you doing, walking all on your own? The world's a dangerous place, you know. Even when you think you're safe at home." A quick flash of fingers and a smear of something slick and thick goes over Blaise's nostrils. He nearly chokes as he breathes it in. Fireworks of pain explode through Blaise's head with each breath, the worst pain that he's had since he woke up in hospital, and Abadzhiev's face shifts in and out of focus.

"Don't hurt him too badly, Luka," Dolohov says from what seems to be far away. "We need him to send a message, now don't we?"

Blaise tries to raise his wand to defend himself, or even just Apparate away, but the world tips to one side as he sways towards the ground, strong arms catching him just in time. Words swirl around him, phrases he knows, ones he doesn't, whispers and mumurs and tight fingers on his jaw.

The last thing Blaise sees before everything fades into darkness is Dolohov's sharp, bitter smile. He sinks under.

***

Inspector Abbott shuffles the parchments in front of her. "I believe we have what we need, Constable Malfoy. Once our recommendation to the Auror department is complete, you'll receive an owl with the final decision regarding your promotion to sergeant."

Draco nods, trying his best to keep his posture straight and not slump in his chair, exhausted and defeated. There's no way he'll be put forward. Not after what Durant just saw. "Thank you, ma'am," he manages, and Abbott gives him a sympathetic look.
"I know we put you through the wringer today," she says, with a faint smile. "But is there any final statement you'd like us to make in our deliberation?" Polley snorts, only to be scowled at by Abbott. Durant's face is expressionless. Draco looks away from him.

"Only, ma'am," Draco says after a long moment, "that I've worked hard for the past eight years to get where I am on the force. Whatever anyone might think," and here he risks another glance at Durant, "I've done it all on my own. I'm committed to my work as an Auror. I enjoy it. I'm good at it. If you take my file into consideration, you'll see that. I have recommendations and commendations from superior officers, including the Head Auror himself. I'd ask that you overlook my past, and the mistakes made by a very foolish, very misled child. I'm not that boy any longer, and I've done everything I could over the years to repudiate who I was." His voice breaks slightly, and he glances away, taking a deep breath. "Thank you for your consideration."

Abbott's face softens. "And thank you, Constable Malfoy. You've done well today." She stands and looks between Polley and Durant. "Gentlemen, I'd like your reports by end of Monday, if you will."

She sweeps out of the room with Polley on her heels. Durant closes his binder and stands, striding towards the door. He stops, his hand on the doorknob and looks back at Draco, who's just reaching down for his satchel and his cloak.

"Can I have a word?" Durant asks, that soft, low drawl back in his voice.

Draco hesitates. He doesn't want to say anything to this man. He doesn't trust him, and the envy that's swirling up in him at the thought of Potter spread out on Durant's prick--Circe. Draco shoves his hands in his pockets to keep from clenching them at his side. He just looks at Durant, silent and tense.

"What I saw," Durant says after a moment. "Between you and Ha--" He catches himself. "Your SIO. It's recent. I can't tell."

Draco meets Durant's gaze evenly. He's not giving any more information than he has to. He slings the strap of his satchel over his chest, his cloak still draped over one arm.

Durant runs a hand through his hair, mussing his blond curls. "Look, Malfoy. You didn't know a damn thing about me, did you? Because I sure as hell didn't know about you. Not entirely. I suspected there was someone. Harry pretty much admitted it when he tossed me out on my ear the other day."

That's news Draco didn't want to hear, although it explains the change in Potter's behaviour earlier that week. But he doesn't like the idea of being yet another one of Potter's fucktoys, and Circe, how ironic is that. He was fine with it when he thought he was the only one. Now he feels like a fucking fool. His stomach twists. He draws in a slow breath and lets it out. "No. I didn't know."

Durant shakes his head, with a bitter laugh. "What an asshole. Harry. Not you." He chews on his bottom lip. "I do need to know something, Constable, and I'd appreciate you being honest with me." Durant checks the door, makes certain its closed, and Draco tenses. His mind calculates how fast he'd have to be to pull his wand out if he needs it as Durant moves closer. "Are you being coerced by your SIO into a sexual relationship? Is he making you do this in some way?"

Well. Draco's not expecting that question. Nor is he expecting the look of concern in Durant's eyes.

"If you say yes," Durant says, "I'll walk with you right now to Professional Standards to make a formal complaint. I don't give a fuck what sort of power Harry has in this country."
"You think Potter's making me fuck him?" Circe, if it were only that easy. That simple. Draco laughs, sharp and bitter, then shakes his head. "It's not like that." He chews on his lip before he says, "Potter couldn't make me do anything I didn't want to. SIO or not."

Durant studies Draco for a long moment, then nods curtly. "I won't say I'm happy, but that's a relief in a way. I've known Harry for two years, but people can surprise you. I had to be sure."

Two years. That hits Draco in the gut. He wonders how long Durant's been fucking Potter. If it's been that entire time. God, he's been so fucking stupid, hasn't he? Sniffing around Potter like some pathetic lost soul, eager for any bit of favour Potter might bestow—Merlin. Draco bloody well loathes himself right now.

He eyes Durant suspiciously. "Shouldn't you be furious about this?" About me, he wants to say, but he doesn't. He looks at this man in front of him, in his neat dark blue wool uniform and crisp red tie, his jaw square and firm, so unlike Draco's sharp angles and hollowed cheekbones. Jake Durant's a man, not a boy, and Draco feels so very, very young standing here with his chin-length hair and sloping shoulders. Why the fuck would Potter want him when he could have Durant in his bed instead?

"Oh, I'm absolutely fucking ripshit," Durant says. His voice is calm. "But not at you, not exactly." He pauses. "Not in any way I won't get over. You may be guilty as hell, but you didn't know about me. You were just making stupid-ass choices, and I can't save you from that." Something shifts in the depths of Durant's eyes, into a hard, cold glint that makes Draco uneasy. "Harry, on the other hand, damn well did know what he was doing." Durant scowls. "And he shouldn't ever have started something with a junior officer on his team. He should have known better than that. Both of you ought to have, for Christ's sake. You can't tell me the Auror force here doesn't have fraternization rules. Harry's only been an SIO in this assignment for a few weeks, and he's already fucking it up something fierce."

"You're going to tank my promotion, aren't you?" Draco lifts his chin. He'd rather know now than later. He doesn't want the chance to get his hopes up. Besides, he knows the answer. Durant would be a fool not to.

Durant's silent for a moment, then he glances away. "Let me tell you something, Malfoy. I grew up in Louisiana. My dad? He was an absolute shit." Durant looks at Draco then. "Beat the hell out of us. Fucked my older brother up but good with his messed up thinking, then landed himself in Oudepoort for life when I was eight." Draco blinks. He's heard about the American wizarding prison in New York. Supposedly it's worse than Azkaban. Durant rubs the back of his neck. "I was lucky. Late in life baby, you know? My brother..." He sighs. "Well. I work for MACUSA, and he's on the other side of the law mostly. So I know something about being held hostage in your own family. I know how hard it is to be your own man when you grow up in the midst of dysfunction like that. I saw your dad in your memories. And I recognize those feelings. So..."

Draco lets himself have a tendril of hope. "So?"

"Whatever you're doing with Harry," Durant says, "I think it's shit. Not for me--that's separate. But for you. It's stupid, and it's reckless, and you ought to damn well know better. You ought to take better care of yourself. Show some goddamn self-respect. But if you're not being coerced, it doesn't belong in my report. That was the only thing that worried me in my professional capacity. Personally..." Durant's face closes off. "We won't talk about that." His voice goes cold.

"You do believe me that I'm not. Being coerced, I mean?" Draco wants it clear. He doesn't know why it matters. Frankly, there's part of him that's tempted to agree, to let Durant go with him to Professional Standards, to lay it all out in the open in a way that would protect him. But he can't. He wouldn't do that to Potter. Not now.
"Oh, believe me," Durant favours him with grim smile. "I know exactly how persuasive Harry can be when he's focused on you. He's not half-bad in the sack, either. I'm glad he's not trading in his influence for anything non-consensual from you, but I'm going to nail his damn guts to the wall when I see him. And that's not your affair."

Except Draco thinks perhaps it is. He feels strangely protective of Potter, and this unfamiliar instinct to protect Potter in the face of his own peril worries the hell out of Draco.

Durant reaches for the door again, then stops, his hand on the knob. "You know you were really impressive under examination, don't you?" Durant examines Draco's face. "I didn't see any Occlumency listed in your files."

Draco purses his lips bitterly. "I didn't see any Occlumency in my performance either."

That makes Durant bark a laugh. "You kept me in one mental room, Malfoy. And only because I got the jump on you." He hesitates. "And I recognised exactly what you were covering." There's an unsettled silence between them for a moment, then Durant says, "You're a good Occlumens— one of the best I've seen in a long time. I guess you had to. But if you ever get bored with this place, let me know. MACUSA's always looking for new talent."

"I'm fairly certain I'm not American material," Draco says with a snort. He can't imagine leaving England. He also doesn't want to like Durant, but Durant's a charming bastard, and Draco's partial to bloody charming bastards, it seems. And then he remembers what it felt like to turn his head and see Jake Durant's face reflected in the mirror of Potter's hallway instead of his, to feel the press of Potter's body against a prick that isn't his.

His soul aches.

Draco looks away, his throat tight and raw. He feels defenseless, fragile suddenly, and he can't bear to be on display any longer. Blaise is waiting for him in the Athenaeum, or so he'd insisted this morning, saying he intended to buy Draco a round for surviving the fucking Board, and Draco desperately wants a whisky right now— a whole bottle, really. He wonders if he could drink himself blind for the rest of the afternoon, if he could somehow manage not to go back into the incident room, not to see Potter sitting there in his office. Circe, but he wants to flee. He doesn't know how he's going to face Potter. Not now. Not after what he knows. He's angry, and he's humiliated, and he still wants to defend Potter, and he hates that feeling. It makes him feel weak, biddable. A damned fucking fool. "I should go," he says after a moment.

Even though they're not linked by Legilimency any longer, Durant seems to be able to read Draco's face. "Why don't you go down the back stairs? I can show you how to get out of here and get some privacy. You've earned it after all this."

All Draco can do is nod. He needs to get out of this room before it stifles him. His cloak swirls as he wraps it around his shoulders, buckling the silver clasp. "Thanks," he manages to get out, and when Durant opens the door, Draco strides through, catching a faint whiff of lemongrass and musk from his skin as he brushes past Jake. He smells exactly like Potter's pillows.

With this last tap, Draco's heart shatters in the middle of his chest.

***

Harry paces across the front reception of the Promotions Board office, his trainers nearly wearing path through the low-pile carpet. He's alone; the receptionist had given up and gone to lunch a good twenty minutes ago, telling him she'd no idea when Jake would be done. Harry runs a hand through his hair and
huffs. He’s terrified, whether for himself or Malfoy or both of them he’s not
quite certain. He hopes Malfoy's as good at Occlumency as Parkinson thinks.

When he hears voices down the hall, he draws up short, listening. He thinks he hears Malfoy's drawl and Jake's, but he can't quite tell. He pulls at his shirttails, trying to look a bit more presentable. Fuck, but he must look like a nutter. He can't do anything about the holdall he's still carrying about, with its singed handles and streaks of black down the leather sides. He looks mournfully down at it, perched on one of the narrow chairs lining one wall. He bloody loved that holdall.

The voices fade, and Harry bounces on the balls of his feet. He doesn't particularly want to run into Malfoy here, but he needs to talk to Jake before he submits his report--just in case. If he has to Harry supposes he could track him down in Islington, but he'd rather not face down Hermione at the moment. Especially not if Jake's found out. Harry swears and wraps his arms around himself. He doesn't know what he's going to do if Jake has. He prays to whomever might be listening that Malfoy's Occlumency doesn't slip. Not that far.

The office falls quiet again. Harry curses the receptionist for not coming back. He's tempted to just go back into the depths himself and rouse Jake from wherever he's tucked himself away, except Harry's not quite sure Malfoy's interview isn't still going on, and he doesn't want to cock things up any more than he already has.

He's wondering if he should just go when footsteps echo down the hall. Harry turns around, and Jake's there, satchel over one shoulder and a binder tucked beneath his arm. He stops, looking at Harry with an inscrutable expression on his face.

They're both silent for a moment, and then Jake very calmly, very quietly says, "What the goddamn fuck are you doing here, you motherfucking jackass?"

Harry's heart sinks, but he doesn't look away. "You've been in Malfoy's head."

"Damn right I have," Jake snaps. "And I know, Harry. I saw him fucking you in the same fucking bed I had you in on Saturday night. Malfoy's good at Occlumency, but he's not that damn good." Jake's mouth is tight. "I let him in on our last little rendezvous, by the way. That's how I broke him. Poor bastard."

That draws Harry up short. Christ. He can only imagine what Malfoy must have seen, must have felt--what he must thinking right now. Harry closes his eyes. He can barely breathe at that. He doesn't want Malfoy to walk away from him. Not again. But Harry knows Malfoy will, and there's nothing he can do about it, no way he can explain Jake away. Harry's angry again with the ridiculousness of the situation and, if he's honest, with his own stupid, god-awful behaviour. A wave of fury bursts through him, directed at Jake, fairly or not. Harry can feel his magic starting to build up again, pricking across his skin. He tries to breathe out, to calm himself. It doesn't work. "You never should have been examining one of my team. Gawain shouldn't have asked you--"

"Always with the damn excuses, Harry." Jake's jaw tightens. "Every fucking time you do something wrong. It's never your fault, is it?"

"Fuck you," Harry spits out. "You don't know anything about me--"

"Goddamn it, you two-timing son of a bitch." Jake's practically shaking with fury. His voice is low and heated. "I know everything about you. We were together for two goddamn years, Harry. Two. So don't you fucking stand here like an upset teenager acting like you're oh so fucking oppressed by the world, because I know you, Harry James Potter. I fucked you. I know how that screwed-up mind of yours work--"
"Oh, lay off with the bloody psychobabble." Harry doesn't bother to hide his disdain. "It's shite and you know it. All those years of Mind Healing, and you're no better than me. Your dad's in prison, your brother's on the run, and oh, Jake, perfect, bloody Jake, he has to suffer so much for their sins, doesn't he?"

For a moment, Harry thinks Jake is going to strike him. He wishes he would. They're at a stand-off, both of them tight and tense, fists clenched, any affection they might have had towards one another bleeding off in the viper's nest of scathing wounds they've just inflicted.

"You're goddamn delusional," Jake says finally, his face shuttered and blank in a way Harry's never seen it before. "You never should have been fucking around with someone under your command. Jesus fucking Christ. How much more messed up can you get? What you're doing is unethical, it's unprofessional, it's--"

"You've no right to judge me," Harry says hotly, and Jake laughs, hard and harsh.

"I have every right, you fucker." Jake steps closer. His eyes are bright and angry, and Harry can see the pain deep inside, pain that Harry's inflicted. "Two damn years, whether or not it was off and on, and you still fucking cheated on me with a junior officer. You can't tell me it wasn't. I don't care what our arrangement was. Not with this one. And I'm fairly certain it wasn't just that one fuck, was it? Not some one-off with a guy in a club that you knew I wouldn't give a shit about. Malfoy's the guy you tossed me over for. Yeah?"

Harry looks away. His heart feels like it's clamped in a burning vise. "You don't understand--"

"Fuck you." Jake runs his hand through his hair. Harry can practically see the anger roiling under his skin waiting to burst out, more terrifying because Jake almost never loses his calm. Still, Harry prefers Jake's anger to the blankness of before. "You don't get to play the wronged one here, you bastard. I'm not misunderstanding you. I'm calling you on being a goddamn fucking shit. You fucked me over; now you're fucking that kid over."

Harry doesn't bother to point out that Malfoy's two months older than him. He's pretty sure Jake's not in the mood for that right now.

"And for what, Harry?" Jake gives him a contemptuous look. "A good shag now and then? A chance to get your rocks off with one of your underlings? Christ. The only thing stopping me from dragging your sorry ass right into Professional Standards is the fact that I wouldn't just be fucking up your career, I'd be fucking up his too, and I think he deserves better than that." His mouth is twisted to one side, his brows drawn together. "He deserves better than you."

He's right. Harry knows that too. His shoulders sag. "Don't bollocks this up for him, Jake. Not because you're angry at me. I know I've done everything wrong, but he hasn't. Not really."

"He ought to have known not to fuck his SIO." Jake looks away, arms crossed tightly across his chest.

Harry sighs. "I wasn't his SIO the first time we fucked."

Jake's head snaps up, understanding unfolding across his face. "Holy shit. You fucked him before coming to New York, didn't you."

"I--" An alarm wails through the building, shrill and loud, and Harry breaks off, his body tensing. "That's a curses fired warning," he says.

A woman's voice echoes through the hallway, her voice amplified by a Sonorous. "All security personnel to the Great Lobby. All security personnel to the Great Lobby."
Harry and Jake both wordlessly draw their wands, sliding into the cold professional efficiency that had made them excellent Auror partners in the first place.

"You take point," Jake murmurs, his jaw still tight. "I'll cover." "Try not to hit me in the back," Harry says.

Jake glares at him. "Fuck you. I'm not promising anything."

They dash out of the narrow hallway and avoid the crowded staircase, Harry leading them to the side lift that the cleaning staff use.

Coming out into the black and white marble-paved entryway, Harry’s heart catches in his throat as he sees Malfoy on his knees in the middle of the Ministry seal, hair in his face, his dark constable's cloak billowed around him, the grey lining flipped out at the front. A quick glance and Harry realises Blaise Zabini's swaying over Malfoy, his wand raised. Shit. Whatever this is, Harry has to put a stop to it.

Now.

"Careful," Harry says beneath his breath to Jake. "He's on my team too."

Jake gives him an incredulous look. "Christ, you really are a shit SIO, aren't you?"

Harry's not certain he's wrong. He bites his lip and moves closer, letting Jake follow behind.

The small circle forming in a wide swathe around Zabini and Malfoy is dead silent, faces pinched with shock. There are several clerical staff and visitors, but Harry doesn't see a Chief Inspector yet--or anyone authorised to use any sort of force in a situation like this. So he and Jake are first on the scene. Brilliant. Harry swears beneath his breath and motions for Jake to circle around the other side. They need to get people out of the way. He catches sight of a security witch pushing her way down the staircase, and he jerks his head at her. Her eyes widen when she recognises him.

She hurries over. "Sir, what do you want me to do?" Her voice is hushed and tight. She looks young, barely out of Hogwarts.

"What's your name?" Harry asks.

"Edie," she says, her gaze darting nervously towards Zabini.

Harry leans closer to her. He doesn't want to attract any more attention than they have. "Edie, I want you to start getting these people out of the way, all right? Quietly and without making a fuss, do you understand? I don't want anyone caught in any crossfire. Clear the lobby, and leave the rest to me and my team." He wants to laugh at that. Team indeed. All he needs is for Parkinson to show up with a bloody Dark artefact to make it even better. He glances around the perimeter, just to make certain she's not there, but he's fairly certain he would have heard her shrieking at Malfoy and Zabini by now.

"Yes, sir." Edie glances over at the other security wizards who've made their way through the crowd. "We can handle that."

"Good." Harry turns his attention back to Malfoy and Zabini. He moves closer, towards Malfoy, and he catches Jake's eye across the lobby from him. Jake points his chin towards Zabini, and Harry nods.
Slowly the circling crowd slips away, drawn aside by the security detail, until it's just Malfoy and Zabini, Jake and Harry.

Malfoy doesn't have his wand in his hand--Harry can see it lying against the base of a statue of Venusia Crickerly--and there's blood streaming from his temple and another huge spot of blood seeping through his jacket, bright crimson against the grey lining of his cloak. His face is bruised along one side. "Blaise. Please don't." His voice is low. "Come back to me, old man. Deep breaths, yes? I know you're still there."

Something's wrong with Zabini's balance, Harry realises. Zabini jerks like a puppet, to one side and then the other. Sweat breaks out on his forehead, and his eyes aren't right. Harry is suddenly sure--Zabini's under an Imperius of some sort. Harry can't tell whether it was badly cast or a variant, but it doesn't matter, does it? He doesn't know whether he can stop Zabini without harming him, but if he doesn't Zabini might hurt Malfoy. Harry can't deal with that.

"Zabini," Harry calls out, and his voice rings out through the lobby, strong and loud.

Malfoy looks over at him, his battered face twisting into what Harry's fairly certain is pure bloody annoyance. "Go away, Potter," he says, keeping his voice soft. "I can handle this."

Fuck that, Harry thinks. Malfoy's in intense pain. Harry can tell by the way Malfoy's holding himself, stiffly crouched, keeping his centre mass low to the ground. Zabini's a better dueller than Malfoy, and Harry's certain he's landed more hits than Malfoy's managed.

"Because you're doing such a good job, yeah?" Harry moves closer to Malfoy, stepping into Zabini's spell range. "Keep down, you twat."

Zabini's wand wavers between Malfoy and Harry. He's breathing hard, and it's obvious he's trying to fight whatever has hold of him. "I--" he says, and then he groans, his face a rictus of agony.

"Hey," Harry says conversationally. He snaps his fingers. "Zabini. It's not that we haven't all wanted to send Malfoy sprawling across the mat at one time or another, but this is bloody ridiculous, mate."

"Oh, that's helping," Malfoy says, his voice bitter, if weary. "Ta ever so, arsehole."

Zabini raises his wand again, pointing it at Malfoy. Harry stays still, focusing on how to block Malfoy from Zabini's spellcasting without hitting Zabini with deadly force.

"Traitor," Zabini chokes out. His jaw's clenched, as if the words are being forced from him. "Blood traitor. Malfoy." His breath is a ragged huff. Harry looks around, trying to see if there's anyone nearby controlling him. It has to be Dolohov. Or Abadzhiev. The headaches, Harry thinks. Shit. Zabini's been complaining about them all week. It's not a fucking Imperius. It's something else. Harry feels sick. He doesn't know how to counter this, or even what's really at play here, but he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Zabini's under someone's influence.

Jake swears across from Harry. "Jesus fuck, Harry. Get something in there."

Harry quickly casts a Protego, but the angle is bad and he's not sure it lands properly. He's got to come up with something, but his mind is blank. Protocol is to take down the aggressor, but he would be maiming, possibly killing Zabini. He can't do that. Not unless he has to.

"Ava--" Zabini flinches. "Avada--" He breaks off, his whole body shuddering.

Come on, Harry thinks. Fight it, Zabini. You're strong enough... He doesn't want to kill Blaise if
he can do anything else, but he raises his wand to cover Malfoy.

Jake raises his wand and casts a strong countering spell to throw off an Imperius. It doesn't work.

"It's not Imperius," Harry says over at Jake, keeping his eyes and wand trained on Blaise. "It's something else. Don't hurt him if you can help it. He's Malfoy's best friend--"

Jake's gaze jerks towards Malfoy, who's trying to push himself up.

"Get down!" Harry shouts at him, but Malfoy doesn't listen. He rises to his feet, barely able to stand.

"Blaise," Malfoy says thickly. "Throw it off--"

As if in a horrible dream, Zabini raises his wand again at Malfoy, muscles rigid and seemingly locked. "Avada--" His whole body arches back, so deep that Harry's afraid he's going to crack his spine. His wand arm swings from Malfoy towards Harry. "Crucio!"

Harry's thrown to the ground, his Protego broken. There's no pain though, and he sits up, only to see Malfoy's body beside him, hideously contorted, writhing in torment on the floor. One hand rests stretched towards Harry's back, where Malfoy had shoved him, pushing him out of the way of the curse. Malfoy's anguished screams echo in the silence of the lobby.

Zabini raises his wand again, but he clenches, shudders, and then he falls as well, his muscles locked in a seizure.

"Get him." Jake propels Harry in Malfoy's direction, racing to reach Zabini's prone form before a group of newly arrived Hit Wizards do. "Back off," he snarls at them. "He needs help."

Harry can hear Jake next to Zabini, murmuring the spells to protect him, to contain the seizure, shouting for the Hit Wizards to arrange a medical transport. Harry instinctively knows Malfoy doesn't have time to wait. Harry kneels beside him, scoops Malfoy in his arms, feeling the tremors of pain that wrack through Malfoy's body. Blood from Malfoy's chest wound stains Harry's white shirt. Fuck, it's deep. Harry can't stand this. He holds Malfoy close. "It's okay," he whispers against Malfoy's hair. "I've got you now."

Malfoy looks up at him with wide eyes, his mouth trying to make a word. It only comes out as a scream, and Malfoy twists in Harry's arms in distress, trying to get away from the pain, his fists pummeling Harry's chest.

"Hold on," Harry says, and with one final glance at Jake bent over Zabini's still form, he pulls Malfoy closer, letting the rush of Apparition pull them away.

Chapter End Notes

Next update is due May 4-5! I'm running behind on answering comments but please know that not only am I treasuring everything you tell me about reading, but also the outpouring of interest and concern this week has been incredibly motivating while slogging through writing 31K for this update. Thank you, thank you, all of you!!!

As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Hit Wizards descend, Professional Standards get involved, and Robards is beyond narked off. Oh, and it's all going into the Prophet. Enough said.

Chapter Notes

This is still a long chapter, though not quite as epic as last week's. (Well, if you consider almost 30K vs 31K not as epic. LOLZ.) Warnings for angst, hospital beds, mothers, and a moment of woefully misogynistic language. (I promise it's important to the plot.) There's also a background reference to 9/11 and American extrajudicial prisons. And Harry's inner chest monster is really unhappy--it's needing to behave and failing. Oh, and there might be some bondage jokes that Blaise makes in inappropriate circumstances. Just putting that out there.

Eternal thanks to sassy_cissa and noeon for their efforts in keeping this chapter on time during a truly, truly, TRULY horrendous work fortnight for me (almost as bad as the week Harry's having…)<3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry stumbles forward, nearly losing his balance when his feet hit the slick floor of St Mungo's. His hands tighten around Malfoy, and Malfoy screams at the touch, the sound echoing through the quiet reception area, causing everyone nearby to turn and stare. Harry knows it hurts Malfoy to be held; the pressure of Harry's body against Malfoy's only intensifies the after-effect of the Crucius. Still, Malfoy's in no shape to stand on his own, and Harry doesn't trust his Levitation Charm. Not at the moment.

"Auror down," Harry snaps at the Welcome Witch sitting behind the wide, curved desk in the middle of the room. She just looks at him, shocked, her blue eyes wide. "Another's coming behind me in a medical transport. I want a team out here now."

She nods as Malfoy tenses against Harry's body, another shudder wracking through him. Harry doesn't wait to see what she'll do; he kneels on the floor, laying Malfoy down across the cool slab of shining black marble. Malfoy's eyes flutter open for a moment before his jaw tenses, his bottom lip bleeding from where his teeth are digging in. He's biting back a scream, Harry can tell.

"Hang on," Harry says softly. He wants to smooth Malfoy's hair back from his too pale, sweat-damp brow, but he doesn't dare touch him any more than he has to. He remembers how it feels to be hit with the curse, how it'd wracked his body with pain, how his bones had felt like liquid fire inside of him, his skin like it was flayed open with the sharp slice of thousands of heated knives. He doesn't want to think about what kind of anger Zabini must have deep inside to cast a Crucius with such devastating effect, even if Dolohov had pushed him. How the hell could Zabini want to inflict that level of pain on one of his closest friends? Harry clenches his fists, a wave of fury going through him. And then he remembers that the curse wasn't meant for Malfoy.
It was meant for him.

And then there are Healers around Harry, pulling him away, a phalanx of swirling green robes that circle around and cut off Harry's view of Malfoy's pale, blood-streaked and bruised face.

"What happened?" A tall, grey-haired Healer turns towards Harry. The name on his St. Mungo's badge is Rutherford Poke.

"Cruciatu," Harry says. He runs a hand through his hair. When he pulls it away, he realises his skin is smeared with Malfoy's blood. He looks down at his untucked shirt; the white cotton is spattered with thick crimson streaks. "Not sure what else."

Another Healer glances up from where she's crouched over Malfoy's body. "He's had good amount of blood loss, Rutherford."

"Get him on the stretcher and into Spell Damage," Poke says, and Malfoy shrieks as three sets of hands close around his body, lifting him onto the stretcher levitating two feet off the floor. "There's another one coming?" He doesn't wait for Harry to answer. "Same curses?"

"No. Some sort of Imperius," Harry says. "He'll be in a medical transport." He hesitates. "Secured with DMLE personnel." The Healers will know what that means. There's a special locked ward on the third floor that's used solely for individuals under Auror guard. And the occasional prisoner from Azkaban.

"I thought the other one's an Auror?" Poke asks.

Harry's mouth tightens. "He is." The Healers pull Malfoy's stretcher up another foot, then start off across the lobby towards the staff lifts. "Constable Blaise Zabini. He'll be in your records; he was wounded last week and put under the care of William Irskine."

Poke's gaze widens, but he nods. "And this one?" He follows the other Healers, motioning for Harry to come with him. He digs a quill out of his pocket along with a small notebook, scrawling notes as he walks.

"Constable Draco Malfoy," Harry says, his throat tight and hot. "Injured in the line of duty."

An expression Harry's all too familiar with crosses Poke's face, a moue of distaste that makes it quite clear he recognises Malfoy's name, but he doesn't say a thing, for which Harry is grateful. He doesn't want to have to start a fight in the reception area, after all. Poke presses his lips together and writes Malfoy's name in careful cursive letters, then underlines it.

In the lift, the Healers are already bent over Malfoy's long body, using their wands to cut through his uniform as Harry and Poke step into the lift. Malfoy's breathing is shallow; his eyes are closed. Harry looks away as Poke has them pull back the blood-soaked wool of Malfoy's jacket to reveal a jagged slashes across Malfoy's upper chest.

"That angle over the left shoulder looks nasty--I think we might have deeper vascular trauma," one of the Healers says grimly, and Poke puts his notebook and quill away.

"Where is it?" Poke peers over Harry's head at Malfoy and swears as he pushes Harry out of the way. "Fuck, Anna, give me a cleaning charms on the wound, then Martin, I want a sealing spell over it. It just needs to hold to the fourth floor." He punches the lift button, his brows drawn together. "Just keep it together, people."

Harry presses his back against the side of the lift, keeping his gaze away from Malfoy's body. He
flinches when Malfoy screams. Christ, but he doesn't think he can take this. Malfoy's pain shatters Harry to his very core.

The doors of the lift slide shut behind them.

***

Jake supposes he ought to have expected the transport to be staffed with bloody Hit Wizards. He can’t imagine that an initial report on the incident hasn't already been filed with the DMLE; the Crickerly Building’s attached to the Ministry properly by Floo, after all.

Still, it infuriates him to see the Hit Wizards jerk Zabini to his feet as if he’s nothing but a common criminal. The lobby's been cleared by the security force, and it's just them and him and Zabini at the moment. Jake knows what that means to a Hit Wizard. No one important's around to see? Doesn’t matter how the fuck you treat the prisoner.

"Watch it," Jake snaps. "He just had a seizure--"

Zabini's head rolls forward limply, and one of the transport medics steps forward to stabilise him with a charm. "We're going to need to immobilise him," the medic says. "Standard procedure with hostiles."

"This is an Auror under Harry Potter's command," Jake fights to keep his eyes trained on the medics. He knows throwing Harry's name around should draw them up short, as much as it pains him to admit it, and he's pleased by the nervous looks the Hit Wizards give each other. At least Harry's good for something at the moment. "He needs special care. He's suspected to be under the influence of an unknown substance or curse which ought to require immediate neuromagical observation, for Christ's sake."

The Hit Wizards look at each other, then back to him. Jake tries to project confidence and calm. He doesn't want to escalate the situation, but he will if he has to. The way they're handling Harry's team member doesn't sit right with him. No one should be left alone with Hit Wizards, especially not if they're injured. They're the cowboys of magical law enforcement, way too trigger-happy when it comes to their wands and more than willing to cover those mistakes up. Jake's also worried about Zabini's mental status—that curse he cast was vicious, and the Imperius counter Jake used should have taken down most anything in the field. Zabini's got something stronger on him than a simple Imperius, and the inquisitive, intellectual side of Jake is intrigued—he'd like time to figure it out. He's never seen anything like it, and he's been around enough compulsion curses to know. But he also doesn't want Zabini to be forced into a confession—or worse—when he's just had his mental control hijacked.

One of the Hit Wizards steps forward. He's confident and cocky, and Jake recognises his younger self in his swagger. It's one of the reasons he’d left the Atlanta branch of the Hit Wizards three years after he'd been recruited out of school. He hadn't liked the man he was becoming. "Sir, we've protocols to follow. If you'll please move back…” It's an order, not a request and Jake knows it. He meets the Hit Wizard's gaze evenly, standing still.

"I think you've got plenty of room here, son," Jake says, his arms crossed over his chest.

The Hit Wizard leading the transport casts Petrificus Totalus on Zabini, and Zabini’s body stiffens into motionlessness, held up only by one of the medics and another of the Hit Wizards. Zabini's still conscious, though, and Jake tries to catch his eye. He wants to make sure Zabini knows he's there, wants to make sure Zabini is still okay despite his helplessness. Jake could send a brief, comforting image into Zabini's mind, but he doesn't want to risk it at the moment. He's too worried about potential trauma from Zabini's seizure, and the way these idiots are manhandling him, Jake's
afraid they're only going to worsen it. The last thing Zabini needs is fucking concussion, which is something any good medic would know. Which indicates to Jake they're not really trained medics. Either that or they're fucking shoddy, which he supposes is possible. But not likely. Not knowing the Hit Wizards.

Jake's not sure entirely why the Hit Wizards' attitudes are riling him up, but he's spitting mad and ready to fight for proper treatment from the goddamn bastards. Maybe it's the fight with Harry and what he just discovered in the interview room, but Jake also knows what Hit Wizards are capable of, after all. His years in Atlanta still haunt him. And more recently, Jake's spent enough time as an observer with suspects interrogated in secret sites outside of regular territorial boundaries in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks— one of the few times MACUSA had let their top squads work with Washington. That'd only been a year before Jake had asked New York for a diplomatic reassignment—the one that had eventually led him to Luxembourg and Harry—but it was enough to last a lifetime. Jake knows where the Hit Wizards hide the damn bodies, and there's something about the way these bastards are acting that makes Jake's sixth sense twitch. He doesn't trust them with Zabini's safety, and maybe it's damn stupid of him to get involved, but he's too furious to care. Harry's not here to speak for Zabini, which means Jake'll have to.

The head of the transport team pulls out a large disc, placing it on the floor in front of Zabini, and sets the coordinates. "Thank you for your assistance, Auror."

"Unspeakable, actually. " It's been nearly eight months and Jake still hasn't quite got used to his promotion from the Auror force. "Jake Durant from MACUSA. I'm in London working with Hermione Granger." He gives the Hit Wizard his best, most charming fuck-you smile, the one he learned in Thibodaux, Louisiana at his bastard of a daddy's knee and perfected during his Legilimency training in Paris. He enjoys the flinch across the wizard's face. What a fucking ass. "I'll be coming with you to St Mungo's."

The Hit Wizard looks annoyed. "I'm sorry, Mr Durant. We can't allow that. Authorised personnel only."

"Well, that's a damn shame," Jake smiles again, even fiercer this time, all teeth and drawn-back lips, further unnerving the Hit Wizard. He knows it's animal psychology, displaying threat, but he doesn't care—he'll use it. "I'd really hate to have to invoke diplomatic status and insist." Jake draws his Magipol clearance card slowly, stepping a bit closer into the ring of Hit Wizards to show it, and to get nearer to Zabini's body so he can lunge if they start trying to transport him without Jake. "I'm also authorised for intervention under the Joint Magical Accords."

Technically his last Luxembourg assignment's been over since he returned to New York back in February, but his clearance is good for another year in case he needs to consult with them. More likely that they'll come knocking at his door asking for favours. Decent Legilimency is at a premium these days, and Jake is very, very good at what he does. His potential to be poached by other groups is what makes the New York office willing to let him travel. That, and the intelligence they gather by loaning him to other services. Magical cooperation and all that bullshit jazz, Jake thinks as he waits for the Hit Wizard to give in.

The countdown is ticking on the Portkey disc, numbers flashing in bright yellow on the round face. Jake looks down at it, and then back to the Hit Wizard. He affects a stronger drawl than usual. "I'd hate to delay your transport, but I'd be more than happy to call in Hermione Granger if you'd like." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a mobile, his other hand near his wand. He's an ambidextrous drawl, which helps in situations like this. "Got her on speed dial even."

As hoped, this last name takes the fight out of the Hit Wizard—Hermione's a force to be reckoned with. Jake'd learnt that fast. She'll be running the Unspeakables here soon, Jake thinks, once the old guard got out of the way or perhaps even before. The Hit Wizard swears and makes a little
space for Jake to join the transport, the numbers now under 20 seconds to transport. Jake pushes his way into the circle, making sure to lay a hand directly on Zabini's leg and keep hold, his fingers twisted in the wool of Zabini's trousers. This isn't the most comfortable way to travel, but he'll be damned if he lets them disappear this kid.

He's got too many mistakes in his past as it is.

Jake meets the commander's gaze evenly with a tight smile as the Portkey activates.

The lobby of the Crickerly Building fades away in a bright yellow flash and a tug just beneath his navel.

***

Harry sits alone in the silent, empty waiting room just off the main corridor of the Spell Damage ward on the fourth floor of St Mungo's. It's just gone one o'clock, but he feels as if he's been sitting here an eternity. Still, it's only been half an hour, if that, since the Healers had rushed Malfoy into theatre, telling Harry to take a seat. A medwitch had brought him a cup of tea; it's gone cold now, sitting on the floor at his feet, untouched.

He looks down at his hands. They're clean now; he'd gone to the loo to scrub Malfoy's blood off his skin, watching blankly as it washed off him, turning the water a pale pink as it rushed down the drain. He'd wadded up a wet paper towel and rubbed it over his face, wiping away the small splashes and smears of blood from his cheek and forehead. There's still a tiny bit in his hair from when he'd run bloody fingers through it, and his shirt's stained a rusty iron-red in spots. There's nothing to be done about that, Harry thinks, and he's cold, so very cold. He wraps his arms around himself and closes his eyes, breathing out.

This is shock, he knows. He recognises it from the war and from his first few forays into Auror field work. His mind's shut down. Blank. He can't think about what it felt like to have Malfoy writhing in his arms, to hear those anguished screams as he'd Apparated them away.

Harry's hands tremble, and he clenches them tight, willing them to stop. His nails dig into his palms. They leave behind small half-circles in his flesh when he opens his fingers; the tiny crescents fade in the space of two breaths.

Malfoy'll be all right. Harry won't have it any other way. He has to be; Harry doesn't want to be in a world that doesn't include a ridiculous, arrogant bastard like Draco sodding Malfoy. He closes his eyes, tries to swallow. Please, he thinks. Let him be okay.

Zabini's on the next floor down. Harry'd heard the Healers talking as they'd walked past. Jake's still with him—at least, Harry assumes that's who the Healers' use of "that bloody damned Yank who's pissing off the Hit Wizards" is referring to. Harry's grateful for Jake's intervention; Jake owes him nothing, after all, not after what he's done, so this protection of Zabini is common bloody decency on his part. Not leaving a man behind and all. Harry's not worried that Jake's among the Hit Wizards—in fact, he feels sorry for the shits. He knows what they're up against, and they've no idea. Harry also knows he should go down to check on them, but he can't pull himself away from this waiting room whilst they're working on Malfoy in case he misses something.

Malfoy's in an operating theatre a few hallways away; Harry can't shake the stupidly superstitious belief that if he walks away now that something terrible will happen. He knows he's going to have to get over it and go check on Zabini, but he's been dragging his heels because Jake's in there.

Still, if he's very honest, Harry's not certain how he can face Zabini at the moment either. He knows it wasn't him, not really, but there'd been so much rage behind the Crucius Zabini had thrown his way. You can't cast anything that bad without intent, and this unsettles Harry. He'd
thought Zabini liked him well enough, but now he can't help but wonder if perhaps Gawain's right. He's useless as a leader because his team hasn't the slightest respect for him.

In Zabini's case, he must hate Harry. At least a little.

Footsteps, sharp and quick, bring Harry to his feet just as Parkinson turns the corner. She looks a wreck, still in her blue lab scrubs, her hair pulled tightly back to the nape of her neck, face pinched with worry.

"Guv," she manages to get out, and then she's beside Harry, her arms wrapped around his waist, face pressed against his chest. Harry holds her almost gingerly at first, and then he leans into her grasp, wrapping her small body in his arms. It's just the two of them right now, the rest of their team in tatters across St Mungo's wards.

"It'll be okay," Harry says against her dark hair. "I promise. They'll both be okay."

Parkinson just nods against his chest, but he can feel her tremble. He can't imagine what she must be going through, her two closest friends lying in hospital like this. He tries to think what he'd be like if it were Ron and Hermione, and he can't. It's just too overwhelming. He'd be collapsed in a heap, he thinks, and he marvels at Parkinson's fortitude.

Pansy Parkinson's a fierce little bitch, and he's never been so grateful as he is at the moment for that strength of hers.

"Did he do it?" she asks into his shoulder. "Blaise? They're saying he went after Draco." She looks up at him fiercely, her brown eyes sparking with anger. "He wouldn't. No matter what."

Harry doesn't answer for a moment, and then he sighs. "It wasn't him. Not entirely. He wasn't under a standard Imperius, but he was definitely being controlled. He--he wanted to hit me with the last curse. Cruciatus. He was fighting it though." Zabini'd switched from a Killing Curse to a lesser Unforgivable, after all. The effort that must have taken under a mind control? Christ. There's another bloody strong-willed bastard, Harry thinks.

A look of grim understanding crosses Pansy's face. She presses her lips in a line, her delicate eyebrows drawing together. "Dolohov. It must be."

"Probably," Harry says. "Him or Abadzhiev. But we can't prove it yet."

"I will." Pansy looks away. She blinks a few times, and there's a touch of wetness on her dark lashes. "Just give me time."

Harry nods and awkwardly rubs a circle on her back with his fingertips, unable to speak himself.

"Harry?" And Hermione's there in the doorway, watching them embrace, a curious expression on her face.

"Hey," Harry says, and he reluctantly lets his hands drop from Parkinson's waist. He misses the warm comfort already.

Parkinson pulls away from Harry. She swipes a thumb across one eye, then the other. "Sorry," she murmurs. "I should..." She trails off, and she looks over at Hermione, a bit lost.

Harry catches her hand. "Malfoy's in theatre. Zabini's waiting for the Healers--"
"In the secure ward," Pansy says with a bitter twist of her mouth. Harry knows how she feels. Zabini's being punished for something that's not his fault. Still, there are protocols to follow. Harry may not like them, but they're there for a reason. Or so he hopes. He has to believe that. If not, then it's just a slow unravelling of everything he holds dear. He squeezes her fingers, looks over at Hermione, then back at Parkinson.

"Look," Harry says. "I haven't firecalled their mums yet. Either one of them. Do you think you could?" He can't. He doesn't have it in him to face either of them. Not with Malfoy's blood still staining his clothes. He's a coward, perhaps, but Olivia Zabini terrifies him, and Narcissa Malfoy had once defied Voldemort himself to save her son.

Parkinson gives him a faint smile, and he knows she's judging him, but not in a vicious way. "I'll do it," she says. "Although I ought to insist you grow a pair." She steps back, her foot hitting Harry's tea and sloshing it over the sides of the cup. She looks down. "I'll bring you another cuppa?"

"No. But cheers," Harry says, and Parkinson brushes past Hermione with just the barest huff.

Hermione looks back over at Harry. "She's lovely." Her mouth's turned down at the corners. "As always."

Harry's mobile vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out and flips it open. *My office. Immediately. It's from Gawain's number.*

"Parkinson's not so bad," Harry says, closing his mobile and tucking it back into his pocket. He can't deal with Gawain. Not right now. He's staying in St Mungo's until Malfoy's out of theatre. Gawain'll have to drag him out kicking and screaming. Harry rubs his hands over his face, pressing his fingertips against the bridge of his nose. He also doesn't want to argue with Hermione in the middle of a waiting room. He drops his hands. "You heard then. About Malfoy."

"The whole Ministry knows." Hermione moves into the waiting room. Her hair's full and curly today, and she has on a neatly tailored apple green suit, tightly buttoned and belted at the waist, the skirt just hitting the top of her knees. Her brown legs look long and lean, calves pushed up by the high heels she's wearing, and Harry knows she must have been in meetings all morning rather than testing out the latest in Unspeakable charm enhancements. She never wears heels in the lab. "Do you know how many alarms Zabini set off with this little stunt?"

Harry sinks back down into his chair. He can't explain adequately. "It wasn't a stunt, Hermione."

"You know what I mean." Hermione sits next to him. She crosses one leg over the other. "What the hell is going on with your team, Harry?"

"Antonin Dolohov, I'd say." Harry really doesn't want to fight with her--he doesn't have the energy to be kind right now. A ball of rage is shaping in his chest, and it's taking all his effort to keep it from growing to consume him. He leans his head against the wall behind him, his hair catching on the brick, and wishes St Mungo's would invest in more comfortable chairs. He can't believe it's only been two weeks since he was here last. He wants to laugh, bitter and harsh. Christ, but his team needs to stop. Maybe creating Special Branch seven-four-alpha was the best way to get them all maimed. Or worse. Hermione should be pleased with that, really. Turn them on themselves, let them hex themselves into oblivion. Brilliant. Harry looks up at the waiting room ceiling. It's charmed to look as if it's an open sky, bright and blue with soft, fluffy clouds. He supposes the Healers think it's calming. It's not. Harry doesn't think anything could calm him right now. He can feel the thrum of his pulse through his whole body, the acid of his rage; he's tense and terrified and furious.
Hermione's just watching him. "You're angry," she says after a moment.

"I'm tired." He's bone-fucking weary, actually. And, yes, bloody angry as well, if he's honest. But Harry doesn't know how honest he can afford to be at the moment. With himself or with anyone else. "Half my team are down."

Hermione doesn't say anything.

Harry sighs. "What do you want me to say?"

"It's not your fault Zabini went after Malfoy." Hermione studies him. "I know what you're thinking, Harold."

If only that were true. "Something got to Zabini and I didn't spot it," Harry says tightly. "If I had, Malfoy wouldn't be hurt. And I'm fucking certain it's Dolohov and Abadzhiev."

Hermione cocks her head, her expression unreadable. "Okay. And you're falling to pieces now because you've members of your team injured? That happens, Harry. To every team. You know that. It's awful, but it's part of the job, and it has nothing to do with you personally." Her voice is gentle, and Harry knows he should be grateful that she's here, even if she's still naffed off about him and Jake. She's worried, and she's here for him, not because her job requires it. Any Unspeakable could have come to check in with the Hit Wizards. Hermione came to make sure Harry was okay.

"You were in a meeting when you heard, weren't you?" he asks.

"Don't deflect, Harold," Hermione says, but her faint smile softens her sharp tone.

Harry rakes a hand through his hair, then glances to check if anyone is in listening distance. He's so fucking tired of everything right now. He can't believe that he was in the gym just three hours ago, and now he's sitting here, with half his team in hospital. Again. Fucking hell, Jake's right. He's a shit SIO. He draws in a slow, unhappy breath. "I'm falling to pieces because we had two weeks ago in Prague with Zabini and now today with Zabini and Malfoy in a fucking Ministry building, Hermione. If they can touch them there? Jesus." He leans forward, his hands between his thighs. "I'm doing a shit job of protecting them. In fact, I'm putting them directly in harm's way. And it's very, very public."

"Right." Hermione crosses her arms over her chest, watching him. She's curious now, scenting something in Harry's words, perhaps in his tone. He recognises that look, and he frowns. "Explain how you're responsible for something Zabini did. They're Aurors, Harry. Not even trainees. You're their SIO. Nothing else. And they knew what they signed up for when they went through training. How dangerous this job can be. We all did."

Harry takes a deep breath, willing his anger to subside. "You know what everyone thinks of them. In the press, in the Ministry. Even here." Despite himself, he waves a hand around to encompass the grey reception area. He doesn't want to draw attention, but he's frustrated and his words are failing him. "There's a good chance they won't receive proper care." Or Malfoy might not, at least. He thinks Olivia Zabini would hex any Healer who didn't treat her son well. But the Malfoys? They live under a cloud of suspicion, even after all these years. Harry rather doubts that even Narcissa Malfoy could force a Healer's hand now. He looks over at Hermione. "Besides, they're already being shit on in the force for even daring to attempt taking down a dark wizard that other Aurors failed to kill."

And Harry doesn't even really dare dwell on this too much, the spectre of anti-Slytherin prejudice in their treatment by Healers and Aurors and Hit Wizards alike. This is not what he fought for in
the war, not what he keeps fighting for even now, and it makes Harry furious. But Harry also knows he burns things with his rage, if his magic gets out of control. He did this morning in fact. If he can't control himself, everything's going to start coming apart, and what bloody damned good will that do any of them? He looks away, his chest almost too tight to breathe.

Hermione's silent, waiting.

"What?" Harry asks after a moment, rubbing his palm over his forehead.

"What aren't you telling me, Harry?" Hermione's gaze is bright, scanning his face, and Harry closes his eyes. It's easier somehow. "This isn't just about protecting those Slytherins. You're a terrible idealist, I know that, but there's something else." She reaches over and grabs his hand, her brown fingers twisting through his.

It's all too much, and Harry feels stretched tight by his lies, by his secrets, by his own bloody stupidity. He's so goddamned tired of it all, and he just wants to set it all down, slide that burden off his shoulders. He makes the decision without thinking. "It's Malfoy," he says, and he can't look at her, can't see the disappointment writ across her face.

"Malfoy," Hermione says. Her voice is quiet, soft. "You're worried about him."

Harry nods. His throat hurts so badly, he's not certain he can speak.

"Why?" Hermione's hands curl around Harry's fingers, warm and soft. "It's not a mortal wound, is it?"

"Probably not." Harry's voice sounds gravelly and rough to his own ears. He wonders how strong his friendship is with Hermione, if it can withstand what he's about to say. Harry breathes out, then looks over at Hermione. "I slept with him." Hermione tenses, her fingernails digging into Harry's hand before she catches herself. It's her only reaction; like a good Unspeakable, she keeps her face perfectly still. Harry has a wild urge to laugh, to scream, to do anything to make that calm expression slip. "It wasn't just once," he says. Hermione blinks, a slow even flick of lashes against her cheeks. "A few times."

"Malfoy. Your team member." Hermione pulls her hands away, folds them neatly in her lap. She licks her lip, a quick swipe of her tongue across her orange-red lipstick. Harry catches the twitch of her jaw before she glances back at him. "You broke up with Jake. Over…"

"Yeah," Harry says quietly.

"Oh." Hermione looks away. "Ron said there was someone else. So did Jake. I thought it was a one night stand or someone you'd picked up in a club." Her voice trembles just a little. "Not…" She sighs. Harry feels like a shit. "Not someone who threw a slur at you when we were kids?"

Hermione doesn't say anything for a long moment. "Or who took the Dark Mark." "You know he regrets that," Harry says.

"Do I?" Hermione looks over at him again. "I know what he says. I don't know what he believes."

Harry meets her gaze evenly. "I do." The certainty settles on him then. He knows Malfoy, trusts Malfoy. Would do anything for Malfoy, even stand up to his oldest, dearest friend and tell her she's wrong. "He's not that boy any more." Harry draws in a deep breath. "And now I'm worried
that I've put him in danger by getting close to him."

The silence between them stretches, and then Hermione bites her lip. "You have feelings for him." It's not a question, and it's loaded with a deep bitterness. "Not Jake, who's a brilliant match for you. But Malfoy."

He'd hoped it would be better to tell her. It's not. It just makes him feel more anxious about whether Malfoy's okay. Harry's mouth quirks in a bitter, joyless smile. "Maybe. I don't know. It's hard to say what they are. I thought they would go away."

"Did they?" Hermione smooths an imaginary wrinkle out of her skirt, not looking at him. "In the multiple times you've…" Her voice catches. "Seen him."

"No. Yes. I mean, sort of. But then they came back." Harry knows he isn't making sense, that he sounds like a fool right now. He doesn't care. Harry closes his eyes. Pain is washing through him, and his chest feels hollow. Empty. He's glad they're alone in the waiting room, no one nearby to see his collapse.

Hermione's quiet long enough that he opens his eyes and turns to look over at her. Her face is a complex mixture of thought and he can't tell if she's angry or thinking hard. Probably both.

"It makes sense, I suppose." Her frown lines are deeply creased. She sounds tired and cross, and so very, very done with Harry. "You were both fixated on each other for the entirety of school, and those sorts of things don't go away easily."

The grief Harry feels is threatening to swallow him whole. He looks up at Hermione. "Look, I know I'm a complete arse, and you can tell me that when we know he's okay. But God, if he--" The words are too difficult to get out. "He has to make it through this because I can't--" Something cracks inside Harry's chest. "I just--" And Harry buries his face in his hands, his glasses pushed up on his forehead, as he fights back the wave of despair that crashes over him, threatening to drag him under in the force of its swell.

Hermione's hand settles on his shoulder. "Oh Harold. You are such a fucking arse. Not to mention an idiot."

"Yeah." Harry swallows around the lump in his throat. "To both counts."

She touches his cheek gently for a moment. "I can't even fathom what you were thinking. Harry James Potter, you don't do things by half measure, do you? And here I was just thinking you were being self-destructive when it came to Jake. I had no idea you were imploding even more than I thought."

Harry can barely remember what he was so worried about before Zabini turned his wand on Malfoy. It's only been a little while, but it feels like years. "Did you know he was going to be Malfoy's Legimens?"

"No. That's..." Hermione hesitates. "But he said he was working with the Promotions Board today, which is odd because they don't use Legimens--"

"Malfoy's allergic to Veritaserum," Harry says. "Remember the hearings?"

The Knut drops; Hermione's eyes are wide. "Ohshit, Harold. That's... that's so you, you utter goddamned berk. How bloody fucking stupid do you have to be?"

To his surprise, Harry is able to smile at her, even if it's just a small quirk of his mouth. He rarely gets to see Hermione use vulgar language; she mostly scolds him and Ron for their profanity.
"Yeah, it is, I guess. I'm really sorry, if it makes any difference. I nearly got myself fired by Robards when I found out." Merlin's tits, the whole fucking office probably knows about that by now. "But it was too late to stop the interview."

"Jesus." Hermione frowns at him. "Do you know what Jake saw?"

Harry shrugs, looking to the side. He never wanted to hurt Jake, but he knows what Jake must have seen, at least what Harry sees all the time. The images of Malfoy spread beneath him, cock hard, eyes hot with desire have been haunting Harry's dreams, have made him feel like he has something to keep him going. The world's in colour when Harry's with Malfoy. Harry can't stay away from him, has no desire to, even though this is madder, more reckless than anything else Harry's ever done. Harry lives for the rush of burning himself in Malfoy's flame.

Hermione squares her shoulders, like she's about to tackle a particularly difficult project. "Look, I'm not even going to get on you about being stupid enough to get involved with Malfoy of all people. You know how I feel about that. You're a bloody idiot for tossing Jake aside, and I'm still angry at you for that--"

"It wasn't working--" Harry tries to say, but Hermione holds up a hand.

"Save that shit for Ron, who'll buy it," she snaps. "You know as well as I do, that's an excuse for what you've wanted to do with Malfoy. Jake's good for you, Harry, and Malfoy's not. Don't argue that with me."

Harry can't. He looks away.

"But putting that aside because I just can't deal with the idea of you and Malfoy right now without wanting to hex you in incredibly painful ways for being so--" Hermione breaks off in an angry huff, closing her eyes and obviously trying to calm herself. Whatever she does seems to work; she opens her eyes and looks at Harry. "The fact of the matter is that you can't get distracted by personal problems. You know you need to prove yourself now to Robards. You've done impressive work abroad, but you won't make it higher in the DMLE without putting in your time and taking your lumps. What matters most is your career. Don't throw it away." Her face crumples. "Not for Malfoy, please. And if Robards finds out you've been sleeping with a junior officer--" She runs a hand over her face. "Not even being Harry bloody Potter's going to save you from that one, love."

Harry nods, strangely grateful to be receiving a dressing down from Hermione again. He feels that if she's willing to improve him, maybe, just maybe, things can't be all that bad. Even if he knows, deep down inside, they're beyond hopeless.

Hermione's silent for a moment. "Have you been to see Zabini yet?"

"No." Harry watches as mediwitch crosses the hallway in front of them, her arms filled with potions bags. She's not paying attention to them sitting here. "Jake's with him."

"But you're his SIO."

Harry shifts in his chair. "I know." He's hesitant to go. Between his worry about Malfoy and his anger at Jake... Harry runs a hand through his hair with a tired huff. "I know," he says again. He doesn't feel like much of an SIO right now.

Hermione leans her head on his shoulder. "Don't fuck up your life, Harry."

Christ, Harry thinks, it's far too late for that.
The first thing that Blaise notices is that his head doesn't hurt as much. Or, rather, it hurts differently. Like a bruise but not like a nightmare, the way it had. He's so glad it's gone, that dull throbbing ache.

The second thing he notices is that he's tied to a bed--and not in a pleasant way--and his throat is aching. The harsh light suggests he's in St Mungo's. He's got far too used to it in recent days.

Blaise remembers standing in the lobby of the Crickerly, although it's all a bit vague, honestly. He feels like he woke up when…

Draco hit the floor.

It's like a vision. Draco falling, his cloak swirling around him, his screams echoing in Blaise's ears. The wand tight in his hand, shuddering with the force of the curse.

He'd hit him with it. His best friend.

Blaise tenses at the memory, his muscles clenching, other images tumbling through his cloudy mind. Dolohov. Abadziew. The clearing near the Horse Guard Parade Ground in St James Park. He'd been hit with something, something bad, but he can't remember what it was. Just that it smelled sharp and pungent and grassy.

"Shh." There's a hand on Blaise's, thick fingers a pale beige against his skin, and Blaise looks up, his eyes still focusing. The light's not hurting him any longer, but everything still feels terribly far away. "Constable Zabini, it's going to be okay."

"Who the fuck are you?" Blaise manages to get out. He blinks again. Blond curls and a square, stubbled chin swim into view before fading back into a blur.

The low, warm chuckle sends a pleasant shiver through him, but Blaise is still completely mistrustful. "Jake Durant. Unspeakable working with Hermione Granger. MACUSA, as I'm sure you can tell."

Ah. The American, Blaise thinks. He was in the lobby, and Potter was talking to him, although Blaise doesn't remember much until the Hit Wizards showed up. He'd heard that voice then too, with the faint, curiously flat drawl that sounds so strange to his ears.

"Okay. So what the fuck are you doing here?" Blaise tries to sit up. He can't. His wrists are caught with an Incarcerous. He slumps back against the bed. It's raised up just enough to keep him from being flat on his back.

"Give me a second." Durant walks a little away from the bed. Blaise tries to focus. He blinks hard, and the world around him shifts back, the blur settling into firmer forms. A chair. A door. A curtain pushed back from his bed, letting him see the three other beds down the ward. Durant's broad back, clad in a dark blue wool robe. A uniform, Blaise thinks. "He needs water," Durant says to someone else. "Could you fetch us some? And I'm going to raise the head of the bed so he can breathe."

Blaise's head swims.

"We don't have orders for that," a bland voice comes from the door to the cell. That's where Blaise thinks he must be, and doesn't that bear thinking on. Why else would he be tied down if he's not in a holding cell? But he could have sworn from the walls and the beds and the smell that he's in St Mungo's. Then it dawns on him, the third floor. He's in the prisoner's ward. He swears, letting his
aching head fall back against the thin pillow. No creature comforts here. Not for the criminal sort.

"You need an order for basic human decency?" Durant asks. "Fuck that. I'll be more than happy to register complaints with the Luxembourg authorities that would get your ass suspended and your entire Ministry placed under scrutiny for unethical practices regarding prisoner rights. Unless you'd like to help me, of course."

That does the trick. The door opens and the guard files out, saying something to another guard outside. If Blaise focuses, he can see the black and bright silver of their uniforms. He knows that insignia. He blinks, and his head settles. Becomes a little sharper. Fuck, these are Hit Wizards, and the elite squad at that. He has new respect for Durant, who seems to have exactly zero fear of them and orders them around like house elves. With a bit more swearing.

Durant walks back from the door. "Okay, we've got about ten minutes. And I don't know how much of the ward is under an observation charm, so keep that in mind. But they won't get through the lock easily." He says another spell and the bed raises so that Blaise's sitting up and can survey his surroundings. Merlin, but that's better. He blinks hard, and the world centres back around him.

"I can't do much about these," Durant gestures to the Incarcerous bonds on Blaise's arms and ankles. "Although..." Durant makes a quick wand gesture, drawing what looks like a knot. The bonds relax, and Blaise feels the circulation come back into his hands and feet. "Is that all right?"

"Cheers." Blaise wiggles his fingers. He looks up at Durant. He's starting to feel a bit more himself. "Now what the bloody fuck is going on?"

Durant smiles. He's tall with broad shoulders and blond curls that remind Blaise of Draco's baby portraits. His dark blue MACUSA uniform is well tailored, although his red tie is a bit askew. He has a jaw that could cut glass, and Blaise's quite aware of the shifting muscles under the sleek wool of Durant's uniform. He's a handsome bugger, Blaise thinks. Durant sits down in the chair beside Blaise's bed. "Well, how much do you remember?"

Blaise shakes his head. "I know I hit Draco with something. I'd meant to hit Potter."

"It was one hell of a Cruciatius." Durant snorts. "I'm almost sorry you missed Harry." He says the last part under his breath, but Blaise hears it and wonders at the sharp whisper of malice in Durant's tone. It surprises him; he's used to everyone kowtowing to the guy. Not that Potter asks for it, Blaise has to admit. It's just one of those things, he supposes. It's bloody annoying, but even Blaise finds himself doing it from time to time. The only person who doesn't is Draco. Although that raises its own set of issues, doesn't it?

"Stupid git got in the way." Blaise's head is still a little fuzzy, filled with images of Draco in his dress uniform, on his knees, cloak spread out around him. And then Potter's there, and Blaise remembers the rush of rage. He hadn't been able to control it. Not like he had the others, the waves of anger that had pushed him towards Draco. "Why were we--" Blaise inhales sharply, his throat burning. He can taste a bitterness deep at the roof of his mouth. "Dolohov. And Abadzhiev. They smeared something on my face and then it's a blur."

"We think you were controlled," Durant says. "But it wasn't Imperius. I tried to lift it while you were duelling Malfoy in the lobby of the Crickerley Building. The controlling spell didn't respond to the usual Imperius counterspells." Durant tilts his head, considering. "You're an excellent duellist. You resisted well too, because whatever was compelling you to go after Malfoy must have been something powerful." He shifts in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "You pushed away a Killing Curse. Multiple times."

Blaise closes his eyes. He remembers holding his wand out, feeling the fury at Draco on his knees.
"Blood traitor. The words echo in his mind. They're not his. They never were. Fucking Circe. "Shit. So now I'm being charged with assault?"

Durant clears his throat. "Not if I can help it. Harry-- Inspector Potter should be here soon. I'm just making the Hit Wizards back off a bit." He looks grim. "I've had some experience with them before."

Yeah, Blaise thinks. I bet you have. He glances back towards the door. He knows what the Hit Wizards are capable of. There'd been more than one Slytherin family after the war who'd had a family member disappear for weeks or months at a time. They always came back silent and shattered, refusing to talk about where they'd been or what had been done to them. Blaise had been offered a spot with the Hit Wizards after Auror training. He'd turned them down flat.

"Why are the Hit Wizards involved?" Blaise asks. "We were in a Ministry building." He can't believe how cocked up this all is. "Why didn't the Aurors come?" He knows the procedure. Aurors have primary jurisdiction in law enforcement throughout Britain, but particularly in London. Hit Wizards have to be authorised. It's a use of force question, and Robards has been adamant in recent years that a distinction be made.

"I'm not sure." Durant's voice sounds concerned to Blaise. He runs his hand through his hair in a familiar gesture. The guv does the same thing, Blaise thinks. "I'm trying to figure that part out. I called for a medical transport and got those guys. But right now I'm just here to keep you company."

This is bad, Blaise can tell, despite Durant's casual demeanour. Blaise's unease grows. "My mother. Has she been here yet?" He thinks he would have remembered seeing her, but he can't be sure with what's just happened. His mother can fix things. Probably. If elite Hit Wizards are involved, though, even this might be beyond her sphere of influence. A panic rises in Blaise's chest, and he pushes it back down. It's going to be okay, he tells himself. He's not terribly hurt, as far as he can tell, and, even if he's bound, he's not alone. It's cold comfort, that.

"I haven't seen anyone except the Healer who cleaned off your face. And a passel of pissed off Hit Wizards." Durant leans his chair back on its legs. "We should see Harry or Hermione soon. And a Healer who's treated you before. Irskine?"

Blaise notes that an odd note creeps into Durant's voice when he says Potter's name. And he thinks about how much he doesn't like his stupid Healer who is thick as a bag of rocks. Or as thick as Greg Goyle after being hit with a stunning spell. Belatedly, he hears the other name. "Wait, Granger? Why would she come?"

"We're working together," Durant says. "I'm consulting with the Unspeakables for a bit." He smiles, but there's a tightness around his mouth. "I'm also her house guest."

"Convenient," Blaise says, his brain swirling with all this information. He can't process everything, and knows there are things he's missing or realising late. "Draco. Is he...?" Blaise can't bring himself to say the words. If he leaves them hanging, maybe they won't be true.

From Durant's hesitation, Blaise can tell it's not good. Durant sighs, and he brings the chair back down with a thump of legs against the floor. "He's injured. You got in some good hits before Malfoy took the Cruciatus. A Diffindo or two at the very least, from what I could tell, but I might be wrong about that. Fair amount of blood. I don't know what happened after Inspector Potter brought him here." Blaise notes Durant's switch back to calling the guv by his last name. His voice still sounds pained. There's a story there, Blaise thinks, and he files it away.

"The guards are going to be back soon. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?" Durant leans
Blaise considers. "How do I know this isn't an interrogation technique?" He wouldn't put it past the Hit Wizards to trick him like that. He doesn't know Durant, only remembers him vaguely from the lobby, and for all he knows, that could be a false memory.

Durant cracks a smile that would make Blaise weak at the knees if he were standing, charming and just this side of evil. "Sweetheart, if I wanted to trick you, I'd already be in your head. I'm a Legilimens."

Blaise raises an eyebrow. "Kinky."

Durant barks a laugh.

The door opens and Blaise's heart lifts as Pansy appears. The guv is right behind her, as is a Hit Wizard, looking particularly annoyed.

Potter shifts, and right behind him, another face appears. Of course, it's Hermione bloody Granger, Blaise thinks, beautiful and severe in a green suit and heels. Damn, but Granger has better legs than he remembers. Granger makes a beeline for Jake, standing by his side. They exchange looks, wordless.

Pansy hurries over to Blaise's side, bending over the railing to smooth a hand over his cheek. "Blaise." She's been crying, but she looks fierce and resolved. She taps his cheek, a sharp, light smack of her fingers against his skin. "You fucking arsehole."

"Hey, babes," Blaise says cheerfully. "I'm great. My mind might be a bit fucked up, but I'm most definitely enjoying this bit of bondage." Pansy rolls her eyes, but it makes her smile a little, and that's worth it in Blaise's book.

Potter gives him a look. "You're surprisingly chipper for someone who just scared the everliving shite out of us."

Blaise studies him. "I think you mean, someone who just put their best friend in hospital." It hits him hard then, that Draco's not there with them, that he's somewhere else in St Mungo's being treated for whatever it is that Blaise has done to him, and Blaise can barely breathe. Potter looks away, his jaw clenching, and Blaise sinks back against the bed. Fuck.

The Hit Wizard hands Durant a glass of water. "Strangely, we couldn't open the door when we got back. Unspeakable Granger had to help us get in."

The expression on Durant's face is bland. "Goodness. Are you sure it's safe to be on this ward if the doors are self-locking?" He sits up in his chair, holding the glass up to Blaise's mouth. He sips it, grateful for the wetness, even if it's a bit warm.

Hermione turns to the guard. "Perhaps we could have a bit of privacy." The Hit Wizard is about to put up a fight, but then he looks over at Potter, who's stone-faced and silent, arms crossed over his chest, and he meekly leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Good, Blaise thinks. The Gryffindors en masse are sodding annoying, but at least they impress people.

Potter's standing awkwardly beside the door, hands in his pockets. He looks like shit. His shirt is stained with what looks like blood. Draco's blood, Blaise realises, and suddenly he wants to sick up. He turns his head from the water, gagging, and Durant pulls the glass away, his sharp eyes taking in more than Blaise would like him to see.
"Jesus, Harry. You really need to change your shirt." Durant's voice is chilly enough to freeze a Dementor. "You all right?" he asks Blaise. Blaise just nods and tries to swallow. Durant sets the glass down next to Blaise's bed.

"I haven't anything else." Potter's face has that particular mulish cast that Blaise knows can only bode ill. Whatever bad blood there is between the guy and Durant, they're not bothering to hide it. From the looks of it, you'd think they'd been the ones duelling.

"What's this, the Gryffindor bloody common room?" Blaise is tired, but he'll be damned if he's going to show it in front of everyone. "Where's the blasted Fat Lady?"

Potter moves around to the other side of the bed where Pansy has taken up a position over Blaise's chart, the clipboard in her hands. He's standing back a little behind her, at a good distance from Durant and Granger. "Sorry, Zabini. We tried, but the dungeon rooms were taken."

"Pity." Blaise tries to pull his hands forward. The Incarcerous snaps them back against the bed. "We had better much saltires in our common room."

Both Durant and Potter look at him, in surprised amusement. Well, well, Blaise thinks. "Someone's been to a proper dungeon, now haven't they?" He leans back into his pillow, tired. "Wanton little sods."

Granger rolls her eyes. "Jesus," is all she says.

Blaise hears rustling at his feet and realises that Pansy's flipping through his chart. "Oi, what are you doing down there?"

Pansy gives him a quick smile, her face a bit too bright for anything good, then turns back to the heavily annotated parchment. "Copying your chart. You don't mind, do you?" She taps her wand against the parchment, murmuring the copying spells before she looks back up at him. "I'm sending it back to my log at the lab." She looks around the gathered group. "Not one bloody word from any of you, thanks."

"If you weren't already," Potter says, "I'd tell you to nick it."

"What does a wizard have to do to get some privacy in this establishment?" Blaise knows Pansy is trying to help him, but right now he just wishes she would bloody talk to him. "So what's the plan, Potter?"

Potter looks over to Durant, who's suddenly become inscrutable and silent on the other side of the bed. "Jake, did the Hit Wizards say anything about why they came with the transport?"

It's the way Potter says Durant's first name that gives him away. The tightness and the tension of it, the same way Potter says Malfoy when he and Draco are at odds. Blaise isn't a complete idiot. His eyes flick towards Durant, who's decidedly not looking at Potter. Fuck, Blaise thinks. Draco doesn't know this, does he? He must not, or he'd have ranted about it for days. Draco doesn't share well. He never has, not even with Blaise. A rush of shame floods him. Circe, but he's been a prick sometimes to Draco, going after blokes he knew Draco was interested in. Not lately, but in the past, and Blaise can't bear it if he doesn't get a chance to tell Draco that. Blaise looks back over at Potter. He can't fault Durant's taste, although Pansy disagrees with him on the hotness score of their guy.

"No. Although they did mention special holding cells." Durant has his arms crossed tight across his chest.
Pansy takes the other seat beside Jake, her gaze fixed on Blaise in a way that makes him incredibly nervous. It's like she's trying to figure him out, "Those would be the medical cells at Azkaban," she says.

Blaise jerks in his restraints. "What the bloody fuck! Azkaban? You can't be serious." Oh, shit, shit, shit. His mother will be incandescent with rage, and Blaise won't be able to stop her from doing something completely, utterly, implosively stupid.

Potter comes close, then, stepping to the head of the bed. He rests a hand on Blaise's shoulder. "You are not going to Azkaban, Zabini. I will hex whomever and whatever I have to to keep this from happening."

Pansy lets out a distracted huff from the chart. "Merlin, Potter, all we have to do is firecall Millie. A barrister's far more effective. Your hexes don't really carry legal weight."

Durant snorts, far more derisively than even Blaise thinks is appropriate, and Potter's face closes off. He looks away, his jaw working.

Blaise can't take it any longer. "Does Draco know about him?" he demands of the guy, with a nod towards Durant. "Because I'm trying to figure out how I've never heard him complain about your, what? Ex-boyfriend? Partner? Person you were fucking when you weren't fucking my best friend?" He's suddenly furious on Draco's behalf.

"What?" Pansy looks up from Blaise's chart.

It's as if all the air's gone out of the room. Potter's pale, his eyes wide. Durant looks grimly amused.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Potter starts to say.


Pansy looks between them, and Granger just sinks back in her seat, her fingers pressed to the bridge of her nose. "Jesus," Granger says again, this time with a bit more inflection.

And then it hits Blaise what he means. "Fuck. You're a Legimens," he says to Durant. His gaze shifts to Pansy. "Draco's interview--"

Her eyes widen, and she drops the chart. It clatters against the wooden floor. "Oh, Circe sodding fucking shit."

Potter just says, "So you both knew about me and Malfoy." His voice is weary.

"Everyone knows!" Pansy snaps, her voice rising. "Blaise knew. I knew. Blaise's mum knew, for fuck's sake."

"This is what happens when you fuck with Aurors, Harry," Granger murmurs from the background. "It's not as if they're not trained to notice things." Potter doesn't even react.

"Hell, even bloody Suková figured it out," Blaise says. "And she had just met all of us." At Pansy's raised eyebrow, he shrugs. "Sorry. Draco admitted it when you weren't speaking."

Pansy's mouth tightens, and Blaise thinks he might have to pay for that bit of knowledge at some point. For the moment, though, she's focused on Durant. "So how long have you been in the
picture then?"

"Harry?" Durant asks, but he doesn't look at Potter.

Potter runs a hand through his hair. He looks miserable. "Jake and I have been seeing each other off and on for two years. But we're not now."

Durant says sharply. "Like I said, he broke it off on Sunday." He gives Potter a pointed, bitter look. "I'm over it though. I mean, I did come to London to figure out why he was avoiding my goddamn calls, see if we could patch things up." He snorts. "And that would be a no."

Granger reaches over and touches Durant's shoulder. She doesn't say anything, but Blaise can tell whose side she's taken. And that he finds bloody fascinating. Saint Potter's losing holiness points by the minute.

"On Sunday." Pansy looks over at Potter, as if she's hoping he'll deny it. Blaise wonders if he knows how much danger he's in with this. Pansy's fiercely protective of Draco. She always has been, whether or not they're arguing themselves. "This Sunday."

It takes a moment, but Potter nods wearily. "Yeah," he says.

Pansy stoops down and picks up the chart. She hangs it on the end of Blaise's bed with near surgical precision.

Fuck, Blaise thinks. She's moving too slowly, too carefully to be anything other than complete hacked off. And then she walks over to Potter, looks him straight in the eye, and slaps his face, hard enough to turn Potter's head.

The smack of skin against skin echoes in the silent room. Blaise can't believe she just did that, but he's cheering inwardly. She just walked up and slapped the guv. Circe, but Pansy Iphigenia Parkinson has bollocks.

"Write me up," Pansy says, her voice deadly quiet. Potter's hand is on his cheek. The skin beneath his fingers is already turning pink. "Go ahead, guv. I don't give a fuck. My Draco is in a sodding operating theatre, bleeding out, and I actually felt bloody well fucking sorry for you--" She breaks off, her breath hitching. "Draco knows about this?" She glares at Durant. "About him?"

Potter looks over at Durant. "He knows as of two hours ago," Durant says. Neither of them say anything else.

It's all Pansy needs. She swears. "You arsehole," she says. "You fucking, goddamned arsehole--" Raised voices from the hall stop her. She looks towards the door. "I can't. I just." The voices are louder now. Blaise recognises his mother's sharp tone, demanding to be allowed to see him.

"Pans," Blaise says, as gently as he can. He pities Durant, has no sympathy for Potter, but is also suddenly worried about what's going on outside. "That's my mother. Will you go after her? You know what she'll be like."

She nods and strides to the door, slipping out. He can tell she's nearly in tears. Some time facing down Olivia Zabini'll do Pansy good, he thinks. She needs something else to focus on.

"You did," Granger agrees. Durant just looks away.
Blaise studies Potter. He looks like shit. And then Blaise thinks of Draco, silent and subdued, on his knees on the lobby floor, and Blaise's stomach twists. Whatever happened in that interview, it ripped the rug out from beneath Draco and had let Blaise, his mind addled, get a drop on him. Draco hadn't fought back. Blaise remembers that much. He hadn't gone after his wand when Blaise had sent it skittering across the marble.

He'd just stood there, looking defeated, those bright, grey eyes of his meeting Blaise's.

Blaise wants to rage, wants to pull his hands free and go after Potter himself. Something swells inside of him, an anger that's not just his own, raw and vicious, and Blaise twists beneath it, his body protesting against his bonds.

And then Granger's beside him, her fingers light and cool against his forehead. "Jake." "Shit,"

Durant says. He's there in an instant, his hands pressing Blaise back against the bed as Granger steps away. When Potter makes a move forward, Durant stops him with a single, "don't." Potter stops where he is, and Blaise howls, because he wants Potter closer, wants to claw his face, wants to hurt him for the way Potter's hurt his friend—

There's a movement in Blaise's head. Soft. Careful. A velvet thread that slips through his angry thoughts, brushing against them, featherlight. It's the faint scent of a sea breeze, the call of a gull as it sweeps through a grey sky, the quiet rumble of water as it crashes against a shoreline, long and white and sandy, nothing like the pebbled beaches Blaise knows.

Blaise is looking into Durant's eyes. They're a deep, brilliant blue, flecked with bits of gold. "Just breathe," Durant says. Blaise does, and the urge to hurt and maim begins to fade. The rage dissipates, as well, twisting into a puff of pale smoke that drifts off into the ether. He's left tired and limp, sunken against the mattress.

"Sorry," Blaise says, the word thick and rough against his throat.

"It's fine." Durant glances up at Granger. "Whatever's controlling him hasn't entirely worn off."

Granger nods. "We can't let the Hit Wizards know." She hesitates, her arms crossed. "I should speak with Croaker. If we can get him on our side, he and Gawain can block Peasegood if he tries to push for Zabini's incarceration." The look she gives Blaise is troubled before she glances back at Durant. "Jake, I hate to ask you this, but can you stay? Harry needs to deal with the fallout back at headquarters, I'm sure, and I'll be more help in the Ministry. I just don't want to leave him alone. I don't trust Peasegood not to make a move."

That fucking terrifies Blaise. He looks between them. "You really think they'd have me in Azkaban?"

"They wouldn't be here if that wasn't an option on the table," Potter says quietly. Blaise can't look at him. "I've no fucking idea why."

Granger sighs. "Jake?"

Durant sits back down in the chair beside Blaise's bed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks." Granger glances at Blaise. "We'll keep you safe, Zabini." And then she's gone, without a word to Potter.

Potter's watching Blaise, a pained expression on his face. Blaise's stomach twists. He doesn't know how he's going to work with Potter now. He doesn't know how any of them will.
"Sit the hell down, guv," Blaise says finally. "Unless you'd rather go out there and face my mother?"

Potter takes the chair across from Durant. Blaise sighs.

That's what he'd thought.

***

Olivia Zabini in full fury is a terrifying sight to most people.

Pansy lurked on the edges of Olivia's strops since she was thirteen, however, and she's not fazed by the sight of Olivia shouting at one of the Hit Wizards guarding Blaise's ward. She's surprised that it's taken Blaise's mother this long to show up, if she's honest. She glances down at her watch. It's nearly two in the afternoon. Pansy rubs at her face. She's tired already, and Olivia's starting to give her a bloody headache.

"I don't give a damn who you are, ma'am," one of the Hit Wizards is saying, his arm held out to block Olivia from the door, and Circe, Pansy hopes he's quick with his defensive charms. "No one enters this room without St Mungo's or DMLE credentials."

Olivia draws herself up to her full height. "How dare you--"

Pansy closes the door behind her. "Olivia," she says. "I'm glad to see you." She is, in a way. She needs the distraction from Potter. Fuck, but she'd cast Cruciatus on him herself at the moment.

Olivia sinks back, reaching out for Pansy's arm. She looks fragile and worn, more so than Pansy's ever seen here before. "They won't let me see him." Her face crumples, and Pansy feels a sharp pang. She wonders if her mother would be so shaken were she the one lying in the ward. Probably not. Camilla Parkinson would most likely wash her hands of her daughter, and gladly so. Olivia's mouth tightens. "I have to see him."

"I know." Pansy side-steps the Hit Wizards, giving them both a disdainful look that they ignore. She touches Olivia's arm, leading her away from the door and towards the arched, leaded window that looks down into the hospital courtyard, four storeys below. "I told you what happened."

Olivia sits on the stone bench beneath the window. Her blue robe is crumpled in places, and her hair's twisted back tightly, kept in place with a few simple, dark hairpins. Still, she looks beautiful. Pansy feels a mess in her lab scrubs. "I've been trying to find him for half an hour," she says, and her voice is thick with emotion. "It took me that long before a mediwitch would even tell me about this ward." She looks around her, at the long, narrow, dark hallway that still reeks of Dementor, and she shudders. "This isn't any place for my son."

Pansy sits next to her. "It's protocol," she says. "He turned his wand on Draco--"

"He wouldn't," Olivia says fiercely. "You've got it all wrong--he adores Draco. He has since they were boys--"

"We think it was a type of Imperius." Pansy puts her hand over Olivia's, her dry, unpolished fingers almost corpse-like against Olivia's perfect dark red manicure. "Something from when he was hurt that could be triggered by an outside force."

"Dolohov." Olivia spits the name out, and Pansy nods. "That bastard. I'll hunt him down, I'll rip his entrails from his belly--"

"You'll do nothing of the bloody sort," Pansy retorts, adding you mad cowmentally. Even though
she appreciates the sentiment, the last thing any of them need is a vindictive Olivia Zabini on their hands. Their team's already fractured as it is. She doesn't want Olivia to shatter it into shards. She snaps her fingers, drawing Olivia's attention. "No revenge fantasies, allright?"

Olivia's eyes narrow, and Pansy's stomach flips ever so slightly. Still, she holds her gaze even, and Olivia looks away first.

"Fine."

Pansy breathes out a faint sigh of relief. "I do need your help though." She looks up as the door the ward opens again and the Hit Wizards step aside. Granger slips out, her bright green suit a splash of vivid colour against the grey stone walls. Pansy glances back at Olivia, all too aware of Granger hesitating, drawing back into the shadows of the corridor. "There's a book we found in Dolohov's possessions. A journal of sorts. I'd meant to Owl you today about it, but this…" She bites her lip. Her lipstick's probably all gone by now, chewed off in her nervousness the past hour. "Blaise said there were parts of it handwritten in Enochian."

"I see." Olivia's face shutters.

"No, you don't," Pansy says. She knows that look. She's seen it on Blaise's face every time he's about to get stupidly stubborn about something. "Look, I think this book's important to finding Dolohov. To figuring out what the fuck he's doing. I know you've no love for the Aurors--" At that, Olivia snorts. "But if it could help us find out what he did to your son…" Pansy trails off. She presses her knuckles to her mouth, trying not to let the tears that have been threatening to come for the past hour spill over. Granger's watching her from across the hall, and Pansy looks away. She wraps her arms around herself, wishing she had a proper robe. It's cold out here, colder than it'd been in Blaise's stuffy room. "Please help me." There's a tightness in her whole body that threatens to shatter, and Pansy isn't certain she can survive that. Not right now. "It's just me for now. And Potter, but he's bloody Gryffindor, useless with this sort of thing."

And with everything else, she thinks but doesn't say.

Olivia is quiet for a long moment, then she brushes Pansy's knee with her hand. "All right," she says quietly. "But only on the understanding that if you can't bring that bastard in, if you can't make the charges stick, I get my chance." Her eyes glint, feral and bright. "And I won't miss, you realise."

Pansy nods. "Fair enough," she murmurs. There's a part of her that hopes Olivia will have the opportunity. She wants Dolohov to suffer, to be ripped apart the way she feels gutted right now, the way she wants to go after the bloody guv for dragging them all into this and then fucking everything over. She glances up to find Granger studying her still, a curiously intent look on her face. It's enough to irritate Pansy into calling out, "Is there something you want, Granger?"

Granger's heels echo in the corridor as she walks towards them. "Mrs Zabini," she says, and she squats beside her, ignoring Pansy. Olivia turns a cold gaze her way. "I think I can help you get in to see your son."

"How?" Despite her calm tone, there's a touch of eagerness to Olivia's voice.

"I work with the Department of Mysteries," Granger says. Her bloody lipstick's perfect, Pansy notices. Bright and gorgeous and not a spot of it worn away. God, Pansy dislikes her. Of course Granger would turn out to be an Unspeakable, wouldn't she? She's always been self-righteous enough for the bloody spooks. Granger glances at Pansy, almost as if she can hear her thoughts. "There's a possibility I can get you temporary credentials for the ward. It won't be for long, but it's something, yeah?"
Olivia hesitates, then nods. "What do I need to do?"

"Just come with me. I'm headed over there anyway," Granger stands. "It's just a bit of paperwork and a signature from one of the DMLE heads. We can get it arranged for you."

"He didn't do it," Olivia says sharply. "He's an Auror, and you're treating him like a bloody criminal."

Granger stands up. "That's what we're trying to prove, ma'am. But he has to stay here until we know what caused him to attack a fellow team member in the middle of the Crickerly Building." She looks over at Pansy. "That's why Parkinson needs your help." The admission surprises Pansy. Perhaps Granger isn't a complete cow.

Olivia frowns. "I don't like any of this."

"Neither do I," Pansy says quietly. "But I do think you should go with Granger. See if she can get you in, even if it's just for five minutes. He needs you right now."

That makes Olivia look away. Her face is still, resigned. "When do you want me at the Ministry?"

"Six?" Pansy glances at Granger, who nods. "I'll leave word at the front desk for them to bring you to my lab when you get there."

Olivia stands. "All right." She turns to Granger. "Why are you helping me? Pansy, I understand, but you?" She crosses her arms and eyes Granger up and down. "What reason do you have to get me in to see my son?"

An odd look crosses Granger's face. "You're a mother," she says after a moment. "And if I were in your shoes, I'd want to see my child. I think it's only fair, and it's not something this lot--" She gestures behind her at the Hit Wizards. "--Seem to understand."

Olivia doesn't say anything for a moment, then she nods. "Then show me this damned paperwork I'm to fill out for the privilege of seeing my boy. He will still be here when I return, I hope? Not dragged off to some Azkaban holding cell?"

"You have my word," Granger says. "He won't leave this room. I've left one of my men there with him." That surprises Pansy. She'd have thought Granger would be first in line to have them all carted off to Azkaban. Granger steps back. "If you'll come with me?"

Pansy catches Olivia's arm. "Tonight. Please."

"I'll be there." Olivia gives her a faint smile. "Chin up, child." She sweeps away, following Granger down the hallway.

Pansy pushes herself off the bench, not giving a fuck if the Hit Wizards are watching her. She's too tired, too frustrated to care.

"Miss Parkinson."

She turns to see William Irskine coming down the hall, a wry smile on his face. "So sorry to see you again," Pansy says lightly, and he chuckles.

"I have to admit, I'd hoped not to have Mr Zabini back under my care in this manner, but I suppose there might have been a certain amount of inevitability in it." Irskine flashes his St Mungo's badge at the Hit Wizards. When they just scowl at him, he heaves a deep sigh. "Out of my way, you idiots. I'm
here to see my patient, so don't make me have you dumped at the other
end of the corridor."

Pansy's mouth quirks up to one side as the Hit Wizards step back, letting Irskine push the heavy wooden door open. Whatever Blaise might think of his Healer, Pansy's definitely a fan.

She follows him back into the ward.

***

Harry sits across from Jake; Zabini stretched out between them. Neither of them are looking at him; Jake's bent his head near Zabini's and is checking in with Zabini about how he's feeling. Tired, mostly, it seems, but the headache Zabini's been suffering from is better. Harry's glad of that, even as Jake pulls out his notepad and a small travel quill and starts scrawling down everything Zabini thinks he can remember about before he found himself in the Crickerly lobby.

The tension in the room is thick and unrelenting, and Harry knows he deserves it. He's humiliated, horrified that his whole team knows what he's been doing with Malfoy--probably in great detail, to be honest--and Harry's starting to understand how Zabini might have been angry enough to cast a Cruciatus at him. Frankly, Harry'd have done it himself, were he in Zabini's shoes.

And honestly none of that matters until he hears that Malfoy is all right.

Still, it's a relief when the door opens again, and Irskine comes in, Parkinson trailing behind him. Her face is set and furrowed, and she doesn't look his way. He didn't expect her to.

"Mr Zabini," Irskine booms. "And here I thought I'd already seen you this morning."

"Evidently," Zabini says with a frown, "you haven't been doing your job properly, Irsky. "He tries to lift his hands and can't. "Shocking that I'd end up here--perhaps I should speak to an administrator about healing malpractice?"

Irskine just smiles and reaches for Zabini's chart. "Perhaps someone ought not to have checked himself out of hospital against medical advice."

Zabini's face falls. "Touché, my man. Touché."

Irskine hums softly as he flips through Zabini's chart. "Well," he says after a moment. "I'd say the headaches may have been a symptom of whatever allowed the mind control to be initiated--"

"You think?" Zabini snaps.

"I do," Irskine doesn't seem to notice--or at least give a damn about--Zabini's attitude. Harry wishes he could be that calm in the face of Slytherin ire. Irskine snaps the chart shut and hangs it back on the end of Zabini's bed. "On that note, I'd like to run another battery of tests. Blood work, magical scans, that sort of thing. See if there's any trace element of the activator remaining."

"He was swabbed on admittance," Pansy says. "According to the chart."

Irskine strokes his beard. "Which I'll want to send to our pathologists." He watches Zabini for a moment, then claps his hands. "All right. All of you out. I want a moment with my patient, please."

Jake crosses one leg over the other. "I'm not fucking leaving," he says. "Hermione Granger's orders. I'm not to leave Zabini alone."

That's not what Hermione meant, Harry's certain, but he also knows what Jake's like when he's
got a bone between his teeth, and for whatever reason, he's decided that Zabini's to be defended at all costs. Harry doesn't disagree, but he's starting to get naffed off that this is his goddamned team and Jake and Hermione are taking defensive point. It should be him going toe-to-toe with Peasegood, him standing up for Zabini's rights and keeping him from harm.

Irskine hesitates, looking at each of them, and then he sighs. "Fine. You stay." He points a finger at Harry, then Parkinson. "You two, out. Now."

"And to think I liked you for a moment," Parkinson says, just loud enough for Irskine to hear. He waves her away.

"Don't start with me, young witch. I've got your friend here to deal with already." Irskine eyes Zabini. "At least your mum's not here."

"Yet," Zabini says, and Irskine rolls his eyes.

"Oh, joy." He looks over at Harry. "Why are you still here, Inspector Potter? I thought I threw you and Constable Parkinson out a good minute ago?"

Harry pushes himself up out of his chair. "We'll be back," he says to Zabini.

Zabini just folds his sheet between his fingertips, accordion-pleating it. "Don't hurry on my account."

God, Harry thinks. He can't do anything right. He strides out of the room, Parkinson dawdling behind. He's nearly at the double swinging doors at the end of the hall before he stops, turning to wait for her.

"I don't care how narked off you are at me," Harry says as Parkinson approaches. "And I understand why you would be. We'll ignore what happened in there, yeah? The whole striking your SIO, and all, because it was, in some ways, justified." His face still stings a bit. Parkinson has a heavy hand, and she's fucking strong. He's pleased, but it'll bruise.

Parkinson's mouth is turned down at the corners; she wraps her arms around herself and scowls deeper. "I'm not sorry."

Harry acts as if he doesn't hear her. "But the fact of the matter is that right now it's you and me, Parkinson. We're all that's left today, to try to figure out what the fuck is going on and how the goddamned hell Dolohov got to Zabini."

"I know," Parkinson says quietly. She looks up at him then. "I'm still furious with you."

"Good." Harry starts walking again. Parkinson follows him through the double doors out into the main corridor of the third floor. "Use that anger. You've got Zabini's charts copied?"

Parkinson pats her wand pocket. "Sent them to my lab already."

Harry nods. "I want you on that tonight. Use whatever resources you need, but find out how the hell we went from Zabini nearly bleeding out in a Prague alleyway to him trying to Avada his best friend in the middle of a Ministry building."

"I've got Olivia Zabini coming by at six," Parkinson says. "To see the book. I know she's family, and it wouldn't hold up in the Wizengamot, but if she looked at Blaise's chart, she might see something I could miss." Parkinson hesitates. "Her mother's family came down from the de Medicis. She's had some experience with poisons."
Harry doesn't bother to point out that of course she has. There's an open file on Olivia Zabini in the Head Auror's office. They just can't ever pin anything on her. She's a smart woman. Harry rather likes that about her. "Keep it out of the official reports then," he says. "Don't list her as a consultant, and if she can point you in a particular direction, you'll need to go back and set up the research trail yourself."

Parkinson nods. "I've already thought of that."

"Inspector Potter!"

Harry turns to see an older mediwitch, brown hair just turning grey at the temples, hurrying towards him. He'd talked to her earlier, when Malfoy'd just been brought onto the Spell Damage ward. He's surprised to see her down on this end, although she's a bit out of breath. "Iris, right?"

Iris nods, her hand on her chest. "You said to tell you when Constable Malfoy was out of theatre. He's in a room now, up here on Spell Damage. He's not awake, but we have him stable."

Harry's heart stutters in his chest. "He's all right?"

"Better than he was," Iris says. "There was a fair bit of damage, but Poke's settled most of it. He's not in top form, but he's not in immediate danger."

"Oh, thank God," Parkinson says, and Harry sees his own relief mirrored on her face. "Can we see him?"

"His mother's with him." Iris walks down the hallway with them. "It's up to her, of course, but from our end of things, it'd be fine."

Harry needs to see Malfoy, needs to look down at his face and reassure himself that Malfoy's really here, that he really did make it. He hasn't let himself think about why Malfoy pushed him out of the Cruciatus's trajectory. He can't. That just sparks too much hope, and hope's something Harry doesn't dare allow himself to indulge in at the moment. He just wants to stand beside Malfoy and know he's okay. That'll be enough. At least for now.

As they reach the lifts, the doors slide open. Hassan Shah strides out, looking surprised when he sees Harry and Parkinson standing there, Iris at their side. He catches the lift door, holding it open. "Sir. I were sent to find you."

Harry sighs. "Gawain." Parkinson shoots him a sharp look. "It's fine," he says to her. "I'm sure he wants a briefing."

Shah nods, still holding the lift door wide. "He says he's tried to reach you via mobile, but you're not answering."

"The reception's bad in the secure wing," Harry says. It's a bold-faced lie, but he doesn't care. "Might be the Hit Wizards."


"Fuck," Shah says. The lift buzzes behind him, annoyed at still being held open. Shah doesn't let it go. "No wonder the Head Auror's bloody naffed to see you."

Harry glances over at Parkinson. "I'm going to have to go over. You'll be with Malfoy?"
"I want to see him," Parkinson says. "But I need to be back at the Ministry by six for Olivia."

"Yeah." Harry chews his bottom lip. He doesn't want to leave Malfoy alone. Not now that he's out of theatre. It's too easy to get into St Mungo's, and if Dolhov and Abadzhiev managed to get to Zabini somewhere between the Ministry and the Crickerly, then Harry wants Malfoy under protection. He turns to Shah. "You on an assignment today?"

Shah shrugs. "Just following up a few leads from other cases, sure."

"Forget those." Harry steps into the lift, looking back at the three of them. "I want you in Malfoy's room at alltimes until I get back, yeah?" Shah nods. "Full on guard protocol. Parkinson?"

She raises one eyebrow. "Yeah, guv?"

"Gather all the information you can about Zabini and Malfoy before you head over to the Ministry. If anyone touches Malfoy or tries to take Zabini off ward, I want to know about it." He pulls out his mobile. "I'll keep this on. I want a text every hour until I'm back."

"Will do." Parkinson leans into the lift. "Thanks," she says, her voice a bit wobbly. "You're still a shit, but…" She trails off. Harry understands.

"We'll catch these bastards," he says. "I promise."

Harry hits the button for the ground floor, and Shah lets the door slip free. Harry leans against the mirrored wall of the lift with a sigh. He really doesn't want to face down Gawain.

Fuck.

He squares his shoulders. Best to just get it over with, yeah?

The lift jolts as it starts its descent.

***

Viola's not at her desk when Harry walks into Gawain's outer office. He'd ignored all the odd looks he'd got as he walked through the bullpen. It's obvious the Auror rumour mill's been hard at work; he's heard whispers about Malfoy and Zabini, as well as his own rage fit at the Head Auror earlier today. Brilliant, Harry thinks. Just cracking fantastic. It's only when he knocks on Gawain's door that he realises he's still wearing his white shirt that's covered in Malfoy's blood.

That can't have helped the murmurs.

Too late now, he thinks, as Gawain calls him in. He knows it was a mistake the minute he sees Gawain's nostrils flare.

"Inspector Potter," Gawain says. "I see Constable Shah tracked you down to St Mungo's."

"Sir." Harry stands under Gawain's withering scrutiny. If he's narked off too, it's best just to get it out. It vaguely reminds him of facing down dragons in the Triwizard Cup fourth year. If he's honest, he'd rather stand in front of a Hungarian Horntail than the Head Auror in a mood at present.

Gawain turns, and belatedly Harry realises that someone is sitting in one of the chairs in front of Gawain's desk. Gideon Titus from Professional Standards unfolds his long legs and stands, facing Harry. Bloody fucking hell, Harry thinks. It's even worse than he'd expected.
"Inspector Potter," Titus says, with a small, tight smile. He's a tall, thin man with a non-existent hairline and a sharp, rodent-like nose. "A pity that we meet under such unfortunate circumstances." Harry already feels like he needs to stand beneath a shower. "Am I to understand you've come directly from hospital? How are your men?"

"They're great, thanks." Harry narrows his eyes as he moves further into Gawain's office. "Professional Standards doesn't usually come down to send well wishes."

Titus's smile thins out. "Yes, well, we'll be certain to send a basket of grapes." He sits down again. "Gawain?"

Gawain sighs and leans back in his chair. "Gideon's opening an investigation, Harry." Harry stills. "Into?"

"Constable Zabini," Titus says. "It's not every day an Auror attacks another Auror in a Ministry building."

It happens more frequently than you'd think, Harry wants to say, but he holds his tongue. "I see," he says instead. "Then you've already seen Constable Zabini's medical file from his most recent stay in St Mungo's."

"We have." Titus blinks his golden-brown eyes, slow and steady and careful, like a feral cat watching its prey. "Very interesting, is it not?"

"How so?" Harry keeps his voice even.

Titus shrugs. "Constable Zabini survives a direct attack by a known Death Eater, then turns on Constable Malfoy in a very public setting?" He tuts. "Surely, Inspector Potter, you can see why we might be interested?"

"Because you're fool enough to think Zabini's been turned by Dolohov?" Harry asks bluntly.

"Potter," Gawain says, a sharp tone in his voice.

Harry sits down in the empty chair next to Titus. "I'm just being honest, sir," he says. He's done with this shit, done pretending that he doesn't recognise prejudice when he sees it. "It's easier to think Zabini's gone bad than it is to look at the bloody facts, all of which suggest that Zabini was exposed to and influenced by some form of a controlling spell after our Prague mission. I recognise mind control, sir. I've been bloody trained on it, more than once over the years, and I've an American Leglimens sat right now in St Mungo's with Constable Zabini who's willing to go on record saying he's certain of the same." At least Harry hopes Jake would. It wouldn't be for Harry though, if he did.

Titus frowns at him. "I'm afraid that's for my department to determine, Inspector Potter. I came down to give Head Auror Robards a courtesy notice that we'll be taking on a review of Constable Zabini's actions and providing a recommendation for how to proceed." His mouth purses even more; he looks as if he's swallowed a whole lemon. "The general public does have a right to expect a certain behavior from the Auror force, Inspector Potter. Whether or not Constable Zabini was under the influence of another individual does not change the fact that he placed civilians as well as Auror personnel in danger."

Harry can't argue with that, as much as he wants to. It's a shit move, invoking public safety. They can hold him without charge for that, although the limit's still three days. He looks away. "Fine. Zabini's under fire, then."
Titus stands up. "In that case, I'll provide a written notice to you as soon as possible, Inspector, that your junior officer is under our evaluation." He glances at Gawain. "The corresponding form will be filed with Viola, of course."

Gawain waves his hand. "Whatever, Gideon. Do what you must." "Of that you can be certain." Titus nods at Harry. "Inspector."

Harry barely waits until the door closes behind Titus's scrawny arse. "Are you fucking kidding me? You know as well as I do that Zabini did not go after Malfoy on his own. Christ, Gawain, they've been friends since childhood---"

"And Auror protocols still require Professional Standards to look into the incident." Gawain runs his hand over his face. "Don't bloody well start with me, Harry. Just because you managed to defeat Voldemort as an eighteen-year-old idiot doesn't mean you or your team are exempt from standard practices. Zabini fucked up. Gideon's team will investigate it, they'll find out that yes, he was in fact not himself, and then they'll mark him cleared."

"Except there'll always be a blot on his record," Harry says hotly. "You know what a Professional Standards investigation looks like. Especially for my team. The whole bloody force is waiting for them to fuck up somehow."

Gawain leans forward, his eyebrows drawn together. "Well, then, you oughtn't have handed it to them gift-wrapped and tagged, now should you have, Harry?"

That stings.

"You sent us in against one of the darkest wizards possible with little more than a fare-thee-well," Harry snaps, his fury suddenly unable to be contained. He's done. He's tired, he's been through fucking hell in the past four goddamned hours, and it's just enough. "Well, we found Dolohov. And now you don't like the consequences. You shouldn't have started this Gawain, shouldn't have sent us down this path if you couldn't handle what we'd find. Blaise Zabini is alive because he is a damn good dueller. He's under the influences of things St Mungo's can barely find, that neither Jake nor I have never seen before in any of our assignments." Harry's voice rises. "For fuck's sake, he tried to kill his best friend. I watched him resist multiple commands to Avada Malfoy myself. And now you want to act like he's the problem? Your cowardice is the problem. And vicious prejudice in the Ministry against anyone possibly connected to Voldemort, however tenuously."

Gawain meets his gaze. "Are you done?"

"No." Harry doesn't think he'll ever be done. Not after today. "Hit Wizards, Gawain. Jake called for a medical transport expecting to be accompanied by Aurors, and Hit Wizards showed up. Want to explain that? Hermione, Jake and I had to intervene to keep them from carting him away. It's like the bloody War never ended. We're back to the fucking Snatchers. Except now we're the bad guys."

The clock in the corner ticks, loud and harsh in the silence. Gawain picks up a quill and rolls it between his fingertips. He sighs. "I don't know why the Hit Wizards are involved." He frowns down at his ink-stained fingers. "Peasegood knew even before we did. It's like he was waiting for Durant's request to come in." He leans forward, his elbows on his desk blotter. "Have you ever wondered, Harry, why Dolohov seems to be a step ahead?"

The thought has crossed Harry's mind. At least once. "Yes, but the leak's not in our boat. No one on my team--"
"I don't think it's your team," Gawain says. "Not that you don't need to get them in order, mind. But it's from somewhere else. Somewhere in the DMLE." He looks troubled. "But that's not your concern. I'm following those leads. What you need to do is to find Dolohov and take that bloody fuck of a bastard down." He puts his quill down. "And if he has someone in the Ministry feeding him intel, well. We'll nail that piece of scum to the wall too."

Harry can't quite believe what he's hearing. Part of him wants to think that Gawain's just being paranoid, but another part of him knows that Dolohov didn't just stumble upon Zabini out of hand today. This was planned, for what reason Harry doesn't yet know. Nor can he figure out why Malfoy would be targeted, not him. And as much as Zabini had tried to cast Crucius on Harry, his first target had been Malfoy. With a Killing Curse at that.

Christ, but Harry's grateful that Zabini had fought that off, had somehow managed to twist the compulsion to kill Malfoy into one to hurt Harry. Things could have been so much worse than they are even now. He can't even imagine if Blaise had actually not been able to resist, if Malfoy had actually died. He sees a green flash in his mind, remembers the first time he saw the curse as an adult, when Cedric Diggory had died at Pettigrew's cast. His mind numbs at the prospect and his scar tingles a bit, the ghost of sensation he's not felt in a while. He rubs it almost unconsciously.

Gawain's watching Harry. "This'll be in the Prophet tomorrow, you realise. Not even Barnabas can keep it out. Too many people saw, there's too many rumours swirling about." He pauses. "I don't suppose there's anything else you'd like me to know about?"

Harry stills, his face heating. Christ, if anything hit the press about him and Malfoy. They weren't exactly discreet about it to begin with, still aren't if he's honest. Plenty of people could have seen them at the Thestral's Wing, afterall. "No," he says finally. "There's nothing else."

Gawain gives him a curt nod. "Right. So that, lad, is why Gideon Titus was in here. There'll be people demanding Zabini's head on a platter. The best thing you can do is to let Professional Standards do their job." He pauses. "And let me do mine. I'll protect Zabini as best I can."

"You lifted our wand restriction," Harry points out. "What are we supposed to do about that? You don't think Professional Standards is going to wonder why Zabini's Crucius doesn't show up in the wand logs? They're not asking why he was able to cast it in the first place?"

"Oh, that's already been questioned," Gawain says calmly. "I've implied that Zabini's wand must have been compromised during the Prague attack."

Harry worries his lip between his teeth. "That's not going to hold up."

"It will with a bit of help from the Unspeakables." Gawain folds his arms across his chest. "Granger's already owled me for a meeting."

"Oh, right. She mentioned something about enlisting Croaker as well." Harry doesn't know how to feel about all of it. He knows Hermione's still angry with him. Probably even more so now that she knows about Malfoy. But he loves that she's standing beside him, helping out Zabini. She'll always be his best friend, even when she's ready to string him up by his toenails. He supposes she's had practice dealing with him. After all, Hermione knows him better than most anyone except Ron. But it hurts that she's so angry about Malfoy, even though he understands why. Deep within Harry lurks a fear that Malfoy will divide him from his friends when nothing else could.

And he doesn't know which side he'd choose, which is even more unnerving.

Gawain picks up a file jacket and hands it to Harry. He opens it up; there's a stack of forms. "You'll need to start your statement; Gideon wants you down in Professional Standards in an hour
Harry stands up. "Can I go back to hospital first? To check on Zabini and Malfoy?"

"No," Gawain slides a pair of glasses on his nose and peers over the rims at Harry. "You need to take care of this. You're more help to your team here. But Harry?" He raises an eyebrow. "Change your damned shirt first. You look like you've been in a fucking slaughterhouse. If you haven't anything here, have Viola give you one of mine."

Harry flinches at the iron note of authority in the Head Auror's voice. "Yes, sir." He walks out, letting the door slam behind him a little harder than he probably should.

Viola's back at her desk; she looks up. "Harry." She's still a bit cool towards him. Harry supposes she deserves that as well. He's been a bit of prick; it's not been his best day, he'll admit.

"Hey," he says with a small, apologetic smile, and Viola's face softens.

"Hold up," she says, and she reaches beneath her desk and pulls out his holdall, singed handle and all. "You left this in the Crickerly. One of our boys brought it back when he realised it was yours."

Harry thumbs the traces of gold monogramming, HJP still faintly visible on the brown surface of the bag. Hermione had given this to him for his first assignment in Luxembourg, complete with an Undetectable Extension Charm on it to be able to cart most anything with him. Harry'd even used it to help Ron and Hermione move into their flat. "Thanks," he says.

"Thought you'd want it back," Viola pats his hand. "Oh, and that reminds me." She opens a drawer in her desk and pulls out a mobile. "This was turned in earlier today by someone who works at the Thestral's Wing."

Harry turns the mobile over between his hands. *Auror property no. 6703-253A* is engraved onto the back.

"It was assigned to your team," Viola's saying, and Harry nods. "I won't bother giving the lecture about keeping track of Auror devices, will I?"

"No, I've got it." It's Malfoy's. He must have left it last night. Harry wants to laugh. Fuck. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours. He glances at the clock behind Viola's desk. It's ten to three now.

Malfoy went down barely two and a half hours ago. Harry'd kissed him at his Floo less than nine hours past, and he can still feel Malfoy's lips against his. His fingers close around the mobile, gripping it tightly. He swallows around the lump in his throat. "I'll make sure it gets back. With your lecture, yeah?"

Viola gives him a sympathetic smile. "You're a good lad."

Harry slides Malfoy's mobile into his pocket and picks up his holdall. "Let's hope Professional Standards thinks so too."

"Just remind them you took down Voldemort," Viola says. Her mouth pulls down at the corners. "That rat Titus hasn't ever done anything like that."

No, Harry thinks. Very few of us have. And lived to tell the tale. He hefts his holdall over his shoulder. "Thanks again."

He's nearly made it to the bullpen when Marcus Wrightson turns the corner, nearly running into him. Wrightson pulls up short, looking Harry up and down.
"Potter," he says. "Heard you lot got into a spot of trouble this afternoon."

"Nothing we can't handle," Harry says coolly. Even Wrightson, idiot that he is, knows that's a bald-faced lie. Harry can't bear to care.

Wrightson grins in a flash of yellowing teeth. "Sure," he says, and then he's on his way again, heading towards Gawain's office.

Fuck, Harry thinks. That one bears some watching. He doesn't trust Wrightson further than he can throw him. He turns back around, catches Althea Whitaker watching him from across the bullpen. Their eyes meet and hold before she walks away.

Odd, Harry thinks.

He strides through the office, back towards the incident room and his tiny office. He's a shirt to find after all.

What he'll say to try to get Zabini out from under suspicion, he has no idea. But he's going to give it his best.

***

Draco wakes to the steady beep of a monitoring charm.

It doesn't surprise him that he recognises the sound. He'd spent so much time in St Mungo's recently with Blaise, after all.

What does surprise him is how much his body aches and how difficult it is to open his eyes. He breathes out slowly, a soft grunt slipping from between his lips, and when his eyelashes flutter open, his mother is there beside him, leaning over to brush her fingertips across his forehead.

"Hello, my love," Narcissa murmurs. "You're awake then."

Draco blinks the sleep from his eyes. "Mother," he says, and he reaches up to take her hand. A quiet pain prickles through his arm, and he winces. It's not as bad as it had been before. He'd never felt anything as agonising as the Cruciatus. But this still hurts. He breathes out. No wonder Dolohov hates him. The Dark Lord had made Draco cast Cruciatus on him and Thorfinn Rowle for letting Potter escape once. That'd been back at the beginning of seventh year, and Draco'd been so terrified of being killed that he'd channelled that anger and fear into a Cruciatus that had left Dolohov writhing on the floor for a good quarter-hour afterwards. Draco supposes this is his penance.

"Careful," his mother says. "The Healers warned me you might still be feeling a few aftereffects."

A movement at the door makes Draco turn his head, catching the wide shoulders of a man in a robe. Not his father. Please. Draco can't deal with Lucius right now. He blinks again, and Shah slips into focus. "What are you doing here?" He sounds rude, and his mother purses her mouth. Shah just laughs.

"Potter's put me on Malfoy watch, hasn't he?" Shah slouches against the wall, arms crossed, but his robe's open enough for Draco to see that his wand holster's at the ready, unsnapped so that he can grab his wand in an instant. "Wants to make sure you don't end up splattered across this floor too."

"You don't have to stay." Draco tries to push himself up in the bed. A shudder of agony goes
through him, but it's just for a moment before it fades away. His mother's hands slip behind him, holding him up as she adjusts the bed so he's sitting, plumping up the pillows behind him.

Shah shakes his head "Ah, no you don't, mate. Potter put me here until he's back again, and I'm not stepping a bloody foot outside this door until the guv says it's fine by him to leave your scrawny arse alone. I'm not taking him on in a snit, am I? I'm here and I'm staying put. Don't give a damn what you say." He looks over at Narcissa. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Potter's a fucking arsehole," Draco says, settling back against the pillows. He feels unsettled, out of sorts. Most definitely marred off at Potter, the bloody lying wanker. His body tenses in irritation, and a wave of pain rips through all of his muscles. He tries to make himself relax. It doesn't entirely work.

"Language, Draco." Narcissa sits down beside the bed. She gives him a disapproving look, and Draco wants to roll his eyes. She's lived with his father for almost thirty years now. He's fairly certain she's heard worse.

"I've just been Crucio'd, Mother." He narrows his eyes at her. "I rather think that entitles me to use whatever language I damn well please." Especially about that sodding twat. His stomach flips as he remembers that memory of Durant's, Potter beneath him, fingers tight on Durant's hips as he arched up into Durant's thrusts.

His heart seeps misery, a thick, bloody ooze of grief.

Draco looks away from his mother and Shah, towards the tall, paned windows at the end of the ward. They've put him alone here. Draco's not surprised by that. He's still a risk, he knows. If Dolohov wants him dead so badly that he'd use Blaise as his weapon of choice, then there's no question that he'd try for St Mungo's if he had a chance. That's what Potter's thinking, of course. Draco'd worry about the same were he not the one trapped in bed.

He touches the bandages wrapped around his bare chest and up over his shoulder.

"Don't," his mother says, smacking his hand away. "You're still healing. You don't want to scar."

She means well, Draco knows, but she's already driving him bloody mental. "Mother," he says calmly. "I rather think I'm past worrying about scars, thank you very much. Another one for the collection won't bother me that much."

That makes his mother's face buckle, and Draco feels a right twat. He looks over towards Shah, who's trying not to smile. Shah shrugs and mouths *mums, yeah?* When Narcissa turns her head to frown at him, he straightens his shoulders and tries to look the proper Auror. Draco snorts.

"How's Blaise?" Draco asks, worry tugging at him. He can't imagine things have gone well on that front. Not with the force involved. Shah and Narcissa exchange a look, and that concerns Draco even more. "What aren't you telling me?"

Narcissa folds her hands together, setting them on her lap. Oh, Circe, that's never a good sign. "Your friend Pansy stopped by earlier." She hesitates. Draco knows that tone in her voice; his mother's always disapproved of Pansy's family connections. "Blaise is in a ward here too, under guard because of the incident with you."

Shah looks over at him. *The* ward.

Draco swears, ignoring his mother's pursed lips and general aura of disapproval. He knows exactly what ward Shah's referring to. "He wasn't himself," he snaps. "How can they even think he's a danger to anyone else?"
"Tell it to the Hit Wizards, mate." Shah looks more than a little angry. "Fuckers've been all over the fucking place." He looks over at Narcissa. "Sorry."

Narcissa nods graciously. Her objections against obscenity are more pointedly for her son than others. "Evidently your supervisor, Mr Potter--"

"Inspector," Draco corrects her, almost automatically.

"Inspector Potter is at the Ministry right now, according to Pansy." Narcissa waves her hand. "Something about talking to the Head Auror?"

Draco pushes himself up. "I have to--"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Draco Lucius." His mother stands and puts a hand on his chest, pressing him back down against the mattress. Draco's so weak he goes easily, despite his protest. "You can't help anyone in this condition. And if anything happens to you, it will be far worse for Blaise."

Shah steps forward, and Draco knows he might as well give in. He thinks he might be able to escape his mother--eventually--but Shah'd have him trussed up and back in the bed before he got halfway down the hall. "Pansy says there's a bloke in with him, an Unspeakable from Granger's team. And she's also working on things." Shah shrugs. "Don't know what, but she's a spook, yeah? Got to have some dirt to use, I reckon. Or be able to make someone disappear and all."

"Well, that's a mercy," Draco says, not bothering to hide his scorn. "I'm so very sure Blaise'll get fair treatment under the law. Although Granger's bloody effective. Has anyone owled Millie? As I see it, if I don't press assault charges against him--"

"Mate, they're using community safety to keep him locked up," Shah says with a scowl. "Hit Wizards are sayin' it were a public place he went after you in, and anyone might've got hurt."

Draco's furious. "He's not a fucking Dark Wizard. Dolohov is, damn--" Pain wracks through him, cutting his words off. He gasps, and his mother's hand is back on his chest, soft and light.

"Calm down before you hurt yourself," Narcissa says. "Right now, I believe they're trying to keep Blaise from being transported." His mother's face is grim, and Draco knows exactly what that means. Azkaban. A place his sort know all too well. "Once there are official responses, Millicent can likely be of use. And Inspector Potter's reputation won't hurt either."

She means a Wizengamot charge, Draco knows. Something that will stain Blaise's record forever, even if it's cleared. And it will be. Potter'll make certain of that. If he was able to keep sodding Lucius out of Azkaban, he'll be able to make sure Blaise walks free. He has to. Draco doesn't know what he'll do if Potter can't.

He closes his eyes. He can't believe how buggered everything is. Fucking Circe.

"I want to see him," he says, his voice a soft rasp. He opens his eyes to look at his mother. "Blaise."

Narcissa cards her fingers through Draco's hair. "I know. But you can't right now."

That hurts worse than the Cruciatlus, Draco thinks. He can't imagine what Blaise is going through, how terrified he must be, whatever blustery cheerful front he's putting on.

"They won't take him," he says to his mother. "I don't care what I have to do. They won't."
Narcissa gives him a small smile. "Then let yourself rest, darling. You're of no use to Blaise in a hospital bed." She lets her fingertips smooth across his forehead. They're soft and warm and comforting. Draco remembers her soothing him when he was a boy, downed by a bout of spattergroit. His mother had sat by his bed for hours on end, reading to him, singing, smoothing a damp cloth across his heated skin. She'd ignored his father for days, which had sent Lucius into a sulk, but Draco had needed her then.

He needs her now.

"Mumsy," he says, and she smiles at the childhood nickname. He looks up at her, so very damned tired, so very damned lost. "I think I've fucked everything up."

"Nothing," Narcissa says fiercely. "Nothing is unable to be unfucked, my love." Draco can't help a small smile at her quiet profanity. "Whatever it might be. Remember that."

She presses her lips to his cheek, and he closes his eyes, letting himself breathe in the comforting, familiar scent of his mother's lilac perfume.

For a moment, at least, he believes her.

***

At two minutes past six o'clock, Pansy strides into the Auror bullpen to find Olivia Zabini sitting stiffly in a chair at Abigail Roberts's desk. Roberts looks bloody relieved to see Pansy, possibly for the first time in Pansy's entire career with the Aurors.

"Parkinson, your appointment is here," Roberts says, reaching for the satchel already packed and waiting on her desk. "I'm out." The clerical support in Auror headquarters is not renowned for their tact and diplomacy; then again, Pansy supposes neither are terribly effective in daily dealings with Aurors.

"Olivia," Pansy says. "Would you like to come with me?"

Blaise's mother stands, still in the slightly crumpled blue robe Pansy'd seen her in last. Pansy's changed from her scrubs into the jeans and deep blue silk tunic she'd left in her office this morning. Olivia still looks better than she does.

They're in the lift before Pansy asks, "Have you seen him yet?"

Olivia shakes her head. She looks tense and angry. "Ms Granger's only just managed to get me permission. I'll go over when I'm done here."

"Would you rather go now?" Pansy doesn't want to keep a mother from her son. Particularly not Olivia Zabini.

"No," Olivia looks over at her. "I'd rather help my son at the moment." Her mouth tightens. "I've spent enough time in the Ministry this afternoon to know exactly what Blaise is up against with these devils."

Pansy punches the button for Level Four. "I take it you met with Peasegood?"

"Among others." Olivia leans her head against the polished oak panel as the lift starts its descent. "Men can be quite patronising when they see you as nothing more than a foolish, distraught mother. Idiots." She sighs. "Though they're quick to point the blame at one another."

"Welcome to the Ministry," Pansy says. "Where the incompetent all too often find themselves at
the top of the heap."

The lift doors open onto a narrow, darkened hallway. Pansy leads Olivia past the Goblin Liaison Office and around the Pest Advisory Bureau to another smaller hallway, lit only with flickering sconces that cast long shadows across the grey stone floor. Pansy pushes through a heavy oak door, holding it open for Blaise's mother, before taking a sharp right into her lab.

Pansy grabs a leather lab apron from the pegs on the wall and slides it over her head, tying it around her waist. "There's one for you," she says, but Olivia already has it on, and she's reaching for a pair of the safety goggles on top of one of the potions cabinets.

"I grew up in a lab," Olivia says, settling the goggles on her forehead. "Mother worked on potions, and Father--" She hesitates. "The less said about him, the better."

Pansy knows better than to push. She just nods and motions Olivia over to her wet lab bench. "From what I can tell," she says, "the garrote Abadzhiev used on Blaise was made of Devil's Snare and metal with some form of the Boletus gabretae mushroom thrown into the mix. Possibly combined with some sort of unguent to coat the surface of the garrote. My working theory is that the spores were introduced into Blaise's bloodstream that way. I wasn't certain why, but today…” She chews her lip. "I think the spores might work as some sort of hallucinogen, allowing for potential susceptibility to neural control."

"A biological Imperius," Olivia says.

"Something along those lines." Pansy positions a slide on her microscope. "I just don't know how. I mean, all the literature suggests that the Boletus gabretae's a nasty bit of fungus that can mimic death in the right potion. There've been potioneers who've used small fragments of it in their Draughts of Living Death, for instance, but it's a very volatile ingredient and, used in too great a quantity, well." She looks over at Olivia and grimaces, then yields the spot at the bench to her so she can look too. "No waking up from that."

"I'm aware." Olivia peers into the eyepiece. "This is the fungus?"

Pansy perches on a stool. "A sampling taken from Blaise's wound. There's Devil's Snare in there as well, and some sort of ointment. I'm still working on the ratios."

Olivia leans back. "Curious."

"You've not seen a poison like that before, have you?" Pansy asks carefully. It's a delicate subject, the reference to Olivia's poisoning past, but Olivia gives her an amused smile.

"I'm afraid not." Olivia looks a bit disappointed. "I've never heard of that particular combination."

Pansy sighs. "I thought you might not have. I think Dolohov's playing around with a new substance, to be honest, and I've no idea how it works."

"A reaction between the fungus and the Datura stramonium, perhaps." Olivia steps away from the microscope, resting her back against the lab bench.

"Perhaps." Pansy frowns. "I mean, it has to be in a way, I think. I just can't find anything that would indicate they'd have a particular interaction. I've tested my samples, and whilst I can record traces of a magical signature developing between the two, nothing I've been able to replicate would be anywhere near strong enough to have caused Blaise's initial reaction." She drums her fingernails against the worktable. "Or today's, for that matter." She reaches for a stack of
parchments. "I even have his chart here, but I haven't had the chance to really look through it yet." Olivia
takes it from her. "You're quite resourceful, Pansy Parkinson."

"I try." Pansy watches Olivia flip through her son's medical record. "Oh, and I want you to look at the
Enochian book too whilst you're here." She slides off her stool and walks over to the side bench
where she's been keeping her boxes of artefacts and other non-wet materials from Anichka Dolohova's
house.

They're not there.

Pansy draws up short, looking around the lab. There's no neatly stacked set of white boxes,
perfectly labelled according to Auror protocol. She strides over to the side office, where Jones is still
sitting hunched over a sheaf of paperwork, his quill flying across the forms. "Hey, Jonesey?"

Jones looks up, blinking at her behind his glasses. "You're back."

"I am," Pansy says, not bothering to point out that she's been in and out of the lab for the past fifteen
minutes, waiting for Olivia. "Look, have you seen my evidence boxes from the Dolohov case? It's just
that they're not on my side bench where I left them this afternoon--"

"Wrightson's lot took them," Jones says, and he dips his quill in the inkwell again. "A couple of hours
ago."

Pansy's stomach drops. "What?"

Jones scrawls his name across the bottom of a report. "Aubrey said it was fine, and Wrightson's
paperwork was in order. Something about having access to them on Monday anyway and the whole
Zabini thing changing the timeline?" He shrugs. "I wasn't really paying attention."

It takes Pansy to a full count of fifty before she decides she won't actually murder Jones in cold blood in
the middle of their shared lab. But she really, really wants to. "Bertie okayed it," she says flatly.

"I told you that." Jones looks at her as if she's bloody daft. "Hey, did Potter really go off on
Robards this morning? Only Halliwell's telling everyone that he had an utter meltdown in front of her
and Aubrey--"

"Jonesey?" Pansy keeps her voice as calm as she can. "Fuck the bloody hell off." She turns on her heel as
he splutters behind her.

Olivia looks up as she comes back in. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing that I think I can't fix." Pansy tries to smile. She's certain it comes out looking as if she's lost the
plot. Perhaps she has. "Would you mind waiting here? I need to track something down." *And cast a few
Killing Curses of my own along the way*, she thinks. She knows better than to say it out loud. You never knew
who might be listening around the corner.

"Of course," Olivia says, and Pansy slips out of her lab apron, hanging it and her goggles back on the
hook.

"It'll just take a moment," Pansy says. She hurries out of the lab and takes another right, away from the
double doors that lead out to the lift. She's no time for that; it's the back stairs for her right now. She takes
them two at a time, grateful for all the working out Potter's making them do. She's not even breathless by
the time she's two floors up, pushing into the back corridors of Auror headquarters.
Pansy knows which incident room Wrightson likes to use. It's the biggest, the flashiest, the most well equipped. Nothing like the small, cosy incident room her team calls home.

Her team.

At that thought, Pansy's heart twists. It's not just her and Blaise and Draco. Potter's part of that now, no matter how angry Pansy is at him for being an utter fucking twat. And the ridiculous thing, at least in Pansy's mind, is that, when it comes to Draco, it's obvious that Potter's not just in it for the sex. Or vice versa. Whatever the two of them might say. No one's prick is good enough to put the whole lot of their careers on the line. Not just for a quick shag.

What that means for Draco worries Pansy.

Just as Pansy strides up to Wrightson's incident room, the door opens and Arthur Maxton steps out, his shirt sleeves rolled up over his thick forearms and his ginger hair sticking out every which way. He looks surprised to see her there.

"Maxie," Pansy says with a curt nod. "You've got my shit in there."

"Marcus," Maxie calls back into the room. "We've a problem."

They damned well do, Pansy thinks. She crosses her arms, her jaw set, and waits for Wrightson to appear in the doorway. He frowns at her.

"I'll handle this, Maxie," Wrightson says. "Go on with what you were doing."

Maxie lumbers off down the hallway. Pansy doesn't take her gaze off Wrightson. "You took some boxes from my lab."

The smile Wrightson gives her is quick and thin, almostrapier-like in its sharpness. "With proper authorisation, yes."

"I want them back," Pansy snaps. "You'd no right--"

"The hell I didn't!" Wrightson steps out into the hall. Pansy gets a glimpse of Althea Whittaker in the incident room, watching them with a furrowed brow before Wrightson closes the door behind him. "I was due those files on Monday morning as it is, and that little performance your Zabini gave in the Crickerly today just moved my investigation up a few days. Your team's off the bloody rails, Parkinson. Even the Head Auror thinks so--"

"Don't give me that shite," Pansy says, her voice rising. "You're in this for yourself, Wrightson. You think you're going to swoop in and take this case from us--"

Wrightson laughs. "I don't think. I know I am, you stupid bint. " He stepscloser to her, looming over Pansy, his face twisted into a snarl. "Potter's little experiment with you failed. The whole department's aware. An SIO who can't even control his team, much less keep them out of Hit Wizard custody? None of you should have ever been given a case this high-profile. You're shit Aurors. Everyone knows Slytherins can't cut it. Not in today's Auror force."

"You fucking bastard." It's the last straw for Pansy. Her hand goes to her wand, but Wrightson's faster. He has the tip of his wand pressed to the fleshy underside of her jaw.

"Tempt me," Wrightson whispers. "I can make anyone believe it's self-defence, you Slytherin cunt."
Pansy jerks away, breathing hard. She ought to put a report in. Bring this fucking arsehole down.
No one would believe her. Except maybe Potter, and what credibility does he have now? They've all ruined him as well.

"Fuck you," Pansy says. She's shaking with fury. "You won't get away with this."

"I already have," Wrightson sheathes his wand and steps back, his hand on the doorknob. "Tell Potter shouting at the Head Auror's not the best career move he might have made, yeah?" He slams the incident room door in her face.

Pansy swears, slapping her palm against the closed door. It just rattles on its hinges. She can hear faint laughter from behind it. "Fucking wankers," she says, as loud as she can, and then she's down the hall again, taking two turns along the twisty corridor until she's in front of Bertie's office.

He opens it on the second knock. "I thought you'd be at St Mungo's," Bertie says as Pansy storms in past him.

"You're an arsehole," Pansy says, turning to face Bertie. At his blank look, she adds, "Wrightson?"

"Ah." Bertie closes the door and walks over to his desk. He sits down behind a huge stack of parchment. "Yes. I didn't think you'd be happy."

"Jonesey says you signed off on them taking my evidence--"

"Which they were entitled to," Bertie says mildly. "On Monday, and don't tell me your lot was going to finish packing it up for them this weekend. Not with half your team in hospital." He looks upset. "Draco?"

"He'll make it." Pansy sits in the chair opposite Bertie's desk, her body suddenly unable of holding her upright. "Blaise has the Hit Wizards after him." She rubs her hands over her face, fighting back the urge to cry. "It's not even his fault."

Bertie digs in his pockets and pulls out a clean, folded handkerchief. He hands it to her. "They'll blame who they want, child."

Pansy swipes the handkerchief across her eyes. Tears seep out. She's so tired of holding them back, of trying to look strong. "Time to go after Slytherin House again," she says. "I suppose I don't blame them. We made it easy."

"It's not the best of circumstances," Bertie admits. He leans back in his chair with a sigh. "I worry that I made a mistake encouraging you lot to throw in with Potter." His bushy eyebrows draw together; he scowls. "I thought he'd be good for all of you. Put you on better footing. I didn't realise he'd be so inexperienced as an SIO."

"We all are," Pansy says. She wads up the handkerchief and presses it to her nose, sniffing into it. "Inexperienced, I mean. It's not just Potter. She doesn't know why she's defending him, other than he's part of them now. Whether or not any of them like it.

Bertie doesn't look convinced. "Maybe it's best that Wrightson takes over the case."

"No," Pansy snaps. "Are you mad? This is our case--Dolohov's gone after us. If you think I'm going to walk away after that--"

"He's put two of you in hospital," Bertie says, his mouth pulling down at the corners. "I'm not going to one of your sodding funerals, Pansy."
That gives her pause. She looks over at him, takes in the slump of his shoulders and the lines between his eyebrows. "Oh."

Bertie glances away. "I'd rather not see any of you hurt by a madman. Particularly not one of Dolohov's caliber."

Pansy folds her handkerchief between her fingers. "It's part of the job."

"I don't have to like it." Bertie leans forward, elbows on his desk, fingers carding through his hair. "And I'm not going to apologise for signing off on Wrightson taking your boxes. Not if it keeps you alive."

A tiny curl of warmth starts to unfurl deep inside Pansy. She's not used to be protected. Not by anyone other than Blaise or Draco or Millie or Greg. It's a new feeling, curious and hot. "Bertie," she says, and then she stops.

He looks over at her, his gruff exterior sliding back into place. "Don't get all soft on me, girl."

Pansy smiles. "I'll try." She stands and lays the now-wrinkled handkerchief on the side of his desk. "I'm still narked off at you."

"Good," Bertie says. "Maybe it'll spur you on."

"Thought you didn't want that." Pansy eyes him.

Bertie glances away. He huffs a sigh. "I don't. But I know you lot. Stubborn as the day is long, all of you, and if Blaise is in trouble, you and Draco won't rest until he's cleared. And none of you'll take this Dolohov shite lying down. Not even Potter. So I suppose I haven't a choice but to watch you fight it out with Wrightson, do I?"

"Not really. "Pansy's determined to get that goddamned book back. It's important. She knows it, deep down in her bones. And Wrightson'll suffer for taking advantage of her team's pain--she'll see to it personally.

"Then do whatever you have to," Bertie says. "Just try not to get caught, yeah?" Pansy gives him a bright smile from the doorway. "When do I ever, Bertie?"

She closes the door on his snort and leans her head against the thick frame. She's no idea what to do next, other than to go back to her lab.

So she does.

Olivia looks up when Pansy comes back in. She's standing at Pansy's other worktable, a jar of Star Grass Salve in her gloved hand. Her face is grey.

"Where did you get enough Soul Grass to make a salve?"

Pansy stops in the middle of the lab. "What?" She glances down at the row of five other jars lined up in front of Olivia. "That's Star Grass Salve."

"No," Olivia says. She holds the jar out to Pansy. "Smell."

The salve smells crisp and grassy. "It's fine."

"Smell again," Olivia insists, and Pansy lifts the jar to her nose once more. "Breathe in deeply."
This time Pansy catches it, that whiff of decay that's lurking just beneath the sweet scent of grass and that catches in the back of her throat. She flinches, and Olivia nods.

"You see?" Olivia takes the jar back from Pansy and caps it, a look of distaste on her face. "It's unmistakable, whatever it might be labelled."

Pansy looks over at her. "I don't quite understand." She's never heard of Soul Grass, not that she really wants to admit that to Blaise's mother.

"You wouldn't." Olivia sits on the stool at Pansy's workbench, looking more than a bit perturbed. "It's a rare botanical, grown only in small patches naturally, and even then in cold climates. The Highlands, sometimes. Scandinavia. Siberia. The upper reaches of Canada. All near the Arctic Circle." She presses a fist to her mouth, her gaze drifting over to the jars. "And you've enough to have made all this salve."

"What does it do?" Pansy's starting to get worried now. In all the years she's known Blaise, she's never seen Olivia this unsettled. "Is it a poison?"

Olivia laughs a bit incredulously. "Of sorts. She looks back at Pansy. "It's primarily used to make Dementors, my dear."

Pansy's blood runs cold. She grips the edge of the worktable. "Oh." She licks her lip. "I didn't know you could do that." She'd never thought of it, she supposes. Dementors have always been a part of her understanding of the wizarding world. She's never given thought to how they came into being.

"Indeed." Olivia picks up one of the jars, looking at it blankly. "And I'm fairly certain that, based on what I've seen in my son's chart, traces of a salve very similar to this were found around his nostrils today."

"Oh." Pansy says again. She can barely breathe. "Please tell me you don't think Dolohov's trying…" She breaks off. She can't say it.

Olivia presses her mouth into a thin line. "I don't know," she says after a moment. "But I think I'm acquainted with someone who might."

Pansy just looks at her, and Olivia sighs.

"My father," Olivia says, and her face hardens. "I haven't spoken to him since Blaise was in Hogwart's." Her jaw works. "Bloody hell, I'd hoped the bastard would die before I reached this point." She looks at Pansy. "My father. Not my son."

"Obviously," Pansy murmurs.

Olivia looking down at the jar of salve again, her face a knot of annoyance and fear. "I suppose it's time to apologise," she says under her breath.

There's a knock on the lab door. They both look up to see Granger standing there, looking exhausted.

"Sorry to interrupt," Granger says, "but if you're ready to go back to hospital, Mrs Zabini?"

Olivia nods slowly. She sets the salve back down, then glances at Pansy. "We'll talk tomorrow. After I make a firecall I've been avoiding."

"Of course." Pansy doesn't know what else to say. She watches as Olivia takes off her lab apron
and hangs it up, smoothing her rumpled robe before she follows Granger out of the lab.

Pansy needs coffee, and lots of it, along with as many research materials she can find that might have the slightest mention of Soul Grass in them.

It's going to be a fucking long night.

***

Shadows are gathering in the corners of the room and the lights are dimmer when Jake opens his eyes. It must be getting on evening, he thinks. He's sitting on the floor of St Mungo's, reaching for some sort of mental calm. He'd already spent some time on warm-up stretches and a few sun salutations in the narrow space available between the four ward beds before folding himself into lotus in the corner of the room. Zabini is sleeping peacefully nearby; with his consent a few hours before, Jake had tugged and smoothed at the jagged wrinkles of Zabini's mind until he lulled the poor bastard into a half-doze. Zabini needs the rest and, to be honest, so does Jake. He had no damn idea that his life would rupture so violently today, and he's still reeling from the events of the past few hours.

He's learnt that meditation helps when both the outside world and his inner world seem out of control. Harry'd never understood that. He'd loved the release that came with exhausting physical activity, like a grueling workout at the gym or a rough bout of sex. But sitting still? Not within Harry's capabilities, and maybe Jake ought to have seen the writing on the wall with that. Sometimes the best action you can take is nothing, especially with the things you can't change. Things as bitter as his breakup from Harry and the violence of today only benefit from a bit of mental detachment. Also a bit of meditation is the only damn thing that can keep him from fantasising about strangling his ex with his bare hands.

Jake has his hands pressed together over his chest in a deep exhale when he hears the creak of the door and the click of heels against the floorboards, alerting him that Hermione is near. There is still a Hit Wizard in the corner, eyeing him suspiciously, and another guard outside, but Jake's not feeling quite as reactive to that fact any longer.

"Hello, darling," Jake starts to says as Hermione comes in, but he draws up short when he realises she isn't alone. There's an older, taller witch behind her with high cheekbones, sepia skin, and an impossibly elegant demeanour. Jake immediately stands in respect, dusting off his uniform trousers. His jacket is hanging over the back of the chair. "Good evening, ladies."

Hermione comes over to him, whilst the older woman makes a beeline for the bed, tutting immediately over Zabini and the scratches on his face. The fury in her eyes when she sees the bonds holding Zabini down makes Jake pity the Hit Wizards a little. This woman's clearly dangerous, and Jake only has to glance to see the familial resemblance: she's most definitely Zabini's mother.

Wisely, the Hit Wizard takes the hint and steps outside to join his companion. Jake thinks he looks like a dog with his tail between his legs.

Hermione frowns. "Has it been awful today?"

Jake watches thoughtfully as Zabini wakes up at his mother's whisper, smiling up into her face. "I've had more comfortable days on guard, but it hasn't been that bad. There's a mediwitch who's been bringing me food and staying in the room with him while I take restroom breaks. Pretty sure she dislikes the Hit Wizards more than I do."

"Oh, right." Hermione's face is apologetic. "I should have remembered to ask the Healers to
expand the ward--I think they can get you a sofa and an en suite, even here."

"How's everything at the Department of Mysteries?" Jake can see the exhaustion in Hermione's eyes, behind her professional facade. They've known each other for a while now, since the first time Harry'd brought him home from Luxembourg to meet his friends, and Jake thinks of Hermione as one of his closest friends now. He's learned to see past her ruses. Even the hyper-competent, incredibly brilliant Hermione Granger gets worn out. "Does Peasgood still have his head up his ass?"

Hermione laughs. "I don't think it can be removed, sadly. But he swears he's not behind this latest problem with the Hit Wizards. Which leaves us in the odd position of a Hit Wizard team with no chain of command, really." She sighs. "Nothing like them just showing up on our doorstep, unordered."

"If they were a pizza, we could just send them back." Jake suddenly yearns for a good pie. He may not be a native New Yorker, but he loves the magic of sauce and cheese and crust something fierce. It's never quite the same outside of the boroughs. He's 3,500 miles and a few weeks away from his next opportunity for a decent garlic and artichoke pie from Lucali. Christ, he's tired.

"One can only wish," Hermione says. "But I am worried, Jake. And at the same time, I'm so sorry you've had to deal with this. We've put you through far too much today."

Jake sighs. "Yeah. It's been a pretty fucking bad day, all things considered. But I don't think you put me through it." It's not worth pointing out it's Harry's fault. Because it's not. Not entirely. He wants to laugh, but not in amusement. Only he could get caught up in something this goddamn ridiculous. His brother would tell him he's a pussy sap. He's not sure Eddie'd be wrong.

"I know, but I feel terrible asking you to guard one of Harry's team members under the circumstances." Hermione brushes a curl of hair out of her face with a fierce scowl.

"Hey, hey. None of that. Blaise is a great guy. It's not his fault his SIO is a fucking asshole." Jake tries for a grin, but he still feels the clenched pain in his chest.

The thing is, Jake thought he was good with Harry. Even though they'd had their fights and makeup sex and more fights and more makeup sex, he'd thought they had a chance. Stupid of him, maybe. But Harry's friends were great, Harry himself was attentive when he was around, and overall they'd had more pluses than minuses. Until New York. Everything had changed after that. Now Jake feels like a complete moronic lovesick teenager who's been dumped at the homecoming dance. He knows it's childish, he knows he ought to be the goddamn grown-up in this whole shitty equation, but it still stings something bad. He knows he'll have to deal with the pain soon, but right now it's nice to have some distraction until he has space to fall apart and process in private.

Hermione puts a hand on his arm. "I swear, once this is over, I will tie his bollocks into knots and wear them as earrings. But for right now, is there any way you could stay with Zabini?" She pauses. "And how did you get on a first name basis with him, anyway?"

Jake smiles, his inner tension yielding a little. "Well, like I said, he's a decent guy, all things considered. And I'm American and useless at your social niceties and fancy class structure." At Hermione's sceptical look, he laughs. "Also we were playing cards, and he tried to cheat even though he was under Incarcerous and I had to help him see his hand by levitating the cards with my wand. It was very impressive."

Hermione shakes her head. "Once a Slytherin…"
"So you do take that sort of thing seriously." Jake looks at her. "I thought it was all inter-house cooperation and all, or some such buzzword, but there are significant divisions between everyone still."

Hermione fiddles with a curl of hair. "I can't really talk about it here." She motions toward the bed where Mrs Zabini and her son are engaged in conversation, her face mere inches from his. She's clinging to him like she never wants to let him go. Zabini looks like a kitten being held against his will, complacent but also a bit ready to wriggle free and dive away if he gets a chance. "I promise. I'll explain more when it's just us."

"Got you," Jake says. "I have things that I can't really talk about in public either. I'd like to hear about it later, though."

Hermione tucks the lock of hair behind her ear. "Promise. We'll drink and talk tomorrow--I think that we should be set to get Zabini released by then."

Jake nods but is inwardly doubtful. This is a pretty big fuck up if Hermione can't find the goddamn off switch, and it's the weekend, after all. He may be here eating crisps from the staff break room and drinking plenty of strong tea until Monday. "Okay. I'll get them to bring me some pyjamas or something better than my dress uniform."

"Merlin, yes."" Hermione pauses in thought. "Do you want me to bring anything over tonight?"

"No." Jake pulls her against his side, squeezing her tight before he lets her go. "Just go home to Ron and have a really good dinner. There's plenty of time to figure things out tomorrow."

Hermione nods, then gently goes over to the other side of the bed. "Mrs Zabini, I have to take you back out now." The Hit Wizards are hovering again.

Zabini's mother wipes away a tear, but stands up without complaint. Her bearing's terribly regal, Jake thinks. That must be where Zabini gets it from. Honestly, he's about the poshest boy Jake has ever spent time around, except for that Thai prince Jake'd been on diplomatic guard duty for. Oh, and Jonathan of course, but the less said about him the better, really. Jake ought to have learnt from him: never date a boarding school boy. It always ends in heartache.

"I'll speak to the Healer's about the expansion," Hermione calls from the door. "And I'll be back in the morning with reinforcements."

"Can you get them to cater in some sushi?" Zabini asks from the bed. "I could murder some nigiri. Oh, and spicy tuna roll. You know the place, Mother."

Hermione laughs, uncertain, whilst Zabini's mother nods, a small, affectionate smile curving her lips. The door snicks shut behind them.

Jake would be very surprised if a full sushi platter didn't arrive sometime tomorrow, possibly hand delivered by Hit Wizards. He'd laugh himself if he had more energy. Jesus. How's this his life now?

He glances over at Zabini stretched out in the bed, looking a bit calmer than he had earlier in the day. Zabini catches him watching, and smiles, a quick, feral flash of teeth that doesn't bother Jake in the least. "Hungry?"

"Asshole," Jake says with a shake of his head, and Zabini winks.

Things could be worse, Jake thinks. He prays he won't have cause to regret his words.
It's gone half nine before Harry can make it back to the Spell Damage ward. Titus and his minions took ages with him and his statement about Zabini, running over all of Zabini's known connections, his family's connections, Malfoy's family, and various other completely off-topic speculations about his team's allegiances, past activities, and reasons for joining the Aurors and then Special Branch 74A. Harry managed to keep his temper throughout, mainly out of a desire not to cause a fresh topic for investigation and give the bloody bastards more work, but it was a narrow thing at times. Harry's still furious about the fact that Zabini's under investigation, but he's banked the fires of his rage more closely. It really won't help Zabini if Harry loses his nerve. Or his cool. Particularly in public.

Now Harry's back here at St Mungo's, racing through the halls, hurrying back to where his mind has been all day, to Malfoy, to this quiet ward and the careful peace that enfolds it. Harry sees Shah the minute he opens Malfoy's door. The Healer on rounds stops for a moment, looking at him in recognition, then puts her head down and moves on to her next patient.

Harry clasps Shah's arm in greeting. "Shah, you are a wonder. Thank you so much for staying on guard. I owe you at least a few rounds at the Leaky."

Shah smiles, an easy grin splitting his face. "Nah. It's alright, Inspector. I mean, I'm not one to turn down a pint or two, but I were happy to help with all the shite today, begging your pardon. I know you'd not have asked otherwise."

Harry nods, grateful for Shah's uncommon courtesy after the wretched day he's had. "No, but I owe you none the less."

"Oi, I'd ask you to sign me to your team, excepting that don't look too safe from where I'm sat." Shah rolls his shoulders and shoots Harry another grin. He's keeping the mood light, laughing in the face of the evil around them, and Harry appreciates his irreverence something fierce.

"Be careful what you wish for, yeah?" Harry takes a deep breath, looking over to Draco's prone form. It is only then that a further motion catches his eye, a small, fragile shadow by the window, almost easy to look past.

It's Narcissa Malfoy. Harry's heart is suddenly in his throat, and he's no idea why exactly. And yet, on reflection, he knows exactly why. He owes her at least an explanation, perhaps more. The last time he'd seen her, it was at the trials after the War. He'd thought he'd discharged his debt to her and kept the family out of Azkaban. Now he's just taken her only son on a dangerous mission, and nearly got him killed by accident. Life debts aren't so easily got rid of, it seems.

She nods in greeting, shifts a little, becoming more visible in the faint light of the monitoring spells. Harry almost wonders if she had a Notice-Me-Not on, or if it's just a natural talent of hers.

"Sure you're all right here, Potter?" Shah's obviously ready to leave, but he politely waits for Harry to dismiss him as though this were a legitimate assignment. Maybe he's right. Harry ought to tap him for the team. It's not as if he hasn't been a damned fine help in recent weeks anyway. And they do need more help with the amount of shit they've been shoveling since Prague.

"Yeah. Thank you so much for all you've done. You've earned your weekend." Harry presses a few Galleons on him for a pint or two down the Leaky. "I'll drink the next few with you, yeah?"

Once Shah's left and the heavy door has shut, Narcissa materialises fully out of the shadows. She's older than he remembers, a few more fine lines across her exquisite features, but Harry thinks she's possibly one of the more beautiful women he's ever seen. She's certainly one of the more
intimidating as well, in her own quiet way.

"I'm glad to see you, Inspector Potter. I have a matter to discuss with you concerning Draco's welfare." Narcissa looks over to her son, face pallid and wan against the hospital sheets as he sleeps soundly, a gentle breath stirring his chest in rhythmic frequency.

Harry would like to watch Draco sleep for longer than is appropriate, so he forces himself to tear his eyes away. "I'm happy to be of service, Mrs Malfoy. What do you require?"

"I require your guarantee for his safety." She is deadly serious as she says this. "St Mungo's is hardly a secure location. Anyone could walk in here, and we know Antonin Dolohov is out there."

Harry cocks his head at her. Of course, he'd expect Malfoy to talk to his mother. Still, this seems a bit emphatic for second-hand knowledge. "Yes," he says cautiously. "I completely agree, actually. I've worried about this myself, which is why I was planning to stay. He's just been through a major procedure, after all."

Narcissa waves her hand. "He's stable now, and he'll be well enough soon. He needs to be moved to a secure location."

This takes Harry by surprise. "I'm sorry. Do you mean tonight?" "Yes."

She clasps her arm tight over her chest. "I'm afraid I do."

Whilst he's happy someone is taking the threat seriously that Dolohov or Abadzhiev could just walk onto the bloody ward, Harry's less than thrilled about the possibility of moving Malfoy right now. Although, to be honest, Narcissa is right. Malfoy is a easy target. It's possible that even Harry couldn't protect him here.

Harry wonders if Narcissa knows something concrete about the attack, something the Aurors don't. She seems much more than idly concerned. Or maybe he's just tired and everything and everyone seems suspicious.

"Where would you have us move him, if they let it happen? I don't think he'll be too happy to return to the Manor." Harry's stomach cramps just thinking about that awful place and the brief amount of time he'd spent in its dungeons. He'd hate to send Malfoy back, but it's his family home. Still, Harry doesn't know how Malfoy managed to live there for so many years. "Shouldn't he stay closer to London and also closer to hospital in case of emergency?"

Harry's grasping at straws, he knows it, but he doesn't want to let her take Malfoy to Wiltshire, not to that gruesome old pile of a house. He also fears what the Healers will say. Malfoy's not as badly injured as Zabini was, thank Christ, but they'll want to keep him overnight at the very least.

"Indeed. And I have no earthly desire to bring him any nearer to his father than necessary." That's interesting, Harry thinks. He's never heard her be disloyal to Malfoy senior. This feels new to him, fresh even.

"How can I help?" he asks Narcissa. "I mean, there are always rooms at the Leaky but they're hard to book on short notice. I could talk to Tom. The Auror barracks are too uncomfortable."

Narcissa favours him with a tight smile. "Thank you for considering the options so thoroughly. I know it's not optimal, but aren't you trained in field medicine as an Inspector?"

Harry nods slowly. They had received basic medical support training, and he'd done extra training for some of his assignments. "A bit, yeah. But that's not the same as proper medical supervision."
"And Grimmauld Place," Narcissa says. "You are still in possession of the house, are you not?"

Harry nods again, a bit wary of where this is all going. He knows his house has years of connections to Narcissa's family, but he'd inherited it from Sirius and it's his only tie to his godfather. Besides, it was the Order of the Phoenix headquarters. Remus lived there. Tonks too. Teddy'd been conceived in one of its bedrooms. They were all together in that house, and Harry would hate to lose those memories. "Yes. I live there now."

"Then I would ask you to bring Draco there and let him stay until Dolohov is captured or murdered." Narcissa's fine-boned face is grim. "The house will protect him and help him heal. There is a special set of spells on the property. Draco is a Black and the old magic in its walls is bound to protect anyone within our bloodline. It won't allow him to be hurt, or at least I hope it won't when it recognises him." She pauses. "Your presence will help as well. The Ministry won't touch him with you standing guard, and Antonin will think twice before he crosses its threshold. The house is still Unplottable, yes?"

Harry nods slowly. It's everything he could want, to have Malfoy where he can look after him, and yet it's the furthest thing from sanity at the same time. How could Malfoy possibly stay with him after everything that's happened today? He'll hex Harry into next week when everyone else is out of earshot. If he's even speaking to Harry enough to curse him. And yet, he imagines that Narcissa knows best what the protections in the house are that might help her son.

"Yes." Harry takes a deep breath. "I'm happy to help if you think that is best. And if the Healers agree to let him go."

An irate snort comes from the bed, and Harry looks over to see Malfoy struggling to sit up in the bed. He utterly fails and falls back against the thick stack of pillows. "You're both completely off your nut." His hair's mussed, and there are deep dark circles beneath his eyes, but they flash with annoyance. "And I refuse to go to Potter's manky old townhouse." He doesn't look at Harry. "I'm staying right here until the Healers release me tomorrow, and then I'm going back to my own damn bed. Nowhere else." He glares at his mother. "You shouldn't speak so loudly when you're plotting to ruin my life, Mother."

His acid mood is oddly pleasing to Harry. A furious, complaining Malfoy is so much better than a Malfoy too weak to fight back. Harry'll happily dodge hexes if Malfoy's all right.

"Don't be ridiculous, darling," Narcissa says, ignoring her offspring's outrage. "I'll have to put my foot down on this."


Harry watches, fascinated, as there's a silent standoff between mother and son, and then Malfoy presses his lips together and turns his head towards the wall.

Narcissa looks back to Harry. "Would you be willing to make a vow of sanctuary?" Her eyes are bright, and Harry senses urgency in how she is holding herself. She's worried about a concrete threat to Malfoy's safety. He doesn't blame her. He's concerned himself. Zabini has his guards; Malfoy's too damned easy to reach here.

"Don't you bloody dare, Potter," Malfoy says, and there's a tightness in his voice that only escalates Harry's worry. Malfoy's on the edge, he thinks, and that's a dangerous place from which to make any decision about self-preservation and safety.
That settles it. Harry doesn't hesitate. "Your son is welcome as my guest at Grimmauld Place for as long as he needs sanctuary." The formal vow soothes Harry, makes this feel more legitimate and less selfish. He and Narcissa clasp hands, briefly, and the agreement's sealed. Narcissa looks relieved.

Malfoy swears from the bed, a colourful streak of language that only makes his mother sigh and frown.

"Thank you." She glances back towards her son, then back at Harry, an eyebrow quirking. "I can also send a house elf, should you require one. My son can be a handful."

Harry shakes his head. "I have one. Kreacher'll be thrilled to have a scion of the Black family back in the house, I'm certain."

"Oh, yes, he'll love having me," Malfoy says sharply from the bed. "Horrible elf that he is." He stops dead, likely when he realises what he's just revealed. Harry winces inwardly.

"Then you have been there before," Narcissa eyes Malfoy more closely before her gaze flicks back towards Harry. She looks speculative, and Harry doesn't like that she seems to be catching on to exactly what might be happening between her son and Harry. "Well. You'll be right at home, I suppose."

Harry's so far past being able to deal with everything that's happened in the past twelve hours. This day is really one for the record books. Of doom. Christ, but he's feeling melodramatic today. And it's all his own fault, really, a little voice inside of him keeps saying.

Malfoy coughs. "There was a team dinner there." His eyes flick towards Harry. "Kreacher likes me better than he likes Potter."

Malfoy's lying through his teeth--although perhaps not about Kreacher, who had been delighted to bring Malfoy buttered toast this very morning on Malfoy's way out the Floo--but Harry nods. It'll be a better if he doesn't speak. Hermione's always told Harry that he can't tell a lie to save his life. His face gives everything he's thinking away. And the Slytherins are quick to catch any of his tells.

"Dear old Kreacher. I can't believe he's still alive." Narcissa smooths a wrinkle from the sheets at the foot of Malfoy's bed, but her eyes are sharp, and Harry is on full guard. She looks up to Harry, likely gauging his reactions. "As a child, I found him terrifying."

Harry runs a hand awkwardly through his hair, and hopes he's not blushing. "Yeah. Well, he's still there, frightening as ever in his little tea towel. But I can also take care of everything that Malfoy needs." Harry realises he's misspoken, and he hurries to clarify whilst Narcissa regards him with a keen and curious eye. "I mean, I can make sure we have everything. You don't have to send anything."

Narcissa holds up a gently forbidding hand. "I would feel better if I did. Some linens from the Manor, perhaps, and some of the peonies. Those will be wonderfully cheering. Perhaps also some of that elderberry jam that Trissie makes. It's been very good this year."

"Just say yes, Potter," Malfoy says wearily from the bed. "She'll never stop otherwise." He hesitates. "And that jam is bloody amazing."

Harry looks at them both. "Will your husband know where Draco is?"

Narcissa meets Harry's gaze. Malfoy doesn't. "Lucius seldom pays attention to the running of the house, Inspector Potter. He'll certainly not be concerned about a basket put together by the house
elves." She watches him closely. "Why?"

Harry doesn't know. He just doesn't want Lucius Malfoy showing up on his doorstep demanding his son back, he thinks. But it's more than that really. He's seen the look on Malfoy's face when his father's mentioned. And Harry will do anything to keep that bastard shit away from Malfoy whilst he's healing. "No reason, really."

Narcissa tilts her head. "I think we're in agreement." She moves to stand beside her son, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "And all the jam, my love."

Malfoy appears to ponder for a moment, before he looks up at his mother. "Could we have some good wine too? I refuse to drink the plonk I'm sure Potter has in his cupboards, and I'm bloody well not staying at his house sober."

A shiver goes through Harry at the thought of a wine-drunk Malfoy lolling about in his bed. He chews on his lip, and Malfoy looks away. A part of Harry is still hoping the Healers prevent Malfoy's discharge, so at least he can look like he offered full hospitality and then perhaps Malfoy'll be kept in hospital. Then again, Harry's not too keen to be on guard on a weekend if Dolohov comes through. In a way, he's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. And he's far too tired to make any more good decisions. He's already made so many bad ones.

"You can't drink on potions," Harry points out. "Just so we're clear."

"Fuck off and get a decent cellar," Malfoy says, sounding sullen. "You Philistine."

Narcissa rolls her eyes at her spoilt offspring. "Uncle Orion was quite a connoisseur," she says, her voice light. "The Grimmauld Place cellars were once quite well-renowned in London society."

This brings Harry up short. "I don't think I've ever found the wine cellars, at least not ones like that." He's suddenly curious, despite himself. He's spent so little time at home in the past years.

Narcissa smiles gently. "I'll have to come over and unspell them. Aunt Walburga was always hiding them from the family, who liked to use them a bit too freely for her more puritanical tastes. I played hide and seek in them as a child, and once spent a whole afternoon avoiding my mother during one school holiday." She looks over to Malfoy, who is listening with bated breath despite his half-closed eyes. "She'd just found out I was dating your father and threw an almighty strop at family Christmas dinner that year. I'm sure I could still find the gouges in the cabinetry from her hexes."

"Charming," Malfoy says. He's obviously still put out by his mother.

Narcissa gathers her handbag. "All right. I'll go talk to the Healers and have Draco released." She looks at Harry. "Perhaps you could wait here whilst I fetch someone who can sign him out? I'm quite certain there'll be a bit of kerfuffle over my right to do so, but I do anticipate prevailing."

She strides purposefully out of the room.

"You're a bloody idiot," Malfoy says from the bed.

"Probably," Harry agrees. "But she's not wrong. You're not safe here, and you know it."

Malfoy looks away, an odd expression crossing his face. "Perhaps I'm not safe at your house either."

Harry doesn't know what to say to that. He sighs. "Malfoy--"
"What happened to your face?" Malfoy asks.

Harry puts a hand to his cheek. Parkinson's slap did leave a faint bruise. No one else has commented on it, but leave it to Malfoy to notice. "Parkinson," Harry says after a moment. "She found out about Jake."

Malfoy's mouth tightens. "Good for her."

"Look, I--"

"Just shut it," Malfoy says. "My mother's made her mind up, and there's nothing to be done, especially now that you've given her that damned vow." He sounds tired and beaten down. "But I'm not sleeping in your bed. I want that bloody clear."

"Of course," Harry says quietly. "You can have your own floor if you like."

"Good." Malfoy closes his eyes. "Now keep your stupid mouth shut. I'm annoyed at both of you right now."

That's fair, Harry thinks. He carefully settles himself in the chair nearest the window. They can talk later. Or not talk, more likely.

For now, Harry just wants to sit here and wait for the world to stop coming apart.

***

Draco wakes with a start. The room's dark around him, soft, thick velvety shadows that wrap their way around his bed, broken only by the faint light from the curtained window. For a moment he's discombobulated, expecting the quiet busyness of St Mungo's.

And then he remembers being bundled in Potter's arms and Apparated out of his ward, much to his Healers' displeasure, not to mention his own. He ought to have protested, ought to have fought his mother, ought to have insisted he has no place at Potter's home. But he'd been tired, still drowsy from the potions and the attempts to repair his injuries, not to mention the frissons of pain that still, every so often, ripple through his body, making him catch his breath.

His mother had kissed his forehead before they left and told him she was so very glad he'd be safe. He'd seen the fear in her eyes, and that had helped him keep his tongue as well. His mother hasn't been this frightened since the Dark Lord died.

To be honest, neither has Draco.

He shifts in the bed, wincing as he rolls onto his side. He's on the upper floor of Grimmauld Place, tucked away in one of the guest rooms, as he asked. The bed's a bit musty, but at least Potter'd ordered Kreacher to change the sheets. He hopes his mother sends linens in the morning, the ones ironed crisp with lavender water. Also, Draco thinks he hears the scrabbling of Doxies somewhere deep in the walls, but he supposes he can't complain. It's not as if Potter's turning the place over every season, and Kreacher's too damned old to care.

There's a soft breath in the darkness and Draco stills, his arms wrapping around the extra pillow he's pulled up against him. He raises his head, his eyes just barely adjusting to the gloom.

"Kreacher?" he murmurs.

There's a flare of a small Lumos, and Draco sees Potter in the armchair tucked in the corner between the window and the enormous, carved chest of drawers. His face is shadowed by the
light; it glints off his glasses and the bottle of firewhisky in his hand. "Didn't mean to wake you," Potter says.

Draco pulls the pillow closer against him, his stomach roiling just a bit. It's not unpleasant. "You do know how creepy it is to lurk in someone's room, watching them sleep."

"Wasn't lurking." Potter sounds out of sorts. And a bit pissed, if Draco's honest. "I'm trying to be protective."

"By drinking half a bottle of firewhisky." Draco settles back into the mattress. He won't tell Potter this, but he feels a bit better with him in the room. He's not certain he could have fallen asleep if he hadn't been on potions, and now that they're wearing off, he doesn't like being in a new and unexpected place. He'd had night terrors for most of his childhood, ones that only intensified during his adolescence in Death Eater Central, leaving him with panic attacks and a deep-seated anxiety that he's never been able to shake. New places unsettle him, particularly ones in houses like this, that seem to seep rage and grief from the very floorboards and joists.

"I don't know how you stand this room," he says, surprising himself. "Speaking of creepy."

Potter sighs and puts the firewhisky aside. "It was my godfather's, growing up." He looks around the dark room, seeing past the shadows to something Draco doesn't quite understand. "It's part of him."

Draco watches him. Potter looks worn out. "Have you slept?"

"Not really." Potter sits forward, the Lumos from his wand dipping low enough to cast his face in shadows again. "It's been a day."

To say the least. "Yeah." Draco hesitates. "You should rest though." He doesn't know why he's concerned about Potter's well-being. He shouldn't be. Potter's a lying, fucking shit. If it weren't for his mother, Draco wouldn't be here, and he wonders if she'd have sent him over if he'd told her what Potter'd done. Probably. Narcissa Malfoy is a bloody pragmatist. After all, she lives with Draco's father.

"Don't want to," Potter says after a moment. He sighs. "I tried. All I could think of was what would happen if Dolohov managed to get in here…" He looks away. His voice is thick and rough. "Your mum would kill me if anything happened to you."

Merlin save him from idiots and pissed Gryffindors, Draco thinks. Or one and the same. "The house has protections, you twit. Dolohov won't get in."

"Dolohov got to Zabini," Potter says. "I don't know how, but he did. Zabini wouldn't go after you for any other reason."

"I don't know," Draco says lightly. "You ought to have seen some of the fights we had in the common room."

Potter just looks over at him. "You didn't fight back. Against Zabini."

Draco doesn't say anything for a long moment. He doesn't know how to describe how it'd felt with one of his best friends standing across the lobby from him, fighting the urge to kill him. Literally. Draco hadn't wanted to fight back, hadn't wanted to strike at Blaise. It wouldn't have done any good; Draco knows his limitations as a duellist. But he'd thought, maybe, if he could reach him somehow, find that part of Blaise that had still been Blaise, he'd be able to help him fight whatever was controlling him. He doesn't know if he had, in the end.
"I couldn't," Draco says finally, and Potter nods. "He's my friend." They'd been through so much together over the years, from the Slytherin common room to Auror training to the hours they've spent in the incident room, arguing case points just for the joy of the chase. Blaise is Draco's, as fiercely as Pansy is, and he doesn't think he could ever truly raise his wand against him. Not unless he had no other choice. That hadn't been today.

More silence stretches out between them. Potter rocks a bit in his chair, his elbows on his knees. "You pushed me out of the way."

Draco buries his face in the pillow. Circe, but he'd hoped Potter wouldn't bring that up. He doesn't know why he was that foolish, shoving Potter out of the line of fire and taking his place instead. Except if Draco's honest, he might. He couldn't bear the thought of Potter being hit, being brought down like that, and he hadn't been certain Blaise wouldn't actually cast the Killing Curse. He hadn't even thought; he'd just acted, and he knows if he had to do it all over again, he wouldn't change a damned thing. Draco draws in a deep breath. He can't tell Potter any of that, though. He rubs his cheek against the pillowcase and deflects. "You're the Saviour of the Wizarding World. I'm a former Death Eater. Who do you think deserved that curse?" "Not you," Potter says quietly.

Draco swallows past the thick tightness of his throat. "Well, you're an idiot," he says. "I know." Potter looks up at him, his eyes dark behind his glasses. "I really do."

The pillow folds a bit beneath Draco's grip. "I'm angry." There's a tight, heavy ball of rage that's settled in his gut, and Draco doesn't know how long it's going to stay.

"You should be." Potter rolls his wand between his fingers. The light from the Lumos flits around the room, lighting up blue brocade wallpaper and heavy walnut furniture. There's a faded felt Gryffindor pennant in the corner, the edges ripped as if it'd been torn off the wall then tacked back again. "I'm sorry."

Draco doesn't answer.

Potter leans back and picks up his bottle of firewhisky. He takes a long drink. Draco watches his throat move, long and lean and golden. His jaw's stubbled, and Draco remembers how that had felt against his skin, rough and heated. It'd only been last night that Draco had been a floor below in Potter's bed, Potter's legs wrapped around Draco's hips, his face twisted in pleasure as Draco's prick pressed deeper into him.

Merlin.

A sharp, hot spike of possessiveness goes through Draco, and his rage twists up again. "You lied to me," he spits out. "The things I saw in his head--" Draco breaks off, a shudder of pain ripping across his chest, and then Potter's up out of his chair, firewhisky forgotten as he kneels beside the bed.

"Are you all right?" Potter doesn't touch Draco, but his hand lies on the bed between them.

Draco nods, letting the after-spasms roll over him. He breathes out. "Fine," he's finally able to say.

Potter studies him, an unhappy expression on his face. "I should have told you," he says. "About Jake."

That name spikes an ache through Draco's heart. "Yeah," is all he can get out. They look at each other, and Potter bites his lip.
"I couldn't do it any longer," Potter says. "It wasn't working, him and me. We had an arrangement, you know? Whatever happened in separate countries, well. It happened. And then you came along, and--"

"Stop." Draco can't hear this. He doesn't know if he can ever hear it. He's angry, and he's hurt, and he doesn't want any of Potter's bloody excuses. Not here. Not now.

Potter falls silent.

"You're a shit," Draco says finally. "And I'm a bloody fool, so I don't know which one of us is more of an arsehole." He pauses. "Except you should assume it's probably you."

Potter gives him a small smile.

Draco doesn't know what to do, so he does the stupidest thing he can think of. "Fuck," he says, and he rolls over to his other side, taking the pillow with him. "Lie down, Potter. You look a bloody fright, and I'm too tired to do this right now."

For a moment Potter hesitates, and then Draco feels the dip of the mattress as he crawls onto the bed. There's a soft thud, followed by another as Potter's boots hit the floor. He stretches out next to Draco, a solid presence at Draco's back, a hand's width or two between them.

Draco's stomach flutters. His cock twitches, but it's a symbolic gesture more than anything. He's too worn out and in pain to think about doing anything with--or to--Potter at the moment. That's probably a good thing, if he's honest. He doesn't want to fall back into whatever this is between him and Potter. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

But the feel of Potter behind him is a comfort, settling his mind in a way that Draco'd rather not dwell on. They lie there silently for a long moment before Potter's hand hovers above Draco's hip, fingers almost brushing the soft cotton of the pyjama bottoms Draco's borrowed from Potter's dresser drawers until his mother brings clothes from his flat in the morning. And then the warmth of Potter's hand is gone, and Draco feels strangely bereft.

"You can..." Draco trails off, but he looks back over his shoulder at Potter, who's taken his glasses off and is watching Draco as if he's some skittish animal. Draco presses his lips together, then licks them before he turns back to settle his head against the pillow. "I don't mind."

Potter's hand curls around Draco's hip, heavy and light at the same time, as if Potter's terrified the wrong touch might shatter Draco into a thousand tiny shards. Draco tenses at first, not certain that the brush of Potter's fingers won't send his frazzled nerve endings into a fit of agony, but a warmth slides over his skin, soft and careful and comforting, and Draco's body goes loose for the first time since he'd woken up in St Mungo's.

"Okay?" Potter asks softly, and Draco nods.

He feels safe here like this, in Potter's godfather's bed, the silence of the house settling around them, the dark of the night wrapping them in a quiet, velvet embrace.

Potter's breath is warm against Draco's shoulder, and he smells of firewhisky and the faintest whiff of almond soap when he turns his head, leaning his forehead against Draco's neck.

"I was so worried," Potter whispers, and Draco shakes his head.

"Don't, Potter." He lets his body relax backwards, slotting itself against the curve of Potter's hip and legs.
His bandages are tight and rough against his chest, holding his shoulder back at an
awkward angle. "I'm serious."

Potter huffs out against Draco's skin, but he nods.

"Go to fucking sleep," Draco says. "I won't have you still half-pissed when my mother arrives." "Your mother's nearly as terrifying as Zabini's," Potter says against Draco's nape.

Draco's arms turn to gooseflesh. "Not quite."

Potter falls quiet. Draco almost thinks Potter's asleep when he murmurs, "Don't hate me" into Draco's hair.

Draco doesn't answer. He waits, listening to Potter's breath even out, turning soft, shallow. Sleep doesn't come for Draco until it's nearly dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Next update will be on Saturday, May 13. I'm in the craziest two weeks of my job supervising exams, and will not be coherent until the last exam ends on May 12, so I'm pretty sure I'm going to need an extra day or so to finish writing and editing Chapter 9. I'm VERY sorry for the delay and will try to get back on schedule for Chapter 10.

You are all so wonderful, dear readers. Thank you so much for your enthusiasm, for the birthday wishes, and for your incredibly dear comments!

As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Draco develops a relationship to 12 Grimmauld Place, Blaise gives evidence, and Kreacher insists that Harry behave properly.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with this, dear readers! This chapter is the longest, and tbh, the hardest yet. I have been struck with the Drarry feels something wicked! I hope you enjoy--we're racing to the finish of this story, but it's not the end yet! One more week to go!

Eternal thanks to sassy_cissa and noeon for their Herculean efforts and willingness to debate character feels day or night. Their enthusiasm, precision, and dedication have kept me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco wakes up alone in the bedroom. It takes him a sleepy moment before he realises where he is--at Grimmauld Place and not his cosy Regent's Park flat. Bright light's filtering around the edges of the faded curtains hanging limply around the tall window, illuminating the dust that drifts and sparkles in the air. Draco sits up, his head aching, his shoulder still sore. He touches the bandage beneath the t-shirt he's wearing and winces. His whole body still hurts from the Cruciatus, but more as if he'd run a bloody marathon than been tortured by his best friend, which Draco supposes is better than things might be. He pushes the horrible red and gold coverlet down and slowly swings his legs to the side.

The wooden floor's cold against his bare feet. He sits for a moment on the edge of the bed, letting himself wake up. His head's still fuzzy from too little sleep, not to mention the potions he's on, but he remembers lying in bed beside Potter, listening to him sleep, feeling the warmth of Potter's body pressed up against his. Fuck, Draco thinks. He'd been so stupid. He doesn't know what it is about Potter that gets under his skin, makes him act a bloody fool, convinces him that what he needs is a sodding cuddle in the middle of the fucking night. Merlin. Draco breathes out and looks around. The room's bigger than he'd thought last night, or maybe he's just imagining the extra few feet between the bed and the enormous, carved wardrobe that takes up half the blue brocade wall. There are posters and photographs stuck to the wallpaper, edges torn as if someone had tried to peel them away and couldn't. Most are of Muggle motorcycles and half-clad women, the great majority of them in small bikinis that their tits are practically bursting out from. Draco's nostrils flare in amusement. Someone seems to have been trying a bit too hard to project a very particular expression of masculinity.

He pads out into the hallway and limps down three flights of the steep steps, his fingers trailing lightly along the bannister. The house is grimy, dusty and silent, almost sullen in the way the floorboards creak beneath Draco's feet. Draco lets his palm rest against the knob of a newel on a landing for just a moment. It's sticky beneath his hand, the finish a bit cracked and worn. "Poor
thing," he murmurs. "The arsehole hasn't been taking care of you properly, has he?" He almost swears he hears a shuddering sigh from the eaves.

Potter's in the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee. He looks up when Draco comes in. "Hey." He's in jeans, frayed at the hem, and a snug red t-shirt with the Fitchburg Finches logo on it. The sleeves are stretched tight across his biceps. "I thought I'd let you sleep."

Draco looks away. "Thanks," he says. "What time is it?"

"Nearly eleven." Potter hands the coffee to Draco, then pushes him towards a chair at the long, rectangular table. Four phials are lined up neatly in front of it. "Potions are there. Wound sealer, blood multiplier, bone grafter for your cheekbone, and some sort of sedative."

"I'm not taking that one," Draco says automatically. He sits down and picks up the first phial, uncapping it. He flinches at the smell. "Merlin."

Potter gives him a spoon. "Dose yourself. One per phial, except for the sedative. The Healer said a half-dose for that one as needed." He eyes Draco. "You look like hell, so I'd say you need it."

Draco ignores him. He pours out doses of each of the other three potions and downs them as quickly as he can before he gags. He thrusts the spoon back at Potter and follows the potions with a long chaser of coffee before he sets the mug down. He feels a little bit better.

"You hungry?" Potter asks, and Draco nods. He feels odd, sitting here in this farce of domesticity. Still, he doesn't have it in him to argue with Potter. He watches as Potter pulls a plate from the oven, a warming charm still on it. He puts it in front of Draco. "It's nothing much."

The plate's piled with a full English, complete with beans on toast.

Draco bloody loves beans on toast.

He takes the fork Potter hands over and digs in. The eggs are surprisingly good. "Did you--"

"Kreacher." Potter pours another cup of coffee and sits down across from Draco. "He's thrilled to be cooking for someone other than me." Potter smiles faintly over the rim of his mug. "Last I saw, he was heading off to dust the entire third floor."

"It needs it," Draco says. He spears a bit of sausage, then looks up at Potter, who's regarding him solemnly, mug cupped between two hands. There's a smudge of something--perhaps butter--on the edge of his glasses. "What?"

Potter shakes his head. He takes a sip of coffee. "Your mum firecalled this morning. She was trying to be quiet, so I couldn't make all of it out, but she said something about your dad being in an uproar so she can't bring your things over until this afternoon."

Unsurprising. Draco wonders what's got in his father's craw now. Merlin only knows. Lucius's rants have only become more maddening as the years have past. His father's not well; Draco knows that. It doesn't matter. "That's fine," he says. He's a bit relieved, actually. Now that he's more coherent--Circe, but he hates that sedative--he'd rather not have his mother in his flat unsupervised, and he might be able to talk Potter into letting him go himself, cutting her off before she arrives. His mother's a terrible snoop and always has been, and Draco's rather certain he's a few things out in plain sight that he'd rather Narcissa not stumble upon. Like his small collection of Victorian pornography in the sitting room bookcases that he always charms to look like Thomas Hardy books before she comes over because no one in their right mind would want to pick up Jude the Obscure.
"I thought you'd be annoyed," Potter says.

Draco shrugs. "Mother and Father aren't always the most reliable. They try, but…" He trails off, unable to put his parent's relationship into words. When he was younger, he'd worshipped them both, been adored and petted and spoilt whenever he was in their company. It hadn't been until he'd started to reconsider his family--post-psychopathic Dark Lord--that Draco'd realised that most of his childhood had been spent with the Manor elves looking after him whilst his parents flitted away to one social gathering or another, only bringing Draco with them if it was advantageous to show off the Malfoy heir. His mother had tried when she could, he knows--drawing him into her dressing room as she put on her makeup, walking with him in the gardens, coming into his room to kiss him good night and to ask about his day--but his father had demanded more and more of her time as Draco had grown up, jealously keeping her at his side, pulling her away from her friends and family and son as he spiralled into a firewhisky-fuelled grasp for any kind of power he could maintain in the face of the Dark Lord's scorn. It had only been in recent years that Draco had made his peace with that fact and forgiven his mother for her foolishness in loving his father. It's not like her sisters had done much better. Stupidity in relationships must be a Black family trait. Draco looks away from Potter. "I'm sure I'll figure something out."

"But--"

Draco glances at him then, his mouth tight. "It's fine, Potter."

Potter falls silent as Draco goes back to eating. Draco's nearly demolished his plate before Potter leans back in his chair and sighs.

Draco set his fork down. He wipes the corner of his mouth with his thumb. He hates to say it, but Kreacher's as good of a cook as the Manor elves are. Surprising, that. He sucks his thumb clean, and when he looks up at Potter, Potter's watching him, eyes bright. Draco drops his hand. "Are you going to tell me what you're huffing about?" he asks as Potter pushes a napkin his way. It's fine Irish linen, embroidered in pale gilt with the Black family crest. His mother has a set tucked away.

"You," Potter says bluntly. He stretches his hands back behind his head, and Draco really wishes he wouldn't. The t-shirt's taut across Potter's chest; Draco can see the outline of Potter's nipples against the cotton until Potter sits forward with a thump, letting his arms fall in front of him. "You're staying here."

Draco gives him a wary look, but doesn't answer. He'd thought that much was understood, given Potter's vow of sanctuary last night.

Potter scowls at him. "Look, I don't care. You can stay in whatever room you want, but as long Dolohov's out there, you're either here or in the Ministry. Nowhere else, yeah? I don't know what the fuck he wants from you, but I made a promise to your mum, and I'm not going to have you out there on your own. I won't touch you. Hell, I won't even speak to you if you want--"

Draco can only wish. He picks his fork back up again and drags the tines through the remnants of his beans.

"But I'm putting my foot down." Potter gives him a defiant look; he obviously expects Draco to protest. "You're a guest in this house for now. Do I make myself clear?"

"Are you going to order me about, Inspector?" Draco licks the back of his fork. He likes the way it makes Potter swallow then look away. He suspects that makes him a prick, but he doesn't really care. He's angry with Potter still, but he can't help but find him attractive. It's bloody confusing is what it is, and Draco doesn't like feeling topsy turvy like this.
"If I have to," Potter says.

Draco shrugs. "All right." He doesn't really have a choice in the matter. His mother's seen to that. "You're still an arsehole, but you've already given me sanctuary. Do you think I'm going to throw that aside?"

Potter seems a bit surprised. "Oh."

"I'm not sleeping with you," Draco says coolly. "Just so we're clear. And if I find you in that godawful Gryffindor bedroom lurking over me again in the middle of the bloody night, I'll curse your fucking bollocks off. Do I make myself clear?" Now that he's eaten, the pain's starting to seep back, prickling over his skin. He'd like a dose of the sedative, to be honest, but he's not about to take it in front of Potter. There's only so much weakness he's willing to show.

Potter's face flushes, but he nods. "Fair enough."

They look at each other across the table, tension tight and twisted between them. Draco breaks it first, glancing down at his empty plate. "I do need some things from my flat though."

"Your mother's said--"

"She's not going into my flat." Draco cuts him off. "I love my mother, but that's my space. Not hers. And the last thing I want is her digging through my chest of drawers for clean pants and finding my stash of sex toys."

That draws Potter up short. "Oh."

Yes, you twat, Draco wants to say. Pity you fucked everything up so bloody badly, isn't it? You might have got to play with those too. Except Draco doesn't really want to use the dildos and plugs he has stored away in a box. Not with Potter. Nicholas liked those, and Draco ought to have thrown them away months ago. It's not as if he can't buy new ones, ones that don't have difficult memories associated with them. He thinks of the transfigured glass Potter had shoved up into Draco's arse that night in Prague, and a shiver goes through him, his cheeks warming just enough for Potter to notice, he's certain.

Draco stands up, swaying a little, but he steadies himself before Potter can reach over to help him. "I need clothes," he says, "and a toothbrush."

"I'm not going to let you go alone." Potter's already pushing his chair back with a scrape of wooden legs against the stone floor. Draco'd expected that, but it still annoys him.

"For fuck's sake, I'm perfectly capable, Potter--" He takes a step and the world tilts slightly. Potter catches him.

Potter's hands are warm and firm around Draco's arms. "Yeah, are you?"

"Just a wobble." Draco tries to look composed. It's hard with Potter's chest pressed against his back. Fuck, but Potter smells good. A bit of almond soap, a hint of mint toothpaste, and the unmistakable gingery-spicy scent of a hangover potion. Potter's hands slip away; he steps back, and Draco's suddenly cold. He wraps his arms around himself and ignores Potter's raised eyebrow. "Fine," he says sulkily. "But I'm going now." He wants out of Potter's pyjamas and into his own cosy clothes. "And I want a proper shower before I'm forced to endure whatever wretched plumbing you've allowed this house to accumulate." There's a creak and a groan of pipes from overhead. Draco isn't certain if they're protesting or agreeing.
To Draco's surprise Potter doesn't argue—or at least not much, though he does take offence to Draco's disparagement of his bathing facilities—and Draco finds himself a quarter-hour later standing beneath the spray of his own shower whilst Potter cools his heels in the kitchen of Draco's flat, expressly forbidden to come anywhere near Draco's bedroom.

The hot water feels good against Draco's aching body, and he lets it pound against his skin until he's a bright pink before he lathers up with his favourite citron verbena soap, then washes himself, the frothy water swirling down the drain between his feet. He towels off and checks his shoulder beneath the waterproof bandage. The torn flesh is knitting together, more quickly than Draco would have expected, even with the healing charms and potions. It's going to scar though. He can tell that already.

Draco looks at himself in the steamed-up mirror. His face looks gaunter, the shadows beneath his eyes more pronounced. His scars stand out, deep lines scored into his flesh, wrapping across his chest, down to his hip. He sighs and traces the path of the cut, its intersection with a thick Sectumsempra scar an inch or two above his right nipple. Draco's thin and muscular, but there's no broad width to his shoulders, no thick heft to his biceps. He looks like a boy still, ribcage visible beneath a faint ripple of muscles, his sharp hipbones jutting out above a thatch of dark gold hair, and he doesn't understand what Potters saw in him. Not after Durant.

Durant's the kind of man who could lift Potter up, could carry him to bed and fuck him senseless. Not like Draco, who might be fast and nimble but who couldn't even think about hefting Potter over his shoulder and striding off to the bedroom. Like Potter had done for him. Draco's mouth goes dry at the memory. And Durant seems stable. Calm. A fucking adult who has his shit together. Draco's quick, and he's clever. He knows that. But he's young and stupid and bloody well fucked up in the head. Draco knows that as well. You have to be messed up to do what he's doing with Potter. With his SIO. Merlin. Draco leans over the sink, breathing in the verbena scented steam, suddenly feeling as if he's been punched in the gut.

There's a knock on the door, and Draco wraps the towel around him, tightening it around his hips. "What do you want?" Draco snaps as he opens the door just enough to let Potter peer in. "I thought I'd banished you to the kitchen."

Potter's eyes drift down Draco's chest, then back up to his bandaged shoulder. "You all right?" "I'm fine."

Draco pushes his wet hair back from his forehead.

"It's just there's an owl tapping at the kitchen window," Potter says. "I didn't know if you wanted me to…" His gaze flicks back behind Draco, towards the sink. "Good God, how many bottles of face cream do you have? Hermione doesn't even have that many."

Draco turns and looks back at the row of anti-aging creams and moisturising packs that line the side of the sink. "One can never start too early with the Malfoy skin," he says, and then he turns back, poking a finger in Potter's far too firm chest. "Back to the kitchen. Let the bloody owl in-- there's a bowl of treats next to the window."

"I--" Potter says, but Draco shuts the door in his face and leans against it. He closes his eyes, still seeing the look on Potter's face when he'd let his gaze slide down Draco's body. Circe. Draco's cock's half-hard, and he wills it down, thinking of everything he possibly can to wilt his prick. It doesn't entirely help.

"You'd best not be standing there when I come out, Potter," he says, hoping his voice doesn't tremble. Part of him wishes Potter might ignore him, that he might be sitting on the bed, hard and ready for Draco when he steps out.
There's not a sound from the other side of the door. Draco waits, then slips out into his bedroom. No Potter. Draco's relieved, at least that's what he lets himself think. The bedroom door's closed, too, thank Merlin, and Draco dresses quickly, in clean pants and jeans, with an untucked blue dress shirt over it, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He digs through his chest of drawers, packing clothes into a black leather holdall, then going back into the en suite for his toothbrush and a few essential cream pots. Fuck whatever Potter thinks. Draco's dark circles are screaming for help, and a slap of moisturiser wouldn't hurt Potter either.

When Draco comes into the kitchen, his hair still a bit damp and sticking against the back of his neck, Potter's leaning against the sink, cooing to a great grey owl currently perched on Draco's faucet.

"The great Harry Potter," Draco says. "Flirting with an owl."

"I like owls." Potter smooths a finger over the owl's fluffy face plumage. "I had one for a long time. A snowy owl. She was brilliant."

"What happened to her?" Draco moves closer, setting his holdall down on one of the kitchen stools. He remembers that owl, swooping overhead in the Great Hall when the post came in. It was hard not to notice a creature that beautiful. Snowy owls weren't native to Britain, after all.

Potter doesn't answer for a moment, and then he pulls back, letting his hand move away from the owl. "She was killed by a Death Eater," he says finally. "During the war." He doesn't look at Draco.

"I'm sorry." Draco goes to the refrigerator and gets a bottle of water. He twists the cap open and leans against the closed refrigerator door. He means that. Draco likes animals, more than people sometimes. He can't imagine losing a pet; his own eagle owl, Hercules, picked out from Eeylops Owl Emporium as an owlet when Draco was eight, is living out his years in the Manor owlery, happily surrounded by the rest of his flock. He flies to London every few weeks to see Draco, usually bringing with him a package of baked goods from the Manor kitchen elves. "That's awful."

"It wasn't your fault." Potter's rubbing at a spot on the edge of the sink with his thumb. "That doesn't really matter, does it? I'm still sorry." Draco watches Potter ignore him, then he sighs. "Hello, Orestes." The owl ruffles his feathers before launching himself from the faucet to Draco's side. Orestes settles on the island counter, leaning over to pluck and preen at Draco's hair. "Stop," Draco says, but he runs a hand down the owl's wide, soft back. Orestes has been one of the Malfoy owls since Draco can remember, and Draco's rather fond of the old bastard. "Did Mother send you?"

Orestes hoots softly and holds out his leg. There's a letter tied to it, and Draco recognises the handwriting. His mouth tightens. "Not Mother then."

Potter looks over at that. "Your father?"

"The one and only." Draco unties the letter as Orestes hops, his wings rustling to keep him balanced. He flicks a fingernail beneath the wax seal, breaking it, and pulls out the folded sheet of paper. He skims it, the muscle in his jaw tensing.

"What the fuck does he want?" Potter walks over to the counter, holding his hand out. Draco passes the letter over.

"He's suddenly ever so concerned about my safety." Draco looks away. His throat's tight. "I
suppose the Prophet must have come out this morning. There's definitely a snide mention of how Father knew Blaise was the wrong sort."

A flash of anger crosses Potter's face as he reads the note. "Fuck him." He throws it down on the counter. "What are you going to do?"

Draco calmly pulls out his wand and casts Incendio on the note, letting it flare up into a puff of fiery smoke before puffing into ashes. He walks over to the side hutch and digs through a drawer, pulling out an envelope. "This," he says, and he sweeps the ashy remnants of note into the envelope and seals it. "Orestes, would you care to return this to my father?"

Orestes gives Draco a dubious look, but he holds his leg out to allow Draco to attach the envelope with the scrap of leather cord the original note had been bound to. He hoots and shakes his head, but with a gentle nip at Draco's ear, he takes off with a stretch of his wings, flying back out the open window.

Potter looks at Draco. "That'll nark your dad off."

"That's the whole point, Potter." Draco walks over and shuts the window. He turns around, leans against the sink. "Besides, he wants something. Circe only knows what, but when my father expresses any form of concern about my welfare, you can damn well expect it's to cover his own sodding arse." He rubs his hands over his face. He's so fucking tired right now. "He's probably caught wind of Mother's duplicity, coming to see me without him. They play off each other at times. It's bloody ridiculous." And toxic. He still doesn't know why his mother stays with his father. He knows she loves Lucius, but the way he treats her sometimes infuriates Draco. His father's a giant prick, and he's been one since Draco can remember, but when he was younger Draco'd idolised Lucius. Wanted nothing more than to be him. And then the War had happened and Draco had watched his beloved father turn into a bitter, wrathful old bastard, unwilling to see his role in the destruction of the family he held so dear.

Draco won't be controlled by him. Not any longer. He takes a long swig from his water bottle, then caps it and sticks it in his holdall. "Are you ready, then? Have you determined I'm utterly unlikely to be attacked by Dolohov in my own kitchen?"

"It might have happened," Potters says mildly. Draco snorts; Potter'd made him wait by the Floo whilst he'd searched the whole flat when they first came in.

"Idiot," Draco says, but there's something warm curling in the depths of his belly that he knows damned well he needs to be careful of. He glances around his kitchen, a wisp of sadness slipping through him. He loves his bright, comfortable flat; he doesn't want to leave it for Potter's grim and dirty house. But he knows he's not safe here. Not if Dolohov wants him dead--and for what, Draco's not certain. He'd only been a boy those many years ago when the Dark Lord had forced him into casting Cruciatus. That can't be enough to make Dolohov hate him that much.

Draco hefts his holdall over his shoulder and strides past Potter to the Floo. He lets his hand catch the doorjamb on his way out, fingers trailing over the white-painted wood. Be safe, he thinks to the flat. I'll be back soon.

He can feel the wards shift and reform beneath his fingers, the solidity of his flat taking protective precautions. He allows himself one last glance around, at the pile of trainers at the front door, the stacks of books beside the sofa, the cozy hominess of everything he owns. And then he looks at Potter, face formidable and set, that furrow between his brow deepening. Draco wonders what the hell he's agreed to and how bollockxed he is.

"Ready?" Potter asks, tossing a bit of Floo powder into the hearth.
No, Draco thinks. But he hasn't a choice, has he?

His fingers tightening on the handle of his holdall, he steps into the crackling green flames, leaving behind his home for Potter's.

Circe help him.

***

Harry walks into Auror headquarters, shoulders tense, head up. He's in an offensive pose, he knows, ready for whatever battle he's going to face in the meeting to which he's been summoned. Gawain had firecalled at half-eight this morning whilst Malfoy was still sleeping, asking Harry if he'd come at two o'clock, for, as Gawain put it, "a little tête-à-tête with a few interested parties." Harry doesn't know what to expect, but he knows it's not good.

He's thrown his Auror cloak over his jeans, but kept his Finches t-shirt on. If Robards wants him in on a Saturday, he can take him in his weekend clothes. Malfoy had asked him how to operate the Floo ward, just in case Parkinson called. Harry'd had to make him promise to only open for team members or his mother. He doesn't think he has to put Jake on that list--Malfoy's anguish at the interview had been palpable, and Harry's worried about what might happen if he ever has to see them together again. He knows it's terribly selfish, but Harry had been keeping them in separate rooms of his head, Jake in New York and Malfoy here, and that had worked at first.

Harry'd had two lives, ones that didn't intersect, and then Malfoy began to take up more and more of Harry's mental real estate and Jake decided to come over to London and now somehow the rooms have got confused and Harry feels like a bloody stranger in his own home. And he shouldn't like having Malfoy at Grimmauld Place as much as he does, shouldn't like how good Malfoy looks at the breakfast table in the kitchen, still with dark circles under his eyes, bird-boned and razor-tongued, but in Harry's pyjamas and eating breakfast made by Kreacher. Harry shouldn't want to keep him safe, shouldn't want him near. It's too unfair, after all. Harry has no right.

Hell, if he's honest, Harry didn't want to leave Malfoy behind for this meeting. But it would be potentially more dangerous to bring him into the Ministry at the moment. And it's also perhaps dangerous for Robards to see them together right now any more than he has to; the Head Auror is sharp and canny, too much so for the current state of Harry's nerves. He and Malfoy have reached an uneasy truce with each other, but Harry feels absolutely wretched about the amount of suffering he's caused. To Jake too, although he was prepared for that--breakups are never easy--he just didn't know how it would go down, and he would never have picked this way for Jake to find out that Harry wanted to end things between them. Still, Malfoy's far more vulnerable than either he or Jake in this fucked-up triangle, particularly after being interviewed for promotion, then attacked by his best friend and having it appear in the Prophet. Not to mention learning about Jake the way he had. Harry's surprised he hadn't woken up with his prick hexed to his forehead, to be honest. But this morning Harry'd kept catching Malfoy looking at him when he'd probably thought Harry wasn't watching, and the look in those uncommonly large, liquid grey eyes had been pained. Angry. Scornful.

Harry deserves being despised.

The hallways are empty on the way to the large conference room in the back. Very few people will be in today, even with the event yesterday. The Prophet article had been mercifully short and misleading--Harry'd been grateful that they'd buried it in a side column below the fold. Although it upset Harry that Malfoy and Zabini's names were mentioned, he supposes it was unavoidable, given how many people had been watching. Still, the bit of misdirection from "someone close to the two Slytherins" about the fight being a duel over a love interest (with speculation of whom the
before the final bend to the conference room, he takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. He has to be the SIO that his team deserves, even if he feels completely unworthy.

The moment he sees the long oaken table surrounded by glass windows, Harry scans the occupants of the seats to see how much trouble this meeting will be. On the negative side, Gideon Titus is here, chair pushed back from a corner seat at the far end to make room for his legs. It's perhaps unsurprising that he would want a piece of this, given the inquiry he's trying to conduct. Seated next to him is David Peasegood of the Hit Wizards. The hackles on the back of Harry's neck rise.

Gawain is standing in the middle, and he gives Harry a cool look when he approaches the entrance to the fishbowl-like room. Harry relaxes a bit when he realises who the other two witches are at the near end of the table.

Hermione whispers a quick "Hi" as Harry slips into the seat between her and Millicent Bulstrode, who's looking furious and rather intimidating with a sheaf of papers in front of her. At the top is a file jacket is labelled Zabini, B. in neat cursive. Harry smiles at Bulstrode when she glances over at him. If she's on Zabini's side, it's only a matter of time until Zabini is released. Her officious expression is at odds with the blue hoodie and jeans she's wearing. She gives Harry a tight nod in return.

"Glad to see you've made it, Inspector Potter." Gawain's tones aren't icy, so Harry supposes that's an improvement. "We're all set for now, although I believe the Minister will stop by if he can."

Hermione straightens up next to Harry. "Kingsley's coming?"

Gawain takes his seat in the middle of the oval. "Yes. If his schedule can be cleared. He's personally concerned about the threat Dolohov poses to the public."

Peasegood snorts from his end of the table. "One might think."

"Are we willing to go there, then?" Harry leans back in his chair. The door opens, and Kingsley Shackleton walks in, an aide at his side. "We're officially declaring Dolohov alive and a public danger?"

Kingsley sits at the opposite end of the conference table from Gawain, who raises an eyebrow at him.

"Care to field that, Minister?"

The aide sits behind Kingsley, then leans forward and whispers in his ear. "I am aware, Michael," Kingsley says to him. He looks over at Harry. "To answer Inspector Potter's question, I believe the DMLE should reopen Antonin Dolohov's file now so that information can be properly shared across its various departments. And at some point the general public will need to be made aware of any threat he presents--"

"You'll start a panic in the streets," Titus says. "This is an internal matter--"

"Which just became very public." Gawain rests his elbows on the table, his quill tapping against his pad of parchment. "The Prophet article this morning specifically named Malfoy and Zabini as the Aurors in the incident--"
Harry shifts in his chair. "I liked the bit about them duelling over a woman," he says. "Very stupidly melodramatic. Wizarding society'll eat it up."

"You're welcome," Bulstrode says from his side, and Harry glances at her in surprise. He supposes he ought to have known. She shrugs. "I thought it best to give us some sort of cover story if necessary, and I've found it's easiest to bowl one's story to the lowest common denominator."

Kingsley nods at her. "Well done for now."

"I'll say it again," Peasegood scowls down the table. "I object to Zabini's counsel being at this meeting--"

"She has every right to be aware of what charges her client is facing," Hermione says, her voice cold. She loathes Peasegood, Harry knows. They all do, in one way or another, but Hermione despises the way he treats the women under his command, as if they're bloody idiots. Peasegood opens his mouth to protest, but Hermione cuts him off. "As well as make a plea for his release from Hit Wizard custody."

Peasegood laughs, his mouth twisting viciously to one side. "Not fucking likely." "Oh, I don't need your approval," Bulstrode says calmly. "I've every intent to file for a Wizengamot order requiring Blaise be remanded from your custody this evening. You've no real right to keep him locked in St Mungo's, particularly given the testimony from his SIO and a Legilimens that Constable Zabini was, in fact, under a compulsion spell--"

"If you think that, you're a fucking fool," Peasegood snaps. "That boy's a Slytherin. Of course he was working with Dolohov--"

Harry's temper flares. "That's not been proven in any form, and you damned well know it!" The edge of one of Bulstrode's parchments begins to smolder, a small curl of grey smoke rising up into the air.

"Harry," Hermione says quietly. She rests a hand on his arm, and Harry leans back, breathing slowly before he sets the entire stack of papers on fire.

"Careful, Inspector Potter," Gawain warns. Harry looks away, and Gawain turns to Peasegood. "David, Constable Zabini's not been charged with any crime as of yet. Nor will he until Titus's inquest is complete. You'll simply have to release him before then."

Peasegood's thick grey mustache is practically trembling with indignation. "I've three full days before I have to make a decision--"

"Unless a member of the Wizengamot grants my order," Bulstrode says. She meets Peasegood's gaze evenly, and Harry's impressed. Not many Aurors would stand up to the head of the Hit Wizards with such calm aplomb. He can see why Bulstrode's a damned good barrister.

"I'd like to see that happen." Peasegood folds his hands over his ample belly and scowls at her.

Bulstrode closes her file jacket and stands. "In that case, I'm done here. I've an order to have signed." She looks at Harry. "You'll fill me in on whatever's necessary?"

Harry nods. He'll be Zabini's representative at this meeting. There's no question of that. He watches as she strides out of the room, her shoulders set.
Peasegood harrumphs. "Now that she's gone, we can get down to business," he says. "I'll require Zabini to be in our custody the next few days for questioning. My men will remove him from hospital this evening--"

"No," Harry says. "You won't."


"You heard me." Harry folds his arms on the conference table, leaning forward. "Zabini doesn't go anywhere with your men, especially not for 'questioning'." His fingers crook around the word. "There's an Unspeakable with him right now who'll make bloody certain that doesn't happen."

"The Unspeakables have no jurisdiction in this case," Peasegood says sharply.


For a moment Harry thinks Peasegood's going to go apoplectic.

"David," Kingsley says, a faint warning tone in his voice, and Peasegood sinks back into his chair, his mouth a tight, thin line beneath his mustache.

Hermione turns to the others. "Croaker's also asked me to bring up the question of a national manhunt for Dolohov and his associate Luka Abadzhiev. Our department is in favour of doing so, whether publicly or not. And if so, we'd respectfully request to lead it--"

"Absolutely not," Peasegood says. "Kingsley, you can't consider putting the spooks in charge of that. The entire purpose of the Hit Wizard department is to hunt down Dark wizards. It's our mission--"

Kingsley holds up a hand, and Peasegood falls silent.

"He does have a point," Titus says, and Kingsley frowns at him. Titus raises a shoulder. "Such an operation would fall well within the jurisdiction of the Hit Wizards and Auror force rather than the Unspeakables."

"Granger," Kingsley says. "Convince me."

Hermione taps her finger against the table. "To begin with, the Unspeakables are capable of running a nationwide mission with discretion, sir. We've done so on many an occasion that even the individuals sitting at this table may not be aware of. Secondly, I would suggest that should the Hit Wizards take on Dolohov and Abadzhiev, they would be doing so without the extensive intelligence both Inspector Potter's team and my own have been collecting on these two individuals." Before Peasegood can open his mouth, Hermione says, "And I've no intention of turning classified information over to the Hit Wizards without express authorisation from the Wizengamot itself. The Department of Mysteries is far better equipped at this point to find Dolhov and Abadzhiev quickly and with minimal public fallout."

"Fairpoint," Kingsley says. He snaps his fingers at Peasegood when he protests. "Potter? Your opinion?"

Harry chews on his lip. "Normally I'm not thrilled with the Unspeakables taking point on an
operation like this, sir." He gives Hermione an apologetic look, and she nods. She agrees with him, he knows, and believes the Unspokeables ought to have a restricted amount of power when it comes to practical day-to-day law enforcement, but she has to represent Croaker's wishes. "However, I'm far less inclined to support the Hit Wizard's claim of appropriate intervention, given their overly aggressive response to Constable Zabini. If a move is made on Dolohov, I'd request that my team be included—or at least the individuals on my team who might not be affected by any of Dolohov's compulsion charms."

"So you and Parkinson," Gawain says, and Harry nods.

Titus shakes his head. "Professional Standards would say that there'd be a clear conflict of interest--"

"Or Potter and Parkinson would be highly motivated to find and capture Dolohov and Abadzhiev," Kingsley says. He looks over at Gawain. "And also most informed on their targets. It's something to take into consideration."

Peasegood's sputtering. "That's highly unorthodox, Kingsley--"

"And not yet determined." Kingsley leans back in his chair as his aide Michael murmurs something. He nods. "It seems I've another issue to address." He stands, smoothing down the front of his suit.

"Gawain, I'll leave this matter in your capable hands. I'm quite certain a compromise can be reached that's adequate for all involved, yes?"

No one around the table looks happy. Kingsley raises his eyebrows, then glances down the table at Gawain. "Keep me informed."

Peasegood waits until the door closes behind Kingsley and his aide before he points a finger at Hermione. "You're a conniving little cow."

"I've been called worse," Hermione says calmly. "I'm still not letting you have Zabini. Or Dolohov."

"This is ridiculous." Peasegood turns to Gawain. "You're castrating my entire department--"

"Or keeping you from making a very public mistake," Harry says, his anger starting to roil again. He tries to keep it pushed back down, although he can feel rage licking at the corners of his mind. He thinks of Malfoy and the stupid, endearing expression on his face when he handed him the plate of breakfast this morning, the obvious relish with which Malfoy ate. Strangely, this image is calming and centering enough that the anger recedes.

Peasegood slams his fist against the table. "You'd know from public mistakes, wouldn't you, Inspector Potter? Taking a whole team of Slytherin twats under your wing? As if that would ever go well. You fucking deserve this. All of you."

Hermione casts a worried glance Harry's way. Harry only smiles. "Actually, I'd think it was rather more of a mistake that Dolohov's alive in the first place. I'm not concerned about the integrity of my team. They figured it out, after all."

"Because they bloody well knew--"

"David." Gawain's voice is sharp. "Enough."

Peasegood falls silent, glaring at Harry and Hermione's end of the table, and Harry's certain they've made a very dangerous and powerful enemy. At the moment he doesn't give a fuck. It's taking every scrap of self-control he has not to leap over the table and pound Peasegood's smarmy
face into a bloody pulp. He clenches his fists in his lap, then relaxes them, letting out a slow breath.

Gawain runs his hands over his face. "We're getting nowhere," he says after a moment. "Titus, continue your inquiry into Constable Zabini's actions. Granger, tell Croaker there's no manhunt. Yet. Let's wait and see how this plays out first. I want Zabini under Healer's care--"

"William Irskine at St Mungo's is his primary Healer," Harry says, and Gawain nods.

"Your Unspeakable," Gawain says to Hermione. "It's the American Legilimens, yes? Jake Durant?" Harry's stomach flips. He sinks back into his seat, refusing to meet Gawain's eye.

"Yes." Hermione looks a bit wary. "What about him?"

Gawain frowns at Harry, then glances over at Hermione. "I want him left on Zabini's case, if you can spare him. It can't hurt to have a Legilimens at the ready. He's certified, yes?"

Hermione nods. "He has his doctorate in psychomancy from the Institut Tirésias in Paris. He's one of only a handful of wizards to make their highest degree in the last thirty years." Harry curses his bad luck that his now-ex is the most qualified practicing Legilimens in the bloody country. The more he wants to keep Jake and Malfoy separate, the harder it becomes. He doesn't know how he'll broach this with Malfoy. Although maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe they're so broken now that Malfoy won't give a fuck if Harry's ex is poking about not only in his head but also Zabini's. Christ, he thinks. This is beyond fucked up.

Gawain turns to Titus. "Can you make use of him?" No,

Harry wants him to say. He's not that fortunate.

"He has excellent credentials." Even Titus looks impressed. "It's possible I could, yes."

"Do so," Gawain looks over at Harry. "You. Keep Parkinson at the ready. We'll determine what steps to take next over the coming days." Before Peasegood can say anything, Gawain adds, "Same for you, David. Keep a team standing by. Kingsley and I will let you know how this will be handled." He turns to look at him. "But you'd best toe the line. I won't have any personal grievances or prejudices mar the reputation of the DMLE, and I'm sure you'd agree."

Peasegood just nods curtly.

Gawain stands up. "In that case, let's leave this on the table--"

"One last thing, sir." Hermione raises her hand. "Olivia Zabini's requested permission for her father to treat Constable Zabini for the mind control. He has unusual experience with herbal compounds and compulsion, and Mrs Zabini believes he could be of assistance. He'll come in from Crete to help his grandson." She hesitates. "Only he seems to have been asked to live outside the boundaries of Britain twenty years back or so?"

Both Peasegood and Gawain still, their heads turning towards Hermione. "Barachiel Dee," Gawain says slowly, "wants to be allowed back into the country."

"Yes?" Hermione looks confused. Harry doesn't blame her. He's never heard of Olivia's father, although the other two obviously have. "Is that an issue?" She knows it has to be, Harry thinks. Almost no one's kicked out of the country--at least not that Harry's aware of. He wonders what Dee must have done to have that particular sentence cast on him, not to mention why Zabini's never mentioned it.
"You can’t seriously be considering that," Peasegood says to Gawain.

Gawain shrugs. "It's not the maddest thing I've heard today."

"Barachiel Dee is a bloody psychopath," Peasegood snaps. "You know what he did--" "It wasn't entirely proven," Gawain says.

Peasegood throws his hands up in the air. "He made a fucking Dementor, Gawain!"

Harry inhales sharply. He's fairly certain his face mirrors Hermione's look of shock. He's never wondered how Dementors came into existence; they've just always been there, part of the fabric of the wizarding world. He shudders, remembering the cold feel of Dementor's fingers across his cheeks, the catch of his breath as the Dementor's hood lowered--

"Harry." Hermione grabs his arm. "Hey."

The feeling of dread rolls off him. Harry blinks; Titus and Peasegood are watching him, curious expressions on their faces. Harry coughs. "Sorry."

Gawain sighs. "Those charges against Dee were never substantiated."

"He was asked to leave the country," Titus says, rubbing a hand along his jaw. "Whilst it wasn't proven, it also wasn't disproven, if you know what I mean."

"But no one ever found evidence of a Dementor." Gawain sighs and looks over at Hermione. "I can't authorise that without Kingsley's approval. Do you have paperwork from Mrs Zabini?"

Hermione nods.

"Then owl it to me," Gawain says. "I'll give you an answer when I know." He picks up the papers in front of him. "We're done now."

Peasegood and Titus stand; Hermione slides a cap on the nib of her quill. Harry waits until the others have walked out before he catches her arm.

"Zabini's grandfather?" he asks, and Hermione raises a shoulder.

"Parkinson brought it to my attention." Hermione frowns at him. "Mrs Zabini thinks he might be able to help. Something about a salve they found on Zabini's face?" She waves her hand. "It sounded logical at the time."

Harry sighs. "If Parkinson thinks he should be here…" He runs a hand through his hair. "I trust her opinion."

"Don't tell her," Hermione says, "but I do as well." She stands up, rests a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Look, I'll do everything I can to help with this. You know that."

"I do."

She picks up her papers. "I'll owl you when I find out about Dee."

"Thanks," Harry says. He stands as well. He doesn't know what to do other than to go home, and that's an awkward proposition, given Malfoy's pacing through his house. Harry feels a bit adrift, a bit lost. He wants to be doing something. Not just sitting, waiting, wondering where Dolohov might pop up next.
"It'll be fine," Hermione says as they walk out of the conference room. She looks over at him. "We'll find the bastard. You know that."

Harry's not so certain he does.

***

Blaise looks over to the chair where Jake is dozing, his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Odd that Durant's now become Jake in his mind over the past twenty-four hours but he supposes that happens when you're trapped in a St Mungo's ward together, although if he's pressed Blaise would have no goddamned idea who the Hit Wizards standing guard over him are. The last set swapped out over lunch, and this new lot didn't even bother to introduce themselves. Not that Blaise gives a damn. One Hit Wizard's the same as another in his mind right now.

He studies Jake and the slump of his broad shoulders, the dip of his head forward, the blond hair falling into his eyes. Irskine had told him flat-out last night that he was lucky to be alive, that it'd been a bloody miracle a Leglimens had been with him, doing his best to calm his rattled mind, to stabilise him before his neuromagical centres burnt out. Even at that, Irskine's worried that there's something wrong. A bit off-balance. Blaise had another seizure in the middle of the night, one that had sent even the Hit Wizards running out into the hall, shouting for a Healer. Blaise doesn't like the way his brain's turning on him, pulling the rug out from beneath him when he least expects it.

Jake hadn't slept after that. Every time Blaise had woken up, Jake had been by his side, offering water or a raspy You okay? Blaise wants to be angry with him, wants to hate him for whatever pain he's caused Draco—and Blaise knows he must have—but he can't. It's not that Jake's not an arsehole. Blaise has seen him throw his weight around more than once since he'd woken up in this bloody ward, and he's been honest about his academic interest in Blaise's case. Not to mention Blaise is fairly certain Jake's more than happy to stay at his side just to irk the guy. Blaise doesn't necessarily mind that; he's all for Potter being discomfited by his ex's presence in Blaise's room.

It's more that Blaise likes Jake being an arsehole. He has a soft spot for arrogant sods, and he blames Draco for that fact.

Still, the whole situation's put Blaise out of sorts in general, and he knows he's been snappish and sharp today, which bothers him a little. He tries to save that side of himself for circumstances that absolutely require it. It's far more effective that way. He's been trying to convince Draco of that for years, but Draco just tells him to shove off. Once a Malfoy, always a Malfoy, Blaise thinks.

"Stop staring at me," Jake says, without opening his eyes.

"I'm not." Blaise settles back against his pillows. He still has the Incarcerous wrapped around his wrists and ankles, but Jake and one of the mediwitches had insisted he be allowed extra pillows for support. Young Naomi had been rather fierce about it, in fact, and now Blaise is ensconced in a plush palace of geese down stolen from the empty beds on the ward, most of them enhanced with Natalie's excellent plumping spell.

Jake sits up and stretches, yawning wide. "You were," he starts to say, but the door opens and Millicent Bulstrode, that grand and glorious creature, strides in, her dark curls twisted high up on her head, clad in jeans and a Disneyland Paris hoodie.

"Hello, you bastard," she says cheerfully to Blaise. "Pulling me into my office on a bloody weekend, are you now?"

"Have I?" Blaise quirks an eyebrow at her. "Don't recall asking for you."

"Your mum did." Millie holds a hand up to the Hit Wizards, who are approaching her, their
wands out. "I really wouldn't do that, boys." She looks back at Blaise. "Which meant that I had to spend this afternoon in Auror headquarters listening to an annoying batch of man-children whining about you. Christ, Peasegood's a shit." She glances at the Hit Wizards. "You can quote me directly to him on that, thanks." One of the Hit Wizards looks amused, the other nonplussed. Millie tends to have that effect sometimes.

Millie stops next to Blaise's bed, looking down at him. "And Hannah and I were all set to go to the garden centre today to find those bloody slate pavers she's been wanting for the back garden. She's fucking annoyed at this whole mess, let me tell you. Incandescent with rage, in fact." She raises one dark eyebrow at him.

Blaise snorts. "Please. I've never seen Hannah Abbott angry once in all the years you've been dating her." He glances over at Jake. "Milicent Bulstrode, solicitor extraordinaire, meet Jake Durant. Jake's my guard dog against the Hit Wizards, Mils."

Jake's mouth twitches, and he stands, holding out his hand. "I'm working with Hermione Granger-—"

"I know." Millie shakes his hand. "I've heard all about it from Pans and Granger both. Not to mention this one's mother." She turns her gaze on Blaise. "Olivia's not best pleased, that's for damned certain. I'll be taking on your case, just so you know."

This cheers Blaise up immensely. "Which means?"

"That if these sodding fuckers standing behind me don't remove you from bloody Incarcerous right now, I'll have them both hauled in front of the Wizengamot for violating a court order." Millie glances back at the Hit Wizards, a tight smile curving her lips. "You've no right to keep my client trussed up any longer."

One of them—the stupider one, Blaise thinks—objects. "We're not moving without Peasegood's approval—"

Millie reaches into her pocket and pulls out a folded paper, slamming it up against the idiot's chest. "Wizengamot trumps Peasegood, you arsehole, and if you haven't learnt that yet, I'd suggest you go back to training. Now are you going to release Mr Zabini or do I have to bring down every stone in this bloody ward on your heads, because I swear to God, I will, if you keep faffing about."

Stupid Hit Wizard looks at his companion, who shrugs and takes the Wizengamot order to glance over. "Looks official to me, mate," he says, handing it back.

"Like I'd be moronic enough to forge that," Millie says, her disdain evident. She steps back as the Hit Wizards move to either side of Blaise's bed. They release the Incarcerous, and Blaise's hands shudder with the sting of the bonds slipping away.

He rubs his wrists as they move to his ankles. "Am I free?" he asks Millie.

"Out on a bond," Millie says. "Your mum paid, but you'll still be facing an inquest. Not to mention a Professional Standards hearing. Don't worry; I'll be there for both." She helps him swing his legs to the side of the bed as the Hit Wizards withdraw. Jake's there too, his hands steadying Blaise's back. Millie waits until the Hit Wizards are out of the room. "Look, you're not going to be allowed back in the Ministry until this is sorted out—"

"My job's there," Blaise says, tensing, and Jake presses a hand between Blaise's shoulder blades. It strangely calms him down. He glances over his shoulder, and Jake just raises an eyebrow.
Blaise turns back to Millie. "How am I going to--"

"You'll stay at the Beaumont with your mother," Millie says, not waiting for him to finish. "She's waiting there for you with clean clothes. No going back to your flat. Potter doesn't want you alone, and as your legal representation, I concur. If Dolohov gets to you again..." She sighs. "You're safer there with your mother, and Potter's arranging for wards to be put in place on the suite. As for your job, you'll need to talk to him. He wants you at Number 12 Grimmauld Place at half-nine Monday morning, so I assume he'll fill you in then."

That makes Blaise feel slightly better. The guy may be a fucker, but he's got Blaise's back, at least for now.

"I'll go with you," Jake says. "To the Beaumont."

Blaise stands up. His legs are terribly wobbly, and Millie catches him just before he falls. He leans back against the bed. "You've other things to do."

"Not on a weekend." Jake reaches for his jacket. "Besides, I want to make sure those wards are set properly. I don't trust your lot not to fuck you over."

"The Unspeakables are on it," Millie says. She gives Jake a long, considering look. "And you're expecting us to trust you, so..." Her eyebrow goes up.

The strange thing is that Blaise does trust Jake. It might be stupid of him, and Draco will be horrified, with good reason, but Blaise doesn't think that Jake would have stayed with a complete stranger overnight in hospital, complete with guards, if he wasn't somewhat of a decent sort. He looks at Jake, taking in the dark circles under his eyes and his unshaven jaw. "It's all right, Mils," Blaise says after a moment. "I don't mind."

Jake slips into his jacket. "All right then. We'll get you settled, check the wards, and then we'll both crash for a few hours. I don't think either of us slept enough."

Blaise knows he hasn't. Even with Irskine's potions. There's just something about being bound to a bed with Hit Wizards hovering nearby that's utterly unconducive to sleep. He lets Millie help him stand; his feet have come to life enough without the Incarcerous that he feels as if he can actually attempt a step. It's not his best--he moves like he's in a kebab shop at the end of a pub crawl night--but he remains mostly upright. Still, he doesn't protest when Jake's arm slips beneath his elbow.

"Careful," Jake says. He looks at Millie. "You check him out with the Healers yet?"

Millie nods. "Irskine's going to meet us at the Beaumont in an hour. Just to make sure this one's settled. He'll be bringing potions with him."


"Don't be a prick." She bends over to pull Blaise's clothes from the cabinet next to the bed. "Irskine's going out on limb for you. The hospital administrators would rather toss you up in the Janus Thickey Ward and be done with this mess you've put them in."

Blaise scowls at her. "Isn't your job to prevent that?"

"What do you think I've been doing?" Millie tosses his trousers at him. Blaise catches them, not certain he can bend over to put them on. Jake snorts and takes them from him, crouching down low enough that Blaise can step into them whilst still keeping his balance, one hand on Jake's shoulder. He tugs them up Blaise's hips.
"Got that?" Jake asks, moving his hands so Blaise can fasten them.

Blaise's mouth is a bit dry. "Yeah." He buttons his trousers, then slides out of the hospital gown he's been in for far too long. Millie hands him his shirt, and he slips it on, buttoning it slowly. His entire body is sore, and his head aches.

Jake gives him a faint smile. "You'll be fine."

"I suppose." Blaise isn't certain anything's going to be all right now. He dreads seeing Draco again. What does one say to one's best friend whom one tried to murder? He feels a bit sick. He wonders how Draco is, if he's angry with Blaise, if he could ever forgive him. If he even wants to.

Circe, this is hell.

He lets Jake and Millie lead him to the door. A shudder of fear goes through him as it swings open. He feels exposed. Vulnerable. In this room he might be caged, but he's safe. His mind and body are his. When he steps out into that corridor anything can happen.

Millie leans her head forward, her hair brushing his cheek. "It's okay, love," she says quietly, and it's that small endearment that's nearly Blaise's undoing. Millie's never gentle unless she knows you need her to be. Her hand is warm against his arm. "Everything's going to change when you walk through that door. I know that. But I'm going to be next to you, every step of the way, and if they want you, they'll have to go through me. And Pansy. And Draco. And Potter."

"And me," Jake says from his other side. His hand settles on the small of Blaise's back.

"Let's not even get into your mother." Millie gives Blaise a small smile. "I had to threaten her to get her to stay in the suite."

That makes Blaise snort. "I can only imagine how that went down."

"Not well," Millie admits. "But I did promise I'd bring you back with me."

Blaise draws in a small, unsteady breath. He's lucky, he knows. He could be doing this on his own, with no friends, no family, no one to stand beside him during what he's about to face. He looks at Millie, who's come here for him, leaving behind her comfortable house and her kind girlfriend to help him. She meets his gaze, her eyes steady. Calm.

"You'll be okay," Millie says. "I promise."

Blaise nods.

"I think I'm ready," he says after a moment, and, together, the three of them step through the doorway.

***

Draco is bored, and that's always a dangerous thing.

He's sitting cross-legged on the sofa in the library, halfheartedly flipping through a book on household potions he'd managed to pry off one of the lower shelves and eating from a bag of pistachios Kreacher'd dug up for him in the pantry. The poor elf had been appalled at the lack of groceries; Draco's rather certain he'd heard him muttering about needing to go down the shops before dinner. Draco may have given him a few items or twenty for the list.
The Floo flares green a few moments after the clock on the mantel chimes half-four, and he hears
his mother's voice from beyond the grate. "Draco, open the ward."

Draco sighs and sets his pistachios aside, then pushes himself up off the sofa. "How do I know it's you?" He crouches next to the hearth, his fingers searching for the ward release in the depths of the chimney that Potter had shown him before he'd left for the Ministry. "You might be Dolohov impersonating my mother."

"Or, " his mother counters, "I could be your mother who brought you into this world, and who is more than willing to remove you from it, if I find myself stuck in Inspector Potter's Floo."

Draco pulls the ward release, and his mother steps out, looking perfectly put together in elegant green travelling robes, if only a bit sooty around the edges. She's carrying a basket that she sets on the end of the sofa as she brushes herself off.

"Honestly, " Narcissa says. "That Floo needs a good cleaning."

Draco doesn't bother to point out that everything in Grimmauld Place could look a bit more polished up. He watches as his mother looks around her, her face softening as she takes in her aunt and uncle's old home.

"It's barely changed at all," she says after a moment. "I don't hear Aunt Walburga shouting, though. That's new. Her irritation was always quite calming to Uncle Orion in his latter years."

"Potter put her in the basement. " Draco settles back on the sofa. "Along with the house elf heads. Trust me, I've had to listen to Kreacher apologise to me all afternoon for that purported faux pas. As if I wanted a bunch of house elves eyeing me from the great beyond."

Narcissa makes a moue of disgust. "No one liked those heads. They were terrifying. " She looks around the room. "I thought Aunt Walburga was affixed with a Permanent Sticking Charm though."

Draco reaches for the basket. "Potter took the whole wall down, reframed and replastered it. Kreacher says on quiet days you can still hear her shrieking, albeit quite muted now. " He opens the lid and pulls out fresh sheets that smell like crisp starch and lavender. He breathes the scent in before he sets them aside. Potter's idea of linen is atrocious, and Draco absolutely refuses to sleep beneath that awful musty quilted coverlet again. Beneath the lavender-scented sheets are china and glass pots filled with Draco's favourite jams and stews. His stomach growls. "This is brilliant."

His mother touches his cheek as she sits beside him. Her fingers are soft and cool. "I thought it necessary to provide some sustenance for your recovery. There are books as well for mental stimulation. Since you wouldn't let me go to your flat, I had to make do with the volumes in your bedroom at the Manor, so do excuse the juvenile bent."

Draco's already digging through them. "I haven't read Martin Miggs in years."

"You were rather fond of them during Hogwarts, " his mother says. She rearranges the folds of her robe before she adds, "Your father was upset about the return of Orestes this morning."

"He's a prick. " Draco flips through issue six of The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. "Father, obviously, not Orestes. I don't know why he thought I'd want to hear--"

"Lucius is worried about you. " Narcissa plucks the comic from Draco's hands and sets it aside. "He is your father."

"Whenever he wants to remember," Draco says, and his mother looks away. Draco feels a bit ashamed. The difficulties he has with his father aren't his mother's fault. Not entirely. She's stood
up for him in her own quiet way over the years whenever his father's decided to come down on him, and he knows that. He sighs. "Do you have any sense of what he actually wants?"

She stands and walks over to the fireplace, looking up at the Black family tapestry. "I believe his primary concern was for your safety."

She's not looking at him, but her fists are clenched. She's quietly furious: Draco knows her tells. This, more than anything, convinces him that she'll make his father pay, in her own way, for whatever he's up to. And then there was the unpleasantness between them this morning, whatever that was. Draco tries not to care. Still, he worries about his mother.

Draco relents. "Tell him I'm fine."

His mother turns and gives him a faint smile. "Thank you. I'll let him know." Her eyes continue to scan the room, face thoughtful when she catches sight of something familiar. "It's been so long, but it seems like only yesterday. I can still see them all here." She misses her family; she has for years. Draco wishes his mother would make her peace with Aunt Andromeda. It's his father who keeps the two of them distant, he knows that.

The Floo flashes green, and Draco jumps, as does his mother.

Harry Potter's messy, dark hair appears first, then his blessedly fit body in jeans and an Auror cloak. Draco looks away hastily as Potter steps out of the fireplace, but not quickly enough not to catch his mother's eyes on him, taking in his reaction. He feels his face warm. The look on Potter's face is stormy--evidently the meeting didn't go well.

"Why the fuck was the ward open?" Potter asks Draco angrily, then his expression shifts, his forehead smoothing out as he catches sight of Draco's mother. "Oh. My apologies, Mrs Malfoy."

"I hope you'll pardon the intrusion," Draco's mother nods gracefully in Potter's direction. "I was bringing over a basket from the Manor for Draco."

Potter takes his cloak off and hands it absentmindedly to Kreacher, who's just appeared in the doorway. "Of course," Potter scratches his head, clearly embarrassed. He looks over at Draco. "The ward does need to be kept shut if possible. Kreacher, would you help Malfoy with the basket?"

Kreacher hands Potter his cloak back before he toddles over to the sofa to heft the basket that's nearly as big as him. Potter scowls and Draco wants to cheer the crabby elf, who's looking a bit sprightlier now than he had even this morning. With a bow to Narcissa, Kreacher asks, "Will Mr Malfoy be wanting the sheets on his bed? And will he take his dinner in the dining room or here in the library?" Kreacher sniffs at the basket. "I can be ironing his linens as well with flower waters. He needs only to ask." Kreacher turns to face Draco's mother, who looks a bit damp around the edges to Draco.

"Hello, Kreacher," she says in a gentle voice. "It's Narcissa. I think you knew me when I was called Cissy. I'm Cygnus and Druella's daughter."

Kreacher raises his chin in a dignified fashion. "I knows perfectly well who the Mistress Malfoy is. Welcome to Grimmauld Place, ma'am. Is the mistress being staying to eat with Mr Malfoy and Harry Potter?"

"Thank you very much," Draco's mother says, with a glance to Potter, who's draping his cloak over the arm of a chair. Philistine, Draco thinks--that'll cause wrinkles for sure. "But I'm afraid I can't," his mother continues, approaching the Floo. "Inspector Potter, I'm sorry I've interrupted
your afternoon. I've brought more than enough for two, if you'd like eat with Draco."

Potter looks bemused and rather a bit uncomfortable. "You're welcome to stay, Mrs Malfoy."

With a smile, Narcissa shakes her head. "No, I need to be getting back." Draco's almost sad that she's not staying, although he can't imagine how awkward it would be to dine with both Potter and his mother. It's killing him just to be in the same room with the two of them--no one quite knows what to say. Still Draco feels a fierce surge of love for his mother and her willingness to protect him and make his life better however she can. Even if it's something as simple as bringing fresh linens and soup.

He has cause to regret it, though, when she reaches the Floo. Just before she takes a pinch of powder, she turns. "Draco, I'll come by on Monday for your birthday. Would you like Trissie to make lemon drizzle cake?"

Shit, Draco thinks. He didn't want to mention it, not as a guest in Potter's house, but there it is. His twenty-sixth birthday is on Monday. Circe. He's left his first quarter-century behind, and he'll be that much closer to the dreaded thirty. He's officially old.

His mother smiles at him, expectantly. If Draco looks carefully, he can see a glint of mischief in her eyes. She did this on purpose. Potter looks like he's been hit by a Stunner.

"Yes, Mother," Draco says in a small voice. "That would be lovely, thank you."

As the Floo flashes, Potter waits, then reaches in to close the ward. Meanwhile, Kreacher carries the basket into the hallway and down the stairs to the kitchen. Draco can hear the creak of the steps and Kreacher's mutterings about keeping up standards and family birthdays. Draco's afraid that he's offended Kreacher by sending to the Manor for supplies.

Then Potter turns, his face closed off. "Were you going to tell me it was your birthday?"

Draco looks away. Of course he bloody well wasn't. What does Potter take him for? A fool? He doesn't want Potter that close to him, doesn't want him to be part of his life. Not like that. "How did the meeting go?" he asks instead.

Potter sits down heavily in the chair, now definitely wrinkling his cloak. It's bunched up beneath his arse, the rest of it hanging over the chair arm. Kreacher'll be furious, Draco thinks, and rightly so. "Peasegood's an utter arse. He wants to keep Zabini in custody, and take over the hunt for Dolohov." Draco starts forward, words of protest already forming on his lips. Potter holds up a hand. "Don't worry--Bulstrode's getting Zabini out today if she can."

"How?" Draco asks.

"Wizengamot order." Potter smiles faintly. "Peasegood threw down the challenge, and I think it narked her off."

Draco sinks back against the sofa back, somewhat mollified. "Well, that's a mercy. If anyone can take on the Hit Wizards, it's Millie."

"Hermione managed to get the Unspeakables put in charge of the investigation, so Parkinson and I can work with them and share information," Potter looks into the Floo.

"And what am I supposed to do in the meanwhile?"

Potter makes a gesture that encompasses the entire library as a whole. "Read? Rest?"
Draco realises that Potter is leaving him out of plans, and he doesn't like it. "You can't just keep me locked in this awful old house." A floorboard creaks beneath his foot. "Sorry," Draco amends. "You're a lovely house, just in need of proper care."

Potter has an odd look on his face. "Are you talking to my house now?"

Draco shrugs. "To be fair, it started talking to me first. It seems you weren't listening, and I was sympathetic. But don't change the subject. I want to do something. I'll go absolutely mad if I have to stay indoors." He can't bear it. It's bad enough that he's been warned off running until his body heals.

The idea that Potter's not even going to include him in the team's work infuriates Draco--and ratchets up his anxiety a hundredfold. The last time he'd been confined to a house had been during the War when the Dark Lord had taken over the Manor. His parents had made him stay in their wing, except when he was expected to be at the ridiculous performances of violence and viciousness that the Dark Lord called dinner. For Potter to do the same--Draco's stomach twists and roils with apprehension. He can't do this. He can't. "I need to help."

"Malfoy--" Potter looks over, almost apologetically, but Draco can see the muscle clench in his jaw. He's going to be stubborn about this, that much is obvious, and Draco's entire body explodes into dread, sharp prickles going across his skin. His chest tightens to the point that he can barely breathe, and his skin goes clammy. His mind is screaming at him that he's trapped, that it'll be just like the Dark Lord, that he'll bloody well suffocate in this wretched house, and even though Draco knows that it's nothing, that his brain is just reacting to something that happened nearly a decade ago, it doesn't matter.

"Fine," Draco manages to get out past the throb of tension in his throat. "Just--Nevermind." He launches himself to his feet. He can't stay here. Not with Potter. The last thing he wants to do is have a full-blown panic attack in front of him. Kreacher reappears in the doorway, holding a tray that smells delicious, and Draco's suddenly starving. "Kreacher, I'll take my dinner upstairs." He's relieved that his voice holds steady.

"Malfoy," Potter says again, but Draco keeps his back ramrod straight as he walks out on the bastard, refusing to look back, although he hears Potter's exasperated sigh as he storms up the stairs, his hands starting to shake as he rounds the first landing.

FUCK IT ALL TO HELL. He'll find out more about the investigation later. For now, he needs to hide himself away, to be alone whilst his body reacts to the fear of being trapped in this awful, mouldy old house with the one man whom he can't stop thinking about and whom he can't entirely forgive. He doesn't give a damn what Potter might say.

Draco slams his bedroom door behind him.

He can be fucking stubborn too.

***

Strong May sunlight filters down through a newly sparkling window set high in the kitchen wall. Harry's sat at the rough wooden table, a mug of tea in one hand, the latest Quidditch Weekly in the other. He's been trying to focus on the new IQL stats for half an hour and failing. It's just as well he can't find the Prophet that he'd searched half an hour for--his reading concentration is nil right now. Kreacher's upstairs intensively dusting the floors and moving shit around; it sounds like he's in the library right now from the muffled cursing, strange noises, and thuds of heavy furniture hitting the floor. Harry wouldn't put it past him to have snuck the paper to use in cleaning the windows. There's a scrabbling in the walls that indicates that the Doxies are fleeing--and quickly
from the sound of it. Kreacher'd been up at the arse crack of dawn this morning starting his cleaning frenzy, and Harry's quite certain he has Malfoy to blame for that. Kreacher'd woke Harry up when he came upstairs, his pail and mop thumping behind him, but Harry's sleeping lightly enough as it is these days with Dolohov out in the wild and Malfoy in his house. Kreacher appears to be gradually working his way through the house in his fit of cleaning, and Harry is trying find a quiet corner downstairs where he's out of Kreacher's way.

Malfoy is further up in the house, on the third floor, Harry assumes, sulking, or sleeping, or doing whatever he does. Harry suspects he's binge reading those comics Narcissa Malfoy brought by yesterday before dinner. Harry had heard Malfoy come out onto the landing to ask Kreacher to bring his potions at last night, and again this morning, so he knows he's still alive. Not that he sodding cares. Except of course he does care. Desperately. Harry's fighting a near-constant urge to go check on Malfoy and make sure he's all right, but he's determined to keep out of Malfoy's way for a number of reasons, starting with his own horrid lack of self-control around the bastard and ending with his own hopeless inability to stop thinking about the way those thin lips move around that bloody posh accent.

After his dramatic exit yesterday from the library, Malfoy hadn't come downstairs from the top floor, and honestly, Harry's just as glad. He's worried about Malfoy, but he doesn't know what to do. He knows the git's upset with him for keeping him out of the operation; Harry isn't certain how to explain to Malfoy that he can't bear for him to be put into danger. Not when Harry can protect him. He doesn't care how angry Malfoy might get. He'd rather have him alive than happy in the end, and besides, Harry's his bloody SIO, for Christ's sake. What he says goes.

Somehow Harry's rather certain Malfoy wouldn't see it that way.

During the night, Harry'd had ample time to think about the flush that rises on Malfoy's cheeks whenever he's angry with Harry, the flash in his eyes, how irate he would have been if Harry had thrown him over his shoulder and taken him to bed. And what they might have done next. Harry'd wanked himself raw not once but twice, thinking about it, about Malfoy and how it would feel if only he could touch him again. Harry misses the time when whatever this was between then was uncomplicated, just raw desire and fulfillment, when Malfoy was his dirty little secret and he could just step away whenever he chose. Now they're enmeshed in a web of deceit and obligation that keeps trapping Harry in its sticky, complicated threads.

He sets *Quidditch Weekly* aside and runs his hands over his face, slipping his fingers beneath his glasses to press against his cheekbones.

Merlin but he's cocked this one up. Harry wishes it weren't this awful between them, that Malfoy weren't trapped in his house with a madman on the loose and furious with Harry to boot. They'd had a lot of fun before it came crashing down, and Harry still can't quite figure out when things became this serious. When Malfoy had shifted from a brilliant fuck to someone Harry feels soft around. Exposed. Vulnerable. It terrifies him, and Harry's no idea how to fix things. Or even if they can be fixed. Or if he wants them to be fixed. And that's not to mention the cock-up with Jake, and honestly, if Harry thinks about all of it too much, he'll want to go right back to bed and hide out for a week with a crate of firewhisky and a stack of skin mags.

Harry takes a sip of his tea instead. It's going to be all right, Potter, he tells himself. Just keep your wits about you. You've got bigger problems to worry about, like Peasegood and Dolohov. The sad thing is those sodding fucks feel like minor nuisances compared to this writhing ache of emotions that's settled in the pit of his stomach.

It's not that Harry doesn't know he shouldn't wank whilst thinking about Malfoy, knows Malfoy doesn't want anything to do with him--despises him, even, he thinks, and if he doesn't then Malfoy's a damned fool--and frankly, Harry should leave well enough alone. He should walk
away, should let whatever this is between him and Malfoy slip away. But the moment Harry touches himself, he sees grey eyes and thin lips curved into a smirk, the flip of long pale strands of hair as they brush Malfoy's sharply angled chin, the bony articulation of Malfoy's spine, the hollows of his hipbones, the elegant arch of his neck. Harry wants Malfoy desperately, despite his better judgment. And he knows Malfoy wants him, or at least, he did until Friday. And whenever Harry tries to suppress the images of Malfoy just three nights past, long and pale and naked in his bed, that flit through his brain, it only makes them worse.

So now Harry's hiding in his own kitchen on a Sunday afternoon, trying his damnedest to stay out of the way of both his furious houseguest and his frenzied house elf. So far he's managed. He reaches for his mug again. That's a win, he thinks. Harry flicks his wand at the radio, turning the WWN on. It doesn't even matter what show's playing, as long as it drowns out the thumps and bangs from up above his head. He spreads *Quidditch Weekly* open on the table in front of him and flips the page to a feature on Jackie Jernigan, the Welsh team's newest Chaser.

At first, Harry doesn't hear Kreacher calling to him over the Weird Sisters' latest single. When the elf Apparates with a pop in front of him, Harry looks up at him, blinking.

"Master," Kreacher says, sounding most put out, "the Head Auror is at the Floo, threatening to flay Kreacher alive if Master doesn't open the wards."

Harry legs it upstairs to the library, pleased at how quickly the steps fall away. He hasn't lost his damn conditioning yet, although he needs to get back into the training centre. Maybe that would be a better place to hide out, although he can hardly leave Malfoy here alone, now can he?

He jogs into the room and opens the Floo. Gawain is grim-faced and vaguely sooty when he steps out. "I'm impressed that your ward held," Gawain says. "I thought the Head Auror could get into any house in England."

"Dumbledore enchanted this one during the War. " Harry motions to the large fireplace Gawain has just exited. "I'd be surprised if the Floo here doesn't have an intention charm on it as well. I'd get it checked out, but well, who would do it?" he asks, a tinge of sadness colouring his voice. The loss of Dumbledore still hurts. There's been no one able to fill his shoes since.

Gawain nods. "What does Granger say?" He dusts himself off.

"She's been able to map most of the spells." Harry considers the hard lines etched into Gawain's face. "But you're not here to talk to me about my Floo ward, are you?"

"Have you seen the *Prophet*?" Gawain throws himself down into an armchair unbidden. Harry's almost concerned; the Head Auror is usually a model of polite behaviour, even when he's dishing out a dose of bollocking.

Harry shakes his head. "No. I haven't had the chance. I've been trying to catch up on the IQL."

Gawain snorts and his scowl deepens. "That bastard Cufre only went and put in a bloody expose about Dolohov. Four-page spread, complete with editorials." He runs a hand through his hair. "Merlin's sodding bollocks."

This has Harry's eyebrows raising. "They did what now?"

"With evidence from the wizarding public," Gawain says, as if Harry hasn't even spoken. "Known sightings, history, list of crimes, and everything. They'll be living off this for weeks. The issue's already being reprinted. Kingsley is livid." Gawain's eyes are flinty. "There'll be a statement issued from the Ministry today."
Harry says slowly, "Well, how much do they know?"

"More than I'm comfortable with," Gawain inhales and crosses one booted ankle over his knee. "Some of the evidence is very close to what we have in headquarters. Unfortunately close." He gives Harry a pointed look.

"It wasn't any of my team."

Gawain flaps his hand. "I don't think it was." That's a relief, at least. Harry doesn't want the added burden of a suspected leak on his already fragile band of Slytherins. "Malfoy and Zabini are obviously not capable at the moment, and Parkinson would eat that Prophet reporter for mains if they came after either of the other two. Which leaves you, and you, I do hope, would not be that stupid." He looks old and tired. "I suspect Wrightson. He's annoyed that he wasn't included in yesterday's meeting, and he has ties to that reporter who did the article on the potions bust."

"Have they tied it to Prague yet?" Harry's suddenly, belatedly aware of the ramifications.

"Not yet. But it's probably a matter of time." Gawain pauses. "Or they're saving that for tomorrow's edition."

"Can I offer you anything?" Harry's manners return, with some prompting by Kreacher coughing rather loudly and pointedly in the doorway.

"Coffee, please. Black." Gawain looks past Kreacher to Malfoy, who's walking in from the hallway with the Daily Prophet tucked under his arm. Harry supposes he shouldn't be surprised that Malfoy nicked it. "Hullo, Malfoy. How are the wounds healing?"

Malfoy takes a seat opposite Gawain on the sofa, poised and careful. He doesn't look at Harry. "Well, thank you sir. They managed to knit my veins back together."

Malfoy's being a little melodramatic, Harry knows, but he still feels an uncomfortable clench in his stomach at the thought of how much he bled, how frightening Friday's attack was. And he's still in danger, Harry knows. He was a target, and although no one's come forward to say why, Harry's starting to worry that it must all tie back to something with his father, some sort of history between Dolohov and Lucius Malfoy. He can't imagine Malfoy would incur this sort of wrath on his own. Also Harry doesn't trust Malfoy senior further than he can throw him. With a broken wrist, Harry decides to remain standing, hands in his pockets, back against the Floo.

"So people other than Blaise have seen Dolohov," Malfoy says, regarding Gawain carefully. He tosses the Prophet on the coffee table. Dolohov's old Azkaban photo glares up at them from the front page. "In London."

"Well, there are sightings that might be credible." Gawain turns to Harry. "I have to ask, Harry. Are you and your team up for this? Because despite what I told that arse Peasegood yesterday, I'm not sure myself that you're ready."

Harry takes his hands out of his pockets and stands up a bit straighter. "We're ready, sir."

"So if I asked you whether you wanted to step back on this one or take point?" Gawain's eyes don't leave Harry's face.

"We'll take point." Malfoy answers immediately from the sofa. His expression is grim. He gives Harry a sharp look then. "The entire team."

Harry coughs, trying to hide his annoyance at Malfoy's interjection. He knows better than to show
anything less than a unified front with the Head Auror watching. "What Malfoy said, Gawain."
We'll take point. This is beyond personal for all of our team, and we know Dolohov as well as anyone alive, sir. Perhaps better."

When Gawain pauses and frowns, Harry braces himself for the worst. He knows it can't be this easy, and he's ready to fight if he has to. Then Gawain nods curtly. "Congratulations, although I'm afraid that's a dubious honour--you and the Special Branch seven-four-alpha are officially part of Granger's taskforce. Wrightson will have bloody kittens when he finds out, but leave that to me." He glances at Harry. "And stay out of his way."

Harry's relief at Gawain's permission is palpable. He honestly doesn't know what he would have done if he'd said no. Probably go after Dolohov on his own.

Kreacher enters the library with a tray of coffee and sets it down on the low table in front of the sofa. He hands a cup to Gawain, then one to Malfoy before glancing over at Harry, who shakes his head. His stomach can't take coffee at the moment. He's too damned nervous. Gawain takes a long swallow from his cup. Malfoy sips more delicately, refusing to meet Harry's eye.

"You'll need to keep injured members out of the field, of course." Gawain shoots a sharp look Malfoy's direction, who's earnestly paying attention with knitted brow.

Rather too earnestly, Harry thinks. He knows that look now. Malfoy's no intention of obeying that particular order. Jesus, but that'll come down on Harry's head, he's certain.

"I have more faith in you than I have in the other teams, Harry." Gawain's face shutters. "And for fuck's sake, don't die. The paperwork would be a nightmare, not to mention the public outcry. We'd never get the Prophet off our backs." He hesitates, then adds. "And don't betray my trust. Please."

"I won't, sir," Harry promises, and finds to his surprise that he believes it. Despite their problems and rather complicated personal connections, he knows his team, knows that they'll be baying for blood. He wants to give them the chance to get Dolohov, especially now that the secret is out.

Harry runs a hand through his hair and considers the weight of what he's agreed to, putting his novice team back into the line of fire in the middle of a public furore. Not to mention the inquiry Zabini is facing and the whispers about their past as it is. His team know what they're up against, but Dolohov's managed to nearly destroy them in the past weeks. Harry only hopes they can learn from their past mistakes, get the jump on Dolohov this time without paying too high a price. Harry could never forgive himself if anything worse happened. It's already been bad enough.

Gawain sets the cup down in the saucer. "I'll expect you tomorrow at eight sharp in my office. Full dress uniform, as we'll have to make a photo opportunity available to the press." He nods to Malfoy. "See that you keep mending, Constable Malfoy. We'll need you in the field once you're cleared."

Harry stops the Head Auror as he's almost in the Floor. "Gawain, I have one thing to ask you."

Gawain turns, fingers already pinching around a lump of Floo powder. He lets it slide from his fingers, forming slow, glowing trails in the heavy gilt bowl.

"We're moving our base of operations here until further notice." Harry feels rather than hears Malfoy's shift against the leather of the sofa. "Can you make that legitimate in some fashion?" Harry needs this to be official. He's not letting his team be targets at the Ministry. Especially not with Wrightson and Titus nipping at their heels. There've been too many leaks, too much suspicion. "That we're allowed to use Grimmauld as an official safe house until further notice."
"Just like the old days, what? A new Order rides again? I'll put a note in a file." Gawain gives a faint smile, then stops, as if recalling something. "Oh, and Potter? Kingsley's approved Olivia Zabini's request. Barachiel Dee is cleared to reenter the country."

Gawain pinches more powder, pops it into the Floo, and vanishes in a flash of green.

Malfoy gives a low whistle from the sofa. "Blaise's grandfather is coming to London? Blaise is terrified of him."

"Mrs Zabini wants him back. She thinks her father can clear the lingering effects of whatever Dolohov did to Zabini." Harry frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. "He's still having problems from it."

"Well, if anyone can." Malfoy nods slowly. "I've met him once, when I was with my family on Crete. He's quite impressive. Scared the hell out of me. I must have been ten."

Harry just eyes him. He's suddenly curious to know what would frighten Draco Malfoy as a pampered child. He's not overeager to make Mr Dee's acquaintance, truth be told.

"Do you think we're going to survive all of this?" Malfoy asks, rubbing at a spot on the leather. He's being serious, Harry realises with a jolt and it's a bit unnerved. Usually he's the one who worries. It's unsettling to have Malfoy concerned, his eyes an intense grey as they scan Harry's face.

"Oh, we'll be fine," Harry says, trying for the joke, "What's the worst that could happen?" He gives Malfoy a cocky grin, seeing a flush come across Malfoy's pale cheeks and hating himself for enjoying his effect on Malfoy. It's so cheap to play with the attraction between them, but so bloody gratifying to see that it's still there.

Malfoy scowls fiercely, but his cheeks stay pink. "Potter, I'll ignore the fact that I've been just been Crucioed by my friend, who was attacked by Dolohov. And that I'm now trapped in your house indefinitely, without even the dubious prospect now of escaping to the Ministry, ta ever so, which is perhaps the greatest torture of all. Not that I don't like the house itself," he amends, apparently listening for protesting noises for a moment. "But, we've also just put a target the size of England on our backs."

Ignoring the dig about Malfoy's stay with Harry being torture and his weird rapport with the house, Harry says, "Yeah. But it's not like I haven't faced something this bad before, and I'm still here. I was a bigger target once, and the Ministry was backing the other side."

And so were you, Harry thinks but doesn't say. He watches Malfoy shift on the sofa, crossing his legs, a frown on his face that lets Harry know his unspoken words still came across.

"Don't be a berk," Malfoy says finally. "That's different. And the Ministry may be behind this now too. Also, you have to get the whole team through to safety with you this time, not just yourself." He looks at Harry, and his eyes are troubled, as if he's not certain Harry's capable of doing so.

And that brings Harry up short. Shit, Harry thinks. Maybe Malfoy's right. Maybe Harry doesn't know what he's doing after all.

Harry sinks into an armchair across from Malfoy. "It'll be all right," he says, even though the words sound empty to even his ears. He has to believe them. He doesn't have the luxury of falling apart. "I promise." He chews on his thumbnail, feeling overwhelmed and uncertain.
Malfy just sighs and picks up his coffee cup. He stands and looks down at Harry. "I sincerely hope you're right."

And then Harry's left alone in the library, staring blankly into the hearth as the last embers fade from green. He's not entirely sure he knows what's right any longer.

***

Pansy's in her lab early on Monday morning. To be fair, she's barely left it over the weekend--only for a few hours of sleep here and there. She's been pouring over the Soul Grass Salve, trying to break its composition down, and she thinks she's finally isolated the magical signature of the grass itself. Pansy copies her results onto a clean sheet of parchment; she wants to run it past Olivia Zabini if she sees her later today.

A knock on the door causes Pansy to look up. Althea Whittaker's standing there, awkwardly, her Auror jacket hanging open. Pansy catches a glimpse of a crisp white shirt beneath, the first few buttons undone.

"No one was in your incident room," Althea says.

Pansy rolls up the parchment tightly and wraps a spare hair tie around it before dropping it in her half-open satchel. The guv's expecting her at his house in an hour for a team meeting. She doesn't look at Althea. "Wouldn't be right now, would there, given your lot have all our evidence?"

Althea walks into the lab and closes the door behind her. Pansy tenses, her gaze flicking towards the shared office Jones is usually in. He's not here yet, but Pansy thinks she can bluff it if need be. Althea strides over to the workbench and drops a bagged book onto it. "Not all your evidence," she says quietly.

It's the journal. Pansy picks it up, fingerling the embossed spine through the plastic. "Why?"

Althea hesitates, then sighs. "Maxie found some credible evidence," she says, "that there might be a Death Eater encampment near where the photos in that journal were taken. Wrightson won't let us act on it, and I don't know why." She meets Pansy's gaze evenly. "I don't like you, Parkinson. I don't trust you. Any of you, with the possible exception of Potter, and even that's a bit wobbly these days."

"Thanks?" Pansy studies Althea. There are dark circles under her eyes, and she looks troubled. "But you're worried about Wrightson, yeah?"

"Something along those lines." Althea chews her bottom lip, her arms crossed tight against her chest. She's long and lean in her uniform, her dark hair pulled tightly back from her angular face and plaited into a braided knot at the nape of her neck. "Enough for me to think maybe your team might be more effective with this intel."

Pansy turns the book between her hands. "Scotland then."

"Loch Leven." Althea's fingers flex against the wool of her jacket. "The one near Hogwarts. "I know." Pansy looks at her. "You didn't have to--"

"Just fucking use it, Parkinson," Althea says sharply. "If Dolohov's actually out there like it seems, I'd rather him not be running about killing people wily-nily."
Pansy watches Althea as she turns on her heel. The plastic covering the journal rustles as her fingers tighten around it. "Hey," she says before Althea reaches the door, and Althea looks back over her shoulder. "There was a stone with the book. Small, about this big." She measures with her fingers. "Eight-sided, had some engraving on it"

Althea shakes her head. "No, there wasn't. We don't have anything like that in the boxes."

"It was in the evidence record," Pansy says. She can tell Althea has no idea what she's talking about. "You haven't seen it?"

"No." Althea frowns. "I've been through those boxes four times already, and there's nothing on the log. It was bagged?"

Something wriggles through Pansy, a nervous shudder of fear that she doesn't really understand. She's no idea what the stone's for, or if it means anything at all, but she doesn't like the idea that it's disappeared. Or been unlogged. "Yeah," she says slowly, a frown furrowing her brow. "Look, if you happen to find it tucked away somewhere, let me know?"

Althea shrugs. "Fine." And then she's gone in a click of heels against the stone floor of the lab. Pansy looks down at the book in her hands.

She's something to bring up in the team meeting at least.

***

"I'd drink to your birthday." Blaise says through a mouthful of the lemon drizzle cake Draco's mother'd brought over just after breakfast, "but I've been informed by that twat Irskine that alcohol interferes with one of those bloody potions he has me on."

Draco presses the tines of his fork into the crumbled bits of cake still left on his plate. "I can't even have a glass of wine with dinner," he says. "Kreacher's hidden it all, the wretch."

Blaise snorts, and Draco studies him. It'd been awkward when Blaise had first arrived in Potter's Floo; only Draco'd been in the house. Potter's off having his photo taken with Granger at Robards' command, and Pans is running late as usual. Blaise had just looked at Draco, nervous and hesitant in a way that had made Draco choke up a bit before Draco'd pulled him into a silent hug, his face pressed into Blaise's shoulder.

It's all it'd taken; nothing more needed to be said between them. No apologies, no forgiveness. Everything that needed to be spoken was conveyed in that quick press of their bodies together. In a few months, perhaps, one of them will make a joke about the time Blaise had tried to kill Draco, and they'll just laugh, and the whole damned saga will become one of their stories passed around when they're all in their cups, with laughter and head shakes and good-natured recriminations.

For now, though, Draco's just happy to be sat at Potter's kitchen table with his best friend, demolishing the remnants of Draco's birthday cake at quarter-to-ten in the morning.

"Happy twenty-sixth," Blaise says, and he nudges Draco's elbow. "Going to celebrate it with a shag?"

Draco makes a face. "Not bloody likely." At Blaise's raised eyebrow, he shrugs and stabs his fork into the last bite of cake on his plate. "No one about, yeah? I'm trapped in this bloody house--"

"With the bloke you've been shagging for weeks," Blaise points out. "I don't know, it's rather Jane Eyre-like, isn't it? Very Mr Rochester, our guv, with you as the demure governess?"
"Fuck you," Draco says. He puts his fork down, suddenly out-of-sorts.

Blaise watches him thoughtfully. "It's Jake, isn't it?"

Draco really doesn't like that his best friend is now on first-name basis with Durant. His skin prickles with anger. "It's the fact that Potter's a lying bastard."

"Granted." Blaise cuts himself another slice of cake and drops it onto his plate. Pansy's going to be furious that they've eaten almost all of it. Trissie's lemon drizzle is her favourite. "But exactly how furious can you be, given that you've just been shagging him? I mean, don't get me wrong, Potter ought to have told you about Jake. But..." Blaise shrugs. "I'm not certain how much of a righteous snit you can allow yourself. Mr I'm-fucking-my-SIO-who-has-a-boyfriend." He takes a bite of cake. "Glass houses and all. You were the other woman, so to speak."

"Your fluid sense of morality is disturbing at times," Draco pushes his plate away. "Not to mention your heteronormative gender roles. And are you seriously telling me to fuck Potter, whom, I might add, I didn't know had a boyfriend?" Although he ought to have bloody well suspected. Nothing's ever uncomplicated for Draco, after all. "Because I'm not, and I have no intention of doing so ever again."

Blaise doesn't look convinced. To be honest, neither is Draco. He'd woken up in the middle of the night from a vivid dream about Potter's mouth swallowing his prick, and it'd taken him an hour and a rather desperate wank to finally fall back asleep.

"I'm just pointing out," Blaise says, "that you're being slightly hypocritical. He did break up with the poor bastard." He rests his fork against his bottom lip. "Besides, I get the feeling that things really weren't all that good between them. At least recently."

Draco doesn't want to know what Durant's been saying to Blaise. "I don't care," he says after a moment. "It's over."

"All right." Blaise finishes off the slice of cake, licking the tines of his fork clean. "But you're going to have to work with him." He looks around the kitchen. "And live with him, at least until Dolohov's found."

Footsteps on the stairs catch their attention, much to Draco's relief. Pansy comes in, her cheeks just a bit sooty from the Floo. Potter'll shout, Draco's certain, but he'd left the wards open. He just doesn't have it in him to go back and forth each time the Floo rattles. He'd ask Kreacher, but the elf's worse than he is at remembering to shut the wards.

"Is that lemon drizzle?" Pansy demands, eyeing the nearly empty cake plate. "You fuckers." Blaise pushes the little bit left towards her. "You can pick at it."

"Happy birthday, love." Pansy kisses Draco's cheek, taking the seat next to him. "All the good icing's gone," she says, her voice melancholy. "That's the best part."

"I'm sure Mother would be thrilled to have Trissie bake one for you," Draco says with a roll of his eyes. "She's being melodramatic about my condition, and I'm happy to use her maternal guilt to have food brought over from the Manor." He lowers his voice. "Kreacher's good with most dishes, but his repertoire is a bit simple. To say the least. As far as Draco can tell, all Potter ever seems to want for dinner is a cheese toastie and a packet of crisps, and if Draco steps foot towards the kitchen stove, Kreacher pops in to push him away. The dinners that have appeared in Draco's room have mostly been a roast meat and two veg and are delicious, but Draco's starting to get a bit desperate for a good plate of spag bol, some crusty bread, and a proper bottle of wine."
"Where's the guy?" Pansy asks, picking at the remnants of the cake.

"Out playing poster-child for the Ministry," Blaise says. "Robards has him and Granger in photos for the task force, according to Draco."

"Stormed out in full Auror gear." Draco leans back in his chair. "Dress uniform and all." He doesn't add that Potter'd looked insanely hot and authoritative in his dark wool jacket with the inspector's red piping on it. Not to mention the Order of Merlin, first class, that he'd had pinned to his chest, the gold shining against the green ribbon, along with his various Auror awards for marksmanship and spell prowess. If Draco weren't determined to keep his hands off Potter at all costs, he might have dropped to his knees and blown him in front of the library hearth, particularly when Potter had fumbled with his gold cufflinks and Draco'd had to help him put them on.

Draco's sodding enormous uniform kink hasn't helped his resolve to keep Potter at bay. But he's still too angry to yield, whatever Blaise might say, and frankly, Draco's irked that Blaise has suddenly gone from insisting his shagging Potter's the worst thing in the bloody world to suggesting he and Potter get it on for his damned birthday. Dolohov's addled his fucking head, Draco thinks. Still, it's easier this way. He and Potter will work better together if they're not shagging. But a small voice at the back of his mind keeps asking him if he's sure. And Blaise isn't helping, the hedonist.


"Fucking liar," Draco says. He knows Pansy too bloody well.

Blaise spreads his hand out, palm up. "Well, see, and I think you could have Draco's leftovers there too, as he's resolved not to shag our guv any longer."

This stops Pansy's fork on the way to her mouth. She eyes Draco narrowly. "You put us through all this and then you decide not to put out? I mean." She huffs, but there's an affection to her feigned annoyance that makes Draco feel warm. "I get it, I do. And Blaise will tell you I slapped him for you. He had no right to not tell you about his ex."

"She did hit him, old boy." Blaise grins. "In front of Granger and everybody. It was really one for the ages."

"Yes, I did see the bruise. Well done you." Draco settles back, oddly pleased. He had been going to complain about his friends' disloyalty in assuming he would just lie on his back and think of Slytherin for Potter, but he knows how deeply they care about his well-being and that they'll always be on his side no matter what. He can tell Pans or Blaise almost anything. He's so glad that this matter with Potter hasn't come between them. If anything, the recent disasters have made him feel closer to them than ever.

"God-fucking-dammit, Malfoy!" Potter's voice echoes from the stairs, and both Blaise and Pansy turn to look at Draco.

"I didn't do anything," Draco snaps.

Potter's boots thump against the stairs. "There are fucking wards on the bloody fucking Floo for a fucking reason, you fucking arsehole. The next time I come home and the whole goddamn Floo's open to the sodding world I'll--"

"You'll what?" Pansy asks as Potter appears in the kitchen door. "Spank his fucking bum? Draco likes that, trust me."
"Shut up," Draco hisses, face heating. Pansy just shrugs and leans back in her chair, a small smile curving her lips.

"Oh, you're all here," Pottersays, drawing up short. He's put his uniform coat somewhere--Draco hopes Kreacher has found it already to press it and hang it properly. The dress pants hang low on his hips, held up by red braces, the cut of the trousers outlining the perfect curve of his arse. His shirt's unbuttoned at the throat, his tie left wherever he's tossed his coat, Draco suspects. Potter's skin is golden against the pressed white of his collar. He runs a hand through his hair, mussing it. "And you've had cake."

"Sorry," Draco says, not meaning it in the least. "Mother sent over a cake from the Manor."

Potter waves it away, his gaze on Blaise, then swinging to Pansy. His hand goes to the faint bruise still on his cheek; Pansy meets his gaze evenly. "It's great to see you all here." He seems a bit awkward. "Sorry for the inconvenience--I don't think we can use the Ministry right now, all things considered." He looks around at them. "I don't trust Wrightson and his lot, much less the Hit Wizards, and given that Zabini's not allowed back into headquarters until Titus clears him, I've asked Gawain to give us a formal permission to use Grimmauld. Although we do have to fucking ward it so fucking Dolohov can't fucking get in." He glares at Draco. "Malfoy."

Draco grumbles something under his breath about some of them having no choice and being imprisoned, and Blaise kicks his ankle for his troubles.

"Charming," Pansy says, looking around the musty, but newly clean kitchen and wrinkling her nose. Draco doesn't want to have to explain to her that this is what old money looks like--despite being part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, Pans's people had made their fortunes relatively recently and their houses weren't yet this old. Everything whiffed faintly of money around families like hers and was in far too good nick not to be a bit nouveau riche, even if their homes were more comfortable, in Draco's opinion. "I don't suppose you want me to set up me lab here."

Potter shakes his head, snagging a bunch of grapes from a fruit basket on the side counter and straddling a chair backwards. Draco looks away as he pops a purple grape into his mouth, biting down to bruise the skin and then suck its juice. Circe's fucking hell, Draco thinks. Potter's doing that deliberately. "I think you have everything you need there. But meetings should be here, and anything important that we'd rather them not take from us." He says the latter bitterly. Draco can't fault him for that.

"Speaking of." Pansy digs into her satchel and pulls out a bagged book, setting it on the table. "Althea Whittaker of all people brought this to me this morning." She looks at Draco and Blaise. "Recognise it?"

"It's the journal Mother was supposed to look at," Blaise says. "Why did that cow have it?"

"Wrightson took all our evidence over the weekend," Pansy says. "Your mother didn't get a chance to see it. Althea returned this to me this morning. She says Maxton thinks there's a Death Eater encampment near Loch Leven." She looks at Draco. "The photo, remember?"

"Yeah." Draco takes the bagged journal. "Got a glove?"

Pansy pulls a pair from her satchel and hands it to him; Draco slips them on, then unbags the journal, quickly finding the page with the photograph. He presses the pages open, and Potter and Blaise gather closer to peer over his shoulder. Draco touches the photograph with his fingertip. "Maxie's certain about that?"

"Enough that Althea was upset Wrightson wasn't taking him seriously." Pansy looks over at him.
"She risked a lot to give this to me. I don't think she's fucking us over." She hesitates. "I hope." "What's this?" Blaise points to the sketch of the stone on the opposite page.

Potter's breath catches just behind Draco's ear. "That's a Resurrection Stone," he says, his voice quiet. "The Resurrection Stone as I understand it." Draco glances back at him. There's an odd look on Potter's face, almost pained with a dose of fear mixed in. He looks like he's seeing things that aren't there.

"That's a myth," Pansy says. "A fairy tale for children--"

"I held it in my hands the night of the Battle of Hogwarts," Potter says. He's staring at the sketch. "It's real. I left it in the Forbidden Forest..."

They're all looking at him now. "Guv," Blaise says softly.

Potter shakes his head. "Sorry. Just..." He swallows. "I wasn't ever expecting to see that again."

"We had it." Pansy's face is pale. "It was in the evidence taken from Dolohova's house in Prague. I bagged it, I recorded it, and this morning Althea told me it wasn't in their boxes. Or in the log."

Potter stills. "What?" His voice is flat.

"I swear, guv," Pansy says. "It was in my lab until Friday afternoon--"

"You're fucking shitting me." Potter looks stunned. "You had the Resurrection Stone--"

"I didn't know what it was." Pansy's voice rises. "It was a rock for all I knew with a carving on it--"

Potter rubs his hand over his jaw. "A triangle containing a circle and a straight line." At Pansy's nod, he sighs. "The Deathly Hallows."

Draco just looks at him. He's heard the stories of the Peverell brothers. He knows the tales. He'd even heard whispers from the Death Eaters about the existence of a wand that could do magic that no other wand could. "That can't be true," he murmurs.

"It is," Potter says. He gives Draco a careful, sideways glance. "You were the master of one, once."

Draco snorts. "Stop taking the piss."

Potter shakes his head. "When you disarmed Dumbledore that night--" He swallows and looks away, and Draco knows what he's going to say, and his cheeks burn with shame. "On the tower."

"Don't," Draco says.

Potter chews on his lip. "You took the Elder Wand from him, Malfoy. You were the Master of Death without knowing it."

Draco's blood runs cold. "Fuck you," he says, his voice low. He doesn't know why he's so angry, but he is. He doesn't want to hear this, doesn't want to know what Potter's telling him. There's a vicious twist inside his gut. Had he known this at the time, he could have kept his family from ruin, he could have given his father the power he'd wanted, they could have been feted by the Dark Lord himself.

He feels sick at that thought.
"I took it back," Potter says. "When we were in the Manor and I disarmed you--"

Draco closes his eyes. His whole world's shifted. "And you became Master." The entire kitchen is silent.

Potter sighs. Draco can hear the thud of his heartbeat in his ears. He opens his eyes again. Potter's watching him. "Yeah," Potter says after a moment.

"It's just a story," Pansy says quietly. She looks between them, her face worried. "They're not--"

"The story may be bollocks," Potter says, "but I can assure you the Hallows are most definitely real." He looks a bit ill. "Let's hope Dolohov isn't after them as well."

Draco looks away. It's too much to take in. He hates Potter for telling him this, hates him for being the one who always destroys Draco, who defeats him, who bests him in every way. That childhood rivalry rears its head again, sharp and bright and bitter, and Draco wants nothing more than to punch Potter, to split his lip, to slam his fist against that perfectly smug mouth.

"I'm sorry," Potter says, and Draco's shoulders slump, the fight going out of him. He's not that boy any longer, even if fragments of him still exist, buried deep inside Draco's soul.

Draco shakes his head. Pansy reaches across the table and takes his hand, giving it a quick squeeze before Draco can pull away. Draco clears his throat. "So the Hallows exist," he says, his voice only slightly shaky. "And we may have had one, but we no longer do. Dolohov couldn't have got it from the lab."

"Whoever's leaking information might have done." Potter's mouth is grim. He looks at Pansy. "Do you think Althea was telling the truth?"

She nods. "I can't imagine she had any reason to lie. Not at this point. She said she'd gone through the boxes four times."

"And you looked under your labbench?" Potter asks.

Pans gives him a scornful look. "Yes."

"And asked Jones?" Potter's eyebrow raises.


Potter swears. "I'll need to report this to Gawain." He frowns and pushes his glasses up, pinching the bridge of his nose. "And Hermione, I think. Christ, if we get blamed for this--"

"We'll handle it," Blaise says from the end of the table. They all turn towards him. He shrugs. "It's all we can do."

"Yeah," Potter says. He takes another grape from the bunch and bites into it, looking miserable. Draco almost feels sorry for him. Potter shakes his head. "And we've your grandfather to deal with as well, Zabini."

Blaise doesn't look surprised. "I know. Mother's told me."

"He'll be arriving Thursday." Potter rests his arms on the back of the chair. "Gawain wants you to work with him immediately, but that also means we'll need to put you under Leglimency with
Titus and the others beforehand. Just for the record. We'll tackle that tomorrow morning." Blaise nods. "With Jake then."

"Yeah." Potter doesn't look at Draco. "He's the highest-ranking active Legilimens in Britain right now, and Gawain thinks we should make use of him. Particularly since he stayed near you this weekend."

"I'm fine with that," Blaise says. Draco knows he's lying. Blaise hates Legilimency. It frightens him; he doesn't like people poking about in his mind, and Draco can only imagine how fucking difficult this whole ordeal has been for Blaise. He nudges Blaise's elbow, and Blaise gives him a faint smile. "I'll be okay."

Potter stands. "We'll do it there," he says. "I'm not letting you near Professional Standards or the Hit Wizards without proper procedures in place for your safety. Bulstrode's already agreed."

"We'll be there too," Pansy says, and her tone gives Potter no chance of arguing with her. He nods.

"I'd expect that," Potters says. "I've cleared it already with Gawain." He hesitates. "Why don't the rest of you stay for a bit? Celebrate with Malfoy. It's not every day one of us turns twenty-six, yeah?"

"Where are you going?" Draco asks. He tells himself he doesn't care. He almost believes it.

"To talk to Gawain." Potter lets the back of his hand brush Draco's shoulder. "About the Stone." He looks strangely fragile at the moment. And young. Draco pushes aside his worry. Potter nods to Blaise and Pansy. "I'll owl you with the details for tomorrow."

His shoulders are slumped as he leaves the kitchen.


***

Harry's tired and grim when he makes his way back to Grimmauld Place. Parkinson was right; the Resurrection Stone's nowhere to be found in the Ministry--or at least not in any of the places one might expect it. If it weren't for the fact that Parkinson claims she'd logged it into evidence, he'd almost think she'd imagined the whole thing--how could something so small he'd left lying on the floor of the Forbidden Forest so many years back find its way into Dolohov's possession? The whole idea is impossible, ludicrous and so bloody unlikely that even Gawain had been dubious. But if Parkinson said she saw it, that she'd held it in her lab, then she did. Harry won't question her on that.

The evidence log's been wiped, though. Harry's gone over it with Arcturus. There's an empty space where the Stone must have been logged in from Parkinson's lab, but the identifying information's gone. An Auror might have been able to do that, Arcturus had admitted, but it'd have to be someone with authorisation. Someone at least at Harry's level.

"Like Wrightson," Harry had asked, and Arcturus had just nodded, face troubled. It's not enough to make an accusation on, but Harry had brought it up to Gawain anyway.

Still, Harry doesn't know if it's truly the same stone. He hopes it's a fake, a reproduction of some sort, which seems far more reasonable of an assumption. Whatever it is, it's missing from evidence
and even Wrightson had only put up a token protest, sneering about the incompetence of Harry's team, when Harry insisted on being able to sort through the boxes that have been moved into his incident room. That had only raised Harry's hackles. It's almost as if he'd not been worried that Harry'd find the Stone. Althea Whittaker had been there, watching him with those dark, shadowed eyes of hers, and Harry can't help but wonder what her end game is. She's made it clear she doesn't like the Slytherins, doesn't think they should be included in the force, and yet here she is, passing information like she's bloody Severus Snape.

The wards on the Floo slip away for Harry, and he steps into the library. It's cool and shadowed, but the leather of the sofa gleams and the windows are bright and shining in the late afternoon sun. Kreacher's hard work has paid off; the house looks better than Harry's ever seen it. Even the floorboards look less worn, the carpets brighter and more vibrant. Brilliant, Harry thinks. Even his house likes Malfoy better than him. Although he supposes he shouldn't be surprised. Malfoy has Black blood in his veins, after all. In comparison, Harry's just an interloper.

Kreacher stops Harry just as he's set foot on the stairs. "And where is Harry Potter going?" Kreacher asks, his hands on his scrawny hips. "Master Malfoy's birthday dinner is being in the dining room--"

Harry turns. "Kreacher, I think Malfoy would rather I not--"

"Horseradishes!" Kreacher snaps, and Harry's eyebrows rise. He's never seen Kreacher so worked up. "Harry Potter is not having his birthdays alone, and neither is Master Malfoy." He points down the hall towards the dining room. "Harry Potter is being expected. Sir." The latter is added in a surly tone.

"Fine." Harry holds up his hands. "I'll go." The idea of sitting awkwardly with Malfoy in the enormous dining room for however long it takes for Kreacher to served dinner exhausts Harry. He just wants a cheese toastie and a bottle of beer and then a long, hot bath before bed. Instead he pokes his head into the dining room.

Malfoy looks up at him. "Kreacher insisted," he says as Harry enters.

The room's sparkling, candles lit on every available surface, from the gleaming mahogany mantel to the heavy, carved sideboard. Two places are set along the long table, one at the head, and one beside it, and a polished silver candelabra's between the two plates, long, tapered white candles flickering brightly. Everything smells like lemon oil and beeswax.

Harry takes the seat beside Malfoy, who's at the head of the table. In the proper place for a Black, Harry thinks, and a quick flash of annoyance twist through him. Malfoy's fiddling with a string of thick pearls that's stretched beside his three polished silver forks. "What's that?" Harry asks.

Malfoy holds the pearls up. They're almost luminous in the candlelight, large and rather antique looking. "A present from your house, I believe," he says. "They just appeared here a moment ago. Kreacher claims they're Aunt Walburga's."

"They is," Kreacher says with dignity as he levitates a soup tureen into the dining room. "The house is keeping them safe." He sets the tureen on the table with a snap of his fingers. Only a little bit of soup splashes out onto the crisp white tablecloth, and it disappears immediately. A ladle zips over from the sideboard and starts serving the soup into the flat white bowls rimmed in a thick stripe of silver. It smells delicious, Harry has to admit, thick and creamy and mushroomy.

Kreacher frowns at them both as he pours sparkling water into their wine glasses. Malfoy's still restricted from alcohol, so Harry assumes he has to suffer as well. "The house is wishing Master Malfoy a happy birthday."

"With a dead woman's pearls," Harry says, giving Kreacher a look. "Because that's an appropriate gift for Malfoy."

"The house is being happy," Kreacher says, and he gives Harry a disapproving glare back as if he's afraid Harry's going to upset the bloody house. Merlin, sometimes Harry hates living in a magical home. "If a little confused."

Malfoy holds the string of pearls up to his throat. "I don't know. They're rather fetching with my frock, don't you think?"

Harry's mouth goes dry at the thought of Malfoy actually wearing the pearls. He has a vision of Malfoy spread naked across his bed, cock ruddy and heavy against his belly, those pearls gleaming against the curve of his throat.

He looks away, his face heating, and reaches for the goblet of water. He drinks half it down in one swallow. Kreacher gives an annoyed huff, and stands up on his tiptoes to refill the glass again for Harry. When Harry glances back at Malfoy, Malfoy's set the pearls down and is studiously examining his soup, dipping his spoon beneath the creamy surface. His cheeks are slightly flushed, and his hair falls forward as he dips his head, soft blond locks brushing against his jaw. He looks bloody handsome in the candlelight, the pale strands of his hair glittering, the golden glow warming his pale skin. Harry's breath catches; he feels as if he could watch Malfoy for hours like this.

"Is something wrong, Potter?" Malfoy doesn't look up from his soup.

Harry picks up his own spoon, his gaze reluctantly sliding away from Malfoy. "No."

The room falls silent, save for the quiet scrape of spoons against china as they finish off the soup. Harry almost wishes they could go back to avoiding each other again, with Malfoy taking his meals in his room and Harry sneaking down to the kitchen whenever he's hungry.

He clears his throat as Kreacher comes in to switch out the courses, removing the bowls and replacing them with plates piled high with roasted vegetables--carrots, potatoes, a handful of perfectly charred Brussel sprouts--and the most glorious sliced beef Harry's seen in ages, pink and seared and dripping with gravy. Kreacher's outdone himself, Harry thinks.

"So how long did Parkinson and Zabini stay?" Harry asks, cutting into the beef. It nearly melts beneath his knife.

Malfoy presses his napkin to his mouth before he answers. "Past lunch. Pansy wanted to get back to her lab, and Blaise had an appointment at the Beaumont with Irskine." He hesitates. "Durant's there too."

Harry knows. "Hermione wants him nearby in case Zabini has another seizure." He tries to keep his voice light, but he knows it's a delicate subject for both of them. "Or if Dolohov tries anything again."

"So Blaise said." Malfoy cuts another bite of the beef and lifts it to his mouth, not looking at Harry. The sleeves of his rumpled white shirt are rolled up to his elbows; Harry can see the scars winding their way down his forearm.
They sit stiffly together, with just the clink and rattle of their dishes filling the quiet gap between them. Harry hates this, hates the way Malfoy keeps his face turned just enough to hide behind that curtain of silver-gilt hair. He draws in a soft breath. "Malfoy," he says.

"Please don't." Malfoy's voice is quiet but firm. "I'm sitting here out of respect for your home and so I don't hurt Kreacher's feelings after he went to all this trouble. But I'm not interested in a tête-à- tête. Not tonight."

Harry watches him. "I'm sorry," he says finally. "I know this is difficult--"

Malfoy snorts and spears a carrot. "It's idiotic, is what it is." His eyes flick towards Harry, then back at his plate. "Can we just eat, then I'll go back up to my room and you can have full run of the house?"

It's his birthday. Harry owes him silence at least. He nods and picks his fork back up.

Malfoy's quiet until Kreacher comes to take the empty plates away. He waits until Kreacher's gone, mumbling something about bringing back the dessert, and then he looks over at Harry. "One question." He wipes his fingers on his napkin and leans back in his chair. Harry's struck by how well Malfoy fits these surroundings, in a way Harry never has. He looks as if he were born to be the master of Grimmauld Place, and Harry supposes, in a way, he was.

"Anything," Harry says, and he means it.

Malfoy chews his lip as Kreacher reappears, a glass bowl filled with Eton mess in his long fingers. He sets it on the table along with smaller, shining crystal bowls. "Trissie from the Manor is being sure this is your favourite," Kreacher says to Malfoy, and Malfoy gives him a small smile.

"Thank you, Kreacher," he says, as Kreacher dishes out a plate for him, and Kreacher's ears twitch almost happily, Harry thinks. It makes him feel inadequate.

Malfoy licks the spoon clean of whipped cream and crumbled meringue. Harry can barely stand to watch him. Christ, he doesn't know what's wrong with him when just seeing Malfoy eat his bloody birthday dessert makes him hard.

"You had a question?" Harry says a bit roughly. He looks away.

Malfoy sets his spoon back down in his bowl. He sighs, turning the handle between his fingers. "Why..." He hesitates, then quickly says, "why me? Anyone else in this entire world--" He breaks off, his cheeks flushing in the candlelight. "You know what? Just forget it."

"Because you're in my head," Harry says before he thinks about it too much. He doesn't know how else to answer that question. "Because you have been since we were stupid, mad kids, and even when I hated you I couldn't stop thinking about you." His voice drops to a whisper. "I still can't."

When he looks up, Malfoy's watching him. "Potter," he murmurs. "I..." He glances away, his jaw working.

Harry feels as if the world's rippling around him, in a ground swell of something he doesn't understand sweeping him towards Malfoy. He reaches out, but his fingers brush nothing but air. He drops his hand to the tablecloth, looks at Malfoy, then over at his bowl, smeared with cream and strawberries and bits of meringue.

"Fuck it," Malfoy says, and he scrapes his chair back, then Harry feels soft fingers on his jaw, turning his face toward Malfoy, crouching beside his chair. "I'm going to regret this," he says, and
his eyes are bright and so deeply, brilliantly grey. "But it's my fucking birthday and I want--" He closes his eyes as his lips brush Harry's. The kiss is soft and careful, an almost chaste press of lip to lip. And then Harry breathes out, his mouth opening beneath Malfoy's, and it's as if the floodgates of desire explode outwards, their tongues pressing together, sliding over each other, teeth catching on lips and skin. And somehow Harry's out of his chair, and Malfoy's on the table beneath him, their breath hot and humid against each other's skin. Malfoy's pulling him down, and Harry's hand slips beneath Malfoy's shirt to feel the firm solidness of the muscles.

"Christ," Harry says against Malfoy's mouth, and Malfoy kisses him as if he's starving, his fingers tangling in Harry's hair, holding him closer as Malfoy sucks Harry's bottom lip into his mouth, his teeth nipping at the soft skin.

And then Malfoy pulls his mouth away. "I can't," he says, his chest heaving beneath Harry's. Harry can feel how much Malfoy wants him, and it's all he can do not to rut his own swollen prick up against the hard ridge straining Malfoy's trousers. Malfoy catches Harry's hand, pulls it away, out from underneath Malfoy's shirt. "Don't," he says, breathlessly.

Harry rests his forehead against Malfoy's shirt. He can hear the staccato thud of Malfoy's heartbeat. "I know I'm an arse," Harry whispers. "But I still want you."

Malfoy's hand shifts, settles on the back of Harry's head. "It's stupid."

"Incredibly." Harry closes his eyes at the soft touch of Malfoy's fingers against his hair. "I seem to be very good at being an idiot around you." And then Malfoy's hand is gone, and Harry feels as if something's broken between them, something he desperately wants to fix and has no idea how.

"Yes, you are." Malfoy pushes at Harry's shoulder, and Harry stands up, not bothering to hide his erection. There's no way Malfoy didn't feel it pressed up against him, Harry thinks. Malfoy looks away as he sits up. How they managed not to knock over the candelabra, Harry has no fucking idea. "I would have once wanted you to fuck me on this table," Malfoy says quietly. "That would have been my birthday gift."

Harry doesn't say anything. What can he? He's bollocksed this all up between him and Malfoy. He has to live with the consequences.

Malfoy slides off the table, straightening his crumpled shirt. He doesn't look at Harry. There's the smallest pink mark of a love bite on Malfoy's jaw. Harry refuses to point it out. He'd rather think of it being there for as long as Malfoy doesn't notice it. Malfoy leans and scoops the pearls of the table, draping them heavily across his hand.

"I need to be alone," Malfoy says, and he smooths a thumb over the bumps of the pearls. "Tonight. If you don't mind."

"Yeah." Harry rubs at the back of his neck. "I understand."

Malfoy nods, and he heads for the dining room door. He stops and looks back at Harry, his hand on the door knob. "You really are an addiction, Harry Potter," he says. He presses his lips together, and sighs. "I have to find a way to break this." He gestures between them. "For my own bloody peace of mind."

The door closes behind Malfoy, and Harry sinks back into his chair, his face buried in his hands, his glasses pushed up. He feels hollowed out and empty inside, in a way he hasn't felt for a long time. It reminds him of the War, and those months afterwards when Harry was so desperately trying to come to terms with the death and loss surrounding him.
It bothers him that Malfoy brings up those feelings again. Harry doesn't understand it. Doesn't know why watching Malfoy walk out that door twists up a swell of grief that bring memories of Remus and Tonks sitting down the table from him, plates filled with Molly's food. Or Sirius striding through these hallways, shouting at Kreacher. Or Dumbledore looking tired and troubled as he stood beside the hearth. Or Fred, dangling Extendable Ears down the stairwell with George beside him. Or, for fuck's sake, even Snape stomping out from the library, his robes swirling behind him.

So many ghosts still linger in this house, echoes of them whispering through Harry's mind.

Harry takes his glasses off and sets them aside. He rests his forehead on his crossed arms and breathes out, trying so hard to close off that trickle of pain. Of sadness. He's kept it wrapped up, tucked away since the funerals ended and the process of rebuilding began. People didn't need a broken, grieving Harry Potter. They needed him to be their Saviour. The one they could look to, the one who was strong when they couldn't be. And so Harry had locked those memories away as best he could, refusing to let himself feel the pain of losing people whom he loved, whom he respected. The people who, many of them, were the last ties he had to his mum and dad. Harry's never let himself be close to anyone like that since, save Ron and Hermione. He's even kept Mr and Mrs Weasley at a distance, particularly once he broke up with Ginny. Not even Jake had a chance. It's even why he avoids this house, trying so desperately to keep himself away as much as he can. The memories are still here. They still ache.

And yet, here's Malfoy, of all sodding people, breaking through the carefully constructed barriers Harry's put up, and the moment he pushes Harry away, rejects him in the middle of Grimmauld Place--like he bloody well ought to, Harry thinks--all that grief Harry's hidden away comes flooding back.

Tonight, it's one loss too many, even if this one's not a death.

Harry's not certain it feels differently.

The tightness around his chest constricts, his throat aches with the effort of holding back the emotions. He looks up to find Kreacher watching him.

"Get out," Harry says thickly, but Kreacher just rests his long, thin hand on Harry's arm, a gentle touch that breaks down all of Harry's resistance.

And, for the first time in years, Harry lets himself cry.

***

Jake's heart skips a beat when his boots touch the hearth at Harry's house just before ten on Tuesday morning. Blaise and Olivia Zabini are close behind him, on schedule to come through from the Beaumont wizarding concierge Floo in a few minutes. Still, Jake'd thought he'd best go first in case of an unexpected or hostile situation. Even though the past days have been a welcome relief from stress, he's still on guard against anything that could happen whilst he's unawares. This is a Class A war criminal Harry's team've got mixed up with, and Jake's learnt enough about the British Death Eaters to know how dangerous they are. Ideological fascism is terrifying to him, in whatever form he might find it and wherever it pops up, whether in backcountry Louisiana or the highest echelons of British magical society.

If he's honest, though, at the moment, Jake's primary concern is whether he can perform professionally in his ex's house. He knows why Harry's insisting on the work being done here. It's a safe place for Blaise, and one the Ministry can't object to, after all, given the house's historical ties to the Order of the Phoenix as well as its association with its current resident. Harry's name
Malfoy's there, Jake's unwitting replacement, sitting stiffly on the sofa. His grey eyes meet Jake's, and Jake feels a sudden sympathy he didn't expect to have. Malfoy looks caged and furious and desperately unhappy. "Unspeakable Durant," Malfoy says after a moment. "You're early."

Jake nods, listening for a second to the noises of the house, the thumping above stairs that must be Harry getting ready and the slight creaks of Kreacher's footsteps, likely preparing in the wings for the onslaught of company. He'll be thrilled, Jake thinks. Kreacher's been annoyed for years about Harry's refusal to socialise properly. Jake looks around the library. It's the cleanest he's seen it, not a single bit of dust floating in the air.

"I thought it better to be a bit ahead of schedule," Jake gives Malfoy a careful smile. "You know what Blaise is like when he's getting ready, I presume."

Malfoy laughs then, obviously surprising himself and Jake with a quick, husky bark, and the fragility of his mood dissipates, at least a little. "We could be waiting here until tomorrow. Even my mother takes less time."

"Well." Jake glances back over his shoulder, ear tuned to the Floo. "He and Olivia should be right behind me. Where's--"

"Potter's broken his glasses." Malfoy has that pinched, awful look again, and Jake understands, at least in a way. Harry always siphons his nervous energy before something of this import into a ridiculous task. Or breaks something because he can't control his damn magic. It'd driven Jake up the wall more than once. "He's thundering around like a Hippogriff trying to find his backup pair."

Jake has a quick instinct to help, a sudden awareness that the glasses are probably in the cabinet next to Harry's bed, and he always forgets to look there. He stops himself. This isn't his work any longer. It's time to let it go, those minute catalogs of knowledge and intimacy. He and Harry aren't on that level any more. He lets the thought leave his mind.

Kreacher appears with coffee, exactly as Jake likes it--bitter brewed, with a dollop of pouring cream. The Brits think he's crazy for putting full-fat, heavy cream in his coffee. Jake'll take the scorn--British cream is absolutely divine.

Malfoy watches as Jake takes the mug Kreacher hands him. A small flinch crosses his face--he hides it well, but Jake's trained to catch those sorts of microexpressions, and Jake lets his mind gently skim across the surface of Malfoy's emotions, careful not to dip into anything that might be too personal. Malfoy's surprised, Jake realises, at the sting of seeing Kreacher know how Jake takes his coffee without asking. It's a reminder of the place Jake once held in this house, and that neither of them know how to address it.

Malfoy looks away, his teeth digging into his lip.

"Thank you, Kreacher," Jake says, gently, and the elf looks up once, almost fondly, and then nods.
before turning on his heel with the tray.

Jake sips his coffee standing. "How are you holding up?"

Malfoy blinks, apparently caught off guard. "I--All right, I suppose."

"You and Blaise seemed to have reconciled well. At least, he was less edgy when he came back yesterday." The creamy bitterness of the coffee is soothing Jake's frazzled nerves. "He was really concerned about having hurt you." Blaise had been terrified about making his way to Grimmauld Place yesterday morning. Jake had heard him in the sitting room of the Beaumont suite, telling his mother he wasn't certain he could face Malfoy, that Malfoy ought not to forgive him. Olivia had calmed him down and walked with him out to the hotel's Floo to face down his fears, but when she'd come back into the suite she'd been tense and worried herself. Malfoys were unpredictable, she explained to Jake, and it hadn't been until Blaise had arrived back later in the afternoon, smiling and without the furrow of worry between his brows that either Olivia or Jake had relaxed even the slightest.

Malfoy looks down at his lap, rubbing a hand across his collarbone unconsciously. Jake remembers that's where the worst of the damage from the duel was, and clearly Malfoy's body remembers as well. "I couldn't blame him," he says quietly. "He's my best friend."

Jake nods, eyes scanning the door. Harry's bound to come in any moment, at least, the thundering has stopped upstairs. Jake doesn't want Malfoy to feel too vulnerable when he does come in. It would set the wrong note for what's about to happen. "Hey, I have friends like that too." Jake smiles, and Malfoy nods. "I'd forgive them most anything."

And then there's family, Jake thinks. And he lets that thought sink away into the dark, protected waters of his own mind.

"So what are we expecting here?" Jake tries to settle the mood further, letting Malfoy lead him through the official protocol. "I'm new to this sort of gathering."

"As I understand it," Malfoy's shoulders firm up, and he lifts his chin. "We're expecting Head Auror Robards and Granger, of course, for the Unspeakables. Millie will probably come too as Blaise's counsel. And Professional Standards." He frowns. "Gideon Titus. That rat."

"Yeah, Blaise doesn't seem too thrilled about his role in everything." And that's an understatement--Blaise is terrified about being investigated by Titus, Jake knows well from talking with him to prepare for today, and of what it could mean for his career. Jake would like to promise him that Harry will watch out for him but, well, who knows right now what the lay of the land is. Jake can feel huge amounts of power just under the surface of this entire affair, and Hermione keeps mentioning that all is not what it seems, but still, even she doesn't quite know what is going on. "I'll take the evidence in front of Titus so that he agrees that it hasn't been forged and we'll just hope that exonerates Blaise."

"I see you and Blaise have become rather close," Malfoy says, and Jake hears more than a bit of frost in that statement. "He usually waits longer for first-name basis."

Jake shrugs. "He's a likeable guy. And I happen to be in the middle of this, so I've done my part."

Malfoy eyes him, a bit of a wrinkle between his sandy brows. "And how can I be sure you of all people are actually looking out for his best interests?" The frosty tone has gone acid now. "You don't even know him, so don't start claiming Blaise as a great mate."

And isn't that interesting? Jake thinks. Blaise had warned him that Slytherins were protective of
each other, and now Malfoy's showing his fangs. Baby fangs--Jake remembers well being young and thinking he was fierce--but fangs nonetheless. "Well, I don't think you'd trust me if I assured you, so I'll just let you decide."

Jake doesn't need to prove anything to Malfoy. Even though he does hope he'll trust him eventually, that's not going to come from anything Jake says, but rather what he does. He knows guys like Malfoy, after all. His brother, for one. They don't trust easy, but they're loyal as hell once they accept you.

There's a slight cough, and Harry walks into the room, black wire-framed glasses on his face and a wary expression to match. "Hi, Jake." Harry's hands are shoved into his pockets, ruining the line of his Auror jacket. He looks tired, his eyes puffy and red behind his spare glasses, and his face is drawn down, more miserable than Malfoy's. Strangely Jake isn't pleased by that.

Jake nods to his ex, a lump in his throat. He doesn't want to respond to Harry, doesn't want to feel the physical connection they'd had, but it's there. He can sense his body responding, and he tells it to slow down a little. That what he and Harry once had is going to change, is changing. Maybe one day it will be gone.

The Floo flashes, and Jake turns to see Blaise and then, close behind, Olivia Zabini stepping out into the library.

"Oi, Jake," Blaise is easy, grinning at Jake and clapping him on the back, then looking past him to the sofa. "Hey, Draco. How was your birthday dinner?"

Malfoy's expression could curdle cream, and Harry looks away. Jake doesn't want to know what that means. He tells himself he doesn't care, and for the most part it's the truth. Still, he can't help a sideways look at Malfoy, noting the faint mark beneath Malfoy's sharp jaw. Jake's stomach flips, and he wants to stride out of the room, just to get away from the anger that flares up inside him. Instead, he takes a deep breath, watching Harry say a few awkward words of welcome to Mrs Zabini. She nods imperiously at him.

The Floo flashes again, and Parkinson comes through, her dark hair twisted up in a loose knot on the top of her head. She's in full Auror gear as well, and her lips are a bright slash of crimson across her pale face. Jake wonders if she's slept, the dark circles beneath her eyes are pronounced. They make her look oddly like a Parisienne; he half-expects to see her take out a fag and ask him, vous avez du feu? But Parkinson barely pays attention to Jake; she makes her way to Malfoy and sits beside him on the sofa, threading her fingers through his.

Bulstrode's next through the Floo, a thick binder tucked under her arm. She studies Jake coolly. "Ready for this?" she asks.

Jake gives her a small smile. "He'll be fine."

"He'd best be," Bulstrode says. "I'll have your bollocks before the Wizengamot, American or not, if you cock this up."

"Yes, ma'am." Jake's fairly certain she means that. He likes Bulstrode.

Hermione arrives a few minutes later, precisely on time, in her best charcoal suit, the jacket buttoned up and the skirt two inches above her knee. She kisses Jake's cheek. "How's things?" she asks quietly.

"The Beaumont's nice," Jake says. "Not as comfortable as your flat, but it'll do for now." She looks over at Harry, then back at Jake. "I feel awful you've got caught up in this."
Jake shakes his head. "I'm here at your service. If this is what you need me to work on, I've no objections. Besides, it's fascinating, in its own way. Might write it up for one of the Legilimency journals. Graves always likes it when I get another publication credit to my name." Not bloody true---Graves is as anti-intellectual as they come in New York--but Hermione won't know that, and Jake hates the fact that she's worried about putting him in this position. She knows him well, but not enough to realise that no one makes him do anything he'd rather not. Jake's taken on Blaise as a project because he finds the whole damned thing intriguing on an academic level, not because he's masochistic. Well. Not entirely. He glances over at Harry.

Harry's pointing Blaise to the chairs he had Kreacher set out for the Legilimency, so Jake follows the cues as well and takes the seat opposite Blaise.

"Deep breath," Jake murmurs. "It'll all be fine."

Blaise exhaled, his palms flattening against his thighs. "Says you. It's not your brain that's going to be on display to everyone."

They sit awkwardly, facing each other, a heavy silver Pensieve that looks like a family heirloom on a small table next to them. If they weren't being watched by everyone, Jake would take some time to appreciate it. It's obviously Continental in origin, maybe German or Austrian, he thinks, and it must have been made after 1740 or so, judging by the silverwork. It has the Black family seal on it--he recognises it from the tapestry above the mantel--so it must have been bespoke, perhaps for a wedding or a significant anniversary. Jake thinks he remembers something Mrs Zabini said about Draco's mother being part of the Black family and Harry's house actually belonging to her cousins once. Jake's familiar with family drama. Wherever it takes place, it's almost always about possessions and feuds.

"You're doing fine," Jake says to Blaise. He's trying to ignore the look Malfoy's giving him, too bitter and too sharp for Jake's liking. He can't tell if Malfoy's angrier that Jake's friendly with Blaise or that Jake's fucked Harry. Probably both, he thinks, then puts it out of his mind.

When Head Auror Robards and Gideon Titus have come in and taken their seats, Jake and Blaise turn again to face each other, sitting knee to knee surrounded by the semicircle of onlookers.

Jake clears his throat. Blaise looks at him, and Jake tries to project wordless calm. "Constable Blaise Augustus Zabini, I'm here to catalog and record your memories of the events of the second of June for examination by the Ministry of Magic for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Today's date is June sixth, two thousand and six. My name is Jacob Bouvier Durant, Unspeakable and Legilimens with the MACUSA Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Northeastern Branch, docteur en psychomancie de l'Institut Tirésias Paris. Given the unusual nature of the occurrences, Head Auror Gawain Robards has asked that a Pensieve be used to record your memories for later viewing, to remain accessible by the Auror department as well as the department of Professional Standards. Do you consent to have your memories of June second explored and recorded by Legilimency?" He draws in a breath, his voice catching at the back of his throat.

The corner of Blaise's mouth quirks up. "I do consent."

"And do you consent to have these records kept by the Ministry of Magic under the Official Secrets Act of 1680?" Jake wants to roll his eyes at the pompousness of it, seventeenth century magical legislation and all, but he knows this is important for the admissibility of evidence for Blaise's inquiry.

"I do consent," Blaise says. He exhales, his nervousness obvious. At Jake's nod, he finishes the
formal statement. "Willingly and knowingly."

Olivia Zabini snorts from the back row, and Jake risks a quick glance at Blaise, who's flaring his nostrils at his mother's defiance. Jake'd bet there'll be a mother-son tiff about this later. He's spent enough time around the two of them in the past few days to know that Olivia strongly objects to her son's choice of profession. She's been trying to convince him to walk away from it all, to see this as a chance to leave the Aurors behind. It hasn't gone over well, to be honest. She seems to have only strengthened her son's resolve to stay the course.

Jake sets up the spell for the official record, taking pains to make sure Gideon Titus can see all of his hand gestures and hear all of the words. Millicent Bulstrode is sitting closest to Blaise, watching grimly as the process begins. She's here to assure fair treatment of her client, and Jake wouldn't want to be the person who tried to get through her.

At the end of the spell sequence, Jake's wand is floating over the Pensieve, ready to draw the fragments of Blaise's memories that Jake finds and store them in the vessel until they can be moved into flasks for storage. Head Auror Robards is watching the Pensieve--his official role is to monitor the process and guarantee that it is unimpeachable legally. They'll all take vows after the memory drawing process witnessing the integrity of the evidence gathered.

Jake nods at Blaise. "Constable Zabini, what do you remember of the events of June second at approximately eleven-fifty-eight in the morning?"

Immediately, Jake can see the red of the ground underneath Blaise's feet. He's outside, and alone. It's a beautiful day. He's thinking about lunch and what he'll drink with Draco. Jake pushes further, sees Blaise approach a fenced-in area of greenery.

Suddenly, there's a figure, Jake recognises it as Antonin Dolohov. Luka Abadzhiev is with him. Jake's wand is drawing material furiously into the Pensieve, long wispy strands that curl from Blaise's head and drop into the silvery-white potion. Jake pushes a bit further and sees Abadzhiev smear something thick and viscous across Blaise's face and pain explodes in Blaise's memory. It's so strong, so fierce that it almost knocks Jake entirely out of Blaise's head.

Jake sidesteps it, as he's been trained, watching from a side vantage as Abadzhiev tortures Blaise and Dolohov calls him off. Abadzhiev leans forward and whispers instructions to Blaise.

Find Malfroy. Use the Killing Curse. And then Abadzhiev looks back at Dolohov and tells him it's done. That Blaise'll go after Malfroy now, that this is the test they've been waiting for.

He won't kill him, will he? Dolohov asks. The boy's no good to me dead.

Abadzhiev just smiles, his eyes cold and narrow. He'll do what he's told. Dolohov nods and looks away.

The two bastards watch as Blaise staggers off, now under the influence of whatever they've dosed him with. Jake can sense their malice. It's all he can do to keep focussed against it.

The memories are scattered from this point, as Blaise's consciousness was under siege. Jake gathers the road carefully, slowly, trying to slow down the process to tease out the whole way to the Crickerly Building. Blaise doesn't fight him, but it has to be difficult to lead Jake through the parts of his brain that were damaged in this encounter. Jake treads as lightly as he is able, following Blaise gently as he waits for Malfroy, sees him walk down the stairs, start to cross the lobby. Then Blaise raises his wand to strike, and the memories start to tremble and shake. Jake can feel Blaise fighting the compulsion, feel that part of Blaise's mind that's cognisant of who Malfroy is, of what he's trying to do. It hurts Blaise, but he's pushing back, doing everything he can to cut
the words off, but the rage is rising, and it's not his, it's something darker, deeper--not his anger-
-not mine, not mine, NOT MINE, Blaise's mind screams at Jake. The words of the curse are stuck in Blaise's
throat. He can shift them into another hex--Diffindo at first, then Stinging, then Diffindo again--all
things that will hurt but not kill. Still, it's not enough. Whatever's controlling Blaise's mind is determined
to cast the Killing Curse, pushing, shoving, screaming at Blaise to say the words, furious each time he
bites them off.

The pain is nearly unbearable.

Jake is dimly aware of Malfoy kneeling in front of him, bleeding over the black and white floor. The
picture is strobing in and out of Blaise's consciousness, Malfoy's blonde hair, the seal of the Ministry,
Malfoy's grey cloak billowing on the floor, his shirt stained with blood. Blaise's arm keep rising of its
own accord and Blaise's lips are moving, then he is biting it back again.

Jake senses something that gets in the way, a dark presence that doesn't belong, pieces of
consciousness strewn in between Blaise's memories. He freezes the stream of Blaise's thought, holding
it in place, almost grateful for the moment of relief from the anger swelling up from the
depths of Blaise's mind, and Jake reaches for the parts that don't fit. He catches one and it opens up: a
glimpse of Luka Abadzhiev in a shop window, and Jake realises he's looking through Abadzhiev's
eyes, turning in the street, helping Dolohov to kill a man who's refusing to collaborate any longer, a
mushroom expert of some sort. Jake records it to the Pensieve. He slowly lets the stream of Blaise's
memory continue, then he stops it again, another tiny black spot showing up, starting to swell as
Jake pokes lightly at it. He retrieves another piece, a vision of a grassy knoll, frosty, somewhere cold.
He's shivering and looking at his hands, fingernails turning blue. Jake records it.

Slowly, Jake combs through the rest of what he's found, and he goes back, finding another
fragment back near the columns of the Crickerly lobby, where Abadzhiev was watching Blaise-- and
he turns his head, seeing the image of a face nearby, a face that nods at Abadzhiev, then slips away.
Jake takes it and records it. He hears outside of Blaise a gasp and a muffled swear by the Head Auror.
Jake refocuses on Blaise, sinking into the memories, watching until Blaise turns on Harry, feeling the
hate and the confusion, the anger at Potter for hurting Draco and exposing him to danger, to threatening
his friendships and endangering all of them with his bloody fucking Gryffindor imperviousness. But
his hate is augmented by the hate of the man controlling him, intertwined with Blaise's memories are
darker echoes of Death Eater hoods and a shadowy, snake-like figure. The Cruciatuis Curse rings out
bright and flaring through the thickness of Blaise's mental strands, turning to horror as Draco launches
himself in the air and catches it full in the chest.

Blaise is gasping next to him. Jake is worried he might have another seizure. Jake reaches in
carefully, sending the calm of the white caps on the waves off of Malibu, the summer he'd surfed every
morning, the soft, scratchiness of the sand, the cry of the gulls. Blaise breathes more slowly, and Jake
pulls back, letting the memory of the Crickerly Building shift to the forefront again. Jake walks along
with Blaise gently, feeling him fall to the floor, staring up at the building's bright cupola, until he
himself enters Blaise's memory, and then the Hit Wizards, and that's where he stops.

When Jake opens his eyes, Blaise is looking at him, haunted. Jake risks a quick clasp of his arm, the
smallest sign of solace he can offer without registering bias in front of the witnesses. "You did very well,
Constable Zabini."

Blaise nods, but he's breathing hard, and his hands are shaking. He presses them against his knees, fingers
digging into his trousers.

Jake is feeling wrung out and emptied as well. This one was hard. It always is with mind control,
but this was stranger. He's never got two separate sets of memories out of someone before. It's like part of Abadzhiev's soul took up temporary residence in Blaise's head, leaving behind traces of himself. Jake doesn't like that. At all. He wants to go back in, to root out whatever darkness might be lingering, but he doesn't dare. Not yet. He doesn't think Blaise has it in him to withstand another round right now. His neuromagical centres have been too taxed.

Head Auror Robards is holding the rim of the Pensieve, knuckles white. He looks up at the circle, who've all leaned in closely. He's breathing hard. "That was Corban Yaxley," he says quietly.

A chill runs across Jake's shoulders at the look on the Head Auror's face, the hauntedness, the fear. This is something really, really bad. Of that much Jake is sure.

Hermione is quiet and pinched next to him, her chest rising with a quiet breath. Harry is frowning, brows pulled together in full scowl. Parkinson is clutching Malfoy's arm, and Mrs Zabini has a grim look on her face.

This wasn't at all what anyone expected.

Silently, each one of them clasps hands, forming a circle around Blaise that ends with Robards' fingers curling around Jake's left palm. Jake says the words of the witnesses' vow, watching as the names appear on a piece of parchment beside the Pensieve, bright silver that fades into black. When he's done, he lets his hand fall free from Robards', breaking the spell.

A soft breath goes around the circle as they each step away, rubbing at their hands.

"Well," Jake says after a moment. "I think we can guarantee that Dolohov is in England. Or was on Friday, at least." He affixes a Ministry seal on the parchment, thick and red and waxy, and rolls it up, handing it to Robards.

Gideon Titus recovers himself out of a trance-like state. "Yes, well. Thank you, Unspeakable Durant. We'll take the memories you recovered…"

"Not yet." Robards is grim. "I'm going to catalog them and go through them personally. Gideon, you're welcome to watch here as I do so."

Titus looks taken aback. "Yes, of course, Head Auror. I'll stay and assist, of course." Hermione looks over to Harry. "Have Kreacher bring the flasks, Harry."

The elf appears with a milkcrate with newly shaped glass vessels, each stamped with an official seal.

Jake watches as Robards goes through the Pensieve, piece by piece, sorting between the two memories. He puts Abadzhiev into one corner, Blaise into the other, Jake notices.

Once he's done, he and Titus both seal the flasks magically. The official seals creep up to cover the stoppers to the flasks, wrapping around them, the Ministry stamp appearing on them. Robards tucks the witnesses scroll between two flasks.

Gideon and Robards put a further seal on the entire crate, such that it will take both of them to open the seals. Then Robards lets Gideon take the entire crate into the Floo.

When Gideon's long torso has folded into the Floo and disappeared, Jake says, "Head Auror, sir, do you need any help getting that last memory into a flask?" He'd noted that Robards had left that one in the bottom of the Pensieve, keeping it from Titus's grasp.
Robards grins at him. "I've been doing this for years, but why not?"

He sits back as Jake picks up the last memory, the one of the Death Eater the Head Auror identified as Yaxley, and puts it into a new flask that Kreacher brings. Robards takes this one personally and puts it in the pocket of his robes.

"That was a surprise," he says finally, looking around at all of them. Hermione nods, face drawn. "How are all of these dead people turning up alive?" Millicent Bulstrode asks.

Jake looks between Harry and Hermione. "That Yaxley fellow's dead?"

"Reported during the year after the War," Harry says, his mouth tight. His gaze flicks towards Robards. "That was another kill attributed to Bates and McKenna."

The Head Auror shakes his head. "Merlin's fucking tits." He rubs a hand over his face. "This doesn't get mentioned outside of this room. Do I make myself clear? The last damned thing we need is the Prophet going after this as well." He sighs. "Not to mention McKenna and Bates. If there's something there, I don't want them knowing."

Harry nods.

"They were never Death Eaters," Malfoy says quietly. "At least not in the circles I knew."

"Someone could have used them." Hermione leans forward. "The way Zabini was used."

"Or they were sympathisers." Blaise's voice is weary.

Bulstrode stands up. "I'm going to go back to the Ministry and try to keep Titus from locking away the evidence. I'll have it requisitioned into the counsel's room."

Robards nods. "Good plan. I'll make sure Arcturus knows you're coming."

Harry stands up as Bulstrode is leaving. "I want to go after them. Dolohov and Abadzhiev. We've got a known hideout in Scotland--Wrightson's team found credible evidence of a base near Loch Leven. We need to strike hard and fast if we're going to catch them." He looks over at Robards. "It's time, Gawain. We can't wait any longer."

Hermione and Robards nod. Jake hasn't heard this yet, and he pauses. "Are you talking about a field operation?"

The others look at each other, then to Robards for confirmation. "Yes," Robards says simply. "We're going to move against them."

Jake whispers softly.

Blaise stands up, sways a little. Jake reaches out to steady him. "Hey," he whispers gently, "you okay?"

Blaise turns his head, mouthing softly so that only Jake can hear him. "Yeah. But I'm dying for a fag. Get me out of here."

Jake nods, then turns back to the worried faces watching them. "He just needs some air. I'm going to escort him into the hall." He gently puts an arm under Blaise's elbow, and Blaise leans on him, too much to be just pretend. Parkinson's eyes are curious as she watches them pass. Malfoy folds his arms and looks away. He's jealous, Jake realises. And not just of Harry. Interesting, Jake
thinks. Malfoy's a complicated creature--with a possessive streak wider than Lake Pontchartrain.

As they leave the crowded room, Jake sees Kreacher watching them from the other end of the hallway, cloudy eyes enormous in the half light. Jake leans in close to Blaise, who's slumped against the wallpaper. "You did really well in there, seriously. That was some messed up shit."

"My head is killing me," Blaise admits.

Jake motions to Kreacher and asks for water, which Kreacher brings quickly. Blaise sips at the glass, head leaned back against the old wallpaper.

"Hey, you freaked out the Head Auror. That's got to count for something," Jake smiles. "Special bonus points?"

Blaise gives an amused huff. "I'd rather have alarmed Gideon Titus. He has to sign off on the investigation." He shifts a little against the wall.

"I don't think you have to worry too much about that," Jake says. "Your memories were pretty vivid there. Not much he can do to discredit them."

"I reckon he'll try." Blaise closes his eyes. "Those of us from Slytherin House aren't well liked these days. Plenty of Aurors who'd like to see us kicked off the force still."

Jake doesn't know what to say. The house politics of Hogwarts are foreign to him. Not that America doesn't have its own issues with prejudices and hierarchy. Christ, Jake's had to go up against that shit himself over the years about where he's from, who he's related to, the fact that he has a fancy degree from Paris but didn't go to Ilvermorny. He wants to reassure Blaise, but the world's a shit place sometimes.

He can feel Blaise shaking beside him; sometimes it's best just to be quiet and still.

"Breathe," he says after a moment. "It'll help you come back." He exhales himself, watching Blaise. "Like this." A slow inhale that he holds for a few beats, then he exhales again.

Blaise follows his lead. Together their chests rise and fall, finding a common breath whilst the voices argue inside the room, Hermione's quiet and firm, Harry's sharp and furious, Gawain's grim.

They'll all have time to deal with the repercussions of this. Jake's just as glad to let other people hash it out.

He'll march where he's told. It's what he always does, after all. For now, it's enough to stand here in the hallway and just breathe.

***

Draco's up against the headboard in his bedroom, naked and breathing hard already, the door spelled shut with a locking spell just in case Potter comes back from the Ministry early. There's nothing better to do in this house than wank, he thinks, not now that it's cleared from this morning. Even Pansy and Blaise hadn't stayed to keep him company, both of them sweeping off to other places. Pansy back to her lab with Olivia to give her the journal, Blaise off with Durant for Circe only knows what. And that upsets Draco, the way Durant had put his hand on Blaise's back as they stepped through the Floo, bent his head towards Blaise's, both of them whispering.

He's a bastard, Durant is, and Draco's breath catches. His knees are splayed wide, his bare heels
Draco digs into the mattress; his cock is ruddy and hard in his fist. He doesn't want to think about how often his mother's cousin had wanked up here. He's sure it'd been countless times—the room still reeks of adolescent despair.

Draco's foreskin slides as he moves his hand up and down his swollen length, rolling his palm over the sensitive, swollen head of his prick and letting his eyes close.

Shit, that feels good. Still better than any anxiety potion he's ever tried. Draco can feel his frayed mind settling with each slow twist of his hand down his cock; a good wank can help stave off a panic attack if he catches himself in time. His chest is warm, his breath thick and liquid in his lungs. And the sensitivity of his prick is astounding—evidently being around Potter keeps him half hard all the time because he'd barely needed to touch himself before his cock had leapt to attention.

Draco closes his eyes to the pictures of the half-dressed women on the walls around him and lets his thoughts trawl through his favourite images of bodies, men, pricks and mouths and arseholes that he remembers from experience and from years of flipping through the skin mags Blaise had kept beneath his mattress at Hogwarts. Durant's wide shoulders and easy grin come up briefly, and Draco is furious with himself for finding the man hot. He lets that one go. It's far too fraught.

And then there's Potter, of course. Circe, but Draco's cock is rock hard anytime he lets himself imagine that particular crooked smile, the tangle of messy black curls, those full lips disappearing over and over and over his cock, sucking on the head, sinking down almost all of Draco's length, the warmth of being inside Potter's throat. Draco pinches a nipple, just to feel the quick jolt of sensation, then presses his hand against his balls, stroking harder with his right hand, letting the pressure build in his prick.

Potter was so good at sucking cock. He'd used the right amount of pressure, his thick hands at the base of Draco's cock and that hot, gorgeous mouth sinking down his shaft, sucking and tonguing Draco to madness. Draco wishes that Potter were here right now, in the house, that he could just go downstairs, storm into Potter's room, stick his prick into Potter's mouth, and get himself off that way. He wouldn't say anything, just demand to be serviced and let Potter choose to suck him off or not.

He's sure Potter would do it, and that stops him for a moment, his hand light against the curve of his prick, his foreskin hot beneath his fingers.

What the fuck are they doing, anyway? Is it healthy that Draco wants to hurt Potter, wants to inflict punishment on him for what he's done?

And really, Draco's losing sight of what Potter's done in the swirl of emotions and complications of being here in this damned house with Potter. So Potter'd fucked his boyfriend and broken up with him, what, a week or so ago? Only a floor down from this very room, his brain helpfully supplies. Draco fights against the swell of rage that rushes through him.

Really, shouldn't that be Durant's business to get angry about, not Draco's? Potter had lied, sure, but Durant had been in New York most of the time Potter was fucking Draco. And Draco had never asked. He hadn't wanted to know, even though Draco thinks maybe there was some part of him that might have suspected, that might have thought Potter had some other reason for keeping Draco his dirty little secret. Merlin, he was so fucking stupid.

And Draco wants to hate Durant. He does. But he can't really, and that infuriates him. As jealous as Draco may be about their sudden friendship—and God, but he is—Durant has been great with Blaise. He actually gives a damn about keeping Blaise safe, whether mentally, magically or physically, as far as Draco can tell, and that pisses Draco off to no avail. Draco hates it that he
can't hate him properly. Isn't one supposed to despise one's ex's ex?

His stomach flutters. Is that what Potter is now? Draco's ex? He doesn't like that thought. Potter's nothing to him. Just a good fuck, that's all Draco will let him be. And a good fuck can't be an ex. A good fuck is just a good fuck that one isn't fucking any longer. That's all. He moves his hand again, letting his fingers curl tighter around his prick as he thinks about fucking Potter, about watching him move beneath Draco's body, seeing the arch of Potter's throat as he pushes up to meet Draco's thrust.

Draco groans and shudders, his feet pressing harder into the mattress.

Plus, if Draco's honest, he still doesn't understand why Potter isn't letting himself be banged like a Bludger in World Cup match by Durant. Durant is insanely attractive and more than man enough for the task. Also, he has this self-aware, knowing quality that Draco finds frustratingly calming. Durant knows who he is, and he is hard to rile. Draco can only imagine what that must be like. He's never experienced it himself. Potter's a fucking fool for giving that up, and Draco hates himself for thinking that. He wonders what it was like for Potter to fuck Durant, whether Potter writhed beneath him the way he had for Draco. He closes his eyes and he can see the memory Durant shoved into his head only a few days ago, of Potter's legs wrapped tight around his hips, his eyes wide and unfocussed.

Draco's balls are straining for release. He's panting now, his fist moving more quickly as he picks up pace. Circe, he just needs to bring himself there and get out of his head.

And then he sees Potter in his mind, and Potter's not doing anything particularly. He's just looking at Draco with that strange, small smile. Draco smells the muskiness of Potter's scent that is all over this house, particularly in his bedroom downstairs, and with a shudder he suddenly imagines being splayed out over Potter's pillows again, letting Potter fuck him here, in this house, in his bloody great bed. Letting Potter take possession of him body and soul. And the images in his mind shift.

Draco imagines Potter spreading him open, pounding into him and telling Draco that he's such a good fuck, that yeah, he's mad for Potter's cock. That Draco is his. Draco sees Potter's face when he say this, and Draco cries out, the force of his climax nearly sending him clawing out of his whole body, fingers tight on his prick, his hips writhing and bucking up as his shoulders press against the headboard, slamming it into the wall.

When he returns to himself, collapsed limply on the bed, he feels the stickiness of spunk on his belly, over his fingers, and thinks he hears the eaves of the damn house sighing. He rolls his eyes to the ceiling, then he says a quick cleansing spell. He's loose and limber as if Potter's actually fucked him, though not as sore, but his heart's a tangle of questions he'd rather not examine at the moment.

Draco shifts on his side, curling his knees loosely, gooseflesh prickling across his flesh as the flush of his orgasm fades. He wonders at how real it all felt, that thought of being taken by Potter, being possessed fully. His arse twitches, and his thighs shiver.

It's not real. It wasn't. It can never be. Draco presses his face into his pillow, inhaling the faint scent of lavender. He feels open and raw. Pliant.

Whatever Blaise may say, this is not a fucking Brontë sisters novel, him tucked in the servant's rooms pining over the master in his heavy, canopied bed.

Draco won't let Harry bloody Potter control his life. It's not going to happen. He wraps his arms around the pillow, pulling it closer as his worries rush back over him again.
He closes his eyes, wills himself to breathe. It doesn't bloody help. Not any more.

Merlin, he doesn't know what to do.

***

Pansy's crouched behind a small hillock near the shores of Loch Leven, Potter on one side, Durant on the other. Granger's behind them, murmuring to another one of the Unspeakables, trying to determine where best to place the rest of the task force for optimum effect.

"We have the element of surprise," Potter says, his voice low. "We ought to use that before we lose it."

Granger's mouth thins at him. "You're not in charge, Harry. Remember?"

Potter rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying." He looks over at Durant. "You agree, don't you?"

"I'm not getting into this fight," Durant says. He's gripping his wand tightly, the way Pansy is. She wonders if he's just as nervous to be in the field. "Solve it your damn selves."

They've been here since well before dawn--far too early for a Wednesday morning in Pansy's opinion. And it's bloody cold in Scotland, even in June. She doesn't know why they just haven't moved, why Granger's insisting on multiple risk assessments of the area, changing her force deployment with each one. She agrees with Potter, to be honest. Just go in and get the bloody thing done.

Blaise and Draco have been left behind, Blaise at the Beaumont with his mother and Draco back at Grimmauld Place. And that had been a vicious fight she'd Floo'd in on this morning. She'd never seen Draco so stubbornly adamant to be part of a mission, nor the guv so bloody determined to sideline him. When she'd come into the library, Potter'd been shouting about Draco not even coming out for dinner the night before, and what the hell was bloody wrong with him, anyway.

She'd ducked just in time to not be hit with the vase Draco had thrown Potter's way, and that had sobered Draco up enough for Potter to put his foot down and insist that Draco had no place in a raid that might put him in target range for Dolohov.

A part of Pansy thinks maybe they could have used him, what with his vase-throwing skills and all. Still, Pansy had sided with the guv, which probably means Draco won't be speaking to her for the next day or week. She doesn't give a fuck, really. Not if it means he won't be taking an Unforgivable to the chest again. He's been injured too recently, and he's known to be a bloody direct target of Dolohov's anger. Also, if she's honest, Draco's a crap duellist. He's good enough on defensive, but his offensive skills are really not much better than a first-year recruit's. The Ministry has prized defensive magic after the War, so Draco's been in good stead with the Aurors. But he needs to up his game if he wants to fight Dolohov.

At least Blaise has been bloody sensible about it all. Durant said he didn't even argue when he was told to stay behind with Olivia in the Beaumont. Then again, Blaise has had Dolohov and Abadzhiev in his head already. That has to make a difference.

Potter nudges her arm and she glances up at him. "All right there?" he asks, and Pansy nods.

"It's been a while since I've been in the field," she admits. She wraps her olive Barbour coat tighter around her. "Forgot how long these things take."

Granger turns away from the Unspeakable, who taps his earpiece and says something quietly into
it as he walks away. She crouches down and scoots across the scrubby patches of green grass. She's in jeans and a dark cloak, the same as the other Unspeakables, and her hair's pulled back into a tight knot. She looks grim. "There's a camp there, that's for certain. No idea why Wrightson wouldn't investigate. Broderick's communicating with headquarters to get the all clear for us to move. You lot ready?"

Potter nods. "Where do you want us?"

"Apparating to the shoreline," Granger says. "There's one boat there. Keep them out of it. Jake will be with you, so you'll have cover. My two teams will converge from the left and the right. I'll be up here observing. You should be able to hear me over your communication charms. Hope your mobiles are all charged up. At the moment, we've confirmation of three individuals in the camp, but no ID. Treat them as very dangerous hostiles, yeah?"

Pansy feels wound tight, ready to jump out of her skin at the slightest provocation. There's a reason why she switched her speciality to the lab. She's always hated the pressure that comes with these sorts of missions, the tight thudding of her heart against her chest.

Broderick comes up behind Granger, his long body hunched over. "We've got clearance from Croaker."

"Frazer and Prichett's teams are in place?" Granger asks, and Broderick nods. Frazer's an Unspeakable, Pansy knows, and Prichett's a Hit Wizard. Peasegood had managed to wheedle two of his men onto the taskforce, much to Potter's deep and vocal annoyance. Then there's them.

Potter, his ex, and herself, lab rat extraordinaire. Pansy does wish Draco were beside her, right now, calming her the fuck down. The guv's shite at that.

Granger draws in a deep breath. "Then we have a go, people. Harry, get your team down to the shore now." She claps her hands. "Let's do this."

Potter touches Pansy's arm and jerks his head towards the loch. She takes a deep breath, and then she's Apparating, landing with a soft thud and a grunt in the coarse sand beside the rippling water, half-hidden by the weathered boat. Potter holds his finger to his lips, and she feels Durant hit the ground beside her.

Potter looks over at him and raises his eyebrows. Durant looks up over the side of the boat. He flashes two fingers at Potter and mouths by the campfire. Potter nods and glances over at Pansy. He holds up his hand again, palm out at her. Stay here. She doesn't object.

Durant goes around one side of the boat, Potter the other, both of them clenching their wands in their fists.

"DMLE," a woman shouts. Not Granger. Perhaps the other one. Frazer. The not-Hit Wizard.. "Down on your knees! I said down!"

Pansy takes a deep breath and launches herself around the side of the boat. The camp's in chaos, Unspeakables swarming down the sides of the hill, the two Hit Wizards with them, Potter and Durant in the middle, curses and hexes zipping through the air in a burst of bright colours. Pansy shouts as Potter's hit, first with a Stinging Hex, then with something she doesn't recognise but which sends him stumbling to the ground. "Guv!" She's beside him in a second, pulling him back just as another Dark curse slams into the earth beside his feet, sending up a cloud of dirt and bits of grass.

"Thanks," Potter says, and then he tugs her down before a hex catches her ear. "We've got four down here, Hermione," he shouts.

"Three now." Granger's voice crackles in Pansy's ear. "One just Apparated. Prichett, take the right
side, for fuck's sake. You've a hostile behind the tent."

Pansy sees a figure next to the campfire, throwing something into it. "Oh, hell you don't," she says, and she launches herself forward, casting a Stunning Spell with all the force she can. It hits the man in the back and he pitches forward, his robe dragging through the fire. Pansy runs over and jerks him back, stomping on the flames as the man flops at her feet. She manages to get him immobilised with an Incarcerous around his ankles and hands; the pounding of her pulse and the gasps of her breath are the only thing her terrified mind can focus on. "One down," she shouts, hoping the communications charm catches her voice. "One down by the campfire."

When she looks up, it's all over. She's surprised by how fast it's gone.

The Unspeakables are moving through the camp, and Durant's helping Potter limp over to the boat. He leans against it, looking worse for wear, a deep cut on his cheek and his glasses askew. He's favouring his left leg too, and Pansy'd be willing to bet he's sprained something on his right side.

"All right, guv?" she calls out, and Potter raises his hand.

Then Granger's beside her. "You got one," she says, and Pansy prods the man's side with the toe of her boot. He doesn't move. "Good for you. The others got away."

"Dolohov?" Pansy asks, her fear suddenly rushing back.

Granger shakes her head. "Didn't register his magical signature. I was checking, although I'm fairly certain Abadzhiev was one of our boys." She sounds fierce. "This bastard might help us track him down though." Granger casts a Reviving Spell and waits for the man's eyes to flutter open. She smiles down at him. "James Selwyn. Hello. I've a cozy little cell waiting for you to explain exactly why your wretched arse isn't in Azkaban where it belongs. Broderick!"

Broderick comes over. "Want me to truss him up?"

"That'd be brilliant," Granger says.

Pansy turns away, looking across the ruins of the camp. Potter's on his feet again, picking through the remnants of the tent with Frazer at his side. Durant's pulling an Unspeakable to his feet, checking him for injuries. Pansy's gaze drifts back to the campfire. There's a box next to it, filled with a plant material. Selwyn'd been throwing this onto the fire, she realised, and she squats down beside it, pulling a pair of gloves from her pockets. She snaps them on and pokes at the grasses, lifting them up to sniff the heavy scent of decay rolling off them. They're not rotting though; in fact, they seem freshly clipped. She rolls them between her fingers, certain of what she has.

"Guv!" Pansy digs further into the box. Beneath the grasses are a few small bags of mushrooms she recognises. Fuck. She holds them up into the light as Potter limps over. "Recognise these?"

"I'm assuming they're your mushrooms." Potter crouches next to her. He grunts in pain, his face twisting into a wince before he breathes out.

"Selwyn over there was trying to burn them in the fire," Pansy says. She holds up a handful of the grass. "Pretty sure this is Soul Grass." She flip the grass to show him the cut ends. "Fresh, too, so it had to have been harvested this morning, close by."

Potter looks around the camp. He runs a hand over his mouth. "You think they're growing those here?"

"The grass at least." Pansy's gloved fingers move over the bags of mushrooms. "These I'm willing
to wager are going to match the spores I found on Richard Thomas."

"Can you prove that?" Potter lowers his voice.

Pansy nods. "With a few hours in the lab. Wrightson never took my wet samples."

"Then bag it and go," Potter says. "We'll handle the rest of this. Just get me some sort of connection to Thomas and to what was used on Zabini, yeah?"

Pansy pulls two evidence bags out of her pocket and drops a handful of the Soul Grass into one, sealing it shut before tucking the mushrooms into the other. "Granger thinks she caught Abadzhiev's signature on Apparition." She's suddenly glad Draco wasn't there.

"I know." Potter looks sour. "I almost had him." He reaches over and squeezes Pansy's shoulder. "Good work on Stunning Selwyn."

A warm glow floods Pansy; she's almost embarrassed by the simple praise. "Thanks." She glances back over to where Selwyn's being held up between two Unspeakables. "Are we going to get to question him?"

"We fucking better," Potter says, his mouth tightening. He pushes himself up, wincing as he does. The side of his face is covered in blood from the cut that stretches from his temple to his jaw. His Auror's cloak falls in soft folds around him. "You'll let me know what you find immediately." It's not a request, and she knows it.

Pansy slips the evidence bags in the deep pocket of her Barbour. "The moment I know." The chill of the Scottish morning brushes her cheeks as she stands; the acrid, foul smell of peat and burning Soul Grass filling her nostrils. "If you find anything else, bring it to me."

Potter nods, and Pansy leaves him standing there, shoulders stooped, Granger drawing closer the further away Pansy moves. She catches the other woman's gaze and holds it. Granger doesn't like her. Pansy thinks, but Granger's small nod conveys at least a modicum of respect. Pansy gives her a cold smile. A Slytherin lab rat brought down a Death Eater, something that none of Granger's perfect Unspeakables had managed.

And for that, Pansy thinks she deserves a bloody stiff drink.

***

The interview room is surrounded by Unspeakables when Harry gets back from filing his report with Gawain. The Head Auror had wanted to send Harry to St Mungo's for further checks, but Harry'd refused to lose his shot at Selwyn. Besides, he can still walk, if a bit stiffly, and the pain keeps him focused on his anger. He's not seen Selwyn since the War hearings, but he remembers him well. Fucking bastard took down Hedwig. Harry'll never forgive him that. Harry rubs his hip as he limps down the hall. He'll take a potion when he gets home tonight.

When Harry enters the stark room, Selwyn is slumped in a chair, hands bound to the table by an Incarcerous. His lank, brown hair covers his face. There's more grey in it--Harry remembers him younger somehow. But it's been eight years now, and Harry knows Azkaban can age you prematurely. He pushes down thoughts of Sirius and the deep lines scored into his face from his twelve years spent in that wretched place. It's not time for his personal grief. Not right now.

Harry sits down, spreads out the file, and casts the Recording spell. "Inspector Harry Potter of the London Auror force interviewing James Roseus Selwyn at two-twelve p.m. on the seventh of June, two thousand and six. Mr Selwyn's fingerprints and magical signature have been recorded and
confirmed within the Auror database as per the Wizengamot Justice and Courts Act of 1999.
Mr Selwyn, I will proceed by reading you the following caution: you do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?"

Harry eyes the wizard across from him, who is muttering softly to himself. "Mr Selwyn?"

Selwyn looks up at Harry, his eyes narrowed. "I understand," he says with a twist of his mouth to one side. He's like a rabid beast, Harry thinks, and a stab of pity goes through him. Harry may be an Auror, but he doesn't like what Azkaban does to people. Even sodding Death Eaters.

Harry shuffles his papers in front of him, taking a moment to compose himself. "Mr Selwyn, would you care to explain why you aren't in your cell at Azkaban?"

Selwyn smirks up at him, "Isn't that your job, Inspector? Won't have me doing it for you."

Harry's head hurts. Maybe he should have taken more pain potion before coming in, but at least he'd cleaned off the blood and smeared dittany along the cut on his face. He unclenches his fists and tries to relax. "You were sentenced Azkaban for your crimes committed during the second rise of Lord Voldemort, were you not?" Harry focuses on the wall behind Selwyn.

"You know as well as I do, Inspector. You sent me there yourself." Selwyn's voice is rough, gravelly even, and his breath smells of fish. "How's that little snow white birdie of yours?" He grins. "Oh wait, she fell from the sky, didn't she? Pity my curse didn't hit you instead."

Harry centres himself. It won't do to lose his calm, although Selwyn is pushing him. "And how did you escape from Azkaban, Mr Selwyn?"

"I'm not telling you, boy. You can rake me over hot coals and I won't say a thing." Selwyn looks smug and unconcerned.

Harry slams a fist down on the table, causing an Unspeakable to peer into the room worriedly. "Mr Selwyn, I have a warrant to send you immediately to the solitary confinement section of Azkaban. If you can give me any information, I will consider returning you to the normal levels."

"Oh, look at nasty Inspector Potter, threatening to send me to the Hive." Selwyn snorts and leans forward, the stench of him rolling across to hit Harry's nostrils. "I'm not saying a goddamned thing. I've got my rights, remember?"

Harry sits back, his jaw working. Fine. If he wants to play that game. "I understand your sister lives in Scotland." He meets Selwyn's gaze. "We're currently investigating whether or not she may have aided you on your flight." They've already had a confession out of her that she'd seen him last night, though she swears she had nothing to do with his escape.

Selwyn starts, straining against his bonds, "You leave my Mags out of it, you Muggle-raised brat. Just because you've no bloody family doesn't mean you can take the families of others--"

Harry braces himself on the desk, leaning forward, trying to ignore the ache in his hip. "I can take whomever I want, Selwyn. It's you who've put your family in danger. And unless you start talking, I'll--"

Selwyn spits in Harry's face, a viscous glob of fish-stinking spittle.

Harry stands up, his mind almost blank with rage. It takes everything he has not to reach across the table and punch the fucking hell out of the bastard. Instead he wipes his glasses on his tie, then looks through them, before setting them back on his nose. What Harry bloody well wants to know is how Selwyn got
out of Azkaban without the fucking guards being alerted. Wrightson's already
volunteered to go out to Azkaban to look into that. Harry hadn’t been happy, but Gawain had pointed out that it kept Wrightson out of their hair for now. And Gawain had sent Althea with him, he’d said. Harry honestly hadn't seen what bloody good that was going to do.

"Very well, Mr Selwyn. We're going to charge you with possession of dangerous magical substances for the Soul Grass and mushroom spores, we'll charge your sister with potential collusion, and we'll make sure you never see the light of day again. We're also going to have you interrogated forcibly under Veritaserumand Legilimency." Harry folds up the file jacketand holds it close to his side. "I do hope you enjoy having your brain poked and prodded." Harry's fury is rising, and he belatedly realises that the file jacket he's holding is starting to smoulder around the edges. He blows out the flame that's rising on the corner.

Selwyn sneers at him as he walks out of the door. "You can't prove a fucking thing."

Harry keeps walking, despite the ache in his throat and the pain twisting through his hip. The worst thing he can do to Selwyn is let him face the Wizengamot.  

"When this shit wants total,"

Harry says to the Unspeakingables guarding the door, "let me know."

"Fuck you, Potter," Selwyn shouts from the interview room. "You've no idea what you're up against, you son of a--"

Harry lets the door slam shut behind him.

***

Draco runs up the staircase of Grimmauld Place, his trainers slapping against the worn wood of the treads for the tenth round. He's sweating and breathing hard, his hair twisted up into a sloppy knot on the top of his head, but it feels good to push his body again. He's finally feeling more himself, the quiet pain in his joints and bones gone, the scabs on his shoulder disappearing beneath the healing salves. Kreacher says it's the house as well, and the spells woven into its very foundations to bolster the health of the Black family. Draco doesn't know if he believes that, but he does feel stronger today, enough to keep his ire up at Potter for leaving him trapped inside whilst he and Pansy go do something bloody worthwhile. Draco can't abide feeling useless; he can't help anyone--much less Blaise--whilst he's under what amounts to house arrest in Grimmauld Place like he's the bloody criminal.

He supposes he shouldn't have thrown the vase at Potter this morning, but he'd been so furious that he couldn't stop himself, so upset at the weakness of his wank from the afternoon before, the way thoughts of Potter had burnt their way into his mind, keeping him even from slipping downstairs for dinner. He'd spent the whole night holed up in his room, feeling uncertain and out of sorts. And the worst of it is that, in the end, he'd nearly taken off Pansy's head with a shoddy piece of Victorian pottery. Merlin, but he won't live that down for a while, he's certain. He owes her a nice bottle of wine, at the least. And an apology.

Draco huffs as he races up the last flight of stairs, so steep that his knees are nearly at his chest with each step. He stops at the top landing, just in front of his own bedroom, gasping for breath. He sits on the top step, pulling the hem of his t-shirt up to wipe his face. Late afternoon sunlight pours through the rose window behind him, pooling across the stairs at his feet in warm jewel tones. The freshly beeswaxed treads gleam a deep honeyed brown, and the once-worn banisters are bright and polished. The whole house looks perkier than when he'd first met it--not even a week past. Circe. It feels like a bloody eternity. He stretches his hands out behind him on the floor, enjoying the coolness of the slick wood under his palms.

He's only just got his breath evened out when he hears Potter's booted tread on the steps below.
For a moment, he thinks of fleeing into his room and locking Potter out, but he's tired and still too out of sorts to give a damn, really.

Potter's mess of dark hair turns the corner of the landing towards the master bedroom. He must hear Draco shift on the stairs because he looks up, and the caustic greeting on Draco's tongue slides away at the sight of Potter's battered, bruised face, the ugly scratch from temple to jaw, and the uneven way he's walking.

"What the hell happened?" Draco demands.

"Are you speaking to me then?" Potter starts to move away.

Draco's up on his feet, clattering down the steps. "Don't be a bloody moron."

"I'm fine," Potter says, but he sounds utterly exhausted. He looks it, too, his body slumping in a way Draco's not used to. "I'm not in the mood to be shouted at--"

Draco stops in front of Potter, reaches out to turn Potter's face. "Did you put dittany on that cut?"

"Yes." Potter sounds a bit sullen. He hisses when Draco presses a finger lightly beneath it. "Fuck."

"En suite," Draco snaps at him. "Now."

Potter frowns, but he follows Draco first into the master bedroom and then the bath, obviously too tired to protest effectively. "I've already--"

"Shut it," Draco says, and he's digging in Potter's medicine cabinet, searching through the phials and small pots until he finds both a healing salve and a nearly empty jar of dittany. He points towards the toilet.

"Sit and take your glasses off."

To his surprise, Potter does. Draco sets the jars down on the counter, then washes his hands in the sink. He wets a flannel and soaps it up, carrying it over to clean off Potter's face. Potter winces, and Draco shakes his head. "Have you even looked in the mirror, you idiot?"

"Yes," Potter says, but Draco knows that has to be a lie. The skin around the cut is red and hot, and Draco Presses the warm flannel against Potter's cheek, letting it reopen the wound just enough before he pulls it away and rinses it off in the sink, wringing it out until the hot water runs clear. He brings the damp flannel back over and repeats the process.

"Did you get Dolohov?" Draco asks. He keeps his voice even. His fingers are careful against Potter's jaw; he angles Potter's head, looking to see how deep the cut is before he scoops out a tiny bit of healing salve.

"Wasn't there." Potter makes a small noise when Draco's finger smoothes the salve across the angry cut. He breathes out through his nostrils; the soft puff of air warms the skin on Draco's wrist. "Abadzhiev was, but I missed him."

"You let him get away?" A bit of exasperation creeps into Draco's tone. "If I'd been there--"

"You might have come back in a bloody body bag," Potter says sharply. He catches Draco's hand, looking up at him with bright green eyes. Draco's heart stutters. "Abadzhiev wasn't playing about."

"Did he do this to you?" Draco asks, his voice quiet. If he did, Draco thinks, he'll have Abadzhiev's bollocks on a platter--
Potter's watching him, and Draco realises how close he's standing, his knees nearly at Potter's. He looks away, scanning for the dittany salve, and Potter sighs and drops his hand.

"Wasn't just him." Potter lifts his chin again, letting Draco dab a bit of dittany across the cut. "But we caught one. James Selwyn. Parkinson took him down."

That surprises Draco. "Really."

A small smile twitches Potter's lips. "Put a Stunner to his back, brilliant woman. She also found Soul Grass at the camp, along with mushroom spores."

Draco steps away, reaching for another flannel to wipe his greasy fingers against. "So the journal is tied into whatever Dolohov and Abadzhiev are doing."

"Looks like," Potter says. "Parkinson says Olivia Zabini's looking through it to see if the Enochian text sheds any more light on their plans." He shifts and winces again. "Officially it's released into Jake's custody."

"Where else are you hurt?" Draco can't stop himself from asking.

"It's nothing." Potter slides his glasses back on and stands up, but he favours his left side. He limps out of the en suite and into the bedroom, shrugging out of his Auror jacket and throwing it at the foot of the bed. His tie follows, and he sits on the edge of the bed, working his feet out of his boots.

Draco leans against the door between the bedroom and the en suite, his arms crossed. "Do you need help?"

Potter drops one boot to the floor and starts in on the other one. "No."

"Are you going to be a stubborn tit?" Draco asks, and Potter looks over at him. He looks exhausted.

"Don't shout at me, please." Potter says.

Draco sighs. "I wasn't."

Potter shrugs and pulls his foot out of his boot, dropping it to the floor next to its mate. "You have that look."

"What look?" Draco's honestly unsure what Potter means.

"The one that says you're about to throw another goddamned vase at me." Potter unbuttons his shirt, pulling it out of his trousers, then slides off the bed, walking over to his chest of drawers. He slides the shirt off, his back to Draco, and Draco can't look away from the stretch of golden skin, the way Potter's muscles move as he reaches into a drawer and pulls out a pale blue t-shirt, tugging it over his head. Draco wraps himself against one of the bedposts, remembering the last time he'd been in this bedroom, and how his prick had felt buried to the bollocks in Potter's arse.

Draco presses his cheek against the carved wood, his fingers gripping the post tightly. "I'm sorry," he says, and Potter turns, looking at him. "For the vase. It was stupid. I shouldn't have been that angry."

Potter doesn't say anything for a moment, and then he runs a hand over his hair, the other reaching up beneath the hem of his t-shirt to scratch the flat plane of his belly. "I just didn't want you dead at the end of the day."
"I know." Draco watches as Potter turns back to the chest of drawers and pulls out a pair of black joggers. He unbuttons his trousers and lets them slide down; Draco swallows at the sight of Potter's tightly-fronts across the flat plane of his arse, the white cotton stretching as Potter bends to pull the joggers on. Draco looks away. "I was a bit out of line."

Potter turns around. "A bit?" He walks past Draco and drops onto the bed with a sigh and another wince. "Look, it's fine. You were angry. I was angry. We'll leave it there." He rolls over, his back to Draco.

Draco knows he should leave. Potter's clear about that. But he can't. His thumb traces a carved curlique along the circumference of the post. The silence between them stretches out, almost to an uncomfortable point before he says, "I can't bear being trapped." His voice trembles a bit and he grips the bed post tighter. "In the house, I mean."

Potter looks over his shoulder. "What do you mean?" He shifts, sits up, his hair falling over the rims of his glasses.

"It's..." Draco doesn't know how to explain. He studies the folds of the coverlet that Potter apparently left scrunched down at the foot of the bed this morning. "I have panic attacks sometimes. Bad ones." His fingernails press against the wood of the bedpost. "I don't talk about them because it's useless, really. They're just there, sometimes when I expect them, sometimes not, and I'm fine, really, I am, but when they hit, I can't breathe and everything feels..." Draco trails off, certain he sounds a right fool. "You don't want to hear this."

"I do," Potter says quietly. He pulls his knees up to his chest, shifting a little to get comfortable. "Are you telling me that you had one this morning?"

"No," Draco admits. "I was just really bloody narked off at you for being an arsehole. But I've had them. Here." He pushes himself off the bedpost. "When you won't let me leave. It feels..." He rubs at his still-bandaged shoulder. The skin itches where it's knitting together. "You have to understand what it was like at home. That year when the Dark Lord lived there. I couldn't go out of my room without being afraid." He wraps his arms around him, suppressing a shudder. "It was just as bad at school. I was terrified constantly. I never knew when I'd be hexed. Or threatened with death." He breathes out. It's impossible for anyone who wasn't there to know what it was like, he thinks. How frightened he'd been. How anxious. His chest tightens, and he closes his eyes, willing his body not to betray him. Not in front of Potter.

"You feel like that here," Potter says. He's watching Draco with shadowed eyes.

"A little." Draco rests a hand on the edge of the bed. The linen's been changed and it smells like lavender. Kreacher's taken a page from the Manor elves then. He wonders how long Potter left the sheets that smelled of him. The thought both disgusts and excites him. He looks away. "It's not the same, I know. But still. It's how I feel."

Potter's silent. His fingers are wrapped around his ankles, his chin resting on his knees. He looks young like this, rumpled and so very, very tired. "I'm sorry," he says finally. "I'm not trying to be a prick."

"I know." Draco sits on the end of the bed, his back against the bedpost. It's not comfortable, but he doesn't care. He reaches up to undo his hair.

"Don't," Potter says, and Draco looks at him in surprise. Potter's cheeks flush. "I like it like that."

Draco lets his hand drop, even though he knows he ought to point out he doesn't wear his hair for Potter. But he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room, his blond hair messy and
knotted at the top of his head, and he thinks he doesn't look a complete fright.

Potter just studies him for a moment. "I just want you to be safe. And I promised your mother."

Draco nods. "Knowing that doesn't help, though. Not when I'm feeling trapped." He chews on his lip, feeling terribly vulnerable. He doesn't like it.

They're both quiet. Draco can hear Kreacher moving about downstairs, preparing dinner. Draco's not hungry now; honestly, he feels a bit sick to his stomach.

And then Potter shifts against the headboard, one leg stretching out in front of him, the other still up against his chest. "Is there anything that helps?" He's not looking at Draco. "The panic attacks, I mean?"

"Baths," Draco says lightly, although he's being serious, in a way. "Immersing myself in hot water seems to help calm me down. Baxendale told me it had something to do with the vascular system--"

"Who?" Potter asks, and Draco draws up short. Baxendale's a secret he's never told anyone, not even Pansy or Blaise. They wouldn't have understood, he thinks. He barely does himself, but Baxendale'd been good for him, in a way.

Draco wonders if he can ignore Potter's question, but somehow it feels important, at least at this moment. "Helena Baxendale," he says finally. "My Mind Healer."

"Oh," Potter says, and Draco tenses, ready for the scorn. It doesn't come. Instead Potter draws in a shaky breath and asks, "Why'd you need..." He trails off.

"Why'd I go to her?" Draco looks over at him, and Potter nods. There's a quiet, almost fierce look on his face. Draco hesitates, then holds out his left arm, the scarred side up. "Mother insisted when she saw this. She was terrified I was going to do something worse, and she might have been right." He remembers those days all too well, the empty grimness stretching out in front of him, that hollowed-out feeling of despair that he couldn't escape from, the crushing guilt that he'd struggled with every day. "So I went." He looks at Potter, then glances away again, his throat tight. "You're the only other person who knows that now, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't go spreading it about that I'm a complete nutter."

Potter fiddles with the stretchy hem of his joggers. "You're not."

Draco thinks he probably is, but it doesn't seem right to argue about it. He sighs. "I am a bit. But I suppose it's not unexpected, all things considered." He toes off his trainers and pulls his feet up onto the bed, sitting cross-legged. It feels almost natural, as if he's back in Hogwarts having a heart-to-heart with Blaise in his dormitory, except it's not Hogwarts and it's Potter instead. Circe, there's no probably about it, really. Draco is a nutter.

They're silent for a moment, then Draco says, "You asked me on Friday why I didn't fight back." He looks up at Potter. "When Blaise..."

Potter nods. "He's your best friend. That makes sense--"

"It's not all of it," Draco says. The shadows in the room are lengthening; the sunlight's shifting, moving from the warm oranges of late afternoon into the soft gold of twilight. He doesn't know why he wants Potter to hear this. Maybe it's not about Potter at all, really. Maybe it's just that Draco needs to say these things, and it's easier to tell Potter than to say it to Blaise himself. Or Pansy. They love him, but sometimes that love gets in the way. Makes things more difficult. "I was trained not to fight back, if I could help it," Draco says in a rush. "Not in situations where I
might have been hurt. Better to hide myself away, if I could. I was raised around dangerous people. I could have been killed as a child if I'd responded to everything. My mother made sure I was careful. I learned never to act out and to defend myself in other ways instead." Draco looks over at Potter. "I know I was a horrible bully in school, so you'll think I'm a liar."

"You didn't really fight people back then either," Potter says. "Provoked us a lot, but even in the Duelling Club… I mean Tarantallegra, really?" He gives Draco a slightly apologetic look. "You were shit."

"I was twelve. Besides, I'm still a horrible duellist, you know that." Draco chews on his lip. "This is all why I'm terrible at offensive magic. I thought Bertie was going to strangle me at one point in training when I could barely cast one of the more complex Stinging Hex variants."

Potter smiles faintly at that. "I think Bertie wanted to strangle us all at various points for what we couldn't do. And we all would have deserved it, too."

"You know, I admire you," Draco suddenly admits. He's never told Potter this, and it's actually painful to say, but Draco feels a surprising need to let him know. He pleats his shorts between his fingers, unable to actually look at Potter's face. "I admire you your ability to fight back, to take everything on, to challenge everything, to not be afraid. I could never be as brave or as foolhardy as you are. It's amazed me since we were at school together."

Potter sighs then, closes his eyes. "Malfoy. I'm always afraid. But if I don't fight, I could die." He leans his head back against the headboard, looks up at the ceiling. "I've thought about it, dying. I've come close to it a lot." He glances over at Draco. "Technically did once. Helps to be a Horcrux when a Dark Lord's stupid enough to cast a Killing Curse on you."

Draco gives him a sideways look. "I suppose that comes in handy." He rubs the curve of his knee. He shouldn't ask, he knows, but he can't stop himself. "What was it like? Being hit with it?"

Potter doesn't say anything for a moment, then he shifts, the mattress creaking beneath him. "Dark," he says finally. "Like everything going out of me, all the breath and the life and the love…" He breaks off. "It was like nothingness, and then it wasn't, and there was light, and Dumbledore and bloody King's Cross station." He laughs at that, shaking his head. "And I wanted to stay there and go to the other side. For a moment. It was so peaceful, and quiet and I thought about letting other people carry on for me that night. Draco's so glad Potter hadn't. He can't stand the idea of a world without the stubborn bastard. Potter sighs again. "But I knew I had to come back. So I did." He looks away. "I always come back," he says quietly.

"You didn't have to," Draco watches him. Potter looks as if he's carrying the weight of the world on him. Draco hates that. They all take too much from him—friends, family, enemies. The whole bloody wizarding world, really. "You've never had a chance to be anyone but Harry Potter, have you?"

"No," Potter says. He curls in on himself. "I'm not saying I want to go away. And I sure as fuck don't want to die. But sometimes it feels like the only thing keeping me here is me. I'm all I have. I mean, most everyone I've cared about has died. I've got them somewhere inside, and I haven't forgotten them. I can't." His voice is thick. "I miss them. But in this world, right now, it's only me. And so I have to protect myself, even if I sometimes want to give up and join them." He presses his lips together. "I wonder sometimes what it'd be like to be with my mum, you know?"

Draco can't imagine what it would be like if he didn't have his mother to lean on, even when she's driving him mad. But still. "You're not alone, Potter. You've Granger and Weasley, for starters. You can't tell me they wouldn't do anything for you—"
"But it's them together," Potter says. "Hermione and Ron. It's not that they don't care about me. They do. But it's them. And then it's me. And there'll always be that separation. I'm not complaining. I think it's a good thing. I'm glad they have each other. And their families. But..." He looks up at Draco then. "Sometimes it gets lonely being me. And I do stupid things. I know I do. Because I don't want to feel or I don't want to be..." He breathes out. "I fuck people I shouldn't fuck, and I walk away from people I shouldn't walk away from, and honestly, you're better running far away from me when this stupid thing with Dolohov is through, Malfoy. I'm no good, and I don't really do what's right most of the time. People think I do, and I don't. I'm not their sainthood or their saviour. I'm acting on bloody instinct, and I seem to be crap at it."

Draco knows all too well how that feels, not to be able to do anything right. He's never imagined the opposite could be oppressive as well, how hard it must be for the world to never want you to be wrong. "You're not alone," he says again quietly. "You've also got our team."

"I feel alone." Potter shoves himself further down the bed, his t-shirt riding up. He curls up on his side, watching Draco. "You know," he says after a moment, "everyone keeps asking me if I'm okay. They have since the War, but I don't really know what okay is. I've never been not like this."

"Like what?" Draco asks. He thinks Potter needs to say these things too. Maybe that's what they give each other. A safe space to be the people no one else wants them to be. Stupid, reckless, utterly selfish.

Terrified.

Potter pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Empty inside," he says. He hesitates. "Like I probably should have died when I was one, or maybe when I was seventeen, and all of this life I've had afterwards is just a dream."

Draco crawls over to Potter. "That's bollocks," he says, but his voice is gentle. He stretches out beside Potter, close, but not touching, his head resting on his folded arm. "No one deserves that. Even a scarheaded git like you." He reaches out and traces a fingertip along the pale zig-zag over Potter's left eye. "I couldn't bear it if you were dead," he admits. "No one for me to throw vases at, you know?"

Potter smiles, eyes closed, nosing into Draco's light touch. "You keep me anchored, Malfoy. The fact that you despise me is one of the constants in my world."

And that's the problem, isn't it, Draco thinks. He doesn't despise him. Not any more. What he feels for Potter is very different, and Draco won't--can't--put a name to it. It's almost overwhelming, and Draco wishes he could call it loathing, but he'd be a liar.

And Draco can't lie to himself about this any longer. He feels and he knows and he fears what he might find out if he looks too closely at exactly what this feeling is.

Draco draws in a ragged breath. "I'll keep that in mind," he murmurs.

Potter's eyes flutter open. "Stay with me?" he asks, his voice barely a whisper. "Just until I fall asleep."

"Kreacher's making dinner," Draco says quietly.

"Later. It'll keep." Potter's hand settles on Draco's hip. "Don't go?"

"I won't," Draco says, and he's no desire to leave Potter alone. Not like this. He lets his knuckles brush Potter's cheek as he slips Potter's glasses off, placing them on the table at the side of the bed.
"I'm still angry with you, you realise."

"You're not." Potter looks at him, his lashes dark and thick. "It's okay."

Draco wants to kiss Potter, wants to let his hands drift down Potter's body, holding him close, wrapping himself around him. He doesn't. He's too afraid of what he might admit if he lets himself. He can't even let the words drift through his mind; he knows how fucked up it is, how stupid and foolish he's being. Potter's lied to him, kept secrets from him, treated him as if he's nothing but a quick shag and a good fuck. This, Draco could handle. But then Potter had to lay himself bare, let Draco past his defences, offer him sanctuary and protection and ask nothing in return.

As angry as Draco is with Potter--and he's damned angry, whatever Potter might think--he's drawn to him, can't stay away from him, needs to be in the warmth of his gaze, the brightness of his smile. He's never felt this way about anyone before. It terrifies him, but he couldn't care less. He wants to protect Potter, to defend him, and perhaps, in the eyes of the world, that makes him weak. But, if he's honest, Draco's never felt stronger.

Potter's eyes slip closed, his breathing settles. He looks battered and tired and broken, and oh so very, very young. Draco lets his fingertips graze the curve of Potter's bruised cheek, the swell of Potter's lips, the firm jut of his jaw.

He exhales, his body shuddering as he pulls his hand back and lets his head sink to the pillow. Draco knows bloody well this will end in heartbreak.

Circe, but it already has.

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter of Lost in Your Arms will be posted on Saturday, May 20. The next fic in the series will start posting on Saturday, June 3rd. Um. It'll probably be as long as this one? Let's hope it's not longer, lolz.

As always, you can subscribe for updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic!

Your love for the characters and the story are keeping me going, dear readers! I owe you all comments for your thoughtful (and I must say, influential!) reading comments on this plot arc. You have encouraged me (and even changed my mind on a few bits and pieces) far more than you might imagine!

Particular thank you to rabbitsays, who posted AMAZING Swansea-themed LIYA art on Dreamwidth. Please go show love! (Seriously, it's perfect.) (Your Blaise in a Welsh souvenir t-shirt is my sexuality) (And your Draco is amahzing--the Ministry sweatshirt! The trainers!)

And even more art thank-yous are due to my fantastic beta, sassy_cissa and to citrus_lime! Cissa commissioned this gorgeous art from citrus_lime of the very first scene of LIYA for my birthday! I can't even, you guys. I LOVE THESE BOYS SO MUCH.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which news comes from unexpected quarters, discoveries are made, and the future of the team is at stake.

Chapter Notes

Well, this is it for the first book! I'm almost wordless with relief, joy, and the mad desire to get this to you all and see what you think of this monstrosity. With this week's 44K I've actually exceed the wordcount of Order of the Phoenix on this whole project, a new personal best. *nerdtastic fistpump* It's been an incredible ride, and although this part of the Special Branch adventure is over, I'm grateful that the second round will start soon--June 3rd, everybody! Mark your calendars.

I can't thank enough everyone who has read along, commented, and supported me. Deepest thanks are due to noeon and sassy cissa for their unwavering support throughout this madcap, whirlwind writing process of the past ten weeks. I and my team are so grateful to ao3, dreamwidth, LJ, and tumblr readers for the love and consideration you've shown us all. You've been amazing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Althea's terrified of Azkaban. She does her best not to show it; she's learnt early in her career as an Auror that she has to be more fearless than her male colleagues, or at least make the pretense. So she steel herself as she strides through the tall, dark iron gates, Wrightson a few steps in front of her, the North Sea crashing against the cliff at her back.

There's a quiet air of deep despair seeping over the black stones of the courtyard as the gates swing shut behind them with a solid, unforgiving thud. Althea looks around her, at the towers rising high above, grim and dark into the grey clouds, the thin, barred windows that spiral up them, looking out onto nothing but an expanse of frigid ocean. She can feel the wisps of the Dementors' presence even out here. There's been talk since the War of getting rid of them entirely, but it hasn't been done yet. Every time Shacklebolt puts the idea in front of the Wizengamot, pointing out the fact that the Dementors had turned against wizardingkind in favour of Voldemort's rule, a third of the members vote it down, saying that there needs only to be greater human oversight in the prison, that the Dementors themselves serve a purpose critical to the management of the most dangerous offenders. And so the number of Auror guards at Azkaban has been increased slowly over the years, the new regime charged not only with keeping watch over the prisoners but also over the Dementors themselves. Althea's no idea who'd be mad enough to sign themselves up for that job--she certainly would never--but she's heard the pay is the highest in the DMLE, more even than the Hit Wizards. That has to be attractive to some, she supposes.

Althea draws her Auror cloak tighter around her as she follows Wrightson into the prison itself, their booted footsteps echoing in the silent hall. She doesn't know why Robards had agreed to send her with the guv. There are others on the team who'd be a better choice. Maxie, for one.
Althea thinks she's too new to Wrightson's command; she'd seen the sideways looks in the incident room when she'd been called up for the assignment. They probably think she's fucking him. Wrightson, that is, although, hell, it wouldn't surprise her if they mentioned her in the same breath with Robards. It wouldn't even matter to them that she prefers women. A good quarter of the men she's worked with who've found out she's a lesbian have offered to fuck it out of her, thinking that's a grand joke. Circe, she sometimes wonders why she'd joined the force, but then she thinks of her mum and how pale and cold she'd looked at the funeral and how her dad had fallen apart afterwards, how he'd crawled into the bottle and hadn't come out again, not even for his little girl. Althea had sworn back in the War that she'd do anything she could to make the bastards who'd killed her mum pay, and now here she is, going after Antonin Dolohov himself. One of her mum's murderers. Her stomach churns. It doesn't feel as good as she'd thought it might.

Wrightson stops at a wide, stone desk that's shimmering with protective charms. "James Selwyn," he says to the two guards behind the desk, one tall and ginger, the other burly and dark-haired. "He's in his cell, right?"

The guards exchange a glance. "Why wouldn't he be?" the brawler one says. "He ain't been checked out by one of you lot."

"Certain of that?" Wrightson leans against the desk, one elbow propped against the cold stone. He studies his fingernails, and Althea wants to roll her eyes at the dramatic posturing. She doesn't; she's too good of an Auror for that. Wrightson glances up at the guard. "Because I have the bastard in a holding cell in London right now being interviewed by Harry bloody Potter himself."

"That's bollocks," the ginger says. "Selwyn's in his cell. Rounds were done two hours ago. Billy here did them himself." He nods towards the burly guard.

Wrightson just raises an eyebrow. The guards look uneasy. "Reckon I should check," Wrightson says. "Yeah?"

Billy shrugs. "Yeah, whatever, mate." He pushes a thick book across the desk, along with a quill. "Sign in."

"Whitaker," Wrightson hands the quill to Althea. "Do the honours whilst this gentleman shows me back to Selwyn's cell."

Oh, fuck no. Althea's not being sidelined like that. "But sir--"

Cold blue eyes turn on her. "You'll wait here, Whitaker. That's not a request."

Althea's fingers tighten around the quill. She gives in. She's learnt when to pick her battles. "Sir."

Wrightson follows Billy through an arched gate. The ginger guard gives her a sympathetic look, and Althea wants to fucking hex him. She flips open the book and runs her finger down the list of names of Aurors and solicitors and family members coming by to see prisoners in recent months.

She stills, the quill still hovering over the paper. The same names keep coming up. Over and over again since January. Martin Bates. Lucius Malfoy. Althea's eyes narrow.

Marcus Wrightson.

All to see James Selwyn and Rodolphus Lestrange.

"No," she says. Something clicks together in her mind--she's not entirely certain what, but the sharp intuition all of her instructors back in training had praised is kicking in. "No, no, no--" Althea looks up at
the guard. "Get me back there right now."
"But--" The guard starts to protest, and Althea pulls out her wand. "I can't leave the desk," he says quickly.

"Get me back there right now," she says again, her voice tight. "And send a message to Head Auror Robards. I need a backup team of Aurors here now. Where's Selwyn's cell?"

"Block 8, third floor," the guard says. " Restricted wing." He hands her a small key. "Charmed to get you through the wards."

The gate swings open, and Althea dashes through it, running after Billy and Wrightson. She's moving on Auror instinct now, every bit of her certain that she needs to be there in that cell when Wrightson opens it. She doesn't know what's going on, but she knows that Wrightson didn't want that raid this morning, and he's been furious since, and he'd volunteered to come to Azkaban and not brought Maxie, and none of that seems right to her now. She's reasonably certain things are about to go pear-shaped, that perhaps they already have.

There's no fucking reason why Marcus Wrightson should have been to Azkaban three times since the twenty-fifth of January to see Selwyn or Lestrange, she thinks as picks up speed. There aren't any open cases tied to either of the Death Eaters--there weren't until Selwyn showed up this morning on the side of a Scottish loch.

The thud of Althea's boots rings out in the near silent hallway. She turns the corner, catching a glimpse of a Dementor gliding down the hallway, and she races up the staircase, her heart pounding. She can't be that far behind Wrightson; he's only had a minute or two head start.

She sees the signs for the restricted wing, and her fingers tighten on the key in her left hand. Another Dementor steps out of the shadows, arm raised, and Althea holds up the tiny key, forcing herself not to shudder in its face. Fear prickles along the nape of her neck, but the Dementor shrinks back, head bowing as Althea runs past it. The wards spark across her skin as she flies up the steps towards Block 8; they don't hold her back.

And then she sees Billy lying on the ground outside a cell, and Althea runs faster, her wand still gripped in her right hand. "Marcus," she shouts, as she turns the corner into the cell, and Wrightson's there, his own wand out, Mafalda-bloody-Hopkirk of the Improper Use of Magic office on her knees in front of him, a prisoner's uniform loose and baggy around her small frame. "Marcus," Althea says again. "What are you doing, guv?"

Wrightson looks up at Althea. "It's not what you think--"

"Marcus," Hopkirk says, her hands scrabbling at his robe. "Help me, please. It's been days. James isn't back--you promised--" Her eyes are wide and a bit mad.

"She's not making any bloody sense," Wrightson says.

Althea moves closer, her wand steady on Wrightson. "Yeah," she says slowly. Her eyes flick towards Hopkirk. "She seems to think you're here to help her?"

"I don't know why--"

Hopkirk screams, clawing at her temples. "Too long, too long, no more Polyjuice, too long--"

Wrightson shoves her away from him with his boot. "She's mad."

"She's in Selwyn's cell," Althea says, her voice tight. "Wearing his uniform. And your name's in the log, Marcus. You came to see him and Lestrange--"

"But--" The guard starts to protest, and Althea pulls out her wand. "I can't leave the desk," he says quickly.

"Get me back there right now," she says again, her voice tight. "And send a message to Head Auror Robards. I need a backup team of Aurors here now. Where's Selwyn's cell?"

"Block 8, third floor," the guard says. "Restricted wing." He hands her a small key. "Charmed to get you through the wards."

The gate swings open, and Althea dashes through it, running after Billy and Wrightson. She's moving on Auror instinct now, every bit of her certain that she needs to be there in that cell when Wrightson opens it. She doesn't know what's going on, but she knows that Wrightson didn't want that raid this morning, and he's been furious since, and he'd volunteered to come to Azkaban and not brought Maxie, and none of that seems right to her now. She's reasonably certain things are about to go pear-shaped, that perhaps they already have.

There's no fucking reason why Marcus Wrightson should have been to Azkaban three times since the twenty-fifth of January to see Selwyn or Lestrange, she thinks as picks up speed. There aren't any open cases tied to either of the Death Eaters--there weren't until Selwyn showed up this morning on the side of a Scottish loch.

The thud of Althea's boots rings out in the near silent hallway. She turns the corner, catching a glimpse of a Dementor gliding down the hallway, and she races up the staircase, her heart pounding. She can't be that far behind Wrightson; he's only had a minute or two head start.

She sees the signs for the restricted wing, and her fingers tighten on the key in her left hand. Another Dementor steps out of the shadows, arm raised, and Althea holds up the tiny key, forcing herself not to shudder in its face. Fear prickles along the nape of her neck, but the Dementor shrinks back, head bowing as Althea runs past it. The wards spark across her skin as she flies up the steps towards Block 8; they don't hold her back.

And then she sees Billy lying on the ground outside a cell, and Althea runs faster, her wand still gripped in her right hand. "Marcus," she shouts, as she turns the corner into the cell, and Wrightson's there, his own wand out, Mafalda-bloody-Hopkirk of the Improper Use of Magic office on her knees in front of him, a prisoner's uniform loose and baggy around her small frame. "Marcus," Althea says again. "What are you doing, guv?"

Wrightson looks up at Althea. "It's not what you think--"

"Marcus," Hopkirk says, her hands scrabbling at his robe. "Help me, please. It's been days. James isn't back--you promised--" Her eyes are wide and a bit mad.

"She's not making any bloody sense," Wrightson says.

Althea moves closer, her wand steady on Wrightson. "Yeah," she says slowly. Her eyes flick towards Hopkirk. "She seems to think you're here to help her?"

"I don't know why--"

Hopkirk screams, clawing at her temples. "Too long, too long, no more Polyjuice, too long--"

Wrightson shoves her away from him with his boot. "She's mad."

"She's in Selwyn's cell," Althea says, her voice tight. "Wearing his uniform. And your name's in the log, Marcus. You came to see him and Lestrange--"
"I did not!" Wrightson swings his wand towards Althea. "You're just as mad as she is. When I get back to headquarters, I'll report--"

"There's a guard lying in the hallway, Marcus!" Althea keeps her wand fixed on him. "She hasn't the ability to curse him."

Hopkirk's writhing on the floor, her cries echoing in the cell. Althea can hear other prisoners down the hall, shrieking in response, shouting for someone to shut Hopkirk up.

"You think I did this," Wrightson says. "You fucking bitch--" His wand sweeps down, and Althea throws up a Protego Maxima, blocking his Stunner before it hits. "She's lying," Wrightson screams at her.

"Marcus Wrightson," Althea says, "I'm arresting you on suspicion of collusion with James Selwyn--"

And then Wrightson's barrelling past her, nearly knocking her down as he runs out into the hallway. The prisoners start banging on the bars of their cells. Althea follows, throwing a Petrificus curse at him that misses by a hair, ricocheting off the stone wall towards her. She ducks it and runs after Wrightson. She feels sick. She'd believed in him, thought him a bloody good guv. She'd trusted him for fuck's sake.

Althea turns down a narrow corridor. She can feel the despair building up in her. "Marcus," she calls out. "Please don't make me do this. Come on, guv."

There's silence.

She moves forward carefully. It's getting darker outside, she can tell from the way the light's changing. It's not filtering into the hallway from the narrow windows in the cells any longer; the sconces on the wall are flickering more brightly. She hears a quiet laugh from one of the cells to her left; she looks over and Rodolphus Lestrange's watching her through the bars, his eyes bright and his hair matted.

"Down that way," he says with a nod towards the end of the hall, and his mouth curves into a thin, vicious smile. "But be careful, girlie." He snaps his teeth at her, and Althea can't hide her flinch. It's disgust, she tells herself. Lestrange just laughs.

Althea grips her wand tighter. She doesn't respond to Lestrange. Her heartbeat thuds; her entire body is on high alert. She's barely breathing as she moves into the flickering shadows.

Green light bursts against the stone near her head. Althea jerks, the shock that her guv's trying to kill her sending her staggering backwards. She tried to recover her breath, her resolve. "You're just narking me off now, Marcus," she says.

"You don't know what you're doing." Wrightson's voice echoes down the corridor.

"I know I'm not making a mockery of my Auror's oath," Althea says. Her wand is up again. She peers around a corner. Another burst of green light explodes past her, the remnants of the Killing Curse dissipating; she pulls back just in time. "You're a fucking Death Eater?"

Wrightson laughs. "God, you're such a fucking idealist, Whitaker." She catches a glimpse of movement in the shadows and casts a Stunner. It doesn't land. "I'm not a Death Eater. But that doesn't mean I don't sympathise. All these reforms Shacklebolt and his lot are trying to pass--Merlin. It's impossible to do proper policing with too much meddling." He falls silent.
Althea peers around the corner again. She thinks she sees him; she can't be certain.

"Things are changing, Whitaker," Wrightson says after a moment. "And maybe they ought not. So if someone offers me a great deal of money to help things stay a bit the same...well."

Althea leans against the stone wall. She feels shaken, as if a rug's been ripped out from beneath her. In a way it has. She'd liked Wrightson. Even when she hadn't agreed with him about the raid, she'd still liked him, and now she's questioning her judgment, her very ability as an Auror to read a situation accurately. "So this is about money," she says. Fuck, but she'd respect him more if he'd bought into the bloody ideology.

"It's about power," Wrightson says quietly, and he steps out of the shadows. His wand is pointed towards her; his eyes are shadowed. "And it goes far deeper than you would ever expect, Althea."

"I respected you." Althea moves from around the corner. She faces him off, refusing to show him her fear. If he's telling her this, he thinks he can kill her. "Guv."

Wrightson's mouth twists to one side. "I could make you very powerful, girl." He shift closer, and the buttons on his Auror jacket gleam in the light from the wall sconces. "You could join us. The knowledge I could share with you--Merlin, Whitaker. The Ravenclaw in you would be thrilled."

Althea shakes her head. "Not interested." She can hear footsteps coming down the corridor. "I'm going to arrest you now, Marcus. So if you'll put your wand down--"

A twist of Wrightson's wrist sends another burst of green light flying towards her. Althea throws a Stunner towards him and falls to the floor, feeling the heat of the Killing Curse just above the curve of her shoulder.

Wrightson's thrown backwards, his head hitting the stone wall with a crack that makes Althea wince. He lies still.

Two Aurors are running down the hall towards them. The only one she recognises is Hassan Shah.

"All right, you?" Shah kneels at her side whilst his companion trots past them, down the hall towards Wrightson. She can hear Lestrange laughing from his cell.

"Yeah," Althea says. "Marcus--"

"I heard." Shah helps her stand up. Althea smooths down her cloak. Her knee hurts from slamming against the floor. "Sound carries right well in this place, yeah?"

"Mafalda Hopkirk," Althea says. "Selwyn's cell--"

"Maxie's there." Shah walks down the hall towards Wrightson and the other Auror. "She's out of her mind. Talking like she's completely nutters."

"She's been in there nearly a week, according to the records," Althea says. Shah looks over at her. "No one's missed her at work?"

Althea shrugs. "And then Martin Bates came the week before. On Thursday."

Shah squats next to Wrightson. "Bates's been buried in paperwork and off field duty since Potter's team came back from Prague." He glances up at her. "No reason for him to come to Azkaban."
Althea slides her wand back into its holster. "Doesn't mean he wasn't here." She crosses her arms, ignoring the ache in her shoulder from slamming into the filthy stone floor. "And Wrightson didn't want us checking him out in regards to Dolohov. Said there was no use in rocking the boat there." Maxie'd been irritated by that, and Althea'd tried to calm him down, tell him it wasn't anything. Just Wrighton being political. Christ, she'd been such an idiot.

"Better pass that on to Robards." Shah frowns. "How's that one, Brighty?" He looks over at the other Auror.

Brighty leans back on his heels. "Stunned, but alive."

Althea doesn't know whether she's relieved or not. "Get him up," she says. "I want his fucking arse thrown in a holding cell." She looks over at Shah. "Head Auror still about?"

Shah shakes his head. "We'll have Viola give him a call, yeah?" He slides an arm beneath Wrightson's armpit; Brighty does the same on the other side. They heave him up, Wrightson's body slumped between them. "Want to Revive him first?"

Althea looks at her guv's face. She wants to spit on him. "No," she says. "I can't stomach any of his excuses at the moment. Just take him back to headquarters. I'm going to go deal with Hopkirk."

She turns on her heel and walks away.

***

Draco's only just woken up when there's a knock on his bedroom door. He'd barely slept the night before, his mind twisting and turning, his thoughts going back to his conversation with Potter. He'd laid beside him for an hour, watching him sleep, before he'd slipped out of Potter's room, going down to the kitchen for food. He'd told Kreacher to keep an eye on Potter, to bring him a plate when he woke.

And then Draco had barricaded himself in his own rooms, immersing himself in a hot bath for hours, unable to think of anything except Potter and the feelings stirring to life inside of him.

It'd been a shit of a night, if he's honest.

He stumbled to the door, opening it just enough to see Potter there, looking more rested and ungodly attractive in a dress shirt and a bright red tie with matching braces attached to his dark wool trousers. Draco hates him sometimes. He really does. And here Draco is in a ratty pair of joggers and an old t-shirt advertising Quality Quidditch Supplies that he's fairly certain he nicked from Theo in fifth year. There's definitely an old spag bol stain on the side, a pale, faded smear of orange.

"What?" Draco asks. Potter never shows up at his door this early, or he hasn't so far, at least. He usually sneaks out of the house before Draco's awake, the coward.

Potter's gaze drifts down Draco's body, a faint flush staining his cheeks. He glances away, then back, and he holds a cup of coffee out like a peace offering.

Draco's not fool enough not to take it.

"You should get dressed," Potter says, his voice a bit rough. "You're going in to the Ministry with me."

"Am I?" Draco takes a sip of the coffee. It's milky, the way he likes it, with just a touch of sugar.
"Have I been summoned?"

Potter shakes his head. He leans against the door jamb, nudging the door open a bit more with his foot. "I was just thinking…" He hesitates, catching his lip between his teeth before he sighs. "Look, you're right. You shouldn't be trapped in this house. Not if it's difficult--"

"I'm fine," Draco says. He's not, and they both know it, but he feels as if he has to make a token protest. He hides his mouth behind the mug of coffee.

"Yeah, right." Potter doesn't look convinced. "Anyway. Hermione owled after you went to bed last night. The Unspeakable intel suggests Dolohov isn't in the country right now." Potter runs a hand through his hair. Merlin but he looks good. And smells good. Like lemongrass and basil, Draco thinks. Delectable and edible, and Draco chides himself for being so bloody obvious when Potter's gaze settles on Draco's mouth.

Draco looks away. "You believe that?"

"I don't know," Potter admits. "But I think it's shit of me to keep you cooped up here when you're perfectly safe in the Ministry." He hesitates. "But not the training centre. It's too isolated."

Fair enough, Draco thinks. "All right," he says.

"And I want you to see Irskine or another Healer before we go in," Potter says. "Just to be safe." He eyes Draco as if Draco's going to argue with him.

Draco just shrugs. "Fine." Frankly, he'll do anything for the chance to step out of the house. He's been stuck here for five days now, and he's about to go out of his bloody mind. For fuck's sake, he'd actually been honest with Potter last night, and that's never a good sign, Draco thinks. He turns the mug of coffee between his hands. "When?"

"Now?" Potter's watching him, and Draco's skin feels hot and prickly. "I mean, if you're up for it. Sorry to wake you--"

"It's good." Draco takes another sip of the coffee. "I'll need a few minutes. Shower and all that." Potter's eyes unfocus a bit, and he breathes out. "Yeah." He swallows. "Of course."

Draco manages not to smile at Potter's discomfort. He hands the mug of coffee back. Potter's fingers close around the handle automatically; Draco's almost afraid he's going to drop it. "I'll meet you in the library then? Fifteen minutes?"

Potter clears his throat. "Fifteen minutes. Sure." He steps back, still looking at Draco. "Hey," he says before Draco can shut the door. Draco glances over at him. The early morning sun's filtering through the stained glass window behind Potter, sending blotches of colour across his white shirt. "Yesterday." He scratches his slightly stubbled jaw. He needs a shave. "I mean, last night." He hesitates, then says in a rush, "Thanks for staying with me. It meant a lot."

"I didn't mind." Draco wants to tell Potter that lying beside him, watching the way his eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks as he slept, had been the calmest, most grounding part of his day.

Even if it had freaked him the bloody fuck out later.

Potter nods. He looks young and unsettled and oddly, strangely fragile. If Draco had the bollocks, he'd lean in and kiss that soft mouth of Potter's, tangle his fingers in that messy, dark hair.
But Draco's a craven fool, and so he doesn't.
Potter steps back, his hip hitting the newel post at the top of the staircase. He catches himself from falling with one hand, coffee sloshing over the other. "I'll be downstairs," he says, and then he's on the steps, his booted feet clattering down to the landing.

Draco closes the door behind him and leans against it, a precarious fluttering filling his belly. This is dangerous between them, and he's so bloody tempted to give in, to take what he can from Potter and damn the rest to hell.

That would be the stupidest thing he could do, and he knows it. He closes his eyes and exhales. But he wants to. Ever so badly.

Draco pushes himself off the door. Shower, he thinks. Quick and hot and with no time to wank. Or so he tells himself. He knows damned well it would take two pulls and the thought of Potter's mouth around his prick to send his spunk spattering across the slick tile.

Fuck.

He slams the en suite door behind him.

***

The smell of rot and decay hangs in the air of the lab from the pile of Soul Grass chopped and stewing in a cauldron for positive analysis. It's not the worst of possible lab smells; still, Pansy has a fume spell over the bench to catch as much of it as she can. It's better than a decomposing body at least, but not by much, to be honest.

Pansy's already tested the grass for magical signatures and found a match with Abadzhiev, indicating he'd at least handled it, but she's hoping the cauldron test will further confirm the geographical location it was grown in. Granger's team had gone looking for a field around the loch and staked out a possible ground for the harvest near the raid site. The ethnobotanists are expected to come in to help to build the case for the location near Loch Leven, testing the soil to see if there are any traces of Soul Grass still there. Pansy's sure that, with a bit more time, she can nail Dolohov and the other Death Eaters to the wall on the Soul Grass Salve used on Blaise too. The spores are a little trickier, but the mycologist is reviewing the slides Pansy prepared. She hopes the data will be conclusive, at least for the identity of Richard Thomas' mushrooms and the Scottish finds. The spores from Blaise had been hard to collect--she'd had to threaten the pathologists at St Mungo's more than once to get them to share a larger sample--but she's fairly sure they'll prove a match.

She's just lowered the fire under the cauldron and prepared the origin spell, when a rap of knuckles comes from the doorway to her lab. Pansy turns, pushing up her glasses with a gloved hand.

Draco's standing in the doorway, hands stuffed in his pockets, sheepish look on his face. "Is it safe to come in?" He wrinkles his nose the scent of the Soul Grass wafts his way. "Merlin, but that doesn't half whiff."

"Sure," Pansy says automatically, happiness exploding through her at seeing him lurking in her doorway again. "Put on a lab coat, maybe. Are you cleared by medical to be back in here, by the way?"

Draco laughs, reaching for one of the coats hanging on the wall hooks. "Yeah. As of an hour ago. Potter insisted I get checked by Irskine this morning."
"Good." Pansy bites back a tart comment about Potter checking for himself. Thoroughly, Draco looks too fragile for that particular thread of teasing, and she's still not sure where things stand, between any of them on the team honestly. Instead, she scratches her nose, watching him put on the protective garment, then pad into the main lab area. She meets him a bit away from the wet bench, close enough that she can monitor the spell but far enough away for any effects.

"Walk around the side there," Pansy says. "Stay away from the front part -- I don't want you getting the fumes." Draco's too recently back and, if Pansy is honest, she's nervous still about him and Blaise. She can't believe she nearly lost one of her best friends at the hands of another--she tries not to think about it too much, but it's manifesting in a hyper-protectiveness that she remembers from school. Not to mention that Blaise still needs to be cleared from the influences of whatever the fungal/herbal combination did to him. Pansy's expected at the Beaumont this afternoon once Blaise's grandfather's arrived and been processed by the Aurors; she'd insisted upon being allowed to observe whatever Barachiel Dee intends to do to his grandson, partially out of scientific curiosity but mostly because she wants to be another wand at the ready if the old man tries anything a bit squiffy. She doesn't trust anyone who's been tossed out of the country, particularly by Millicent Bagnold's administration. She'd left two-thirds of the Death Eaters out of Azkaban the first time around, after all.

"Have you missed me?" Draco gives her a sardonic grin. His cheekbones are hollowed out--more than usual--but the colour in his face is good. He's holding his shoulders a bit stiffly still, but Pansy is impressed by how quickly he's healed.

"Terribly. " Pansy heart swells with affection. She honestly has. "It hasn't been the same around here without your sour mug."

Draco smoothes a stray lock of hair out of his eyes. "Congrats on your capture, by the way. The guy was impressed."

Pansy smiles despite herself. She is chuffed at her performance in the raid. The other teams have been giving her grudging respect this morning. Ian Toller had even bought her tea and scone for her in the commissary. "Ta. All of that training we've been doing has helped, you know?"

"I wouldn't know." Draco scowls. "I'm barely allowed into the Ministry. Training centre's still off limits per Potter's orders. I should be grateful he's letting me Floo into the Atrium here."

"And we know how bad you are at being kept indoors." Pansy knows this is hard for him, but tries to keep the tone light. She's actually relieved the guy is being careful. She still doesn't trust the reports yet. "No running, yeah?"

Draco's face falls further. "Only up and down the staircases. I'm going mad, Pans." He's full of hyperbole, she knows. "Did you rip apart the house?"

"I left that to Kreacher." Draco eyes the lab area. "He dusted everything, thank Circe. At first, I was worried for my lungs. You ought to have seen it before you came over on Monday. The whole bloody upstairs was almost as bad as my grandmother's rooms at the Manor."

Pansy knows that Draco's Grandmother Black had been something of a hoarder, and had wanted to keep everything of his grandfather's untouched after his death, leading to famous issues with fungal infiltrations and other forms of pests in the family apartments on the west side. Honestly, there'd been one point in their second year that Draco'd been certain his mother and father were going to end up at their respective solicitors over his grandmother living with them. Maybe they ought to have, Pansy thinks. Draco's life might have been very different.
"How are you and Potter doing?" Pansy bites her lip, not sure she should be broaching this, but sure that no one's about. "Have you ruined all of his ugly household furnishings yet? Any more expensively tacky art objects destroyed?"

Draco's eyes are wide in his unsmiling face for a moment, then he winces. "Oh right. Yeah." He looks awkwardly to the side. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to throw that vase near you. I was aiming for his enormously stupid head."

She laughs. "I know that, you menace. I just wanted to make sure I didn't have to rough up the guv for you, you know."

"Not for the nonce." Draco shakes his head. He wraps his arms around himself and rocks forward on the balls of his feet. "Potter's been all right." He doesn't look at her.

And oh, isn't that different. Although Pansy tells herself she doesn't really want to know, she's definitely curious. But she'll ask later—there's more to deal with today. She turns back to her worktable. "Oh, by the way, did he mention anything about Wrightson?"

"That arsehole?" Draco scoffs. "No. Why?"

Pansy checks the monitoring spell on the Soul Grass, then lowers her voice. "Only, I heard this morning from Shah that Wrightson's being kept in custody. With Bates." She glances at Draco. "In the fortified cells."

"What?" Draco's eyebrows shoot up and his voice is loud with surprise. Everyone knows the cells she's talking about. The Auror force doesn't use them very often, and only with the most dangerous cases. Death Eaters. Criminals who have magical skills beyond what a guard might expect. The walls are lined with runes and charms that dampen magic, suppress it enough to keep the subject no more magically effective than a common household pest. A Doxie, maybe. Or at most a Boggart.

Pansy shushes Draco. "I'm not sure who knows. They found a smoking wand at Azkaban, Shah says. He had to come in last night and help. Said he didn't get home again until nearly half ten, and Robards had to be called back from his dinner table. But I've heard nothing officially. Not a word from anyone else, so they're keeping it pretty bloody quiet, if something did happen. I'm surprised the guv hasn't heard anything." The Soul Grass is done now. She can tell from the change in the cauldron fumes. "Wait here for a sec."

"He might have heard something," Draco says. "He doesn't tell me everything."

Pansy snorts at that. "Please. He'd tell you before me or Blaise, I can damned well assure you of that."

Draco frowns at that, leans against the bench, bum half-perched on Pansy's favourite stool, and Pansy tries to get the cauldron neutralised so it'll be easier to spell clean. She stops when the stomp of boots sounds from outer office.

"Can we come in, Parkinson?" It's Althea Whitaker, from Wrightson's team, with Arthur Maxton close behind. They're each carrying two evidence boxes, with another two floating at their sides. Pansy nearly drops the cauldron on her toe, but recovers it after a brief fumble and sets it down on the table. Whitaker looks a bit roughed up—a long, red scratch on her forehead, a deep bruise across the back of her wand hand.

Maxie is ashen, his face set. "You have a place to put these?"

"Yeah, sure." Pansy waves a hand, keeping her voice level. She recognises those boxes. They'd
been taken from this very lab less than a week back. "On the tables over there. If you like." Draco
swivels to face Althea. He has his wary cat look on. "Is this a trick?" he demands.

Not for the first time, Pansy wishes he'd show a bit more tact with the other teams. They're clearly in
shock about their guv, as she would be too in their shoes. She tries to wonder what it'd be like if Potter'd
been brought in like that, but it wouldn't happen, would it? Not to the Saviour of the Wizarding
World. He's above reproach.

"No. These are your files." Althea's voice is surprisingly calm, patient even. "We got permission from
Robards to bring them back. Potter said to put them in here."

Pansy comes up behind Draco, puts a restraining hand on his arm. "We'll be happy to take
custody."

She watches appreciatively as the two Aurors lay the heavy boxes out on the bench. If she's honest,
they're rather impressively strong. She wonders what Wrightson had his team doing, or if there's a
training club she's not aware of. She reminds herself to ask Potter later. Althea's lean and long as she
bends over the bench, and Pansy's struck by the way her body shifts beneath her tight white shirt and
perfectly tailored black pants. As much as she dislikes Althea, Pansy envies her tall, muscular
physique. The only way Pansy's going to break six feet is with a Polyjuice Potion or a pair of seven-
inch stilettos.

When they finish, Althea walks up to Pansy. "We're going to need your help." Her voice is a bit stiff.
Wary.

"Are you okay?" Pansy asks, surprising herself with her concern. Draco gives her a sharp look, but
Pansy doesn't give a fuck. If Shah's right about Whitaker--and he should know, since he was there--
Pansy marvels at Althea's ability to be in the office this morning seeing to menial tasks the day after
getting her guv taken into custody. Althea Whitaker has bollocks, she thinks.

Althea gives her a quick, candid glance. "I've been better." She hesitates. "A hell of a lot better. But I'm
just glad we caught him in the act. I shudder to think what would have happened, yeah?" She looks
away, and her throat works as she swallows. "You think you know someone..."

Maxie gives a heavy sigh from behind her. He's not meeting anyone's eyes. Truth be told, he looks
more cut up than Althea, Pansy thinks. But then again, Althea's a tough one. She's had to be. Pansy
can respect that; she knows what it's like to be a woman on the force.

"All right," Whitaker says after a moment, wiping her hands on her trousers. "I think that's most of it. We'll
look for anything else and bring it by." She turns to leave, then pauses in the door. "Thanks,
Parkinson.Malfoy."

When she's gone, Draco turns to Pansy, wide-eyed. "What the hell has been going on since I've been
gone?"

Pansy shrugs. "It's been a bit mad, honestly." She motions to the door. "Want to go for tea in the
commissary, and I'll catch you up on the rest?"

And you'll tell me about Potter and you, she thinks after Draco agrees to the tea break. She reflexively
touches the wood of a nearby stool.

As unhinged as things are at the moment, Pansy's skeptical enough to believe they can still get worse.
Noone's ever ready to believe the worst about other people, she thinks. Or themselves.
Harry's in his office, paperwork spread across his desk that could last him through the weekend at the rate the bloody Auror force as a whole seems to be generating incidents. He's tired and not focussing properly; he's read the same paragraph about Wrightson from Althea Whitaker's report four times, and it's still not making sense. It hadn't even when Viola had brought it down the moment he walked in this morning—and he wonders if she has a tracking charm on him given how quickly she'd shown up after he'd put his satchel down next to his chair.

He still doesn't quite understand what happened last night at Azkaban. No one truly does, it seems. Viola had been uncharacteristically quiet when she'd handed it over, telling him Gawain wanted his thoughts on it by half-tent this morning. Selwyn's in the holding cells as well, down the hall from Wrightson. Bates is there too. None of them are talking, and Harry's half a mind to go down and rattle their doors a bit, see if one of the three might crack, but he thinks Gawain'll have his bollocks if hedoes.

Parkinson's down in the lab with the evidence they'd gathered from Scotland, dutifully recording everything and comparing it to the samples she'd gathered from Prague. Malfoy ought to be there with her, judging by what he said when he'd left the incident room forty-odd minutes ago. If Parkinson's sure she can prove a common source between the Scottish Soul Grass Selwyn was trying to burn and the salve that Dolohov used on Zabini, that could get them one step closer to building the case in court. The mushroom spores might be a bit more difficult, but they're highly endangered and rare, so they'll work just on circumstantial evidence. Selwyn's already chargeable before the Wizengamot just on being out of Azkaban without due cause, but any connection they can prove to Dolohov and Abadzhiev will make the case stronger. Hermione should have conclusive evidence on magical signatures from Scotland today, unless something went awry with the monitoring spell grid.

But that still doesn't help Harry place Marcus Wrightson in any of this. He looks back down at Althea Whitaker's statement. There's only one spot where her handwriting gets a bit shaky. She's describing Rodolphus Lestrange's taunting of her. He leans back in his chair, thinking. He doesn't like the story she's weaving, the visits to Azkaban from Wrightson and Bates and Lucius-fucking-Malfoy. He flips the page, studies the copy of the visitor's log from Azkaban. There are the names, bold as day, with dates and times. Lucius Malfoy's signature is large and spiky, the ink black and thick and ever so slightly smeared at the end of the y.

"What were you doing?" Harry mumbles to himself. His gaze follows the line across the page. 28 May, 2006. Visit with Lestrange, R. 9:08 a.m. - 9:24 a.m.

And that's one titbit of information he'll be holding back from Malfoy. For now at least. Harry doesn't know what to do with it. Lestrange is Lucius's brother-in-law. He could have been visiting for familial reasons. For sixteen minutes. The Sunday before Malfoy was attacked in the middle of a Ministry building.

Harry runs a hand over his mouth, pressing a knuckle against his bottom lip as he studies the file in front of him. Fuck. Just fuck. He's glad that Malfoy's off, seeing what Parkinson's up to. He hopes they go for a tea or something. He needs a bit of time to process this information.

When a knock comes at his half-open door, Harry closes the file jacket. "Yeah?" He's incredibly surprised when, of all people, Narcissa Malfoy comes through his door, elegantly dressed in a muted lilac robe and with her hair perfectly coiffed. She clutches a small pink leather handbag, and looks about her a bit uncertainly.

"Mrs Malfoy." Harry's on his feet at once, trying to clear a chair for Narcissa to sit in. With a
sweep of his wand, he turfs out a stack of books into the corner. "Here. My apologies for the mess." He's not certain why she's here, but it seems a bit too coincidental to be a social visit, her showing up as Harry's reading through his husband's file.

Narcissa sits in the wooden chair, her back ramrod straight, and she folds her hands into her lap around her small bag. "Thank you, Inspector Potter. I'm sorry to have arrived unannounced." She glances back at the door. "I was escorted here."

Harry catches sight of Shah standing back from the door. He looks tired and worn out. Harry wonders if he'd slept any before coming back into the Ministry this morning. Knowing Shah he probably just kipped for a few hours in an empty incident room.

"Thanks, Hassan," Harry says, and Shah nods, slipping away. Harry looks back at Narcissa. "You're always welcome, of course." Harry privately thinks that, with her son in his house--not to mention his bed--Narcissa can take whatever bloody liberties she wishes. He does wonder why she didn't just come by Grimmauld, though, and he wonders if there's been a problem with her and Malfoy. He doesn't know that Malfoy would tell him about it if there were.

"How can I help?" Harry scans her face, looking for clues. He sees nothing he can identify.

Narcissa takes a deep breath. Her fingers clench around her bag. "I'm here to talk about Draco."

Harry's throat goes dry and his stomach ties itself into an enormous knot. "All right." He thinks of Malfoy lying beside him in his bed last night, his fingertips soft against Harry's face. There's so much between him and Malfoy that Harry doesn't understand--or maybe he does and he won't let himself think about it properly. When he'd woken up in the middle of the night to Malfoy gone from his side, Harry'd felt more alone than he had the entirety of the bloody War.

Narcissa tilts her head. Her raised eyebrow tells Harry that his nervousness on the topic of her son had not gone unnoticed. Of course. Still, she looks unsettled herself. "And my husband, of course."

And there it is, isn't it? Narcissa has come here to talk to him about her husband, here where her son can't see her. Harry tries not to look too interested, but he leans back in his chair. "Certainly. I'm always happy to listen." He has a few questions of his own he hopes to have answered.

Narcissa takes a slow, careful breath, and she meets Harry's gaze. "Lucius is the person Dolohov was trying to send a message to when Draco was hurt. I'm certain of it."

Harry steeples his fingers. He'd thought as much, if he's honest. It's not a mad leap of logic to make, given the Death Eater connections, their common past. "I'm sorry to be so crass as to ask, but do you have proof of this?"

Narcissa purses her lips. "A wife knows things, Mr Potter. My husband--" She's teetering on the edge of trusting him, Harry can tell. He's been here with many a witness, and he knows that she has to decide to take that leap and betray her nearest and dearest. Narcissa runs a thumb over the smooth leather of her handbag. Harry senses the moment she gives in; her face shifts ever so slightly, just enough for him to recognise she's made her decision. "My husband and I live very separate lives, Inspector Potter. I love him, but I don't often ask him where he's been whenever he goes out of the house." She looks away, her voice catching for a moment. "It's a habit I fell into during the last War. Perhaps even earlier. It was always easier for me not to know. It protected me in many ways, I suppose."

Harry watches her, just waiting. He knows to give her space to say what she needs.
"Lucius," Narcissa says quietly, "has been away quite often as of late. And has received strange visitors as well. In his private quarters." She looks up at Harry. "It's a very familiar pattern, Inspector Potter. One I had hoped he'd broken upon the Dark Lord's demise."

"Would you know where he's gone?" Harry keeps his tone mild. Narcissa's eyes are a bit too bright for his liking. She's almost relieved to be able to tell, he thinks. Secrecy is a heavy burden to carry. "Is he travelling abroad?"

"Sometimes, I think." Narcissa pauses. "But he's been hunting in Scotland as well." Her gaze flicks away, and her mouth thins, ever so slightly. "Or so he says. Lucius has never cared about tracking game bigger than a pheasant in his life."

Bulleseye, Harry thinks. If he can tie Lucius to the Loch Leven raid, well, that will be another strong basis for his case. "Do you know where?" he asks, and he reaches for a quill and a notepad.

"He inherited a lodge near Hogwarts," Narcissa says. "In the Highlands." "Near Loch Leven?" Harry asks, and Narcissa looks a bit surprised.

"Not on the loch, but it isn't far away. A mile or so up in the mountains." Narcissa leans forward, her long and delicate gold earrings swinging with her. "Lucius's father Abraxas loved the place; Lucius loathes it. Has refused to step foot in it for years. And yet he's been there three weekends since March." She meets Harry's gaze. "You see my concern."

Harry thinks he might. Malfoy hadn't mentioned the lodge at all, which bothers Harry. "Does your son know about the property?"

Narcissa shrugs. "I'm certain it's been mentioned around him before, but he's never been there to the best of my knowledge. As I said, Lucius didn't care for it. It was never a family holiday spot." She hesitates, then says, "We've other properties we preferred for that."

Harry's sure they have. Probably ones that the Ministry still doesn't know about. He scrawls notes across the parchment. "You mentioned visitors."

Narcissa stills, and Harry glances up at her. She looks frightened in a way that he's never seen. She breathes out, then nods. "Yes. I've seen one or two familiar faces in the Manor at times when I ought not to have been there." She smooths a lock of hair back behind her ear; Harry catches the faint tremble in her hand. "Coming back early from an errand or from visiting a friend. That sort of thing. And always from afar. A figure down a hall or a voice as a door is closing. Times when it's rather obvious I'm meant to be unawares." She shifts in the chair, crossing her feet at her ankles. "And I've done my part by pretending not to notice. But after this--after Draco--" There's a faint hitch in her voice. "Well, I won't let my son be harmed, Inspector Potter. I think you'll understand that point of view."

Oh, he does. Very much so. Harry sets his quill down. "May I ask whom you've seen?" Harry has all the time it takes. He can tell this is important.

Narcissa sighs, fiddling with the pink strap of her bag before she answers. "I've seen James Selwyn." She looks up at Harry, her face pale. "And I've also heard Corban Yaxley. Twice."

Harry starts upright, then forces himself to relax. The quill leaps up into the air beside him, he snaps his fingers and it starts writing again, filling the parchment with his handwriting. "Mrs Malfoy, let me be perfectly clear. You claim you heard Corban Yaxley, who is supposed to be deceased. And you claim that you saw James Selwyn in Wiltshire, when he's in Azkaban." He
doesn't want to let her know that Selwyn's only a few corridors over in the restricted holding cells.

Narcissa nods, chin high. "Yes, Inspector Potter. You may think me mad, but I know damned well what I saw and heard in my home. There may be those who choose not to believe me, but I know both of these wizards from." She looks down at her hands, curled tightly around her bag. "From before."

I bet you do, Harry thinks. But he doesn't want to upset her, and he's shocked at the corroboration of their recent evidence and of Lucius Malfoy's complicity. Narcissa wouldn't tell him this unless she were very, very angry. He doesn't know whether to be elated or horrified.

Fuck, but he doesn't want to tell Malfoy about this.

"May I ask why you've chosen this moment to come forward if you've suspected these men have been in your house for months now? And why me?" Harry is honestly a bit confused. He would have expected Malfoy's mother to talk to Parkinson or Zabini first.

"Obviously it's because of my son." Narcissa meets his eyes, and Harry tries not to look away. "You've offered Draco sanctuary. And his father has nearly got him killed." Her mouth tightens. "Whilst I may love my husband, Inspector Potter, you know exactly how far I'll go to protect my son."

Harry does. He owes Narcissa Malfoy his very life for that reason. He rubs a thumb over his bottom lip. "Do you know why he was attacked?"

Narcissa looks away, her arched eyebrows drawing together. Harry knows this expression well from her son when he's furious. Usually with Harry.

"My husband is weak," she says after a long moment. "I've learnt over the years how susceptible he is to the power of others. From what I've been able to piece together over the past few days, I think he's been working with Antonin Dolohov on a scheme to regain the power he lost during the War. I believe he had second thoughts shortly before Draco was hurt and tried to recuse himself from whatever plan they've made. Last Thursday night, Lucius came into my rooms, drunk as a lord, and told me he was sorry, that he'd made an enormous mistake and he would do his best to make amends. I let him sleep next to me, he was so shaken. He didn't give me details, but when Draco..." She trails off, and she brushes away a tear with her thumb.

Harry nods slowly, surprised at the candid nature of her observation and her trust in him. He doesn't want to break it. "So when you asked me for sanctuary on Friday, you knew that this was why Draco was hurt."

"I suspected the connection, yes." Narcissa closes her eyes for a moment. "I didn't know it was Dolohov Lucius was speaking of on Thursday night. I didn't know that until I came to St Mungo's on Friday. But the house elves told me later that an hour or two after I left to come to Draco, Dolohov arrived at the Manor, and Lucius went somewhere with him." She opens her eyes and looks at Harry. "Not entirely willingly, I'm afraid. There were words, it seems. Trissie was quite upset by it and hid herself in the pantry for the rest of the day."

"Has your husband said anything to you about this?" Harry asks.

Narcissa shakes her head. "He was angry on Saturday when Draco returned his owl in ashes. The kind of angry Lucius only gets when he's frightened." She hesitates. "Trapped. He went into a rage and locked himself into his rooms. The few times he's come out, he's been drunk." There's a deep sadness etched on her face. "I ought to have come earlier, I suppose. But it's not something I wanted Draco to know. Not this way."
Harry watches her. "Mrs Malfoy, I'm very sorry to ask, but do you feel safe in your home?" Her chin snaps up and she looks at him, eye brilliant in the light.

"Only, if you were my mother, I'd want to make sure," Harry finishes awkwardly.

He's surprised by the warmth of the smile she gives him. "Thank you, Inspector Potter. That's perhaps the kindest thing anyone's said to me in quite a while." She appears to ponder his words for a moment, then she shakes her head. "I'm never safe, you know. But I'm quite used to it. I assure you, I haven't lost any of my defensive skills."

Not for the first time, Harry hates Lucius Malfoy with a hatred that verges on madness. That he could put the woman who loved him and the son who idolised him in such jeopardy, more than once, that he could expose them to such dangerous, violent, and horrible people and then not protect them--Harry has to tamp down a flare of anger that smoulders the edges of his notepad. He bats the smoke away with one palm, smothering the tiny flame. Narcissa just eyes him curiously. There's a scorch mark down the side of the parchment, but Harry doesn't care.

"Could you stay with your sister for a few days?" Harry fiddles nervously with his quill. "I can put a guard on the house. And I think Andromeda wouldn't mind; I mean, she talks about you, you know. When I'm over visiting my godson." Harry doesn't get by nearly often enough, but he tries to see Teddy at least a few times a month. Andromeda has a modest house in Clerkenwell with a nice school for Teddy nearby and a well-tended, if small, garden for him to play in.

Narcissa smiles gently. "If you're going to move against my husband, and I suspect my being here is more than enough reason for you to do so, the very safest place for me at the moment is at his side, don't you think? Else how will it look if you apprehend him when I'm not there? Lucius may be shutting me out of whatever is frightening him, but he'll notice if I disappear. Particularly if I go to my sister's. He's not fond of Dromeda, I'm afraid. Better not to draw his attention."

She's right, of course. Harry knows she is, from countless training opportunities, not to mention cases he'd seen of violence against women in the field. Still, he wants to keep Narcissa safe, if only for the fact she's Malfoy's mother. He wants to protect her in any way he can.

"I knew what I was about when I came here." Narcissa nods slightly, and her slumped shoulders square. There's a sharp glint in her eye. "I won't see my only son killed because his father is a coward."

"Mrs Malfoy, I'll do everything in my power to keep Dolohov from hurting him." Harry bites his lip, trying not to remember what he saw six days past. Images spring unbidden to his mind. Malfoy before Zabini's wand, Malfoy lying so pale and still on the floor, cloak swirled around him, blood pooling on the marble beneath him. His voice shakes a little when he says, "You have my word."

There's a movement in the incident room, the quiet stumble of a body against one of the desks. Harry stills, looking past Narcissa. "Parkinson," he says sharply, but it's not her.

Malfoy steps into the doorway, his face pale and set. "Hello, Mother," he says, politely, but his eyes are wide and shadowed. He won't meet Harry's gaze.

"How long were you out there?" Harry asks, but he already knows the answer.

"Long enough," Malfoy says. He crosses his arms over his chest. He looks lost, out of place standing here in the door of Harry's office. "So Father's up to his old tricks."
"Malfoy," Harry starts to say, but Malfoy holds a hand up.

"It's fine, Potter." Malfoy's mouth twists to one side. It's not a pleasant smile. "You'd think after twenty-six years I'd be used to my father's more idiotic grasps for power." He glances towards his mother. "You're certain about this."

Narcissa doesn't look away from her son. "Yes."

Malfoy draws in an uneven breath. "We'll need to bring it to the Head Auror's attention." His face is pale but determined. "You know they'll raid the Manor. Again."

"I know," Narcissa says, rising to her feet, and Harry feels as if he's no longer part of the conversation. Mother and son are facing each other, wearing identical looks of grim resolve.

"It'll make it difficult for you." Malfoy's jaw works. "And me, but mostly you."

Narcissa gives him a faint smile. "We've survived worse, my love."

"Doesn't mean I like this." Malfoy reaches a hand out, and Narcissa takes it. "Circe, Mother, why don't you leave him--"

"It's not that easy--"

"It is," Malfoy says, his voice harsh. He looks away, but his fingers are still threaded through his mother's. He presses his lips together and huffs.

Narcissa's thumb traces small circles across the back of his hand. "It's what I can do, Dracio. " She pulls him closer, up against him, and her other hand cups his cheek. Harry has to look away; the sight of Malfoy's mother comforting him is almost overwhelming. He feels a wave of grief and longing for his own mother, for what he's never had. "But this is my line," Narcissa whispers. "The one I'll hold, whatever he does. As much as I love him, I won't let you be hurt--"

"But you have," Malfoy murmurs. He presses his face into his mother's shoulder, lets her arms go around him. He closes his eyes. "Mother….

"Do what you need to," Narcissa says quietly. She kisses Malfoy's temple, then she steps away, reaching for the bag she left on the chair. "Wherever this might lead."

Malfoy nods, and Harry can see the pain written across his face. He's never known Malfoy to be this open with how he feels, not in front of Harry, but then Harry's just an interloper here, isn't he?

Narcissa looks over at Harry, and he stands solemnly attentive. "Thank you, Inspector. I'm grateful to you for keeping my son safe."

"If there's anything I can do. Please owl me day or night. I can have Kreacher keep watch for Orestes." Harry wishes there were more he could do. He knows his promises are meaningless, that Narcissa is braver than he could possibly imagine.

"Thank you. If there is need, I'll contact you." She touches Malfoy's face. "Be brave, my boy."

Malfoy just swallows and looks away. Narcissa sighs, and then she's gone in a rustle of lilac silk.

Harry waits for a moment, and then he says, "Look, Malfoy, if you want me to speak to Gawain--"

"That's why I came down," Malfoy says, and he looks over at Harry. There's an open grief to his
Lost in thought, Draco trails Potter through the hallway to Robards' office. He feels numb, but unsurprised, and it's the latter emotion that's upsetting him the most, he thinks. He loves his father, in his own way, but Lucius has always been a selfish prick, placing his own wants above anything that might benefit his wife and son, so Draco doesn't quite know what else he might have expected from him. It's not as if he didn't know Lucius still held his bloody prejudices. Draco's had to hear his rants over Sunday roasts for years. He'd learnt to tune them out, as had his mother, and perhaps that was their mistake, he thinks.

He'd chalked his father's rages up to an old man's bigotry, certain that Lucius had been broken beyond this sort of stupidity. Evidently Draco'd been bloody wrong, now hadn't he?

"You said it's just us and the other stakeholders," Potter says, drawing looking back as they step into the bullpen. "Hermione, of course. Anyone else?"

"Not that Viola said," Draco's still distracted. He's angry with his mother for not coming to him with this, for going to Potter instead and laying bare their family secrets to him all people. Draco's face feels hot; he doesn't like that Potter keeps shooting him worried glances as Draco follows him through the bullpen. If there weren't half the Auror force watching them pass, Draco'd draw to a standstill and shout at him, tell him to leave him the bloody fuck alone.

But he can't, so he just thinks it, and Potter doesn't seem to be able to read Draco's mind. Instead, Potter nods to Maxie and Althea, who're looking up from their desks. Wrightson's team seems underoccupied at the moment, all of them sitting together, looking half-stunned still. Except for Althea, whose mouth is a tight, thin line. She nods at Draco, which surprises him enough to nod back. For not the first time, Draco gives thanks that it's not his guy in custody, that he didn't have to arrest Potter of all people. That would have been beyond horrible—and he could only imagine the gossip that would ripple through the bullpen there. He thinks back to Althea accusing him of blowing Potter to get on the team. He can't believe that was only a few weeks past. Everything's changed around them; everything's falling apart.

He doesn't like it, but he feels for Althea. It can't have been easy for her, he thinks. She's too much of a bloody idealist, especially for a Ravenclaw. There've been whispers about Wrightson and
Althea lately; Draco's paid them no mind. He doesn't think Althea would ever have given Wrightson the time of day, despite the laddish nature of the office rumour mill; Draco's also sure she plays for the opposite team. Still, losing your guy is hard, especially like this, and he doesn't envy anyone on that team.

When they enter the thick-carpeted space of the Head Auror's office, Viola is on her feet, motioning them with frantic gestures. "Where were you? Bertie and the Unspeakables have been in there ten minutes!"

"Sorry, Viola. We had a visitor." Potter sticks his hands in his pockets and gives her a rakishly apologetic grin, and Draco watches as the Potter Magic takes effect. It takes everything Draco has not to roll his eyes and shove Potter aside to get into the Head Auror's inner office. Not to mention, Viola ought to damned well know better. She's far too old for him anyway.

Viola smiles at Potter, despite her evident annoyance ten seconds before. "That's fine, Harry. I know there's a lot to do. Still, he's angry, so do be expecting a bit of a lather." She grimaces.

Draco bites back his snort; he has too much respect for Viola's powers of observation. She'll make his life hell if she catches him. But it's beyond irritating how the bespectacled git still always gets away with everything, especially now that he's grown up handsome, broad-shouldered, and deep-voiced. That works on some, Draco thinks. Despite his own mental anguish, Draco finds himself wishing the world wouldn't bend to Harry Potter's every whim. It might actually do Potter some bloody good to be told no every now and then.

Viola shoots Draco a sharp look and Draco tries to smile, although he's cursing her for being a silly, Potter-besotted cow under his breath.

Then again, who's he fooling? He has no right to point fingers at her. He's practically one himself.

Potter opens the door to the Head Auror's inner office, and Robards voice comes from inside. "Where the blazes have you been, lad! Get in here this instant!"

Draco slides in behind Potter, watching over his shoulder as Robards stands up from behind his desk, looking like he's going to tear strips off of Potter. Finally, Draco thinks, and he waits grimly for the fireworks. The Head Auror is a bit of terrifying when he's furious, and he's clearly not best pleased.

"Gawain," Potter says calmly. "We came as soon as possible."

"Where's Parkinson?" Robards snaps.

"Lab," Potter says. "She still has some evidence she's working with. From Scotland. " He walks towards Robards' desk. "As you know, Zabini's still on health leave, so it's me and Malfoy for now."

Draco scans the room. Granger nods coolly from the corner. Draco notes the absence of the American, Durant. Thank Circe. The last thing Draco needs right now is a Legilimens--much less that one. Draco's sure anyone can read his thoughts; he's angry and frightened. Still, when Bertie gives him a welcoming look, Draco can't help but quirk his mouth.

There are three empty seats, in front of Robards' desk and no one else in the meeting. Draco's surprised that their team was invited to this honestly.

Robards relents, of course, because why the fuck would anyone call Potter to task in this bloody Ministry? With a sigh, he drops back into the chair behind his desk. "Sit, Potter. Malfoy. Granger, would you bring them up to speed?"
Potter settles in the largest, most centrally placed chair, and Draco takes the one to the side, closer to Bertie. "So what do we know so far?" Potter asks.

"Wrightson's in custody," Granger says. "His own team figured out that he was involved in the Selwyn conspiracy. Seems to have been a Polyjuice switch." She and Potter share a private look for a moment. And isn't that interesting, Draco thinks. He knows the golden trio weren't all that golden at school. "As near as we can tell from Hopkirk's statement—and keep in mind it was rather disjointed—he would go to visit Selwyn with two flasks of smuggled Polyjuice. She'd take one, he'd take the other, and he'd walk out of Azkaban as Mafalda Hopkirk. Usually for a day, perhaps two." She frowns. "This last time he didn't come back. She'd been marked as on holiday, but one of her colleagues reported her absence on Wednesday when she didn't return." She looks over at Robards. "Evidently it got lost in paperwork."

Robards rolls his eyes, and Draco leans forward. "Mafalda Hopkirk of the Improper Use of Magic office?" he asks.

Granger nods. "Why?"

"What reason would she have for visiting Selwyn?" Draco says. "It's not as if she's an Auror or a solicitor. She tracks magical signatures, for fuck's sake. Mostly of teenagers."

"Seems she was a cousin of Selwyn's," Robards says. He eyes Draco. "Did she have any previous ties to your family's..." He hesitates, then says, "Acquaintances?" Tactful, really, and Draco appreciates it. It'd do Potter some good to learn that particular skill from the Head Auror, he thinks, instead of stomping around people's feelings like a damned Erumpent in heat.

Draco considers. "She wasn't ever part of my father's inner circle, but I think I've heard her name come up before." He frowns. "Didn't she claim to be Imperiused after the War?"

"She did show traces of the curse," Bertie says from his side. "Enough that she never was brought into the hearings."

Draco shakes his head. "I don't think she was." He glances over at Bertie. "It was years ago, and maybe I'm wrong, but..." He trails off, and he bites at his thumb before dropping his hand with a sigh. "Sorry. Call me cynical, but my father knew exactly how to fake traces of Imperius." The look Potter gives him is sympathetic. Draco turns away.

Granger continues. "The worrying bit is, several of the Polyjuiced visitors were Ministry officials or Aurors. So this is larger than just a Death Eater conspiracy. Or if it is, it's deeper than we thought."

Robards sighs heavily, and counts on his fingers. "Wrightson. Hopkirk. Bates—although he's got an alibi for one of those days, so we're looking into that one." He frowns. "We're still keeping him in the holding cells, though. He claims he's done nothing wrong."

Bertie snorts. "We'll see."

"Do you think Death Eaters were Polyjuicing into Aurors?" Potter asks. "If they got a hair or fingernail--"

"Perhaps," Robards says. "Although Wrightson's evidently a sympathiser, if not an outright believer." His mouth thins beneath his mustache. "Althea Whitaker's statement makes that perfectly clear."

"Has Wrightson said anything yet?" Potter asks.
"No." Robards turns his eyes on Draco. "Your father was in the log as well, Constable Malfoy. Quite frequently, in fact."

Draco's rage bubbles up again, but he tries to keep his composure. Really, nothing would please him more than Apparating over to the Manor in a fury, especially after his mother's confirmation of what his father's been doing. It would please an adolescent part of himself, but he knows he wouldn't sustain his anger, that there would be nothing he could do against his father's self-obsessed insanity. His father's opinion of him is hermetically sealed and has been for years, and Draco can do little else than provoke him or work himself into a fit.

Draco nods, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry for that."

Robards scans his face for a long moment. "Nothing you can do about it, Malfoy. But I appreciate your concern."

Bertie leans forward, squeezes Draco's knee. "You aren't him, Draco. We know that. But did your dad tell you anything about what he was up to?" He gives Draco a bright look, encouraging.

Draco folds his arms over his chest. "No. I'm afraid we don't speak often, and he would never entrust me with important information. He knows how I feel about all of that."

"And how do you feel?" Robards asks.

Granger watches him. Potter looks discomfited, but his body shifts toward Draco in a non-threatening way, his shoulders obliquely positioned. He's being as supportive as he dares, Draco knows, and his face looks genuinely pained on Draco's behalf.

"I'd like to bloody well curse him," Draco says honestly. "Except I've no desire to land in Azkaban myself."

Robards nods. "Good. We're agreed then." He pauses. "If you do ever need to recuse yourself Malfoy, it won't be a problem."

"They are your family, after all," Bertie says. Draco is grateful for his mentor's understanding. Bertie knows something of how complicated Draco's relationship to his father is.

Draco takes a deep breath. "I feel like I'll have no trouble exercising my duties as an Auror to uphold Wizarding law, sir. I'd like to be a part of the team." He looks at Potter. "But are you going to tell him about my father's latest cock up, or am I?"

Potter studies Draco for a long moment, then sighs. "Narcissa Malfoy came to see me, sir." He turns to Robards. "It's why we were late. She had credible testimony that Lucius Malfoy has been meeting with Death Eaters at the Manor since March. Perhaps longer." His gaze flicks towards Draco, but he doesn't stop. "She identified Selwyn, Yaxley and Dolohov as visitors."

"Yaxley." Robards sounds tired. "So the memory in Zabini's head--"

"Appears to be correct," Potter says. "She also suggested that Lucius Malfoy had been meeting with other individuals unknown to her at a lodge the family owns near Loch Leven."

Draco draws in a sharp breath. "What?" He's confused. "We don't own--"

"Your grandfather did," Potter says, almost gently. "Your mother thought it might have been mentioned in front of you at some point, even though you'd never been."
Draco frowns. A memory of his grandfather and father arguing surfaces, both of them shouting about some place Grandfather Abraxas wanted to take Draco to hunt when he was small. "Oh," he says quietly. "I'm an idiot."

Bertie huffs, interrupting him. "None of that, lad. Not your fault your father's a tit."

Robards is watching Draco. "You know we'll need to act on this information, Constable Malfoy."

"I know." Draco meets the Head Auror's gaze. "And as I said, sir, I'll want to be part of the team when it comes to whatever action we take. If nothing else, I can get everyone through the wards."

"It's unorthodox," Robards says.

"Gawain," Potter says quietly, and Robards just nods.

"I'll consider it." Robards leans back in his chair, looking tired and embattled.

"There's also the issue of Wrightson's Unforgivable," Bertie says. He glances at Draco. "Cast a Killing Curse multiple times with his Auror wand. Gawain insists he didn't lift the restrictions."

Robards runs a hand over his face. "He must have broken it himself."

"That's impossible," Granger says. "It can only be lifted by you or one of the other DMLE heads. Croaker, Peasegood. Both of them insist they didn't."

Robards' hand comes down on his desk, the sharp, angry thud echoing in the room, silencing them all. "Well, I bloody well didn't."

"No one's saying you did." Bertie leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "But either Wrightson's a better wizard than I think or he has friends in some high places to break those spells." He frowns down at his clasped hands, a troubled look on his face. "I reckon that means we need to tread carefully here, Gawain."

Robards sighs. "I agree. Which is why none of this goes out of this room, do I make myself clear?" They all nod, even Draco. Robards rests his hands on his desk blotter, fingers drumming lightly against it. "We'll move against Malfoy Manor tomorrow. The earlier the better. Potter, Granger, can you make that happen?"

"I can run the risk assessments this afternoon," Granger says. She looks at Potter. "You want to come to my office to discuss details?"

"Yeah," Potter says, and it's a relief when his attention slides away from Draco. "Half-three work for you?"

Granger wrinkles her nose. "Meeting with Croaker then, but I might have to reschedule anyway if I'm working on the assessment. Let's say four?"

"Works for me." Potter scrawls the time down on his notepad. "I'll come down. Will we be running my team--sans Zabini, of course, since he's still not cleared, and possibly Malfoy--along with the Unspeakables?"

"And a few other Aurors," Robards says. "I'll send names to you later. I want to make certain they're ones we can depend on for their discretion. Same for you, Granger. Your top Unspeakables. Highest clearance." Robards eyes Draco for a long moment, then sighs. "I'm going to make the choice to trust you, lad. If you think you can."
Draco nods, his stomach twisting. He knows what this means, for him, for his mother, for his father. "I just want to be there, sir. For my mother's sake."

"Fine. Don't fuck this up." Robards looks at Potter. "Do you have any problems with Malfoy being on board?" Potter shakes his head, and Robards turns to Granger. "You?"

Granger watches Draco for a moment, then shakes her head. "If Harry thinks Malfoy can handle it, sir, then I won't object. We can use his expertise."

Draco feels an odd flutter of relief, mixed in with his trepidation. "Thank you," he says. Whatever happens tomorrow, he intends to be there. He wants to look his father in the eye when they take him down.

There's a knock on the door, and Viola sticks her head in. "Hobson and Yates are here, sir. With Barachiel Dee. I've put them in the conference room."

Robards swears beneath his breath. "He's not expected at the Beaumont for another hour."

Viola gives him a look that clearly says and what do you expect me to do about that? "He's here now."

"Jake should be at the Beaumont already," Granger says, pulling out her mobile. "I could ring him--"

Robards waves his hand, cutting her off. "I'll handle this, Granger. Thank you." He squares his shoulders, his mouth a grim line. "I've a few words to have with Mr Dee as it is." He stands, and it's clear the meeting is over. "Potter, when Zabini's done, I want you back here. We need to discuss tomorrow's operation before you meet with Granger." His eyes flick towards Draco, then back to Potter. Draco knows what he means. Without the complication listening, Draco frowns; Potter just nods. He doesn't look at Draco, thank Circe.

And then they're filing back out to the outer office. Bertie stops Draco, his hand on Draco's good shoulder. "All right, lad?" he asks softly, his head bent towards Draco's.

Draco nods at him. "It's fine," he says.

It's not and Bertie knows it just as well as Draco does. He grunts, his fingers squeezing lightly over Draco's shirt. "Just remember I'll have your back." He looks over at Potter, who's saying something to Granger. "And that one will too, I reckoned."

Draco watches Potter, studies the line of his broad shoulders, the plane of his square jaw. And then Potter turns his head and catches Draco looking at him. He gives Draco a small smile before glancing away.

Yes, Draco thinks. Maybe Potter will this time.

That thought gives him a modicum of hope.

***

Blaise is bloody well nervous.

He's pacing the length of the Beaumont suite's sitting room, rubbing at his arms as his mother sits primly on the long, low-backed and tufted sofa in front of the fireplace, legs crossed, watching him.
"If you don't stop, I'm going to put you in a full body bind," she says with more than a bit of a tart tinge to her voice. Blaise knows he's driving her mad with his restlessness. He can't help himself.

"You won't." Blaise walks over to one of the French doors that's open out onto the terrace. The red brick rooftops of Mayfair stretch out above the terrace wall. He takes a deep breath of warm air, tinged with the scent of the potted orange trees situated along the length of the terrace to provide a bit of shade and privacy. He glances back at his mother. "Besides, you don't trust it not to interact with whatever your father's about to do to me."

His mother has the grace to look away.

Blaise can't remember the last time he saw his grandfather. Circe, but he must have been a small child. If he closes his eyes and thinks, he gets a sense of a tall, dark man with a deep, commanding voice and broad shoulders. The kind of man one feared, but perhaps didn't quite love.

He doesn't know much about his mother's family. Only that they're talented necromancers, direct descendants of John bloody Dee himself, and that, over the past few centuries, they've served in courts across Europe at the pleasure of kings and queens. And until his grandfather did something particularly sodding stupid, purportedly in the name of academic curiosity, they'd held a respected place in British wizarding society.

Now his grandmother's dead, his grandfather lives on a Cretan clifftop, and their only progeny ran away with Blaise's destitute father at twenty-three instead of finishing her necromantic apprenticeship.

Family reunions have never been something at the top of Blaise's to-do list.

The door to the back bedroom opens and Jake steps out. He's changed clothes, out of the faded jeans and jumper he's been wearing and into a crisply starched white shirt, dark wool trousers, and a grey silk tie. Blaise feels underdressed in his t-shirt and pyjama bottoms, but his mother had insisted he wear comfortable clothes for the ritual.

Merlin's balls. Blaise hasn't ever had a bloody *ritual* performed on him, and he doesn't much like the sound of it, to be honest.

"You all right?" Jake asks him, over his mother's head, and Blaise nods. He's not, but there's no sense in admitting it to anyone. He hates the idea that bits and pieces of Luka Abadzhiev's memories are still trapped in his brain. Jake's sat him down twice since Tuesday morning to gently prod through his mind, pushing and prodding for the tiny dark specks in Blaise's memory that are Abadzhiev's remnants until Blaise's head throbs with the effort of it all.

They haven't found anything astounding yet. Nothing like what unfurled in Blaise's memory two days past. Still, Jake's been siphoning them off into a Pensieve Granger had brought over, capping them up into phials and Flooing back them back to the Department of Mysteries for her to examine. Blaise is fairly certain no one's told the guv yet about this. He can't imagine Potter'd be thrilled about Granger keeping those strands of memory filed away. Then again, the guv's been a bit busy, what with the Scottish raid yesterday. Pansy'd filled him in on that when she'd visited last night.

The suite's silent, and Blaise turns his attention back to the warmth of the terrace. He can hear the sounds of London below, the rumble of traffic and the quiet laughter from passersby on the pavement. He hates being trapped up here, even if it is in the bowels of luxury. He wants his flat and his incident room, and the bloody privilege of walking down the sodding street like a free man.
He shouldn't complain. After what he did, Robards would have every right to throw him in the Auror holding cells, or worse, into Azkaban itself. It's a sign of regard that the Head Auror's allowing him to stay with his mother here, even if Jake's assigned to them and an Auror guard's set on the door. For their protection, Titus had said, but Blaise isn't a fool. He's still not entirely cleared, even though he has hope that Jake's Legilimency has helped speed up the process. But there are protocols and procedures to be followed before he can be released, and so he's trapped here, feeling tired and useless and bloody well as if he's about to go completely round the twist, until Gideon Titus finally decides he wasn't in his right goddamned mind last Friday.

Blaise sighs.

A hand settles on his shoulder; he looks back to see Jake giving him an even look. "It'll be fine," Jake says, and a wave of cooling calmness floods over Blaise's troubled mind.

He pulls away, annoyed. "Stop doing that," he says, and he knows he's being cranky. He can't seem to stop himself, though. Instead, he walks to the terrace and shuts the door. He fights the worry that rises again in his chest.

Blaise walks back into the siting room, stopping at the heavy wooden dining table on the far side of the room. The spread of tarnished, antique and most definitely questionable magical objects is an almost incongruent scene in the middle of a modern luxury hotel suite. Blaise's mother has laid the tools of an necromancer out on a white silk scarf: a silver scrying glass that needs a good polishing around the edges, tall black beeswax candles in a set of crystal candleholders Blaise recognises from his mother's china cabinet, some sort of weird, musky incense waiting to be lit in three small bone bowls, and the pièce de résistance, a yellowed human skull that's crumbling around the eye socket. Blaise really doesn't want to know why. Or for what reason his mother's had that particularly delightful item tucked away in a trunk for God only knows how many years. Blaise prods it lightly with a fingertip. Merlin, but he hopes it's not one of his stepfathers'.

"Stop it," his mother says, and she hasn't even turned on the sofa. He thinks about flipping two fingers at her, but that'd be unforgivable, really, and besides, she'd see it. Somehow.

There's a knock on the door, solid and hard, and they all still. Blaise looks at Jake, who just nods and walks to the door. Blaise slumps in relief. He can't do it. Not right now. He's too bloody terrified.

His mother stands, smoothing down the line of her skirt. She's wearing her favourite dress, a cream linen that sets off the deep brown of her skin beautifully, and her hair is a mass of tight, dark curls, only the barest hint of grey at her temples. She looks bloody gorgeous, Blaise thinks, and he feels a swell of pride at how calm and collected his mother is.

Jake opens the door to the guy, Draco and Pansy. The moment Blaise sees their faces, he knows it's going to be all right. He's missed his team fiercely, and when Draco walks over to him, pulling him into a tight hug, Blaise lets himself relax. "Hello, old man," Blaise says, and Draco thumps Blaise's back gently.

Draco steps back. "You okay with going through with this?" He's studying Blaise's face intently, and Blaise knows he's looking for any hesitation.

Blaise gives him a small smile that he doesn't entirely feel. "I'm good." It's a lie, and they both know it, but it's enough for Draco to nod and step back, only for Pansy to take his place, her arms going around his neck.

"You'll be fine," she whispers. "We'll be here, I promise." Blaise closes his eyes for a moment and breathes in her hair. It smells whiffy, like she's been playing in stinkweed potions again. He feels
better with his two best friends beside him. Circe, but he doesn’t like being separated from these bastards. He squeezes Pansy gently before he lets her go.

"Hobson and Yates are bringing your grandfather," Potter says. He's standing awkwardly to the side, hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed on Blaise and not Jake. "They should be here in a moment."

Blaise nods and tries not to make it obvious that he's wiping his damp palms on his pyjama bottoms. He looks over at his mother, who's gone stonefaced and silent. There's a deep worry line between her eyebrows, and he knows she must be upset if she's letting it stay.

And then the door swings open again, and the air in the room chills, Blaise swears it does. Hobson comes in first, her face pale and set. Her eyes flick towards Potter. "Barachiel Dee, sir," she says, and when she moves out of the door, Blaise gets his first glimpse as an adult of his mother's father.

Barachiel Dee is tall and broad-shouldered, and he looks young for seventy-one. His hair is close-cropped, like Blaise's, and still dark, with only the faintest hint of grey at his temples, and his jaw is square and solid. The only wrinkles on his brown face are around his eyes, etched deep into the corners, and Blaise knows now where his mother's stern, elegant beauty comes from. His grandfather is dressed in a full charcoal suit, including a dark burgundy waistcoat that matches his striped tie perfectly. His black shoes are polished until they gleam, and his hands are neatly manicured. This is a man raised with wealth and power and influence, and Blaise feels oh, so very inadequate in front of him.

"Olivia," Dee says, and Blaise can't think of him in any other way. He doesn't feel a connection to this man, not in the slightest, but he can tell by the stubborn lift of his mother's chin that she's feeling more fragile than she wants to admit.

"Daddy," his mother says, and she holds Dee's gaze until he smiles.

"You've grown up well, my love," Dee says, and his gaze swings to Blaise. It's only then that Blaise notices the cane his grandfather's leaning on, the one sign of weakness. "I haven't seen you since you were a small lad." There's a trace of Wales in Dee's accent, Blaise notes. He remembers his mother telling him once that she'd grown up near Betws-y-Coed.

Blaise just looks at him, and Dee flashes a bright smile his way. "Robards has explained everything to me," Dee says. He moves closer to Blaise; both Pansy and Draco shift beside Blaise, flanking him on either side. Dee raises an eyebrow. "Oh, for Hecate's sake. I'm not going to hurt him, you fools. I wouldn't be here if I were." He stops in front of Blaise; he watches him for a moment, his eyes narrowing, before he reaches up and brushes two cool fingers across Blaise's temple. He pulls his fingers away and rubs them together, frowning down at them. "Well, that's not good, is it?" He frowns. "Where's the bloody Legilimens?"

"Here." Jake steps forward, and Dee gives him a cool, even look.

"American?" he asks.

"Trained at the Institut Tirélias." Jake's trying not to smile, Blaise can tell.

His grandfather just grunts. "Fine." He looks back at Olivia. "I'll need the sofa. Keep the rest of these idiots on the edges." He glances over at Jake. "Except for you. Might as well make use of a Legilimens if I've got one, eh?"

Olivia herds Blaise's team over towards the door where the Aurors are waiting. "Just stay here," she says. "And if I tell you, get out and ward the bloody door shut." She turns to Potter. "I'm
serious. Do not hesitate, do not try to help us. Just get out. Do I make myself clear?"

Potter nods, and his gaze slides to Blaise, "He'll be all right--"

"I won't let anything happen to my son," Olivia says. "But whatever you might see--or think you see--when my father is at work, do not interrupt. Please. Stay where you are and don't cross the circle."

What circle, Blaise wants to ask, but his grandfather's already at work, walking to one side of the fireplace and casting a ward, his cane stretched out like a wand, then walking in a sweeping arc, the cane trailing sparks behind him. "Olivia," he says, and his mother turns back, waving Blaise and Jake towards the sofa before flicking her own wand at the table and levitating the magical objects over to the hearth. She steps into the now glowing circle just before her father closes it off with a twist of his cane.

Blaise looks across the room at his team. Draco looks pale but determined, Pansy has her fist pressed up against her mouth, and Blaise isn't certain the guv's not going to jump over the warded border. Draco sets a hand on Potter's arm, though, and Potter sinks back, Hobson and Yates behind him, their hands on their wand holsters.

"Don't," Potter says to them, and they exchange a glance. Yates doesn't look happy, but that doesn't surprise Blaise. Yates is a decent man, and he's not the sort to be comfortable with a spot of necromancy. Hobson, on the other hand, doesn't seem all that fazed by it, which makes Blaise wonder what might be in her familial background.

"On the sofa," his grandfather says. "Shirt off." When Blaise hesitates, Dee rolls his eyes. "No one's going to care, lad."

That's not what's bothering Blaise. He's been known to strip starkers on a dare and a full bottle of wine. He glances at Jake, who nods. Blaise slips out of his t-shirt and sits on the sofa. His grandfather pushes him onto his back, stretched out across the thick cushions and nubby upholstery. His mother levitates one of the candlesticks, letting it hover just over his head, then sends the other one to his feet. With a snap of Dee's fingers, they light.

"You, Legilimens," Dee says to Jake. "Kneel here." He gestures to a spot behind the low arm of the sofa, near Blaise's head. Blaise feels rather than sees Jake settle behind him. "Hands out." His grandfather moves Jake's hands, pressing one against Blaise's forehead, one against his shoulder. "You'll keep his consciousness stable. You know how to do that?"

"I've done it before," Jake says. His hands are warm against Blaise's bare skin.

"Olivia, stoke the hearth." Dee moves to Blaise's side, setting the three bowls of incense down along the length of the sofa. Another snap of his fingers, and they begin to smoulder, filling the room with the smell of rotting decay. Blaise can hear Hobson gag near the door, and the murmur of someone's--Pansy, perhaps--telling her to stay steady.

His grandfather kneels next to him. "This isn't going to be easy, boy," he murmurs. "Not for you nor for me, but I hope the Legilimens here can help siphon off some of the pain." He glances up at Jake. "Sorry about that."

"I'll live," Jake says, and Dee nods, setting the skull on Blaise's chest, just above his heart. Blaise starts to close his eyes, but his grandfather smacks his arm.

"Open," he says. "You can't escape your fears. You'll ruin the whole damned ritual."

Blaise's gaze darts to Jake. "You'll be fine," he says. Blaise hears his mother at the hearth, metal
scraping across the stone of the fireplace.

"Liar," Blaise says, but he tries to smile. He's fairly certain he doesn't manage it. Not properly.

His grandfather breathes out, his hands held over Blaise's body. He twists his palms upwards, and the lights go out and the curtains swing shut. Only the flames from the candles and the hearth cast a pale flickering light in the sudden gloom of the room.

Blaise's heart thuds against his chest; he can feel the cool bone of the skull heavy against his sternum. He wants to throw it off, to get up and run, but his grandfather's hand settles on his arm, holding him still.

"Be brave," his grandfather says, and then he closes his eyes, his head thrown back, and he's saying something Blaise doesn't quite understand.

Except he does.

He's heard these words before, many, many years ago, from his mother's lips, and they shape into English in his mind. O, you angels of light, CZNS or CZONS, TOITT or TOITT, SIAS or SIGAS, FMND or FMOND, dwelling in the Eastern part of the universe, powerful in the administering of the strong and healthy medicine...

A fragment of a memory drifts across his mind, his mother late at night, bent in front of the hearth, only lit by the faint glow if its embers. He was so little, his small, chubby fingers tight around the bannisters of the stairs he's hiding on, so very frightened by the way his mother's voice is breaking on these very phrases, the pain and agony she's imbuing the words with, and he can see the man beside her, leaning on her, his body frail and weak as she supports him, bathes his brow.

His father.

Blaise's whole body shudders, and he can feel Jake's calm presence moving against his mind. Careful, careful, quiet...

His grandfather's voice rises, the words spilling out, rough and guttural, flowing over Blaise, spilling into his thoughts, and Blaise gives into them, letting the words twist and curve around him, lulling him into a quiet trance.

The room around him slips away, into nothing but faint light and deep shadows and a stillness that Blaise doesn't want to break. He hears the flap of wide wings and the soft caw of a raven, feels the brush of its feathers across his face in the darkness. He can smell the scent of death creeping around him, thick vines curling around his limbs, working their way through his skin, pressing deeper and deeper into him until they burrow their way through his ribs. He's screaming, his body shaking with the pain, but he can feel Jake beside him, his hands still warm and careful on Blaise's skin. That touch is the only thing anchoring Blaise at the moment, and he reaches for Jake, but his hands are tied tight to the earth around him, suffocating him, thick and loamy, and he's swallowing it now, choking on it, as he hears his grandfather's voice echoing in his ears.

The word mean nothing now; they're gibberish, nonsense, an assault on his hearing that slams into his brain, hurting more and more and more until Blaise is certain he can't take any more, and he writhes wildly, his body jerking against his bonds.

And then there's a moment of silence. Blaise is standing on the precipice of a cliff, a cool breeze against his face, the crash of waves echoing against the rocks below him. He's been here before, but only in his mind, and he feels Jake beside him, whispering in his ear. He can't make out what he's saying, but it's calming the erratic thud of Blaise's heart, and when he's falling back, the thick
peat swallowing him again, he doesn't panic.

He feels something being passed over his body, something bright and shining, and it takes him a moment to realise it's the scrying mirror glinting into his eyes, a flash of purplish light from its dark, grimy depths. And then it's almost as if something's being pulled from him, gently at first, then with more force, as if it's being uprooted from Blaise's mind, and the pain's back once more, sharp and hot and fierce as he screams again and again and again, his throat raw and aching.

Blaise slumps into the cushions, gasping, and the scent of rotting flesh starts to drift away, the shadows slip back, the quiet rustle of the raven's wing fades. His face is wet; his body's trembling. He hurts like he's never hurt before, not even the time he fell from his broom when he was ten and broke his wrist and his ankle.

His grandfather's holding a writhing dark mass in his hands. "Move, Olivia," he snaps, and Olivia steps back from the hearth just before Dee throws the tangled vines into the fire. He lets it burn before he scoops the ashes up as he squats by the hearth, pulling a phial from his pocket and pouring the burnt remnants in. The liquid flashes bright and silver when he shakes it, then it settles into a dark, gunmetal grey.

"Legilimens," he says, not looking around. "Gather the energy."

Jake's face appears over Blaise's. "Almost there," he murmurs, and then his hands move to Blaise's temples, soft and feather-light. "Breathe."

Blaise inhales, and the explosion of pain in his head is nearly overwhelming. His body's arched off the sofa, his heels digging into the cushions, his hands flailing, trying to push Jake away, but Jake holds on, his face grim and taut.

His mother grabs his hands, holding them back. "It's all right," she says. "It's all right, my baby boy--" Her voice breaks, and she snaps at Jake, "Hurry before you kill him--"

It feels as if a thousand Cruciatius Curses are going through his head, and Blaise tells himself he deserves this, he earned it, he needs to feel every last moment of pain, no matter how he screams or sobs or pleads to be let free.

And then it's over.

Jake's standing there, cords of purple light wrapped around his hands, his breath coming in hard, sharp gasps, his brow furrowed with pain.

"The scrying mirror," Blaise's grandfather says calmly, and Jake slams his hands against the dark surface, with a grimace of distaste, sending the bright light into the glass. Dee takes it from him, and uncorks the phial, pouring the contents over the glass. There's a flash of fire, blue-white in its intensity and ever so hot.

Blaise feels light. Almost airy, even. He laughs, and Jake frowns down at him. "All right there, man?" Jake looks exhausted. Shaken.

"A bit high, I think," Blaise says, reaching out to touch Jake's cheek. "Hi."

Jake flushes. "Hi." He looks over at Olivia. "Does he normally have reactions like this?" "Merlin, you wouldn't believe." Blaise's mother sits on the sofa next to him. She catches Blaise's hand and pulls it away from Jake's face. "I couldn't ever give him a Pepperup potion when he was younger. Sent him higher than a Hippogriff's flight."
"Where'd you say you trained, Legilimens?" Blaise's grandfather steps closer. Blaise wants to wave at him, but his mother bats his hand back down.

"Paris," Jake says.

Dee snorts. "That skill's not just from Paris."

"By way of Louisiana." Jake gives him a faint smile, and Dee nods.

"More like it," Dee says. "You've a touch of the necromancer about you, I'd say. I can always tell." He looks down at Blaise. "You're well rid of it, lad."

Olivia slips her fingers between Blaise's. "Are you sure, Daddy?" Her father scowls at her. "I said we're done. We're done."

Blaise can feel when the circle wards fall; they shiver across his skin. He feels fresh and new, like he's just been scrubbed raw, and the high of the pain relief's beginning to ebb. Just a little. And Pansy's there beside him, and Draco as well, leaning over the back of the sofa.

"Abadzhiev can't use him any more?" Draco asks.

"The bond's broken," Blaise's grandfather says. He eyes Jake. "No one's getting into this one's mind again, thanks to this fellow."

Blaise looks up at Jake. "What'd you do?"

Jake gives him a small smile. "Locked you up a little bit. You don't have to worry about Dolohov and his lot. They try to come after that brain of yours and they'll regret it."

Blaise doesn't entirely know how he feels about that, but he nods. "Thanks."

His grandfather looks over at Potter, who's walking up to the sofa now, having given Pansy and Draco the space they need with Blaise, and Blaise is grateful for that. Sometimes Potter isn't a half-bad guy, he thinks. "You're the Auror," Dee says. "My lad's boss."

"Of sorts." Potter holds out his hand, and after the briefest hesitation, Dee takes it. "Thanks for helping him."

"I wouldn't have not." Dee lets his palm smooth across Blaise's brow. It's oddly comforting, Blaise thinks. Almost as good as having Jake touch him. He's so tired right now. He almost thinks he's slipped into sleep, then his grandfather says, "By the way, you might want to check the number of Dementors at Azkaban."

"Sir?" Potter asks.

Blaise opens his eyes again. His grandfather's looking down at him, a somber expression on his face. "It's buried in there, lad. In your memory. Or it was." He glances over at Potter. "They're making Dementors. Or trying to at least. I saw a flash of it. Not enough to say whether they've been successful." His jaw is tight, and Olivia's turning away from him, a terrible expression on her face. Blaise wants to ask what's wrong, but he's too exhausted.

"That takes too long," his mother says. Her voice is rough, heavy with emotion.

Her father nods slowly. "Under ordinary circumstances, it can take years. But if you have a
Resurrection Stone… "He raises a shoulder, his eyes fixed on the guv.
Potter goes pale. "Fuck," he says.

"I would say, yes." Dee's still watching Potter. "That might be a matter of concern to you." Potter turns to Draco. "We have to go. Now."

"You have meetings," Draco says. "Robards and Granger--"

"Fuck it. They'll wait." Potter glances down at Blaise. "Rest. I want you on your feet as soon as possible, Zabini. We bloody well need you. Parkinson?"

"I'll stay with him if that's okay." Pansy perches on the arm of the sofa, just above Blaise's head. "You go on, guv."

"One more thing," Dee says, and Potter turns back. "John Pridmore. He's connected to this case, yes?"

"He's a witness," Blaise says through a yawn. "Squib. From Swansea. Why?"

His grandfather looks more fierce than he has yet. "Saw a glimpse of him too. His name isn't Pridmore, and he's bloody well not from Wales. He's Jean-Marie Prudhomme Rosier from Lyon, and I've known him for years. He's a necromancer. Comes from another family of necromancers, but he doesn't give a damn about the academic elements of the craft." Dee's mouth twists to the side in disgust. "He's a contract necromancer, so if you're looking for someone who might have taught Dolohov how exactly to use Soul Grass to control humans and to make a bloody Dementor from it, he'd be the man I'd go after."

"Right," Potter says. "Got that, Malfoy?"

"Wrote it down." Blaise can hear Draco from across the room. "The British Rosiers were in my father's circle, so there's another connection." He hesitates. "My grandmother on my mother's side was a Rosier."

Potter swears, then apologies to Olivia. Blaise wants to tell him not to bother. He's heard his mother out curse a sailor before. He yawns, and his body relaxes into the sofa. He's so damned tired. He's not exactly certain what's going on, but he can tell by the movements around him it's important. Pansy's fingers brush across his cheek.

"Sleep," she says.

He does.

***

The North Sea is battering the cliffs of Azkaban as Potter and Draco arrive in the Warden's Floo. The smell of salt brine is heavy in the air, even inside the prison itself, and Draco tastes metal and fear. It's late afternoon in London, but at this time of year, the prison is suspended between the poles of time, neither light nor dark, neither day nor night. Azkaban is far enough north that the sun doesn't set in June; it only greys out and returns.

Draco tries not to shivers with dread as he steps out behind Potter into the sparsely furnished stone office. He's only been here once, during a visit to his father that awful summer after his fifth year, but he can still remember the despair he'd felt standing beside his mother, waiting for his father to be brought out in shackles, filthy and already half-broken after only a few weeks in this terrible place. He doesn't want to think about what will happen after tomorrow, the certainty that his father
will find himself back in one of these cells. This time Draco isn't so certain he'll be visiting.

He wonders if the power his father had hoped to regain is in any way worth the possibility of trapped in Azkaban again. It wouldn't be to Draco. That he knows damned well.

The Warden is gone for the day, but they'd received permission from the Head Auror himself--it had taken a terse exchange with Robards for the privileges to be given, one that had been conveyed to Shacklebolt a half-hour later before the arrangements could be made. They're to gather up anything that might have been missed when Wrightson was taken into custody before the evidence disappears. Robards has made it clear that he doesn't want a full-scale engagement, given the raid tomorrow--no force authorised unless defensive, reconnaissance only.

"This is a charming spot," Draco sees something scuttle into the corner and bury itself in a crack between the stones, a beetle perhaps, or a smallish mouse.

Potter looks around, then nods. He's on guard, as well, his hand on his wand, eyes warily scanning the shadows.

"Next beach holiday, I'd say." Draco shivers and pulls his Auror cloak tighter around him. He doesn't know how Kirkwood abides this office. It's cold and dank and dirty in ways that make Draco's soul ache. "What do you think--do they rent out?" He's trying for ridiculous. Otherwise he'd have to show how nervous he is, and that's the last thing Draco wants to do right now. Not with Potter.

Potter snorts and gives Draco a little smile. "Views are great, if you like a bit of stormy seas." His warm presence is comforting to Draco in a way he can't explain. He'd never want to go here without Potter. The bleakness of Azkaban is overpowering, and they're only in the administrative section. How the bloody hell does anyone actually work here? What kind of person would you have to be in order to withstand this grim solitude? Draco couldn't bear it.

And yet, after tomorrow, he'll be confining his father to years here, won't he? He wants his father to pay. Fuck, but he does. After all that Lucius has done to destroy their family, Draco has no sympathy. Or he'd like to think he doesn't. Still, his heart sinks. No one deserves this, not with the terror and madness these stones have collected.

They make their way out toward the secure area. There's a solitary guard behind the wide, granite desk, his ginger hair the one spot of brightness in the greyness of the shadows and stones. The air is the kind of shimmery that bespeaks layer upon layer protective charms.

"Harry Potter, Special Branch seven four alpha." Harry shows his warrant card to the guard, even though the guard's raised eyebrows are an obvious sign that the man recognises Potter. And who wouldn't, Draco thinks. You'd have to have been in bloody coma for a decade not to know that head of dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses. "We're here to check the Dementor records."

"Of course you are." The ginger guard's tone is bemused, head shaking. "I wish you were the strangest thing I'd seen recently."

Potter smiles, almost sharklike, Draco thinks. "So who should we be talking to?"

The guard glances to one side, and another, although it seems to be between shifts and no one is about in the administrative areas. He chews on his lip then sighs. The guard stands up and calls into a back area. "Burnham. You need to show these Londoners to the archive. They're here about the Dementors."

The guard looks back at them. "He won't bloody shut up about them. I warn you."
"Thanks, Campbell." Burnham comes out, a small man with a careful air. He approaches them slowly, then puts a hand out.

"Theodore Burnham," he says. "I put in a report twice about the disappearances but no one's come out to investigate."

Potter shakes his hand. "Disappearances?" Draco nods at Burnham and stays in the background.

"I've been trying to get someone to listen." Burnham's pointy face is haggard. He looks worn down, frightened. "They've been disappearing for at least a year."

"Who?" Draco asks.

Burnham hesitates. "Us," he says after a moment. "Guards."

Potter looks closely at the photographs of the guards. "They've all disappeared?"

"All right, Burnham," Potter says. "We're here now. Want to show us what you have?"

"Follow me." Burnham leads them through a dank stone corridor and down a narrow, winding staircase. There are stacks and stacks of paper files here, mildewy and rank. The sea air can't be good for preservation, Draco imagines. Still, their guide knows what he's looking for.

Burnham pulls a newly bound volume with the years marked crisply. "See, here." He stabs a finger at one photo. "Mickey Hambleton." He turns the page and indicates another. "Eddie McKenzie. Not to mention Andrew Pickering and Ravi Singh."

Potter looks closely at the photographs of the guards. "They've all disappeared?"

"In the past two years." Burnham lowers his voice again. "It seemed like a good thing at first, yeah? Some sort of special assignment that came through, and they'd be gone for a bit. But they never came back. None of them. And they ain't having families to complain, yeah? Not like me." He runs a hand through his hair. "But then it got weird. I thought maybe they just quit, right? Except I'd see things in the hall. Things that weren't supposed to be there."

"Things?" Draco feels the flesh on the back of his neck prickle. He looks around, but there's nothing there.

Burnham nods. "You stay around here long enough, you get to recognise the Dementors. They're not all the same. They move differently, act differently sometimes." He licks his lip; he looks terrified, Draco thinks. "They're not just the same creature, the way we all think. They're individuals. And I've been doing this six years now, sirs, and I know them all. Except the past two years, I've seen new ones."

"After the guards disappeared." Potter's voice is quiet.

"Yeah." Burnham sets the book back down and picks up another. He opens it up to a ledger page. "The numbers have changed. The prison, it marks them down here, right? I mean, Dementors don't live forever. They live a damned long time, sure, but they're not immortal. So it changes some from time to time, and every so often we have to have the other Dementors put one down because it does something rogue. Like Kiss a prisoner who's not scheduled for that, yeah?" Burnham points to a column. "And the Minister's been adamant that none of them get replaced now. They're made, you see, and Azkaban hasn't made Dementors in two centuries. Maybe more."
So tell me, sirs, how's this column now have four more in it than it did two years past?" "Shit,"

Potter says, and he takes the ledger from Burnham. "Can we take these?"

"No one cares," Burnham says. "They're just sitting here, mouldering. Kirkwood don't give a damn any more. He's just staying up in his office on his scranny bum waiting out for his pension, yeah? And when I say something to him about this, he tells me to mind me own."

Draco gets the feeling again that they're being watched. He glances back over his shoulder. Still no one there. "Do you think he's involved?"

Burnham shrugs. "Or don't care. One or the other."

Potter looks at Draco. "This is big."

"Fuck, my father's an arsehole," Draco says, running a hand through his hair.

"We don't know it's him," Potter says, and Draco just gives him an incredulous look. Of course Lucius is bollocks deep in this shite, Draco wants to say. He may not have meant to be, but he is, somehow. Draco can feel it deep in his bones. He knows his father. All too well.

"I need to get back," Burnham says. "Shift change is coming."

"Thanks," Potter says. "Mind if we dig through a bit more?"

"Fine by me."

Burnham stops by the door. "Just sign out before you go, yeah? Aurors or not, you can't be wandering about by yourselves. It's not safe."

When he leaves, Draco turns back to Potter. "They're making Dementors. Ones they can control."

"And I wouldn't put it past them to be using the Soul Grass on the guards the way they did on Zabini," Potter says, his voice harsh. "It has to be part of how they're getting in and out of this place. The Dementors are on their side, and if the guards are being controlled as well, they've free run of the place. They just need a Polyjuiced body in the cell to keep the prison roster stable and in case a non-drugged guard comes by."

"Whilst they're off gallivanting around Britain." Draco swears. "Merlin, Potter--"

A scream echoes from the hallway, and neither of them hesitate. They're both running towards the sound, their wands out.

They're too late.

Burnham's slumped limp against the wall, his eyes blank, the last wisps of his soul drifting from his mouth as a Dementor bends over him.

"Expecto Patronum!" Potter bellows, and a blue-white stag bursts out of his wand, running towards the Dementor. It strikes it full in the chest, knocking the Dementor over just before it whirls away, disappearing down the nearest corridor.

"Oh, Circe," Draco says, and he's on his knees next to Burnham, trying everything he can to revive the man. But there's nothing left of him. Burnham stares blankly at Draco, then blinks, no recognition in his eyes. No comprehension. He's just an empty body. There's no soul there. Draco falls backwards onto his arse, his heart stuttering wildly in his chest. He hasn't seen a Kissed person in years. Not since the War. It's just as horrifying as it'd been back then. "Potter--"
Potter's squatting beside him, and pulls Draco back against his chest. "It's fine. It's going to be okay." He flicks his wand again, and his Patronus goes galloping down the hallway.

Draco's shaking, and he can't take his eyes off Burnham. He has a family, he'd said. Fuck. What are they going to do when their dad doesn't come back tonight? His throat tightens, and he fights back a wave of anguish. It's not just the shock of seeing this, he knows. He remembers all too well watching the Dark Lord loose his pet Dementors on people he'd decided were useless. Draco'd always been afraid one would go after him.

He's breathing hard, his heart pounding, the world swirling around him, and it takes him a moment to realise that Potter's still gripping him tightly, rocking Draco just enough to calm him as he whispers something into Draco's hair.

"It's all right," Potter's saying. "It's all right. I've got you. It's all right."

Draco draws in an uneven breath and nods. Potter's arm loosens around his chest, and Draco clambers to his feet. He's still trembling, but his panic's subsiding.

"I'm okay," Draco manages to get out, and Potter looks up at him, green eyes wide with worry. Draco shakes his head. "I am."

Potter stands up just as Campbell rounds the corner. The guard stops short when he sees Burnham lying there.

"Oh, Christ," Campbell says.

"I want this entire place secured," Potter says, with all of the authority not only of an Auror Inspector but also the Saviour of the Goddamned Wizarding World. "All guards on hand, and I'm calling in a team of Aurors. Can the Dementors be rounded up?"

Campbell looks up at Potter, his face ashen. "Yeah."

"Do it." Potter turns to Draco. "I think we'll be here a bit longer than we anticipated." Draco looks down at Burnham's blank face and shudders.

Sometimes he wonders if being an Auror is worth it.

***

It's nearly half-nine when Harry Floos back into Grimmauld Place, Malfoy on his heels. They'd been at Azkaban for hours, directing the Auror teams that had Apparated in to round up the Dementors and to question the guards. The entire prison was in bloody chaos, and even Gawain himself had shown up an hour past, demanding answers. It'll take days to sort things out, Harry thinks, and he's glad he's not the one to deal with the fallout. When they'd left, finally, Gawain had been on his mobile to Kingsley. From what Harry'd heard of the conversation, Kingsley had been furious; Harry wouldn't want to be in Gawain's shoes right now.

At least the force will get a needed win tomorrow when they bring in Lucius Malfoy. But that has issues of its own, doesn't it?

Harry slings his cloak over the back of the sofa. Hermione's run the risk assessment and set up the teams, all without Harry. She's told him they're ready to go. He hopes she's right.

"You want a firewhisky?" he asks Malfoy. He's already reaching for the bottle. It's been that sort
of day.

"No, thanks." Malfoy sounds weary. Harry looks over at him; Malfoy's head is bowed as he unbuttons his cloak, sliding it off his shoulders. "We need to be up early in the morning."

"Yeah." Harry sets the bottle back down. He hesitates, his fingers still on the slick glass before he pulls his hand away. He wants a drink, badly, but he's worried about Malfoy. Has been since Malfoy's nearly fallen apart in the Azkaban corridor. Harry'd been terrified for a moment, not entirely certain he'd be able to calm Malfoy down. It's all been a little too much, he thinks. They've had no time to breathe, no time to just stop and think about everything swirling around them.

"I'm going upstairs," Malfoy says, and he's still not looking at Harry. "I'll be down at half-six."

"Malfoy," Harry says, and then he stops. He doesn't quite know what to say to a man whose father will be arrested by this time tomorrow.

"It's fine," Malfoy says quietly, as if he knows what's giving Harry pause. "Stop worrying about me."

Harry smiles faintly at that. "I think I haven't a choice on that matter." He follows Malfoy into the hallway, his hands in his pockets.

"Well, it's stupid of you." Malfoy turns, his boot on the first step of the staircase. "I know what I'm doing, Potter."

"I didn't say you don't." Harry studies Malfoy's pale face, the faint shadowed circles beneath his eyes. "But I'm not idiot enough to think tomorrow won't be difficult for you."

Malfoy doesn't say anything for a moment, and then he nods. His hair swings forward, brushing against his cheek. He looks fragile, Harry thinks. As if he might fall apart with just one gentle touch. "Father made his choices," Malfoy says finally. He meets Harry's gaze. "I can't change that, as much as I might wish to."

God, Harry thinks. Malfoy's not the spoilt brat he used to be. He's stubborn and brave and sulky and maddening, and there's a part of Harry that wishes he could be half the man that Malfoy's grown into. Malfoy's the hero, really. He's changed who he once was, even as Harry can see the outline of that boy still there, beneath the surface.

Harry reaches out, touches Malfoy's cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispers, and Malfoy's chest shudders with the breath he exhales, his eyes bright. Harry leans closer, presses his lips against Malfoy's forehead, his fingers slipping through Malfoy's silken hair. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Malfoy makes a soft noise, a muffled sob that he swallows before it's fully formed, and his hand comes up to rest on Harry's chest. They stand there for a long moment in the silence of Grimmauld Place, lit only by moonlight from the window on the landing.

If Harry could hold him forever, he would, but Malfoy pulls back and his hand drops, long fingers sliding down the front of Harry's shirt. "I need to sleep," Malfoy says, and Harry nods. He understands.

Harry lets his knuckles graze Malfoy's jaw. "Promise me you will?"

"Yes." Malfoy looks at him then, through a curtain of pale blond hair. He takes another step up the staircase, his hand light on the bannister. "I just need to be alone."

"I know." Harry moves back, his gaze fixed on Malfoy's face. "But you know I'm only down a
Malfoy hesitates. He nods. "Thank you." He turns to go up the stairs, then he looks back at Harry. "I--"
He breaks off, and the next thing Harry knows, Malfoy's taking the two steps back down, and his lips brush against Harry's, closed and dry. It's barely a kiss, but it goes straight to Harry's prick, and when Malfoy pulls back, Harry sways forward, his breath caught in the back of his throat. Malfoy just looks at him for a moment, runs his tongue along his top lip, and then he's gone in a clatter of boots up the staircase.

Harry watches him disappear, his fingertips pressed against his mouth.

"Fucking hell," Harry murmurs when he hears the sharp thud of Malfoy's bedroom door closing behind him. He sinks to the steps, knees spread, elbows on his thighs, unable to think of anything but the way Malfoy makes his entire body flutter with just a touch.

He sits there for a long while, lost in his own thoughts, the house wrapping comforting shadows around him.

***

Draco betrays his father on a mild Friday morning with a clear blue sky and sunshine over the green fields of Wiltshire. It's two hours past an early summer dawn, only just time for his mother to be ordering coffee from the house elves and the crisp fresh rolls she favours with butter and a bit of plum jam. He hasn't had time to warn her they're here; he suspects she knows anyway. The rolling countryside is still quiet and damp with dew in the shadows. Draco wishes he didn't know these fields, these woods and copses as well as he does. Even the smell of the earth is familiar, awakening thoughts of when the roses will be blooming in his mother's gardens and whether the berries will be ripe in the kitchen garden yet--the stone walls and elves' charms make for a plentiful harvest during the early summer.

The Aurors have gathered in a clearing near the entrance to the Manor. Even with Draco in the group, they'll need to be cautious about monitoring spells and various unpleasant surprises. The post-war cleanup had been vicious and thorough, but Draco suspects that his father has maintained some of the older, lesser-known spells nonetheless, the ones that can take a person's head off with the slightest wrong step.

"I'll get us through the gates," Draco says, his voice carrying through the small group. He's relieved that it doesn't tremble. "When I do, stick to the main alleyway. The formal entrance should be all right. It's hard to spell with the corridor already charmed to maintain the hedges. It's as you get closer to the house that the wards will kick in. I'll do my best to undo them as I pass through." He hopes he can. He knows most of his father's tricks, after all. Lucius had taught them to Draco himself.

The group's watching him, silent and tense. He wonders what they think of him, going after his own father like this, like such a terrible son. He rolls his wand between his fingertips, taking a small amount of comfort in the spark of magic that warms his skin. He's tired. He hadn't slept much last night, and there was a moment not long past two when he'd nearly gone down to Potter's bed, longing for nothing more than to be held and comforted.

He hadn't, though. He regrets that now.

Draco looks around at the faces of his fellow Aurors. "If you need cover, there are formal gardens to either side and you can pass through the hedges--look for the silver pebbles in the border at these points. Send up sparks if you need help, but don't use Stunning spells--they won't work until you are inside the house. The entryway is charmed against them to ward off attacks on guests."
You might be able to use an Incarcerous, but that's the highest level I'd try there."

He'd already given Potter these instructions this morning, standing in the library before they'd Apparated to the Wiltshire coordinates, but Potter had asked him to address the group on the raid. There's Pansy and Potter, of course, along with a handful of other Aurors. Granger is here with her Unspeakables, and Althea Whitaker has unfortunately joined them in Blaise's stead today-- Robards told Potter that Whitaker wanted to be useful, and they were down an Auror in any case. Draco doesn't trust her not to hex him, but she's been placid so far. In addition to the entry teams, there are also tactical support units standing by.

The primary target today is Draco's father.

Draco draws in a deep breath. "Don't harm the peacocks. I mean it. You do not want to mess with them. They are vicious buggers, and they will get in the way of everything you do."

A brief chuckle comes from the group. Draco pretends not to hear it. They've no idea how bloody terrifying those damned creatures are. Draco has more than one scar on his calves from a sharp beak chasing after him. Draco hates the peacocks almost as much as his father's damned Crups.

"Same goes for the elves." Draco worries about them the most. "But they're mostly timid. A few are cantankerous. Still, they shouldn't cause you any trouble. They will likely remain on the ground floor." He pauses, his mouth going tight. "And my mother's off limits. Not one goddamned hair on her head should be touched, do I make myself clear?"

Even Althea nods. Everyone knows their intel comes from Narcissa. Draco's determined that she'll be protected.

Granger's face is drawn, and Draco remembers that she was tortured by his aunt at his home. He couldn't even to begin to know what to say besides, "I'm sorry," which he already has when he firstsaw Granger this morning. She'd just nodded and thanked him before turning away.

Potter looks grim, but his expression softens as Draco glances at him. Draco doesn't know what had possessed him last night, kissing Potter on the landing like that. He's a fool, that's what. Still, he wonders what would have happened if he'd crawled into bed beside Potter, if Potter would have held Draco against his chest until sleep had finally caught up with them both. Circe, but Draco's tired. The scars on his chest are itching, but he thinks that's just stress.

"Where will we find your father?" Potter asks. It's the question everyone wants answered, but Draco's relieved it came from him and not Granger or Althea or one of the other Aurors. He can hold it together for Potter or Pansy. That's about it.

"At this time of day," Draco says, "he's likely in the sitting room or in his apartments on the second floor east. Team one is with me, Potter, and Whitaker, headed up the side staircase to the right, through the drawing room, and into the family apartments. My mother should be on the west side and out of our way. Team two is with Parkinson and Granger headed down into the dungeons. If there is anything unsavoury being hidden-- and this is extremely likely-- it should be down there. I have no idea what you'll find, so look alert."

Draco adds a silent prayer that there won't be any artifact or residual spell issues. Ten centuries of Malfoys have written a lot of nastiness into this property's DNA. The old ruined hall a little ways off from the current property had been off limits when he was a child, and he still thinks he'd like to know what's in it. Perhaps he can convince Potter to use it for training at some point. His heart sinks. This is really happening. At least Pansy's in charge down there. She'd spent enough time in the Manor during their Hogwarts years to know to be careful.
Potter steps back to the front of the group. "Stealth charms up. Remember to stage in twos up to the entrance, then team one will take the ascent whilst team two covers. There's a lot of glass along the facade, so you should assume you are visible at all times and spells could come from that direction. Watch for hostiles. We've no idea how many are in there."

Potter's eyes find Draco's for a moment as the team draw their wands. You've got this, he mouths.

Draco nods and hopes it's enough. He doesn't want to think about the alternative, if he loses his nerve, if he finds himself a coward when facing down his father.

It's not an option.

Draco and Potter head first, Draco blowing through the gate spells like a knife through butter. His arrival with a group behind him should keep them open long enough for everyone to get in without the alarm. He strides shoulder to shoulder with Potter down the tall formal avenue, the crushed shells of the path loud beneath their boots. Draco's eyes are trained on the house; he's trying his best not to think about what's happening. This is his job, and he's bloody good at it. He's going to go in, retrieve the suspect, secure the grounds, and go back to headquarters. There'll be time to have other thoughts again later.

The gardens are clear, the sodding peacocks are mercifully scarce, and the rest of the group comes in behind them. Draco reminds himself that it won't be this easy, not once they're in the Manor itself; he's prepared for everything to go pear-shaped in an instant.

At the door, Draco says the spell he learnt as a child, and the door unlocks. He and Potter walk into the grand entrance hall. The heavy black gothic chandelier hangs over the marbled floor, inset with the Malfoy family crest; the walls are lined with dark landscapes in oils and the occasional snoozing ancestor. Mother only allows the pleasant ones down here. An old table, gleaming darkly with beeswax and lemon oil sits near the staircase, with its silver tray for the calling cards some families in his parents' set still use. An enormous crystal vase sits beside the tray, pink and white peonies from the garden spilling over its rim.

The foyer reeks of wealth and privilege, and Draco can see the looks on his colleague's faces, half-disgust, half-envy. It's only like this here, though, where his parents can still pretend to their former level of affluence. Once you get deeper into the house, you can see it crumbling in places. There's not much money to stave time off any longer. Outside of the paintings still hung here, his parents have sold off most of the art collection since the War to help pay for the upkeep of the Manor, not to mention the reparations tax levelled against them in lieu of Lucius being thrown into Azkaban and the solicitors' fees to keep him out of it later, but there'd once been pieces that could pay Draco's salary for a good five years, just sitting along a hallway, barely a single protective ward on them. Draco's broken a vase when he was eight, chasing a Snitch down the corridor in front of his bedroom. The house elves had repaired it, but it kept a small crack in the back. It'd been worth thirty thousand Galleons at auction, far less with the crack.

Only Pansy knows what it's like, although her family have kept most of their fortune intact and even augmented it in the post-War economy. Blaise wasn't raised with the wealth that Pansy and Draco were, though his mother hadn't been wanting. Certainly not by the time Blaise made it to Hogwarts. Draco wants to laugh at the incongruity of their circumstances now, these poor little rich kids that they were, once destined for a life of leisure and laziness, now the ones bringing down the very spheres of influence their parents had treasured and fought for. He knows the other Aurors don't trust them, not entirely, and how could they, walking into a house like this, realising how very different their upbringing must have been. He can see it on Althea Whitaker's face.

What Draco wants to shout is how this is precisely the reason he's working as an Auror. He knows this world, and he's grown to hate it. Desperately. Even his own poisonous nostalgia for it. Nothing is worth supporting wizards like Dolohov or, Merlin forbid, Voldemort. Nothing.
Pansy's team breaks off at the curving centre staircase, headed down to the lower levels of the house. She looks over her shoulder at him before she goes, and he nods, letting her know he's all right. So far at least.

"Watch the wings," Draco says to Granger, and she motions for her team to secure the area before she follows Pansy down to the lower levels.

They proceed up the stairs slowly, Draco first to protect everyone in case they encounter someone. Or something. He's no idea what to expect, and he has a shielding charm at the ready. The halls are empty; the rugs are worn in spots, though Draco can see the telltale signs of house-elf mending along tears and rips caused by Death Eaters tromping through during the War, not giving a damn about his family's possessions.

Draco stops outside his father's rooms. "Let me go in first," he says to Potter. "I…" He bites his lip. "Please. I need to do this."

For a moment, he thinks Potter's going to object, and then he nods. "I'll give you a minute, but we're coming in behind you."

"All right." Draco looks away. Althea's watching them, a curious expression on her face, and Draco feels his cheeks heat. He straightens his shoulders and takes a deep breath, his fingers splayed on the heavy, carved door, his wand still tight in his other hand. He pushes the door open and steps in.

The sitting room is filled with light from the tall, paned windows stretching from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall; despite some of the curtains being drawn shut, it's still nearly blinding after the shadows of the hallway. His father is sitting calmly in his favourite leather chair with a copy of the Daily Prophet and a cup of tea. The bloody Crups are sleeping at his feet, although Cronus opens an eye at the sound of Draco's tread. Cronus growls, deep in the back of his throat, but he doesn't move. Yet. His brothers snuffle in their sleep, Coes burying his nose beneath Crius's leg.

"So this is what it takes to have my own son visit me," Lucius Malfoy says archly, finishing up a sentence before turning to look at Draco.

"Hello, father." Draco walks over to him. He leans down and presses his cheek to his father's stubbled jaw. "I'm not here for a visit," he murmurs, and he kisses his father's temple.

When he pulls back, Lucius is watching him with narrowed eyes. "Then why--"

"I know what you've done," Draco says. His throat hurts. "What you've been doing. Dolohov. Abadzhiev. Selwyn. The fucking Dementors, Father. I know it all--"

"You know absolutely nothing," Lucius spits out. Cronus lifts his head and barks. "As usual. I've no idea what you're on about."

Draco's heart feels heavy and hard in his chest. "I'm here to arrest you." He swallows. "For crimes against the Ministry. For conspiring with known Death Eaters--"

"Such as yourself?" Lucius sets his tea aside. "But, oh I've forgotten, haven't I? You maimed yourself to be rid of that part of your history." His lip curls. "Coward."

Draco looks away. "At least I'm not a drunken fool in search of power he'll never have."

And at that Lucius is out of his chair, the back of his hand striking Draco's face, hard and fast, his ring drawing blood that trickles down Draco's cheek, sending Draco stumbling into a side table.
The Crups are on their feet, all three of them, barking wildly at Draco. "You are disgrace to this family," his father says, low and harsh. "How dare you betray the love and care that your mother and I raised you with! You’re no son of mine, you disgusting little poof--"

Potter’s next to him before Draco can right himself. "Shut up, you bastard," Potter snaps at Lucius, and his hands reach for Draco, helping him steady himself. Cronos lunges forward and Potter stops him with an ankle and a sharp no. The Crup draws up short and blinks before slinking back behind Lucius’s feet to join his brothers. They’re growling steadily. One of Granger’s Unspeakables casts a sleep charm, and the Crups drop gently to the carpet.

"I've got it," Draco says, and he pushes Potter away. He has to do this himself. He can feel the others moving behind him, Althea and the rest of the team, a solid wall of Aurors and Unspeakables that gives Draco the courage to do what he has to.

What his job requires of him.

"Lucius Abraxas Malfoy," Draco says, his voice ringing out through the room. His father is looking back and forth like a caged fox; Draco sees the feral fear in his eyes as Lucius realises that he's miscalculated, that he's trapped. "I'm arresting you on charges of conspiracy to do crimes against the Ministry of Magic for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence--"

His father’s attention stays riveted on Draco. "I should have been done with you when you were young," he says, vicious as only he can be when thwarted. "Weak and pathetic, like the Dark Lord said."

Draco meets his gaze evenly. "Perhaps you ought to have."

Lucius looks away. He seems old and beaten now, Draco thinks, his face puffy with drink, his eyes watery and weak. This isn't the father he'd idolised as a child, the man who could do no wrong, who could sweep into a room and command respect. Draco wonders what one does when one's father falls from that pedestal. How can he reshape his life, restitch his past?

"Turn around," Draco says roughly. His father doesn't. "Turn around," Draco says again, his voice sharper. He reaches for his father's arm, shoving him so that he can pull both his father's hands behind his back. Lucius snorts as Draco binds his wrists. Draco doesn't respond. He'll fall apart later. Right now the worst thing he can do to his father is fail to react to his terrible behaviour.

Draco steps back. "He's yours," he says to one of the Unspeakables.

They lead his father away. Granger's plan is to have him kept in their secure cells, given that the Auror cells are filling up at an alarming rate these recent days, and the chance of a group breakout is high. Not to mention Azkaban can't be used for the moment. That situation's still barely under control.

Draco walks downstairs, leading the Unspeakables back outside to the Manor steps, the rest of the team following. As he watches them Apparate away with his father, Draco feels both a profound sense of peace and the enormous fucking hole that's been ripped in his heart. Reentering the cool of the entrance hall, he looks over towards the side staircase that leads to his old nursery area, where he sees his mother, nearly engulfed by the half-shadows.

He stops, goes to her separately himself from the others. He senses Potter at his back, holding everyone else off. "I'm sorry," he says, briefly clasping Narcissa's hand. It's breaking protocol--if
there is still a protocol for this situation—but rules be damned and blasted. This is his mother.

"You've done well, my love," Narcissa says. There's a deep sadness in her voice. She touches his cheek, her thumb smoothing across his skin. "You had no other choice. I'm glad it was you." She gives him an unamused smile. "I'm sure he'll be angrier when he discovers I turned him in."

"If he hurts you in any way," Draco says hotly, and his mother shakes her head.

"He won't." She drops her hand. "He loves me. And even if one of his friends were foolish enough to try, well." There's a glint in Narcissa's eye that Draco recognises from that annus horribilis that they'd spent living beneath the Dark Lord's thumb. "I'm perfectly capable of defending myself. Trust me, Draco."

Draco nods. He does, he supposes.

A shout comes from downstairs.

"Malfy," Potter says, already heading for the steps, and Draco pulls away from his mother. "I'd better go see," Draco says, motioning. His mother nods.

He races down the stairs to the dungeons, trailing everyone by a length. The smell hasn't improved with age, he sees as the full stench of mould and rot hits his nostrils. But there's something else, too. A scrum of Aurors is gathered at the far side, near one of the low-ceilinged cells.

Draco shoulders through to Pansy, whose face is ashen but composed.

Luka Abadzhiev is hanging from a noose of Devil's Snare, a bloody stump where his left hand should be. He is dead and likely has been for a few days. The blood on the floor has dried inky slick black.

"Your father?" Potter asks from behind Draco. Granger's with him.

"Maybe." Draco studies the body in front of him. "Certainly not my mother." He frowns. "Or the house elves."

Pansy has a handkerchief over her mouth, but is otherwise unfazed. One or two of the Unspeakables are turning away, likely looking for a place to compose themselves. Or vomit. Althea Whitaker is standing with her arms crossed over her chest, not even looking green at the gills.


"The left hand of a hanged thief," Draco says, a shivery feeling settling in his stomach. "I don't suppose my father was trying to make a Hand of Glory?"

"Someone was." Althea comes up behind them. "We'll need to search the house. Just in case."

Draco nods. "I'm sure Mother won't object." Circe but he hopes she didn't have anything to do with this. He doesn't think she would, but he can't be certain. If nothing else, she could be charged for helping to conceal a major crime, even if it was committed upon a psychopathic arsehole.

Potter's hand settles on his shoulder for the briefest of moments.

"We need to bag him and tag him," Pansy says. She casts a Lumos, letting it drift up and down
Abadzhiev's body. "How soon can we get a proper magi-forensics team? I can't do this entirely on my own."

Granger comes into the light, her expression fierce. "They're on their way. Shouldn't be long." She surveys the cell, casting a Lumos of her own to check the corners and the low ceiling without stepping onto the floor. "I'll want a trace run on whatever magical signatures are here." She looks back at Draco. "We'll need to test your mother too."

He wants to protest, but he knows better. The Unspeakables will do whatever the fuck they want. Draco's just glad Granger's holding the reins on this one. He doesn't think she'll let anything be tainted towards his mother. Besides, they've plenty of evidence pointing fingers his father's direction.

They spread out through the dungeons.

"Over here," Pansy says after a moment, her voice echoing down the corridor, and Draco exchanges a glance with Potter. They make their way to the empty cell Pansy's squatting in, her Lumos lighting up a spatter of blood that trails to a broken window set high in the wall, the bars twisted enough for a human to squeeze through.

Potter crouches next to her. "Abadzhiev?"

"It's his blood," Pansy says. "I mean, I'd have to test it more thoroughly in the lab to be certain enough for it to hold up in court, but if it's fresh, and it follows a trail I'd expect from the positioning of the body in the corridor. Probably from the missing hand. If it's not Abadzhiev's blood, I'll fuck Draco."

"No, you won't," Draco says, flipping two fingers her way, and Pansy smiles up at him. Potter just huffs an irritated sigh and shakes his head. Still, the sideways look he shoots Draco has a jealous tinge to it. Draco shouldn't find that gratifying. He does.

"Said I was certain, didn't I?" Pansy stands back up, dusting her hands off. "Now get out of my scene, before I have to hex you both." She follows them out into the corridor. "No one in here without proper suitig," she shouts. "I want booties; I want hair bonnets; I want bloody protective charms over every bit of your goddamned bodies. If you contaminate my scene more than you have to, I'll--" She hesitates. "Well, I don't know what I'll do yet, but it'll be nasty, I can promise that."

Granger steps out of another cell. "I'm fairly certain she means that, people." She looks over at Pansy. "Show me what you have in there."

Draco and Potter leave them to it, heading back up the staircase, their tread slow and weary. Draco feels as if he's been through a twelve-hour day. It can't have been more than half an hour since he was outside, watching the clouds drift over the Manor's towers.

"All right?" Potter asks. His hand almost touches the small of Draco's back. He drops it.

"Tired," Draco says, and Potter nods. Draco glances down at his watch. "Father'll be in booking now." He'd been taken in by Tang and Platt, two of Granger's best Unspeakables. Robards is to meet them in the Department of Mysteries. What happens from there, Draco's no bloody idea. He's in uncharted waters now. How does one go on as an Auror, he thinks, when one's father's in custody for crimes against the state? A deep shame wells up in him; he does his best to push it down. It's not something he can deal with. Not right now.

His mother is still in the entrance hall, being gently questioned by another of Granger's
Unspeakables, a woman. Phoebe Rayne, he thinks her name is. She's sat Narcissa in a chair and is crouched beside her. An elf's brought tea, Draco notices. His mother's holding the delicate china cup with a lost air. She looks pale and faded.

When did his parents grow old? How did they fall from the beautiful, powerful people he remembers from his childhood, almost untouchable in their glory, to this? His father drunken and foolish, his mother tired and weary, years of dealing with his father's fuckery etched in her face. Draco almost wishes he could turn time back, could be the boy again who thought his parents perfect, who didn't see their faults, their failures.

But perhaps that's part of growing up, he thinks. Discovering that his parents aren't quite the incredible, omnipotent beings he thought them to be in childhood. Learning that he can be his own man, stand on his own feet, walk his own path, find his own North Star to guide him.

His gaze drifts towards Rayne, bending down to speak to Narcissa. Draco's acutely aware of Potter's presence at his back, protective, steadying.

What would life have been if Draco had learnt to trust Potter a decade ago? Fifteen years back? Would his family have been spared any of this pain? Could Draco have pulled his father away from this bloody quest for power?

Probably not. Draco knows his father. Lucius would have done whatever the hell he wanted to, no matter what Draco might have said. But still. Perhaps Draco's life might have been different. His mother's even.

And now she's alone. Unprotected. And he can't just leave her here. Draco looks at Rayne, then Narcissa, and he knows what he has to do.

"May I speak with my mother for a moment?" Draco's voice is steady, for which is thankful. Rayne looks at Potter for a moment, then nods, standing.

"Come stay with me," Draco says impetuously to his mother. He hadn't thought this far, but he has a perfectly good flat and she needs to go somewhere. She can't stay in this mouldering pile of stones by herself, just her and the house elves, and Draco bloody well refuses to live here again. Too many memories that still keep him awake at night.

Narcissa hesitates visibly, clutching the handle of the teacup.

"I mean it, Mother," Draco says. "It's not forever. Just until we figure out what to do now." "The house elves," she starts to say, and Draco holds up a hand. She settles the cup in its saucer.

"Will be fine." Draco moves closer; Rayne shifts out of the way. "You can come visit them weekly. They'll like that, you know." The elves have always been fond of his mother. She'd protected them fiercely during the War, refusing to let any of the Death Eaters mistreat them.

Narcissa smiles then, tears starting at the corner of her eyes. "All right." She hands the teacup to the hovering house elf, then reaches for Draco's hand, wrapping her fingers around his. "But only for a little while."

Draco glances at Potter. "I'll be going back to my flat tonight."

For a moment, he thinks Potter's going to say no, and he's prepared to argue the point. Rayne steps away further, tactfully giving them more privacy. And then Potter looks at Draco, an oddly wistful
expression crossing his face, as if he wants to say something, but he doesn't. Potter looks away with a curt nod. "I'll make sure you have Auror protection."

He turns away to talk to an Unspeakable sent by Granger, then motions for Rayne to join him. They all confer for a moment, then head back downstairs.

Narcissa watches Draco, a small furrow in her brow. "Be careful, my darling," she says quietly. "That one won't wait forever."

Draco tenses, his hand still in his mother's. "I've no idea what you're on about."

"It's obvious you care about him," Narcissa says, and when Draco tries to pull away, her fingers only tighten around his. "I'm not an idiot, Draco. I've known there was someone since you sent that awful coverlet to be cleaned by our house elves."

Fuck. Draco'd forgotten about that. He'd sent it over for Trissie the day after Potter'd brought over his exam results. "Mother," he says, but she shakes her head.

"And it was obvious whom the object of your affections was the moment he set foot in your room at St Mungo's." Narcissa touches his cheek. "No one looks at you the way he does, darling. Even if he weren't who he is with the influence that could bring, what I saw between you would ease any mother's heart."

"It's not like that," Draco says, and he slides his hand from hers. "It's complicated. And he's my SIO."

His mother wrinkles her nose at the Auror term. "By which you mean your supervisor." Draco tries not to let his exasperation tinge his voice. "Yes."

Narcissa just watches him. "It doesn't make it impossible. Difficult, yes. Perhaps ill-advised. But if he's what you want--" Her voice grows sharp and fierce. "Then don't let that slip away. I want you happy, Draco, and if he--"

"I don't know that he does." Draco looks away. He might be lying to himself. He doesn't really know right now. He's not certain of anything when it comes to Potter. Not any longer.

His mother just sighs and looks away.

Draco doesn't blame her. Not really. He doesn't know what to do with himself, either. He settles on the floor beside her feet, his head on her knee. Her hand rests lightly on his hair, fingers stroking through it the way she had when he was young and in need of comfort.

They sit silently together in the hall, Aurors and Unspeakables walking through what's left of their home, their boots loud against the slick marble.

Draco wonders again if what he's done is worth it. He closes his eyes and breathes out, his mother's hand warm against his temple.

He'll find out soon enough.

***

Harry pours a glass of firewhisky and carries it over to the sofa.

The house is quiet. Tonight's the second night that Malfoy's not been here, and Harry regrets not
taking Hermione up on her offer to come over for dinner. But he doesn't want to risk running into Jake over wine and Ron's pan-fried trout, not now that Zabini's been cleared by Irskine and Abadzhiev's dead.

Hermione thinks that was Dolohov's work. The magiforensicologists had, under Parkinson's direction, swept the entirety of Manor dungeons for any magical signatures or trace evidence. There's enough to suggest Dolohov had been there. Lucius Malfoy as well, but he's not talking. The Unspeaking still have him, and Harry doesn't want to think about how they sometimes get information from witnesses. They're better than the Hit Wizards, though. At least Hermione's insisted that a representative from the Auror force be there for each interrogation. Bertie Aubrey'd volunteered, and Harry's grateful to him. He doesn't think he could have done it, and there's no way in bloody hell he'd make any of his team sit through that.

Malfoy's already been through too much.

Harry'd gone over to his flat this afternoon, just to make certain the wards he'd asked the Unspeaking to install had been set properly. Malfoy had been irate at that, grumbling that there'd better not be any listening charms involved. Harry'd run all the tests, making certain none of the parameters he'd set out for Hermione had been violated. They hadn't, and now the protective spells on Malfoy's flat are almost as strong as those on Grimmauld Place.

It doesn't make Harry rest any easier. Gawain had agreed to an Auror guard stationed outside Malfoy's house, for the weekend at least. Just until Hermione can get a better bead on where Dolohov might actually be. She still thinks he left the country; Abadzhiev's body had been in the dungeons for at least three days. Narcissa Malfoy insists she didn't know; she'd reiterated it again to Harry this afternoon in the middle of Malfoy's kitchen. Harry's inclined to believe her, though he's quite aware there've been a few raised eyebrows. He'll do what he can to protect her, though.

She's Malfoy's mum, after all, and Malfoy needs her. Harry can tell. It's starting to sink in, what Malfoy's done. Harry doesn't think the berk slept at all last night, judging by how wrecked he looked when Harry'd stopped by. Malfoy'd been practically monosyllabic, barely looking at Harry at all, and when he did, his eyes were cautious and shadowed. It's almost as if they've slipped back into their old selves, long before they'd fallen into bed with one another. Harry's frustrated by it all. He'd thought they'd got past this, that they could speak to each other, confide in each other.

He can still feel the press of Malfoy's mouth against his on Thursday night.

The glass in his hands is almost empty. Harry looks at it blankly, wondering where the firewhisky went. Fuck it, he thinks, and he summons the bottle, setting aside the glass. He uncaps it and takes a swig directly from the bottle itself, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth when he's done. He leans his head back against the sofa. The shadows are lengthening in the room. Twilight's approaching, late this close to midsummer. Eleven days away, and it's one of the wildest nights of the year for the Auror force. The summer solstice always makes people a bit mad.

Harry glances over at the leather chair beside him. He almost expects to see a blond head there, long, lanky limbs folded against the arm. Odd how used to someone you could get in a few days. It hadn't even been a week that he'd had Malfoy in his house, driving him bloody mental. Harry lifts the bottle of firewhisky to his mouth again.

The door creaks and Kreacher creeps in, the shadows almost clinging to his small, stooped frame. "Is Harry Potter wanting dinner?" he asks, a bit dully, and Harry shakes his head. He's not hungry; he'd rather drink supper, thanks.

Kreacher hesitates, then he comes up to the arm of the sofa, his eyes and ears barely visible over the smooth curve of leather. "Harry Potter is missing Master Malfoy," Kreacher says.
"Don't be ridiculous," Harry says. He turns the bottle between his hands. "I'm nothing of the sort." He is, perhaps a little, but he won't admit it to his house elf, for Christ's sake.

Kreacher's eyes are large and round. "The house is missing him too," he says, and Harry swears he hears the walls sigh. He swears. The last damned thing he needs is a lovesick house around him. Merlin's balls. He's already noticed the faint layer of dust on the mantel and it's only been thirty-eight hours since Malfoy stepped into the Floo.

"It needs to stop it," Harry says, and the house shifts and creaks around him, settling with a sulky thump somewhere deep in the basement. Harry leans forward, annoyed. "I said, stop it, you sodding pile of timber!"

There's no answer from the house, but Harry thinks he hears the Doxies in the wall again. They've been suspiciously silent for days.

He sinks back into the sofa, taking another swig from the Ogden's bottle. "He's not coming back," Harry says. "So you'll just have to get used to it." He sets the bottle between his thighs and runs a thumb over it, suddenly tired. "We'll all have to," he says quietly.

Kreacher sighs and shakes his head. "The house is not liking that, Harry Potter, sir." He frowns up at Harry. "You is master here, and you is needing to help the house be happy." His long finger prods at Harry's arm. "That is what being a master is. Master Malfoy is knowing this."

"Master Malfoy can sod the fuck right off," Harry says, his voice sharp, and Kreacher flinches at the tone. Harry rubs his hand over his face. Christ, he just wants to crawl into the bottle right now. Not deal with his bloody house elf. "Look, it's not just me--"

Kreacher snorts. "It is mostly being you."

Harry gives him a scathing look. "He needs to be home with his mum right now."

"Mistress Malfoy is being welcome in this house," Kreacher's finger pokes Harry again. Fuck, but his fingernail's sharp. Harry rubs at his arm.

"I'm not running a home for wayward Malfoys," Harry snaps. Except maybe he wants to be. Fucking hell. He takes another drink, not even bothering to care about the disapproving expression on Kreacher's face. "Go on with you, Kreacher. I'm tired and out of sorts, and I don't need to be sitting here thinking about Malfoy, for fuck's sake."

Kreacher scowls and scratches his hip. "Yes, because it is being better to drink and be thinking about Master Malfoy." He shuffles off, muttering to himself about incompetent masters who can't see what is being in their stupid faces.

Bloody hell, Harry hates that damned elf.

The house sighs around him, pulling the shadows from the corners into the centre of the room.

"You can fuck off too," Harry says, but he doesn't really mean it. Kreacher's right, he misses Malfoy. Terribly. The floorboards creak beneath his feet, as if they know.

Christ, but they're all bloody pathetic. Him most of all.

***
Draco stands at the window in his kitchen, looking out on his back garden. Twilight's fallen, and
he can just see the first stars breaking through the grey-purple sky. It feels good to be back in his own flat—he's missed his bed and his books and his copper-bottomed cooking pans—but he can't help but wonder what Potter's doing right now, if Kreacher's making him eat a proper meal and not just bread and cheese, if the house is settling down, preparing Potter for bed, cooling his bedroom and nudging him towards sleep.

Potter'd been so tense this afternoon when he'd come by to examine the wards, barely looking at Draco whenever Draco's mother walked into the room. Which she had. Constantly. With more than one pointed glance Draco's way, and Draco honestly doesn't know what the hell the bloody woman wants. His mother can be incredibly frustrating whenever she wants to be.

"Draco," she says from behind him, almost as if she can hear his thoughts. He wouldn't be surprised if she could.

He turns; Narcissa's standing there with plates and cutlery in her hand, cleared from the table, looking a bit lost. His mother can run a household of elves beautifully. When it comes to doing things for herself, she's a bit less capable.

Draco walks over and takes the dishes from her, setting them on the centre island. Circe, but he remembers Potter blowing him here, pulling him to the floor, rutting up against him. He looks away, swallowing. As much as he's glad to be home, there's also a strangeness about it, an emptiness that he hadn't felt before Grimmauld Place. This is his flat, and he loves it, but still. There's a part of him that wants Potter to walk through that door, swinging his cloak from his shoulders and throwing it messily across the nearest surface. Merlin, he thinks he misses the prat.

"Are you all right?" his mother asks, and Draco nods.

He picks up the glass of wine he'd set on the counter when he'd come in a few moments ago. "It's been an odd weekend," he says, with a wry smile at her.

"More than that," Narcissa points out. She watches as Draco flicks his wand at the dishes, sending them into the sink where another twist of his wand suds them up, rinses them clean. "I'm grateful for having you with me right now, though." She reaches out for Draco, and he lets her draw him close. "It's been difficult knowing your father's..." She trails off, presses her face against Draco's shoulder. "I know it's the right thing, but I do love him. I hope you can understand that weakness."

Draco kisses the top of her head. "It's not weak," he says, a bit gruffly. "It's not as if I hate him myself." He hesitates. "Not entirely."

"The relationship between father and son can be fraught." Narcissa looks up at him. "Same for mother and daughter. I never entirely forgave Mother for what she did to Dromeda, you know." She sighs. "We were so close back then. She was my oldest sister, and I adored her..." His mother's voice catches. "I'd like to see her again. If she'll have me."

"She will." Draco's certain of that. If his Aunt Dromeda tolerated his presence in her house the infrequent times he'd shown up on her doorstep, he can't imagine she wouldn't throw open her home for his mother. "It was only Father she hated. Not you."

"I was terrible to her." Narcissa leans her head against Draco's. "Even after the War."

Draco pulls back and looks at his mother. "You can make amends. He can't stop either of us from that--"

"No." His mother seems to marvel in the word, as if she's only just realised it. "He can't, can he?"
She brushes his hair back from his face, tucks it behind his ear. "I'm proud of you, Draco. The man you've become..."

"A poof who voted to put Shacklebolt in office?" Draco says bitterly. "Father was so pleased."

Narcissa takes his wine glass from him and sips. "I'm not your father. And yes, I'm proud even of that. Perhaps there are points of view that I don't entirely understand. I'm fifty-one years old and possibly far too set in my ways. But you, my love." Her eyes are bright. She sets the wineglass aside. "You are everything I hoped you would become. Strong, and smart, and clever, and brave. Exactly what a mother might want."

"Poof and all?"

His mother rolls her eyes. "Darling, that has never surprised me. As much as your father refused to discuss it—or tolerate it—I'm not a complete idiot, and I've eyes in my head." She hesitates. "I'm not entirely happy. It won't be an easy life for you, and I don't understand. Not completely. But that's not my choice, is it?"

Draco's filled with a flood of love towards his mother. He lets her pull him close again; she kisses his cheek.

"I'll leave you be, won't I?" Narcissa says quietly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't," he says, but she just gives him a small smile, and then she's gone in a rustle of grey silk.

Draco picks up his wineglass again and leans against the counter. He feels unsettled. Unhappy.

Incomplete.

He wants Potter to curl up against, Potter to card his thick fingers through Draco's hair, Potter to whisper to him, tell him that it'll be all right, that he can face down the Ministry on Monday morning, that no one will say a damned thing to him about his father because Potter will be there and they'd never dare.

Draco closes his eyes and breathes out. He misses Potter, and that's a feeling he doesn't like. It makes him too vulnerable, too easy a mark for someone like Potter who wants only the pleasure of physical release. He's nothing but a good fuck to Potter.

Or is he?

He thinks of what his mother said yesterday. No one looks at you the way he does. But Draco doesn't know how Potter looks at him. Does he? All Draco sees is the exasperation, the annoyance, the desire, yes, but desire means nothing, really. There's no reason for Potter to look at him, not the way his mother seems to think he does.

She's bloody delusional, he thinks, as he drains his wine.

But what if she's not?

Circe. He sets his glass down and runs a hand through his hair. It's too much. His father, and Potter, and this desperate keening feeling deep inside of him that's certain he's going to bugger everything up, that wants him to throw himself in the Floo and land in Potter's library, that thinks he was a damned fool not to go to Potter before the raid.

Fuck Draco wants Potter. However he can have him, and that's the worst decision he knows he
can make.

He sinks down to the floor, his head in his hands, his heart heavy. He can't do this any longer. Can't put himself in this position.

The only thing he can do is leave. He knows that. Perhaps it makes him a coward to walk away. To transfer to another team. Or to resign. He draws in a raw, ragged breath at that thought. But he has to do something. No matter that it'll half-kill him to leave.

It'll be better for everyone in the long run. Even Potter.

Draco knows what he has to do, whatever his heart might be saying. He deserves the chance to be happy, to not worry about what might be coming later, to not think about what people will say, to be a bloody good Auror, not one looking over his shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Potter does too.

And if Draco can't trust himself to stay out of Potter's bed... Well. He'll take himself out of Potter's life. As best he can.

Draco closes his eyes and breathes.

***

It's half-eight on Monday morning, and Harry's already in the office, having come in early to try to tame the piles of parchment threatening to take over his desk. He's managed to sort his incident reports into piles, and he did more than a bit of paperwork last week, so with some luck he might be done with his current stack of parchment before, well, before the next thing happens.

Honestly, half of the Auror job is filing the proper paperwork, usually in triplicate. Their team meeting's scheduled for nine, so he should have a bit of time to approve his SIO report, sign off on the final return to duty sheets for Malfoy, file the preliminary ones for Zabini's return today, and perhaps even get a head start on what the fuck he's going to write up about the Manor raid. And then somehow he needs to get to working on the whole Azkaban fuckup by noon—that's situation's a powderkeg, and Harry knows he needs to be ready to file a full write-up for Gawain, and soon. He'd better start putting something together, or he'll never finish.

And then there's Malfoy and Harry's worry about him, and that's going to distract him all day if he doesn't have the chance to check in with the git. Harry hopes they can have a private conversation at some point. Or maybe make a time and place for one at least. When Malfoy had been staying at Grimmauld, he was close enough that Harry could imagine they might run across each other, even on nights when Malfoy'd locked himself in his bedroom and was doing all he could to avoid Harry. If nothing else, Harry'd at least been able to send Kreacher in to check on him, make sure he'd eaten. Now it's harder with Malfoy's mother staying in Malfoy's flat, not to mention the professional duties Malfoy needs to resume this week. And really, how can Malfoy go on like everything's normal? Especially after Friday? Christ, Harry can't imagine what it must be like to arrest your dad like that. He respects the fuck out Malfoy for being willing to go there, but he knows it has to be hard for him. Harry remembers how Malfoy had idolised Lucius, back when they were in school, how envious Harry had been, whether or not he'd admit it, that Malfoy had a dad there, whom he could look up to like that, even if he was a sodding fuck. Harry would have given anything--well, almost anything, he supposes--to have grown up with James Potter. It's still strange to him that he's older now than his parents were when they were killed, and Christ, but he's a complete fuck-up, isn't he? No family. No kids. Just him and his inability to form a proper human connection outside of Ron and Hermione. He sighs. Maybe he does need some help, he thinks.
When the knock at the door comes, Harry's heart leaps. Maybe it's Malfoy; maybe they can at least talk before the day starts. Harry finds the prospect comforting.

"Come in." Harry half-stands from his chair, hoping to see that blond hair and long nose come around the corner.

Instead Gawain Robards walks in, shutting the scarred oak door behind him. "Hullo, Harry."

Harry tries hard not to show his disappointment. He takes a deep breath and sits back down slowly. "Gawain. Welcome! Sorry--I'm just trying to catch up on all of the forms from last week."

Gawain raises his eyebrows significantly. "Are you going to invite me?"

"Oh, please sit," Harry says belatedly, gesturing at a blessedly empty chair. Thank goodness he'd come in at seven today. An hour ago it'd been filled with a box of file jackets he'd been meaning to send back to the archives since the second week of the Dolohov case.

Gawain takes the chair further in towards Harry's desk, turning it slightly so he can also see the door, should it open. Harry recognises the habits of a veteran Auror. Gawain's clearly on edge and really, with all that's going on, why shouldn't he be?

"I wasn't expecting to see you so early." Harry rubs his hands together. There's an inkstain on his left thumb that's smeared blue across his skin. "Is everything all right?"

Gawain straightens his shoulders, settling his robe around him. "I'm officially here to congratulate your team for Friday's raid. In addition to all of the valuable service to magical beings far and wide, blah, blah, blah, it's been tremendous press against the Azkaban fiasco. Barnabas Cuffe's delighted to be slinging mud at the Malfoy name again, although I do think he's nearly orgasmic over the fact that certain sources are letting it be known that Lucius was arrested by his own son." At Harry's frown, Gawain shakes his head. "Don't look at me, I haven't said anything of the sort. No idea where that's coming from, but Rita Skeeter's editorialising about the Minister giving Malfoy the Younger a bloody Order of Merlin for it." He rolls his eyes.


"Are the Unspeakables receiving official credit for the capture?" Harry asks.

"We get the collar," Gawain says, his eyes flashing, and Harry wagers there's a fight somewhere behind his insistence. He'll have to ask Hermione about it later; Croaker's not the type to take that lying down. Still, Malfoy made the arrest and is the Auror on record. "Malfoy senior is in custody with them, although he's not talking yet. Hermione will build that case, but look to you for intel." Gawain pauses, his face serious. "Also, I think, given the delicate nature of the matter, you should keep your team out of the loop until further notice. Eyes only for you on this one. Constable Malfoy will certainly be called in to testify when his father goes to trial, but I want him and the case protected as best we can until then."

Harry nods. He'd expected as much. He's actually surprised that Gawain trusts him enough to keep him as liaison with the Unspeakables.

"And Azkaban?" Harry prompts.

Gawain passes a hand over his face. "You think you have a lot of paperwork? We've had to pull all of the Dementor guards over the weekends and put extra human shifts on. Since most of the other guards are suspects, they've all had to be rotated in shifts with new blood. Hassan Shah's
been working on coordinating our people up there. Peasegood and his elite team are also holding the peace until further notice."

Harry shakes off the shiver that runs down his spine. He supposes having the Hit Wizards patrolling is better than Dementors, but still. Barely, perhaps. The elite team are still human, callous and cruel with all that entails.

"What's going to happen? To the Dementors, I mean?" Harry never thought he'd feel anything for those strange, tortured creatures, but ever since Burnham told him of their individual personalities and traits, he's had trouble thinking about wanting to eliminate them. What would that make the Ministry, then, if they lined them up and massacred them? No better than Voldemort, he'd say.

"Kingsley's holding emergency sessions in Wizengamot as we speak," Gawain checks his watch. "I'm due in the basement at nine forty-five. " It's not an answer, and Harry knows it. That curl of fear deep inside of him widens.

"Have you thought about using Zabini's grandfather with the Dementors?" Harry thinks of the tall, imposing figure of Barachiel Dee, remembers how he pulled the influence off of his grandson in the suite at the Beaumont. "Surely he knows something about them."

"Yeah. Don't think that's not a public relations nightmare." Gawain shakes his head, obviously uncomfortable with the idea. "But it's already in discussion. Croaker's pushing it, and I can see the fingerprints of Hermione all over his suggestions."

Good, Harry thinks, although he can only imagine what Olivia Zabini is going to be like if her father is staying on in London, rather than returning to Crete. A part of him is curious, but another part knows it's best not to poke that hornet's nest too hard. Zabini'll need to be watched for signs of strain if he stays with his mother much longer--he'll probably be grateful to get back to work, honestly.

"Jake Durant helped him, you know." Harry tries to ward off the raging jealousy that he usually shows by not thinking about the closeness he saw between Jake and Zabini that afternoon and how it made him wonder. To Harry's surprise, though, he doesn't feel much more than mildly curious. "Dee said Jake had something of the necromancer about him."

"I'll keep that in mind." Gawain coughs, then smooths out his robes. "I'd like to talk to you about your team for a moment."

"Sure," Harry's voice sound inauthentic in his own ears, but he doesn't quite know what to say. He tries to fold his hands, fails, settles back in his chair, and ends up leaning at a weird angle and feeling like an idiot.

"Kingsley's prioritised the search for Dolohov," Gawain says. "And Jean-Marie Prudhomme Rosier. There'll be a task force with the Unspeakables, but I want your team to take point, of course, with you at the head. Granger's agreed to give you primary control." He hesitates. "You'll understand, I'm sure, the delicacy of the situation we find ourselves in. With the possibility of two Aurors directly involved in Dolohov's plans--perhaps more, not to mention any potential Azkaban guards..." Gawain looks down at his folded hands. "I don't know whom I can trust, Harry. I'm placing all of my confidence in you, Granger, and your teams. All things considered, I think you're the least like to have thrown your lot in with the Death Eaters, whatever anyone might think of your team members."

Harry nods. "Thank you, sir. I can assure you we can handle that directive."

Gawain regards him levelly. "I expect so. Also, we're splitting up Wrightson's team, obviously,
"I think she understands that," Gawain says.

"All right." Harry nods, hoping he's not making the wrong decision. "We'll try her out on a temporary basis. See how it goes. Althea's a good Auror. Really strong in the raid and also impressive given all the trouble with Wrightson. But if there's any problem between my team and her, she leaves. I want that made clear to her."

A shadow passes over Gawain's face, likely the memory of Wrightson Harry thinks. They had worked together for some time--nearly a quarter-century now--and Harry supposes it must be a blow to be betrayed like that. "I'll approve her transfer then. Conditionally, of course. It'll take a week or two to go through."

"As long as she works well with the rest of the team, I'm fine with it." Despite his worry on how that move might turn out, Harry is relieved in a way, glad to get another Auror on the team with all of the chaos surrounding them. With all the work they've got to do in the next weeks, it'll be good to have Althea with them. He'd ask for Shah as well, but if he's organising the Azkaban relief, there's no chance of Gawain releasing him to Harry. That's far more important. Still, if Althea doesn't work out, Harry'll push for Shah instead. Gawain will owe him, after all.

A rap of knuckles comes from the incident room side. When Malfoy's pale blond head pokes in the door, Harry's heart leaps and it's all he can do not to smile in front of Gawain. Christ, he's missed that idiot. "Hey, Malfoy."

Malfoy's face is impassive, closed. "Hey guv, everyone's here."

"Sure." Harry can tell that Malfoy is avoiding meeting his eyes. There's something wrong, he thinks. "I'll be right there."

"Constable Malfoy," Gawain says, leaning forward in his chair. "I'd like to speak with you this afternoon. Four o'clock in my office, would that be acceptable?"

Malfoy's gaze flicks between Harry and Gawain, then he nods. "Yes, sir. I'll be there." A flicker of worry crosses his face. Harry feels the same. Malfoy looks back at Harry. "Guv." He steps back, pulling the door with him.

What the hell was that about?

When the door is closed, Gawain leans forward. "Before we go, I do need to make quite sure. Would you like to reassign anyone currently on your team, now that you've got Whitaker? I know you're still building, but this is a good chance to reorganise things without any hard feelings."

and I've had a request from one of them." Harry raises an eyebrow. "Would you be willing to take Althea Whitaker onto yours?"

Harry hesitates. "There's bad blood between her and Malfoy." To say the least.

"She said." Gawain rubs a thumb over the arm of the chair. "She also said Malfoy impressed her last week. And that Parkinson's a good Auror as well. She wants to work with them. With you. But I won't bring her in unless you agree." He tilts his head, looking at Harry. "Again, perhaps it's foolish of me, but I think she's not likely to have been drawn into Wrightson's plot, given the fact that she brought him in. I'm not sure I trust her, but I'm not sure I don't either."

Harry considers. "She knows what she's getting into? I won't have her slagging Malfoy off for being a Death Eater. Not on my watch."

"I think she understands that," Gawain says.

Malfoy's face is impassive, closed. "Hey guv, everyone's here."
Harry knows Gawain means Malfoy, and for a wild instant he thinks perhaps he should say yes,
should get Malfoy transferred so they'll have a chance to work things out, should give him the chance to get away. This could be the solution to all of their problems.

But just as quickly, Harry realises he can't. He knows that this Malfoy's decision to make and not his. Harry's no right to separate Malfoy from his friends. It's the least Harry can do to wait for Malfoy's call on this one. Even if Malfoy decides to seek reallocation on his own, Harry'll have to wait and see.

"No," Harry answers firmly, meeting Gawain's eyes. "Not as such, no. Not without their request." He hesitates. "Does this have anything to do with your meeting with Malfoy?"

"You know I'm not going to talk about that." Gawain gives him an even look, and Harry nods. It's that sort of thing then. Not even his SIO's business. Harry doesn't know if that makes him more worried or less. He wonders if Malfoy's put in for a transfer anyway. Protocol would mean he'd be the last to be informed, to protect Malfoy from any retribution.

He hopes that's not the case. He can't imagine coming into the incident room without Malfoy's mocking face greeting him.

Gawain claps his hands. "Well, then let's go congratulate your lot. Circe knows they bloody well deserve it."

When Gawain rises and turns his back, Harry runs a hand through his hair. He's no idea how to handle this. This is the first time his team's been back together in over a week, and Harry's a bit worried he's about to step into a nest of unsettling serpents.

Malfoy, Parkinson, and Zabini are all seated at their desks when Harry enters behind Gawain. Gawain moves to stand at the head of the table and Harry takes a position on his right, his hands in his pockets. He looks around the room, at Zabini, who seems stronger and more composed than he has since Prague, at Parkinson, who gives him that small, tight quirk of her ruby-red lips she reserves for her inner circle, at Malfoy, who seems uneasy and broken in a way that worries Harry deeply. These are his people, he realises. His team. They've gone through hell together, and he's proud of them. They're damned good Aurors. Each and every one of them, and he can't imagine going through the next weeks without them by his side.

"I'm here to welcome you all back to the office officially." Gawain cracks a smile. "I could have sent human resources, but this seems like a special case given all of the trouble you've all gone to. Speaking of which, I might need to ask for funding to set up a ward in St Mungo's in your honour."

There's a laugh from them all, even Malfoy, and Harry relaxes. They're all here and they're all alive.

Harry will take that as a win.

***

At five to four, Draco walks down the corridor to Robards office, oddly nervous. He's not often called to the Head Auror's office alone. It's most likely about his father, but that doesn't matter. He still feels young and overwhelmed, like he's being called to task before one of his professors at school. He'd asked Potter if he knew what Robards wanted from him, but Potter'd just shrugged and said he hadn't been told a thing. Draco doesn't know if he believes that, but Potter'd seemed sincere enough.

Draco doesn't know what Potter will say when his transfer documents come in. If they do.
hasn't turned them in yet, or even filled them out; he'd just picked them up this morning from a harried witch in human resources before coming in for the team meeting. They're in the front pocket of his satchel, sitting beside his desk, folded in half. He hasn't spoken to Pansy about them yet, or to Blaise either. He can't. Draco doesn't want to leave, but he's not certain he can stay either.

He's halfway down the hall when he hears his name being called. He turns, and Bertie's there, stomping towards him with a determined step.

"Hullo, lad," Bertie says, drawing up beside him. "How're you holding up?"

"All right," Draco says, leaning back against the wall. He's grateful for a friendly face right now. "As well as can be expected, I suppose."

Bertie claps his shoulder. "You've had a rough time of it." He eyes Draco from beneath his bushy brows. "Handled yourself well, though. You're the talk of the department, taking down your dad like that."

Draco feels his face grow warm. "Brilliant," he says with a sigh. "Just what every Auror wants to make his name on, arresting his own damned father."

"Don't look a gift dragon in the mouth, lad." Bertie frowns at him. "It's earned you a good bit of respect."

"I'm not certain that's the kind I want, Bertie." Draco tucks his hair back behind one ear. "I've rather tried to outgrow being Lucius Malfoy's spawn, and here I am, again, only recognised because of him--"

"Because of you," Bertie says, voice sharp. He lowers it as a file clerk walks past. "Don't be thinking otherwise. No one gives a damn about Lucius except you. And you seem to be thinking you're tied up in who he is, and that's rats' bollocks, boy. You're not your father, and you've nothing to prove. To anyone, even your fool self."

Draco sighs, and they start down the hall together, side by side. "I wish I could believe that." Draco feels calmer with Bertie next to him. He wonders how his life would have been different if he'd been born to Bertie Aubrey instead of Lucius Malfoy. Less money, perhaps, but fewer criminals and madmen living in his childhood home.

"There'll come a day when you will." Bertie gives him a sideways glance. "You ought to be proud of yourself. Your team. You brought down bloody Azkaban, now didn't you?"

A faint smile twitches the corner of Draco's mouth. "I'm not certain that's something to be proud of."

Bertie snorts. "Shacklebolt's been wanting a reason to dismantle that whole bloody setup and restructure it for years now. You practically laid it in his lap; he's bound to be as giddy as a four-year-old on Christmas morning." He shakes his head. "Don't think he won't be looking to display some gratitude. Take it, lad. Don't be precious."

Draco gives him a look as they turn a corner. "I'm not a complete fool."

"Good to know. I raised you better." Bertie nudges Draco's shoulder. "You're looking a bit too morose."

"I'm just tired," Draco says, and he knows from the look Bertie gives him that it's a shit excuse. "I am."
Bertie stops outside Viola's office. "You've nothing to worry about, Draco." His voice is gentle. Kind. "Let some of that go, all right? You've done well, and you should be proud of yourself. I sure as hell am."

The words settle Draco a bit. He doesn't know why he's so tense, so uptight. Bertie's right, of course. Betraying his father hasn't been bad for his career, and he doesn't regret it. Much.

Still, there's something inside him that feels hollowed out and raw. Pansy's already pulled him aside twice today to check in with him, and Blaise bought him a bloody coffee after lunch, which Blaise never does unless he's worried about Draco. Circe, Draco doesn't know what he's going to do if he leaves them for another team. He wants to rage and rant at Potter for forcing him into this position, for making him question where he should be.

Bertie's watching him, a frown furrowing between his brows. "Draco."

"I'm fine." If Draco says it enough, perhaps he'll actually mean it. At least once.

"You're not going to do something stupid, are you?" Bertie sounds resigned. He rests a hand on Draco's arm. "You know I sat in on those interviews with your father this weekend so no one on your team would have to--"

"I know." And Draco's grateful. He is. He sighs. "I just…" He looks down, letting his hair fall over his face. He does it when he feels exposed, he knows. Pansy had pointed it out to him once. He's never been able to stop, even when he realised she was right. "Maybe I'm not cut out for this work--"

"Bollocks," Bertie says bluntly. "Utter fucking bollocks, you twit. You're a damned fine Auror, and I should know because I trained you myself." He watches Draco. "Hey. Look at me, lad." Draco does. Bertie shakes his head, then reaches out and taps Draco's temple. "Whatever's crawled up into your head, get it the hell out. You'd be a fool to leave this job. You're a brilliant Auror, and an even better detective. You deserve to be on Potter's team, and you'd better damned well remember that, yeah?"

Draco nods, swallowing. "Yeah," he says, a bit hollowly. "Thanks."

"Don't be a damned fool," Bertie says as Draco turns to go into Viola's office. "You're every bit as much mine as your dad's, you know. I brought you up as an Auror, and I'm proud of you. Remember that, Draco Malfoy." His voice cracks a bit. "One day you'll believe me."

That makes Draco look back at him. Bertie's watching him, his worry evident on his face. Merlin, but Draco loves the old man. Owes him everything. His career. His sanity. The belief that he might actually be able to make a bloody mark on this sodding world. His throat tightens. "Thank you," he says, and Bertie grabs him, pulling him into a fierce, hard hug before letting him go.

"You're one of mine, boy," Bertie says, emotion making his moustache quiver. "I won't forget that. Ever."

Draco nods, but the tightness in his chest is easing. "I won't either," he says, and Bertie nods. "Good."

They stand there for a moment, and Draco wonders if he'd ever felt this close to his actual father. He knows the answer to that, and it makes his heart ache.

Bertie makes a gruff noise, then, and waves Draco away. "Get off with you, before you make me
Draco takes a deep breath and turns on his heel, striding into Viola's office.

Viola looks up at him from a pile of paperwork. "He's in there," she says, with a nod towards Robards' door. She's chewing on the tip of what looks suspiciously like one of Blaise's sugar quills. Draco can't help but smile; he's not surprised the bastard's made his way through the whole damned office today.

Robards sets aside a stack of parchment as Draco comes in. "Constable Malfoy," he says. "Thank you for coming."

Draco's booted feet barely make a sound as he moves across the thick, plush carpet. The stained glass DMLE logo casts a blue shadow across his skin as he passes the windows. He takes the seat Robards nods to. "I assume this is about my father--"

"No," Robards says. "It's about you, actually." He folds his hands in front of him and studies Draco. He doesn't say anything for a long moment, and Draco's panic starts to rise. He pushes it back down, tries to breathe out to calm himself. The last thing he needs is to have a bloody fit in the middle of the Head Auror's office.

Robards glances down at his desk blotter, then back up at Draco. "I've been pleased with your performance as of late, Malfoy. You've shown resolve under duress, and a commendable determination to uphold your duties as an Auror in the face of conflicts of loyalty. Given those facts, in combination with your excellent scores on your recent examination and on the recommendation of the Promotion Board, it's my delight to put you forward as a candidate for sergeant."

Draco blinks at him. This isn't at all what he was expecting or what he was prepared for. "Oh," he says. There's a part of him that's brilliantly happy, crowing even with delight. The other part of him feels gut-punched. Terrified, even. This changes everything for him, he thinks. Or could, at least.

Robards raises an eyebrow. "That seems a bit underwhelmed."

"No," Draco says. "I just--I'm surprised is all."

"You shouldn't be." Robards leans back in his chair. "Persephone Abbott was rather impressed with you. Thought you did a cracking job in your interview with her. She was very upset to hear about your stay in St Mungo's."

Draco doesn't know what to say. He rubs the back of his neck, his hair spilling over his fingers. "It's just, I was thinking--" He stops, but he knows if he doesn't say this now, he never will, and he can't bear it if he doesn't. He draws in a deep breath. "I'd thought about offering my resignation, sir. All things considered, I'd understand if the force would prefer I take a leave of absence--"

"What is this complete bollocks coming out of your mouth?" Robards asks. "I just told you the force would like to promote you, Malfoy. Not be rid of you. We can't afford to lose good Aurors, and mark my words, you are a very good Auror."

Draco falls silent. His heart's thudding against his chest. He wants this promotion. Badly. He says, finally, "With my father going on trial--" He stops. "I do read the Prophet, sir. I saw what they said about me."
"As I recall, it was quite complimentary," Robards says. "Called you a hero, even."

"That won't last long." Draco can't hide his bitterness. "One wrong move on my part and they'll be after my head on a silver platter." Merlin only help him if Rita Skeeter finds out about him and Potter, after all. "I'm a Malfoy, sir. With all the shit that entails."

"You're not Lucius." Robards crosses his arms over his chest, studying Draco. "You know that, don't you?"

Draco sighs. "I do, sir." He hesitates. "If I stay on the force, it might be best if I transfer to a more low-key team, though. Something a bit less public than Harry Potter's command."

"Ah," Robards says. He leans back in his chair, a small smile flitting across his face. "So your existential crisis here is really about Harry, isn't it? And whether or not you deserve this promotion given that you've been shagging your SIO on the sly."

Draco's head jerks up. "What?"

Robards shakes his head. "Malfoy. You left an Auror mobile at a nightclub last week. It was returned to my office. I'm not a fool, and I've been around Aurors long enough to know what a drunken text requesting one's SIO's presence at a bar outside of work hours might indicate. I've been there myself in my salad days. She's now in charge of the Promotions Board, and I'm Head Auror. It was stupid and regrettable and caused problems down the line for both of us, and yet I wouldn't go back and change anything we did." The look he gives Draco is even and calm. Draco wants to sink into the floor, although he's relieved at Robards's candour. "So if your request to transfer or resign has to do with Harry pressuring you in any way into improper conduct, that should be a formal complaint to Professional Standards instead and will be handled accordingly."

"It's not Potter," Draco says, even though it obviously is and his brain is screaming with the fact that he is having this conversation with the Head Auror. "It's all me, sir." He doesn't want to do this. "I shouldn't be here--"

"Hogwash." Robards pushes a small box across the desk towards Draco. He picks it up, almost reflexively and opens it. Nestled against black velvet are two sergeant's bars, in bright red. "You earned those, Malfoy, and I want you here. I know I can trust you. There aren't many others I could say that about. Not these days." He looks tired when he leans back in his chair. "But it's your decision as to whether or not you want those bars." He pauses, then says quietly, "And whether or not you feel you're entitled to them."

Draco stares down at the bits of gold and red enamel. He wants them on his uniform. Badly. He closes his eyes and breathes out. "You'll regret it, sir. Taking a Malfoy on as a sergeant. Taking me."

"Perhaps." Robards's chair creaks as he sits forward. "But I doubt it. However, I do have to make clear that Harry should be off limits. For your sake, not his. You're right that it would be challenging for you to be seen fraternising with your SIO right now with both of you in the public eye. It's not that I care, really. I've watched it happen before. As I said, I've done it before. I doubt there's a team in this building that hasn't had this sort of thing happen. We work closely together in dangerous situations. Feelings form. Attractions happen. More people than you realise are in the same situation as yourself. It's why we have the rules in the first place. Still, I'm inclined to look the other way if there's no coercion going on. Is there?"

"No, sir," Draco says quietly, and Robards nods.

"But," Robards says, "on the other hand, it's not his career that'll be ruined by the press. It's yours,
and there's only so far I can protect you if you go down that path. It'll be your throat the Prophet goes after, not his." Draco nods. "I know."

"As for transferring…" Robards leans back in his chair. "You could chose to do so, and if you did, I would support you. But you should know that this morning I asked Harry if there were any staffing decisions he wanted to make, anyone he thought should be moved from his team, and he told me no. Most decisively. Perhaps that's also something you should consider, Sergeant Malfoy."

The new title sends a sudden shiver down Draco's spine, as does the thought of Potter refusing to be rid of him. He still doesn't know what to do though, but perhaps Robards is right. He needs to think about this before he makes a rash decision. He meets Robards's gaze, hesitates, then exhales. "I will, sir."

Robards relaxes. "Good. Should you make a decision that requires paperwork, submit it to human resources." He picks up a quill. "Now get out of my office, Sergeant. Ask Viola to requisition you a uniform with the proper piping."

Draco knows when he's being dismissed. He stands, still clutching the box with his sergeant's bars.

"And Malfoy," Robards says. Draco glances back from the door. "I do mean it about Potter." He looks up from his paperwork. "You're both too good for me to lose, but if my hand's forced, it'll be you that's suspended first. I won't have a choice." His brow is furrowed. "It's politics. Understood?"

Draco's stomach flips. "Yes, sir. Thank you," he says, and he closes the door behind him gently, his hand shaking.

He has no bloody idea what just happened.

Viola watches him, blinking. "Uniform, then?" she prompts, nodding to the box.

"Yes," Draco says, recovering his nerve. "With sergeant's piping, if you please."

In for a Knut, in for a Galleon. Draco's sure he'll have ample time to regret this decision. Right now, he's fighting the urge to run away as far and as fast as he can.

***

Jake pays for his tea with a Galleon coin and waves the change away. He doesn't need the Knuts and Sickles cluttering up his pockets; besides, he'll only be in London for a few more weeks at best--Hermione's talked Graves into letting him stay on to help sort out the Azkaban mess, possibly with Barachiel Dee, which makes Jake more than a little uneasy.

Graves hadn't been thrilled by the idea of his best Legilimens being out of the country any longer than necessary, but Hermione can be rather persuasive when she wants to be. She's even convinced Jake that he's still needed here, after all, despite Jake's gut feeling that he ought to just hop a damn transatlantic Floo back home to Brooklyn. He misses his apartment on the third floor of a Boerum Hill walk-up, and his morning coffee from Lado's downstairs--none of that overpriced, burnt Starbucks shit, thanks--and the storefront Thai from three blocks over that does the best red curry he's ever had, hot and eye-wateringly spicy. Not to mention lazy Sunday mornings walking along the promenade, seeing the Brooklyn Bridge stretching out across the East
River.

The last time he'd done that had been the weekend before Harry'd left, and he'd kissed the fucking asshole on a park bench, feeling even then that Harry was slipping away from him.

Fuck. Sometimes he wishes he'd never been goddamned introduced to Harry Potter.

He's nearly out of the tea shop when he looks up and Harry's there in the doorway, his satchel over his shoulder, obviously getting ready to leave for the day, and Jake's steps slow as he tries to find another way out. Useless, of course. The shop's small and just off the Ministry Atrium; there's one door, and Jake's fucking ex is standing right there.

Looking at him now.

Shit.

Jake lifts his chin and starts walking again. He'll be polite. Civil. For Hermione and Ron's sakes at least. Jake owes them that; they're still his friends too. He doesn't hate Harry, not entirely, but what was once between them is irrevocably broken, and that hurts. Jake knows that what he ought to do is go out tonight, get just drunk enough, find a gorgeous guy with a great ass and fuck him senseless. Preferably hard and fast and with a good handful or two of lube. It's always been how he's dealt with breakups before. He doesn't quite know why that feels off now.

"Harry," he says when he draws closer.

"Hey." Harry looks a bit adrift, like he's alone in this cold hard world, and Jake wants to swear, loud and long and with all the Louisiana curses his daddy taught him strung together. It's that little boy lost thing that got to him the first time, long after their first fuck, when Jake had thought Harry was that next hot guy with the great ass who'd help him get over his last breakup. Shit, but Jake has terrible taste in men, as his best friend Martine points out. All the time. Then again, she's got shit taste in women so he feels like they're a matched pair. Jesus, he misses her too.

"I heard you're staying a bit longer," Harry says after a moment. Hermione, Jake assumes, and he's glad the two of them are talking again. He's been worried. So has Ron. And Jake doesn't like that Harry's been avoiding the both of them, most likely because of him. He knows Hermione invited Harry to dinner over the weekend, and he turned her down. Jake doesn't want to be the person who comes between those three. They need each other; no one's been through what they have.

Jake nods and takes a sip of his tea, without thinking. He grimaces. It's still steaming hot; the bitterness hits his palate. "Is that going to be a problem?" he asks, and Harry shakes his head.

"I'm glad, really." Harry steps aside as a witch brushes past them, looking worn out from the workday. Poor thing, Jake thinks. And it's only Monday. He wonders if she's one of the Ministry officials pulled in on the Azkaban crisis. "Hermione needs your expertise."

They stand there for a moment, awkwardly. It's easier when there are other people between them, and Jake realises how much he's been relying on Blaise and Hermione to cushion him from what he's feeling. He's angry at Harry, and he's hurt, and he doesn't think he's going to get over that easily. But there's a sense of freedom and relief mixed in as well. He's not responsible for Harry any more, and he feels a bit guilty about that. He looks away. "Well," Jake says. "I should…" He doesn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry," Harry says, his voice low, his face turned away, and for the first time, Jake actually believes him. "I've been a shit."
"Yeah." Jake isn't going to make it easy for Harry. Everyone else around him does, he thinks, and that's part of Harry's problem. They excuse him because of what he went through in the War, and yeah, that was shit, Jake's not going to say it wasn't, but fuck. Other people have had shit lives too. He's argued this with Hermione just a few days back. The only person he's ever seen push back against Harry's bullshit has been Malfoy, and as much as that stings, Jake can't help but hope he keeps it up. Harry needs that. Jake had hoped it'd be him who could help Harry grow up, but maybe that was their problem. Maybe Jake had wanted to fix Harry too badly, when he knew damn well that was a fucked-up reason to be with someone. Healer, heal thyself, he thinks, before you waste your time on someone who's not ready themselves.

Harry looks over at him then. "I didn't meant to hurt you."

"Well, you did," Jake says.

"I know." Harry's fingers tighten around the strap of his satchel. "Thanks for all you did with Zabini. You didn't have to, but I'm glad you did. He's a good Auror."

"Yeah. He is." Jake's not ready to think about Blaise and the way his eyes are drawn to him every time he walks in the room. It's the Veela effect, Jake knows, not to mention Jake's own bruised ego from Harry's dumping and the forced intimacy of sharing the intensity of Legilimens care they'd endured. That's a crap combination, allaround, one his instructors had warned him against at the Institut, and Jake's glad he'll be leaving soon.

He almost turns to walk away, but there's something about the way Harry's standing that worries Jake. He's on the balls of his feet, nervous and wound-tight. "Are you all right?" Jake asks.

Harry nods, then glances away. "Look, I just wanted you to know…" He bites his lip then exhales, a long, slow huff. "Since you've been on me before about it."

"Yeah?" Jake doesn't know where this is going, but he can tell it's important to Harry. He waits.

"I've been thinking." Harry twists his satchel strap around his thumb. He moves a bit further away from the door, out into the Atrium itself. There's no one close by, but he lowers his voice anyway. "About seeing someone." Harry looks petrified. "A Mind Healer," he says, so softly that Jake can barely hear him. "I'm fucked up, yeah? And maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk to someone."

Jake feels a wave of sympathy that he doesn't expect, tinged with more than a bit of sadness. This is what he's wanted for Harry since they first got together. "You know I think it's a good idea," he says after a moment.

"I just don't want anyone from St Mungo's," Harry says, not looking at Jake. "Or from London at all. You know? It's…" He trails off in a sigh.

"Too close to home," Jake says. Harry nods. Jake puts a hand on Harry's arm. "I get it." He hesitates. He shouldn't be doing this, he thinks. Harry's not his work now. But he still cares about him. Jake thinks he always will. Harry's just that sort; he leaves a mark on you. Once you're his, you stay his in a way. Jake wishes he could just hate Harry like a normal ex. It'd be fucking easier. "I know people in Paris," he says. "Good Mind Healers who won't give a fuck that you're Harry Potter. If that's what you want."

Harry glances over at him, a flicker of hope in his eyes. "Yeah. I'd like that. Maybe."

"I'll owl you a few names." Jake studies Harry a moment, taking in his sallow face and the dark circles beneath his eyes. "You need to stop drinking so much too," he says before Harry can object. "I know you, Harry, and I know your tell-tale signs. And Malfoy's going to need you
sober right now." He holds up a hand, cutting off Harry's protest. "I know what it's going to be like for him. He may think he's fine with his dad in prison, but it's going to hit him hard at some point." Jake remembers that feeling all too well, the shame and the guilt and the anger towards his own father that had nearly consumed him. "It's not going to be easy, and whether you're his SIO or his..." Jake can't bring himself to say lover. "Whatever. He's going to need all of you around him. If I hadn't had Martine back then..." Jake breaks off. Martine had gotten him through the worst of it, dragging him out of the bottom of the bottle more times than he can count.

Harry nods. "I know."

Jake wonders if he really does. "You know, Harry, you always say you don't know what you want. But I think you do. This time, at least. You're just too fucking scared to admit it."

Harry looks miserable. "Maybe you're right, but that doesn't help me."

"It could if you'd stop being such a fucking mess." Jake sighs. Why the fuck is he doing this, helping his ex work through things with the man he cheated with? He can hear Martine now, in his head, telling him what a goddamn pushover he is, and she'd be right. Christ. He's done with this. Done with Harry. "Look. Go to a Mind Healer. Talk things through. Get some damn help, Harry, before you implode and take everyone else around out with you. Yeah?"

Harry nods. "Yeah."

Jake steps back, his tea still clutched in his hand. "See you around," he says, and the words feel so final. His heart aches, even though he knows this is best for both of them.

He takes a deep breath and walks away.

***

Draco stands in the middle of his bedroom, his shirt off, his trousers hanging low on his hips. His mother's in the spare room, supposedly reading, stretched across the bed with a blanket drawn over her, but the last time he'd checked on her she was sleeping, a half-empty bottle of wine and a glass smudged with lipstick on the nightstand beside her. He'd set the book aside and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. Rain's tapping lightly against the window panes, running down the glass in tiny rivulets, and she'll be out for the rest of the night, he suspects. He doesn't blame her the indulgence: his mother rarely drinks outside of dinners, so it doesn't take much. The Prophet article must have bothered her as well, he thinks. He wonders if the Unspeakables have shown it to his father yet.

He would worry about his mother, but he thinks maybe this is good for her. This one time, at least. Perhaps Narcissa's also finally letting go from living in fear and deserves to rest.

Draco hangs his shirt up in the wardrobe. His satchel's on the bed, and he opens it up, pulling out the folded transfer papers. They crackle a bit when he smooths them out, and Draco just looks down at them, the words and lines blurring together.

Circe, he wishes he knew what to do. The rational side of him knows he should fill the papers out tonight, turn them in first thing in the morning. He'd be stupid not to. But there's something deep down inside of him that's resisting, telling him he'll regret it. He wants to walk into the incident room tomorrow, wants to see Blaise leaning back in his chair, sugar quill turning his lips blue, wants to see Pansy swiveling back and forth, throwing a wadded piece of parchment his way.

He wants to see Potter stepping out of his office, shirt undone at the top button, tie loosened, telling them to stop faffing about and get back to work, and catching the parchment Pansy throws
at him without even looking as it flies his way.

They're his, all of them. Even Potter. He doesn't know how he'd fit in another team again. He's never felt more himself as an Auror than he does right now. He doesn't think he would have had the courage to stand up to his father if he hadn't known he had all of them behind him, at his back.

Draco drops the transfer paperwork onto his bed and closes his eyes. He feels tense, stretched taut, his whole body carrying the worries and anxieties his mind is producing. He rubs at his face. There's a part of him that wants to keep rubbing, to see how far he can go, if he can burrow beneath the skin itself.

He drops his hands. Merlin. He needs to do something. Anything that'll stop the mad circle his mind's intent on forcing him into.

It only takes a minute to slip into a t-shirt and shorts, and he pulls on a pair of trainers by the door, pausing to grab a hoodie from the coat closet. He leaves a note for his mother, in case she wakes, telling her he's off on a run. She'll think him mad, he's certain, to go out in this weather, but he doesn't care.

Draco doesn't bother with an Impervious when he steps outside. He likes the feel of the cool rain against his skin, the splash of the puddles on his calves as he runs down the pavement, feeling the flex and pull of his muscles. It's been over a week since he's run like this, and he's missed the feel of the street beneath his trainers, the rumble of the traffic moving past him.

His mind settles into a quiet hum, the steady thump of his feet against the asphalt a bassline beat to the blankness of his thoughts as he runs through Regent's Park and up along the canal towards Camden and its shops filled with cheap t-shirts and expensive artwork and used records. It's bright and busy and colourful, even muted by the grey rain, and Draco can feel Camden's vibrant power with each step that carries him through the neighbourhood, years of rebellion and anger and rock music imbuing ever cracked kerb and crumbling brick building down High Street.

Draco runs past St Pancras Hospital and down towards King's Cross. He remembers the first time his parents had walked through the station with him, showing him how to reach Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. His mother had been so proud of him, even through her tears. His father had told him not to besmirch the Malfoy name. As if anyone could do that more thoroughly than Lucius had.

He runs harder, trying to escape the memories, dashing through puddles and around tourists clumped beneath umbrellas, trying to find their way to the nearest Tube. His breath is coming in sharp pants, almost painful stabs to his lungs, and he pushes himself as fast as he can, hurdling over a locked bicycle next to a pub, his face and hair and hoodie sodden with rain.

Draco doesn't even realise where his feet are taking him until he finds himself on the edge of the small park in the centre of the square in Islington. He slows, gasping, and the rain falls harder around him as he draws to a stop in front of a line of tall, grey stone townhouses trimmed in white. He takes a breath, and the buildings shift in front of him, opening up to reveal a hidden house, the gleaming black door marked with a brass J2.

Grimmauld Place.

He doesn't know how he found it. He's never been on the outside, but the house must have called to him, brought him to its doorstep.

Draco knows he should walk away. Keep running.
Instead his feet are on the steps, carrying him up to the door. This is what he wants. He knows it is. His heart lead him here, and the house answered. Draco wipes a sodden arm across his face. The rain's pouring now, streaming down around him, puddling at his feet. He makes his decision, mad though it may be.

Draco raises a hand and knocks.

The house is silent. Dark. Draco waits, but there's nothing.

His heart sinks. He's a fool, he thinks. The universe has made that bloody clear. He turns away.

And then the door creaks open, and Potter's there, shadowed by the faint light from the hallway. Draco looks at him, and something bright and hot breaks free in his heart, tumbling through him, setting his whole body on fire.

"Hey," Draco says, and Potter just blinks at him.

"No one ever uses the front door," he says, and Draco wants to laugh, wants to throw himself at Potter and kiss him senseless.

Instead Draco just turns back towards Potter, his hair plastered to his cheeks. "I'm a sergeant now," Draco says, because that's all he can manage to get out right now, and Potter's face cracks, breaks into a wide, honest smile.

"That's great," Potter says, and he opens the door wider. "Want to come in for a drink?"

Draco knows he shouldn't. If he weren't a complete fool, he'd say no and run away. But there's something about Potter that makes Draco want to be stupidly, outrageously brave. The Gryffindor is rubbing off on him, he thinks.

He steps inside. Rain drips from his hoodie, his hair, spatters against the wooden floor. Kreacher will be furious later, he thinks, but then the house gives a faint shudder, and the wet puddles disappear. Draco slides out of his wet hoodie, hanging it on the coat tree just inside the door.

"It likes you," Potter says, a bit apologetically. He casts a quick drying charm on Draco; it sparks across Draco's damp skin, ruffles his sodden hair. "Come on. Wine or firewhisky?"

Draco catches Potter's hand before he turns away. The door's still half-open behind him, the sound of the rain loud against the pavement. "I've been an idiot," Draco says, and Potter looks back at him. He must see something on Draco's face, because he steps closer, his eyes dark.

"No you haven't," Potter says.

"I miss you," Draco whispers. "It's mad, and I'm a complete fool, but I ended up here, and that must mean something, right?"

Potter nods as if he's any idea what Draco's on about.

"Every intelligent part of my brain's telling me not to do this," Draco says. "But I'm here, and I really didn't mean to be."

"You didn't?" Potter asks, and his voice is soft. Careful.

Draco shakes his head. "I know this is stupid." He can't tear his gaze away from Potter's. His breath is uneven, his heart pounds. "I'm not this sort, and maybe it's because it's you or maybe I've lost my mind
over my father. I don't know. I just…" He looks at Potter as if Potter can help him,
can take some of this ache away. "The fact of the matter is that I can't eat, and I can't sleep, and I can't bear not touching you, Potter--" He wavers.

In an instant, he's pressed against the wall, and Potter's kissing him, his mouth hot and impossibly soft against Draco's. It's a careful kiss at first--slow, gentle, hesitating--and then Draco's hands cup Potter's face, fingers curling around the strong bones in his jaw, nestling in the wild curls of his hair. He opens his mouth and lets Potter possess it.

"This is madness," Draco whispers, pulling away breathless. His breath is already hitched. "I can stop," Potter says, his words warm against Draco's lips. "Just ask."

Draco thinks he might die if Potter does. "No," he says, between breaths, between kisses, and his arms slip around Potter's neck, holding on to him like solid ground. "Please don't. Don't stop."

The front door slams shut without either one of them touching it.

Potter's hands grasp Draco's hips, thick fingers sliding across the slick smoothness of Draco's running shorts. "Fuck, you're amazing," he says, and then his hands travel lower, cupping Draco's arse, pulling him close, and Draco's hips buck up against Potter's.

"Oh, Circe, Potter." Draco groans, shoving himself against Potter and allowing Potter to ravage his mouth. It feels so fucking good--Potter's all over him, pressed against Draco, tongue sliding over Draco's, hands kneading Draco's arse cheeks. Potter lifts him up against his impossibly solid, muscular chest, and Draco hangs from Potter's broad shoulders, wrapping his legs around Potter's hips, theirs mouths moving together, hot and desperate, both of them gasping with each slide of teeth and tongues and lips. Draco can feel the stubble on Potter's chin, know he'll likely be casting a slew of healing charms for the burn from it tomorrow, and he doesn't fucking care. He tangles his hands in Potter's hair, pulling him closer, frantic for the feel of Potter against him.

Potter turns then, with Draco wrapped around his body like a Devil's Snare, and he starts walking to the stairs. Draco kisses him again, drags his mouth along Potter's jaw, then sucks a blood bruise into Potter's neck, his prick rubbing through layers of clothing against Potter's brilliantly hard belly with each step Potter takes. Merlin, but it's so simple, really. Why did Draco ever bother to think about this? He just needs to act on his instinct and throw caution to the wind. He wants Potter; Potter wants him. Nothing else bloody matters.

"Fuck, I want your prick so badly," Draco says against Potter's ear, nipping at the lobe. "Do you know how many times I wanked in this house, thinking about it? Wondering if you were doing the same?" He buries his face in Potter's hair, barely paying attention as Potter carries him up the stairs. His palms smooth over Potter's broad shoulders. "Your godfather's mattress is covered in my spunk."

"Jesus, Malfoy." Potter makes the first landing without dropping Draco, and he takes a moment to push Draco's back up against the wall near the library door. "You can't say things like that--"

Draco shuts him up by kissing him again, his tongue sliding across Potter's, flicking up to lick the back of Potter's teeth. Potter swears and pulls his mouth away, then makes the most deliciously filthy noises as he bites down Draco's neck. Draco arches against Potter, his tight running shorts twisting over his bollocks as he rubs himself against Potter's stomach. Circe, but it feels amazing to rut against Potter like this. Draco throws his head back, waves of pleasure rippling through him. He's no idea if he can last until Potter's bedroom or if he'll implode right here in the bloody hallway. He might die of desire, but he doesn't care. It's well worth it.

The wall warms against Draco's back, welcoming him. The light on the landing hovers at the
perfect level of soft and intimate. Draco's a bit worried by the house's apparent consideration of him and Potter, if he's honest, and he makes a note mentally to care later. For now, though, he just wants to feel Potter's perfect body against his, hard and hot and delicious as Draco writhes against him.

Potter nuzzles Draco's jaw with his lips, sucks viciously down his neck to his collarbone in a way that Draco knows is going to bruise. "Fuck, Malfoy, what you do to me."

Draco stretches his neck longer for Potter's mouth, even though this is disaster repeated, and he's not sure they'll survive it this time. This is direct defiance of Robards' order, and Draco knows it. He doesn't care; in fact, it makes it more erotic that Draco wants this, wants Potter, that Draco wants everything this cyclone of desire brings, even the destruction of its wake. Heat crackles between them, Draco's body shudders against Potter's. He's never been so attuned to anyone's touch in his life, and he knows Potter will wreck him, knows he may not ever emerge from this haze.

But Draco's entering this storm willingly, knowingly this time. Whatever happens happens. Right now, right here, Draco needs Potter more than anything. "Please," he says against Potter's throat. "I need this. I need you."

Potter hoists Draco a little bit further up his hips, wraps him a bit more tightly about him, and takes the second stair faster. He's so fucking strong, Draco thinks, and he wishes it didn't turn him on, but it's just one more larger than life thing about Harry fucking Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World and Draco's own personal poison. Potter will be his destruction, and Draco accepts that. Perhaps it's the way it's always been meant to be, the destined ending of their violent, fierce story. No fairy tale romance for Draco Malfoy. Just this slow, terrible, brilliant, fiery burn of desire for Harry Potter that's going to consume him, raze him, sweep him away into oblivion.

At the top of the second stair, Potter stumbles, his hands almost slipping on Draco's hips. Draco tightens his legs around Potter, holds on until Potter steadies them both.

"Careful," Draco says against the the curve of Potter's jaw into his throat. He can feel Potter's erratic pulse against his lips, and he bites gently over the skin. Potter groans and stumbles into the large bedroom, throwing Draco across the bed.

When Potter shucks his jumper, dropping it onto the floor, all Draco can see is acres of golden skin across Potter's muscled chest and shoulders. Potter's jeans are low on the sharply carved jut of his hipbones, and his expression is beyond filthy. Circe, Draco thinks. The things he wants Potter to do to him—his face heats, and he licks his bottom lip. No one else has ever made Draco want to be this dirty. Potter's awakened things in him that Draco didn't even know he felt, regardless of how much sex he's thought he's had before.

Potter looks down at Draco's shorts, and Draco catches sight of the small wet stain that his prick has already made against the dark fabric. Potter's face breaks into a crooked grin. "Is that for me?"

Draco flushes but he tilts his chin back boldly and pushes up on his elbows. He looks Potter in the eye, his thighs falling wider, the hard swell of his cock on full display, pushing against the silky stretch of his shorts. "Only for you, Potter. You make me frightfully shameless."

"God, you can't even--" Potter's eyes are dark, his expression almost feral with want. "I've needed you so much."

Draco gives him a small smile, his hand sliding over his belly, ruching up the hem of his t-shirt. "So, take me then."
Potter launches himself onto the bed, jeans sliding lower as he brackets Draco's hips with his elbows. He bites Draco's hip, his teeth nipping along the waistband of Draco's shorts before his head slips lower, his lips brush the outline of Draco's prick. He mouths the head through Draco's shorts, sucking at the wet spot, his tongue lapping over it.

"Fuck, you taste--" Potter doesn't even finish; he just closes his lips over Draco's shaft, his tongue working the fabric of Draco's shorts across the hot swell of Draco's cock. It's almost too much, and Draco's fingers twist in the coverlet; his trainer-covered feet push against the side of the bed, pressing himself against Potter's touch.

And then Potter's fingers are beneath Draco's shorts, pushing up under the hem, working their way into the leg of Draco's y-fronts. His fingertips brush over Draco's bollocks, and Draco groans at the heat of Potter's skin across his.

"I need--" Draco pulls at Potter, trying to tug him up, and Potter finally lets him, his chest dragging over Draco's as he leans in to kiss Draco, his fingers pull away from Draco's shorts. Draco arches fluidly against the hard plane of Potter's body, letting go of last doubts, lingering anger, grief. His body is pure sensation and his only thought it that wants and that he wants this to last longer.

Potter's skin tastes and smells amazing. Draco wonders how he could have thought that he wanted anything other than Potter, anything other than this feeling of having Potter over him. He wraps one leg around Potter's hip, frothing himself desperately against Potter, the hard lines of his cock rubbing against Potter's equal hardness. Potter's mouth and teeth rough up Draco's lips until they're bruised and warm. Draco digs his nails into Potter's shoulders, and just lets himself go, let's Potter take the lead until he's a babbling mess.

The orgasm is easy--Draco just has to take a breath and he comes so hard against Potter he can't do anything but cry out, his body jerking against Potter's as spunks coats the inside of Draco's y-fronts and oozes at the seam against his thigh, smearing across his running shorts and Potter's jeans whilst Potter ruts up against him.

Potter looks down at Draco, eyes hazy with lust, completely intoxicated. "Fuck. Did you just?"

Draco's breathing hard. "Yeah." He feels fucking high with release. And he can tell that it won't be long before he can go again. His whole body feels like it's on fire. This just took the edge of his apparently endless need for Potter.

Potter swears coarsely, ripping open his jeans and reaching in to stroke his slick, swollen prick. He rises up over Draco, his knees between Draco's thighs. He rolls his palm over himself once, twice, foreskin sliding over the swollen glans, his brown nipples hard and taut, a completely devastated look on his face. His glasses are askew and the bottoms are steamed up. "Malfoy. Jesus. Fuck. Malfoy."

Draco shimmies his running shorts down the hips, his y-fronts following, both of them catching beneath his arse and his bollocks. His softening prick lies against his belly, sticky with spunk. Draco rucks his t-shirt up, slides his fingers over his nipples, pulling and pinching and playing with them until they're so hard he's gasping, shudders going through him. He loves this—it's so easy between them when he doesn't think about the consequences. He displays himself for Potter, lets Potter lean over him, fingers pulling at his cock ruthlessly.

"Come on me," Draco says. "God, I need your spunk, Potter." He scrapes a thumbnail over his nipple and groans, arching up off the bed. "It's what you want, yeah? To cover me in come? Circe, I've been thinking about it for days, watching you like this, your hand on your prick, seeing that head push through your fist like that, knowing it's because of me, that you're thinking about what it'd feel like if your hand were my arse, how you'd fill me with your come and then fuck me.
until it's smeared all down my crease--"

Potter cries out and comes all over Draco's stomach, warm sticky streaks of spunk that spatter from Draco's hip to his sternum. Potter catches himself with his hands before he falls onto Draco, still gasping, his glasses barely perched on the end of his nose. His face is red, his chest flushed.

Draco drags his fingers through Potter's spunk, smearing it across his own. Draco enjoys being marked, he's rather stunningly okay with that fact. It's Potter's mark, after all, and a heady sense of possession ripples through Draco. He pulls his slick fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean.

"Fuck," Potter says, looking at him, and Draco shouldn't want to laugh, but it's too good. He pulls his t-shirt off and throws it aside. It lands somewhere on the floor, and Potter's pulling at Draco's shorts and y-fronts, shoving them down further, tugging them off his legs. They tangle on Draco's trainers, and Potter strips them off, too, dropping them to the floor with two loud thuds, along with Draco's socks. "God," Potter says, looking down at him. "You look brilliant without clothes."

Draco stretches, hooks a foot over Potter's jeans, trying to push them lower. He gets a glimpse of Potter's boxers, cupped beneath his bollocks. "I can't tell about you," he says with a smile, and Potter slides off the bed, pushing his jeans and boxers down.

He kicks them off and looks at Draco. "Better?"

"Oh." Draco lets his gaze slide down the warm, golden planes of Potter's body, down to the thick, softening chub of Potter's prick nestled in the thatch of dark hair between his thighs. Draco wants to lean down and take Potter's foreskin in his mouth, sucking and tugging at it until he can get Potter's cock to rise again. "I think you'll do."

Crawling back onto the bed, Potter casts a quick, wandless cleaning spell over both of them, and the smell of honey and lemon hangs in the air. Fuck, but that makes Draco's cock twitch.

Potter's smiling at him, and his eyes are green and impossibly bright. "Hey." He strokes a thumb across Draco's lips. "Was that okay?"

Draco nips at the fleshy pad of Potter's thumb. "It was fucking amazing, you arsehole."

Potter's lashes brush his cheeks. "I missed you so fucking much."

"Well, you have me now." Draco rolls Potter to the side. His erection's returning again, still soft but growing. He knows there will be more. Potter has an arm over him, possessive, holding him against him. He's playing with Draco's hair with his free hand, combing his fingers through the soft strands, holding them up and letting them drift back against Draco's cheek.

Draco pulls back a little and Potter holds him tighter. "Hey," Draco says with a small smile. "Let me go to the loo down the hall." He leans in to kiss Potter, quick and hard, with an ending swipe of his tongue across Potter's bottom lip. "I'll make it worth your while."

Potter nips Draco's jaw, but he lets go. "Well, when you put it like that. But you can use the en suite if you like."

"Rather go down the hall," Draco says firmly, standing up, his knees a bit wobblier than he expects. He likes the privacy, the moment away from Potter. To be honest, it's nice to have a bit of space from the intensity of sex. It's so all-consuming with Potter, such a complete sensory overload, that time out to breathe is nice too. "I'll be right back."

Potter watches him, his fingers drifting down to curl around his prick. "Don't take too long," Potter calls.
"Christ, I'm going to get hard for you again. Fast."
With a smile, Draco leaves the door half-open as he steps into the hallway, hoping he doesn't run into Kreacher on the landing. It's not that he hasn't seen a house elf before when he's been starkers—or mid-fuck, for that matter—but Draco thinks Kreacher might be a bit too thrilled to find Draco padding about the house, completely naked. The house is silent. Draco pauses, looks into the hallway mirror. To his great relief, his own reflection—not Durant's—peers back at him from the silvered glass, his blond brow gathered in a frown, hair hopelessly mussed, love bites up and down his chest and neck. Draco pads to the bath, takes a quick slash, and sits to finish the prep spells, wincing a little as they spark through his arse, opening him up, cleaning him out.

Draco knows he'll have regrets about tonight. He does. He'll wake up in the morning and realise what a damned fool he's been. But at the moment he could give a fuck. He's here now. He's got out of worse before.

He thinks. Or hopes.

With a sigh, he looks for the lube in the cabinet, finding the familiar phial from the last time he'd shagged Potter in this house, the phial Durant had held as well. Draco turns it back and forth in his hand before saying to hell with it, and twisting the cap open. He drizzles a little oil across fingertips and then he reaches back, and, lifting one leg on the side of the bath, works a slick finger through his hole. Lube is lube. No time for sentimentality. It feels incredible, and he breathes out, pushing his finger a bit deeper, then adding another one.

When he's good and ready, his cock starting to swell with each press of his fingers into his hole, Draco pulls his hand away, then washes off and cleans his face a bit. His hair is beyond fixing, but he smooths it anyway. He picks up the phial of lube and takes a deep breath. They'll need more; he's not slicked himself up nearly enough for Potter's prick. Still he'd made his decision when he'd stepped into Potter's house. He wants to be fucked tonight, hard and fast until he barely remembers his own bloody name. Whatever consequences come from that choice, he'll deal with later.

He walks out.

Draco opens the bedroom door. Potter's spread naked across the coverlet, arms over his head, his prick bobbing up from its nest of dark curls. His glasses are off; he's put them over on the bedside table. A trail of bruises down Potter's jaw looks good on him. Potter smiles a warm, lush smile, full of promises, then he spots the phial in Draco's hand.

"I have a new one." Potter leans and pulls out a phial from the table next to the bed.

Draco nods, turning and dropping the old phial into the bin. Good riddance, he thinks. "That would be better." He looks back at Potter, walks over to the bed. "This is a view I could get used to," Draco says. His heart feels impossibly full for a moment.

Not to mention his prick.

"I can't let you get too spoilt," Potter jokes. He stretches and preens, letting Draco see the rosy fullness of his balls, the stiff length of his growing erection, the trail of hair down his golden skin. He spreads his legs for Draco, subjecting himself to his gaze. Draco's suddenly terrified, but that makes him harder.

Draco lies down next to Potter, settling himself next to him. "Arse." He trails his fingertips down Potter's chest.

Potter kisses him slowly until Draco's blindingly hard again, his hand grabbing Draco's hip possessively again, fingertips likely leaving more marks on Draco's skin. "The things I want to do
to you," he whispers against Draco's mouth.

Draco bites Potter's lip, tugging it with his teeth before letting it slip free. "So do them, Potter." "Roll over." Potter smacks his hip.

Draco does, lifting his hips, up on his elbows but letting his hair fall in his face. Potter's rubbing a finger across his slick arsehole when he says, a bit breathlessly, "Can I eat your arse out first?"

Draco's body is all-over gooseflesh in a heartbeat. "Circe, yes. But only since you asked so nicely."

Potter drops to the floor next to the bed, then pulls Draco backwards until his arse is in the air at the edge, knees over Potter's forearms. Potter's tongue licks a rough swipe through Draco's crease, over his arsehole, and Draco clenches his fists in the sheets and keens. Potter licks him, sliding over his skin, lapping at him, then pushes with the point of his tongue into Draco's arse. Draco's already a bit open from the prep spells, not to mention his own fingering, and the tip of Potter's tongue hooks the edge of his loosened hole. His hands pull at Draco's arsecheeks, holding him wide as he licks and presses his tongue into Draco. It feels amazing. Draco rubs his prick against the sheets, arse completely open to Potter's mouth. Potter seals his mouth over Draco's quivering hole, making Draco almost bite through his lip with an effort not to shout, but he loses his control on the next press of Potter's tongue into him and gives an awkward howling yelp. Draco sounds idiotic, perhaps the love child of a beagle and a banshee, and he doesn't care. Potter's mouth feels utterly incredible on his arse.

"More, Potter." Draco can't believe how far Potter has his tongue wedged inside him. His insides are shivering slickly with want and anticipation.

Potter licks and sucks until Draco's shaking, his whole body tense and taut. Finally, Draco rolls to one hip, breaking the contact. Voice thick in his aching throat, he says, "If you don't stick your cock in me, well, fair warning."

"Demanding, aren't we?" Potter laughs, resting his slick cheek against Draco's arse.

Draco turns, looking at the blissful, debauched picture Potter makes on his knees, stubble covered in spit and lube, a crooked smile on his face. "Fuck the hell out of me, Potter. Less talk, more cock."

Potter's strong hands pull Draco up on all fours then, thighs spread, roughly pulling him into position against his prick. Draco pushes his chest into the bed and settles his knees wider, arching his back, knowing that Potter's watching him. His hole's throbbing, eager for Potter's prick, and he looks back over his shoulder. "Potter," Draco says. "Are you going to fuck me or not?"

"I could look at you for hours," Potter trails a hand along Draco's hip, a wondering tone in his voice. "You have the best arse."

Draco shimmies his hips, resting his cheek on his palm. "Whenever you're ready."

"No," Potter says. "When you are." He plays with Draco's hole, fingertips gliding gently along the sensitive ridges. Draco shudders at the touch, pure lust throbbing hotly through his whole body.

"Now, Potter. I'm ready now," Draco's almost hysterical with need. "Put your fucking cock in me, you arsehole. Now." Logically he knows he won't die from not being fucked, but his body's trying to convince him otherwise.

Potter chuckles. "Say please."
"Please, god-fucking-dammit." Draco thinks he could bite the sheets in frustration.

The mattress shifts as Potter crawls closer, lines himself up, the thick head of his cock pressing between Draco's arsecheeks. He pushes in slowly, then stops, giving Draco a moment to adjust, only the tip of his cock spreading Draco open.

Draco pushes back, gratifyingly feeling Potter slot home deep inside him. Potter grunts in surprise. Draco's brain's telling him that this is a horrible idea, and he doesn't care. It's going to be bloody fantastic. He relaxes, trying to catch his breath.

"Like that, you moron." Draco pushes back a bit harder until he's nearly fully impaled on Potter's cock, his body twinging. He can feel the soft heat of Potter's bollocks against the back of his thighs. Circe. He wants more. "Fuck me like you mean it, Potter."

That shreds whatever control Potter had left, apparently. He places one hand on the back of Draco's head, pushing him down into the mattress. The other hand grips Draco's arse. Potter shoves his prick even deeper, until Draco can barely breathe. He can almost feel Potter in his throat, he's so fucking deep.

It's glorious.

Potter pulls back, slowly, and Draco's heart thuds in anticipation. He twists his fingers in the coverlet, his breath ragged already. He loves the feel of Potter moving in him, the slide of Potter's cock over the aching edges of his hole. Potter's almost entirely out, the full swell of his glans pressing up against the inside of Draco's body, and then his fingers tighten in Draco's hair and he snaps his hips forward, shoving back into Draco with one smooth thrust.


And Potter does it again. Draco's body trembles; his elbows dig into the mattress. Nothing's ever felt this incredible. Not even with Potter. "Please," he says into the folds of fabric. "Please fuck me--" He groans when Potter slams into him again.

Potter builds up, pace of his thrusts accelerating until his swollen, thick cock is pumping in and out of Draco and Draco's struggling to keep his back arched and his thighs taut. He brings his knees in a little, and is rewarded with another inch banging up into him. He writhes and twists beneath Potter's hands, shouting each time Potter's hips pound against his arse.

"You like that, don't you?" Potter's breathless. "Like being fucked rough. Like spreading your legs and making me lose control." Potter's pistoning into him and shows no signs of flagging.

Draco pants under the onslaught, his cock leaking into the bed. "Yes," He manages to get out. "I really--" He groans and pushes back into Potter's thrust. "I really like it when you fuck me hard with your giant, thick cock, Inspector Potter." He bites his arm, his body jolting with each roll of Potter's hips against his.

Potter plants his knees wider, leans back, his cock impossibly deep in Draco. He pulls Draco's hips back and picks up the pace of his thrusts, almost lifting Draco off of the bed with the force of it. Draco's arse is split wide by Potter's cock, and Draco's almost floating on the high of it.

"Is that enough for you, Malfoy?" Potter asks, barely able to speak between the slaps of their flesh together.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes." Draco chants, and his body shakes as Potter thrusts harder, pounds into
him. Potter circles his hips, shifts, and suddenly he's nailing Draco's prostate on every stroke, the impact ripping into Draco's soul. Draco shouts, coming apart with the tearing, liquid pleasure of it. He shoots spunk into Potter's sheets, his body numb and throbbing, shuddering and exploding into a million points of sensation as Potter fucks him through it, the aftershocks sending waves stronger than he could imagine.

Then Potter gives a rough cry and slumps over him, his cock shooting inside Draco's still rhythmically clenching hole. Potter's breathing like he's run a footrace. Draco can barely feel his legs, but his body's still shivering with delight, and it's finally enough.

Awkwardly, slowly, they disentangle, Potter rolling Draco to his side, then spooning next to him. He's still panting, and Draco's glad that he finally gets to see Harry Potter winded. Draco knows he'll be walking sideways for a week and his arse feels split in two, but the looseness in his limbs and the complete inability to think logically are worth it.

Potter noses Draco's neck. "Merlin, Malfoy. Your arse is a bloody miracle."

Draco closes his eyes, shudders still coursing through his body. "Your prick isn't half bad either." "That's high praise from you." Potter's quick laugh is a huff of air against Draco's nape.

Draco smiles into the sheets. "I know what I like. And I like a lot of it."

"I guess I should be glad you like me," Potter's voice is sleepy, rough in a way that makes Draco's cock twitch. He's warm against Draco's back, warm enough that Draco's muscles are relaxing against him, despite the sticky mess smeared across his arse and on the sheets.

"I do," Draco agrees, shifting his hips. "But I'm not done with you yet." It's the truth, Draco thinks.

Potter laughs for real then, incredulous. "You're insatiable."

Draco rolls over, kissing Potter softly, heart swelling in the oddest way. "Only with you, Potter. Only with you."

He means it. No one has moved him the way Potter has. Whatever this is between them, here in the shadows of Potter's bedroom, the rain tapping at the windows, Draco cherishes it. He doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. He doesn't know what anguish his anxious, broken brain will inflict on him when he wakes up.

But he knows he wants to be here with Potter right now, at this moment. Draco lets Potter pull him down against him, lets Potter kiss him, Potter's hands drifting across Draco's body.

Whatever happens tomorrow happens.

For now, they have tonight.

***

Draco wakes to the creak of the house around him, the eaves settling with a quiet sigh. The room's dark and quiet; Potter sleeps beside him, his breath even and steady.

Potter's beautiful like this, Draco thinks, broad shoulders and golden skin against the rumpled white sheets, his dark hair messy, one leg stretched out. Draco can't help but smooth his fingertips across Potter's stubbled jaw, letting them drift down his throat and over Potter's collarbone.
He wonders what he's done, how badly he's fucked things up. It was stupid of him to come here. But here he is, and the damage has been done.

Robards would throttle him, Draco thinks, and he'd be well within his rights. But it's always been Potter, since he was a boy, and Draco doesn't think he can give this up, as much as he knows he should.

He slides out of the bed, his bare feet hitting the floorboards. Dawn's just starting to break, faint and rosy and clear through the windows. The solstice is coming soon, bringing the heat of midsummer and the longest days of the year. He glances at the clock on the mantel; it's just gone past five.

The room stinks of sweat and spunk; Draco's barely any better. He needs a shower and fresh change of clothes before he makes his way into the Ministry. Draco picks up his spunk-smeared shorts and his shirt from the floor, slipping into them as silently as he can. Potter moves in the bed, making a soft sound, and Draco stills.

It's cowardly of him, he thinks, but he needs time, needs space to figure out what he's done, what coming to Potter means. His feelings are jumbled and confused, and the last thing he wants to do is leave Potter here alone.

His trainers are next to the bed; Draco stoops to grab them, and Potter rolls over, his eyes fluttering open. He looks at Draco sleepily for a moment, then says, "Hey," in a thick voice.

Draco just looks at him. Potter's on his back, the sheets pulled away from him, solid muscle and narrow hips, soft prick nestled between strong thighs. He looks like a Renaissance painting of a debauched young god, Draco thinks. All he needs is the wreath of laurels around his dark hair.

He's everything Draco wants.

And then Potter shifts, half-sitting up in bed, and when he does, Draco remembers the things they'd done together only a few hours past, the way Potter had made Draco's body sing, the shudders of want that had pushed Draco over the edge more than once. It's just lust, Draco tells himself, but he knows that's a lie. He's falling for Potter, and that thought terrifies him. Harry Potter has everything he needs to destroy Draco, and Draco's not certain he hasn't already.

"You're leaving," Potter says. He sounds disappointed, and Draco fights the urge to laugh. What did he expect, that they'd walk into the Ministry, hand-in-hand?

"I need clothes," Draco says. "And I left my mother alone. Merlin only knows what she's got into overnight." Probably nothing, to be honest. He doesn't expect her to have woken. Still, he feels the need to check on her. She's his mother, after all, and she's just lost her husband, to prison if not to death.

Potter doesn't say anything for a moment, then he reaches out and takes Draco's hand, pulling him onto the bed. Draco doesn't resist. He can't. Potter cups his cheek, thumb smoothing over his skin. "Are you okay?" he asks, and Draco nods because he can't tell Potter the truth, can't tell him that he's so bloody frightened of what he's feeling, that he's never been this caught up in someone else, not even Nicholas.

It's mad, all of it, and he ought to pull away, but the smell of Potter and the feel of him capture Draco, hold him still. He lets Potter kiss him, slow and sweet, and Draco's breath catches. He hates this feeling, and he adores it, and he never wants it to end even as he prays it does before he's too far gone.
"I'll miss you," Potter says.

"Twat." Draco stays where he is, on the edge of the bed. Too close to Potter and yet too far away. "You'll see me in a few hours."

Potter's smile is lazy and slow. Draco likes him like this, without his glasses, his hair tumbling into his face. "I'll still miss you." His hand settles on Draco's bare knee, fingers slipping up beneath the hem of Draco's running shorts.

At least Draco has the self-control to push Potter's hand away. He knows where that road leads. "I have to go," he says firmly, more for himself than for Potter.

Another kiss and a sweep of Potter's tongue against his, and Draco's self-resolve is faltering. "Potter," he says against Potter's mouth. "I--" He breathes in sharply when Potter nips his bottom lip. "Merlin…"

Potter pulls back, his eyes half-lidded. "I could kiss you for hours." He brushes Draco's hair back, smoothing it behind Draco's ears. "I could fuck you for days."

"Promises," Draco murmurs, and Potter smiles.

"Don't tempt me," Potter says. His knuckles brush Draco's cheek. "Go home, Malfoy. Get dressed, come back to the office, and I'll try not to spend the day thinking about how badly I want your trousers off and your prick in my arse next time."

That image takes Draco's breath away. "You're terrible," he says, and he can't, as much as he might try, keep the affection from his voice.

Potter smacks Draco's hip. "For you, always."

Draco stands up. He doesn't want to. He wants to crawl back into that bed and spend the day sucking Potter's cock.

He can't.

So he leaves Potter in bed, glancing back at the door to see Potter's fingers slide across the swell of his prick. Draco swears, and Potter laughs, and Draco perhaps slams the door a little bit harder than he meant.

The house hums and creaks around him, bright and cheerful as the early morning sunlight starts to filter through the windows. Draco lets his fingertips drift along the banister as he goes downstairs. Even the hearth is warmer than it's been before, embers sparking and jumping as he throws in a handful of Floo powder.

He steps through to his flat.

There's a light on in the kitchen; Draco makes his way in there, certain he'd left it on before he'd gone out. His mother's sitting at the centre island, a cup of tea in her hands, a blue silk dressing gown tied tightly around her waist. Her hair's rumpled and loose around her shoulders; she looks younger than her half-century, almost girlish. She looks up at him, taking in his clothes and general state of disarray.

"You've been gone," she says quietly.

Draco drops his trainers on the floor beside the island. He's forgotten his hoodie, he realises. It's still
hanging on the coat rack next to Potter's front door. He'll pick it up later, he thinks. He'll be
there again. Whether he should or not. They'll keep this from Robards. Somehow. He hopes. "I didn't mean to stay out," Draco says.

"I assumed not." Narcissa taps her neck. "You've a..." She trails off and looks away.

Shit. Draco claps his hand to the curve of his neck. Potter'd spent far too long sucking the soft skin of his throat last night. "Sorry," he says. His mother's never come face-to-face with any real indication that Draco has sex with men. He doesn't know if he's more embarrassed or she is.

"It's fine," Narcissa says. She lifts her cup of tea to her lips. "I was worried." "I should have owled." Draco feels horrible.

His mother shrugs. "You're a grown man." She says it sadly, as if she can still see the little boy he once was in front of her. She falls silent. Draco moves closer. He catches a glimpse of paper in front of her.

"What's that?" he asks, and then he realises. His transfer papers.

Narcissa pushes them towards him. "I found them on your bed." She watches him as he picks them up. "Are you thinking about it?"

"I might." Draco looks up at her. "Things are complicated."

"I can imagine." Narcissa sets her cup down. "Were you with him?"

Draco nods. "I probably shouldn't have been."

His mother doesn't say anything.

"It's not just sex," Draco says after a moment. It's important to him that his mother knows this.

"I don't think it is." Narcissa looks at him then. "I know when you have feelings for someone. I'm your mother."

Draco feels raw and exposed. "I don't know that I--"

"Draco," Narcissa says gently. "Don't be a lying fool. Not to me."

He gives her a faint smile and sits on the stool beside her. "Am I that obvious?"

"Perhaps only to me," His mother touches his hand. "But I've known you since before you were born."

"It's a terrible idea, me and Potter," Draco admits, his voice quiet. "Robards has already warned me off him." He looks at her. "Potter doesn't know that."

Narcissa watches him. "Don't tell him."

"He deserves to know," Draco says. "If we get caught--"

"You love him," his mother says, and Draco stills, the words hanging between them.

"I don't know," Draco says finally. He rests his elbows on the smooth marble of the island.
counter. "I feel something, but I don't know what to call it." He hesitates. "I don't think it's…" The word's too difficult to say, even here. "That."

Narcissa stands up and carries her cup over to the sink. She pours it out, then turns around to look at him. "When you know, you'll know. Until then…" Her gaze drifts towards the transfer papers. "Do you think you should?"

"I haven't decided." Not entirely, he thinks.

His mother nods. She sighs and walks past him, her hand brushing his shoulder. "You'll do the right thing," she says, leaning in to kiss his cheek. "I know that with all my heart."

The kitchen's silent when she leaves. Draco sits, looking down at the papers in front of him. He feels unsettled. Unanchored. Adrift in a morass of feelings that he doesn't entirely understand. He wishes he did.

Images of Potter slip through his mind. Potter in the Thesral's Wing, pink and purple lights shining in his hair, offering to suck Draco's prick to relax him. Potter pressing Draco against his desk in Auror headquarters. Potter lying beside Draco after he'd been cursed, his hand heavy and gentle on Draco's hip. Potter tonight, watching him with those deep green eyes, as if Draco could be his entire world.

Draco closes his eyes. He isn't ready for this. He doesn't know if he ever will be.

When he opens them again, he's looking at the transfer papers. For a moment he thinks about ripping them up, binning them.

He doesn't.

Draco unfolds the papers, smoothing his fingers over them, tracing the DMLE seal at the top. He pulls a self-inking quill from the basket of post at the end of the island, and before he can think, he writes his name on the top line. *Draco Lucius Malfoy* in thick, strong strokes of black ink.

He stops, his heart thudding in his chest, the quill hovering over the space for the date. Slowly he writes *13/06/06*. And then his fingers spasm and he drops the quill, spatters of ink going across paper and marble.

Draco's hand is shaking. He stares down at the papers. He can't do it. He can't finish them. But he can't bin them either. He folds the papers again, into quarters this time, and he drops them into the post basket. He'll worry about them later. Tomorrow perhaps.

Circe, Draco thinks. He slides off the stool, his legs wobbly. He needs a shower and clothes. And then he's going to go to work, and do whatever's required of him to get through the day. And when it comes to Potter…

Well. He'll deal with that when he has to, won't he?

Draco looks back at the post basket, then shakes his head. Right now it's enough that he has a job to do. He turns off the light as he leaves.

Outside a bird trills, and dawn creeps over the rooftops of London.
As always, you can subscribe for Tales from the Special Branch updates here on AO3 or follow me on tumblr at femmequixotic! As I mentioned above, Book Two will start posting on Saturday, June 3. (I need to give myself and my amazing betas a week's break!)

In the meantime, I'm going to start taking LIYA plot asks next week on Tumblr. Oh, and catching up with comment replies that have fallen a bit by the wayside while I write furiously to make deadline! Mark my words, I read every comment. Over and over! <3 <3 <3 You are the best, most thoughtful, most engaged readers an author could hope for. Thank you a million times for reading! I sincerely hope you'll join me for the next part of this adventure.

All the love,
Femme

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