

"In Plain Sight"

"Why me, Pansy?"

"Because you're the only Auror who would care enough to actually find him."

Harry leaned back in the rickety wooden chair that matched the equally rickety desk provided by the Ministry. Pansy sat across from him, back straight and legs crossed demurely, and the only thing revealing her nervousness was the way her knuckles turned white as she clutched the small handbag in her lap.

"Pansy, I'm not sure that I'm really the best per-"

"Auror Potter," she interrupted with false formality, "I know how you followed him throughout our sixth year at Hogwarts. Say what you like, but you and I both know that your obsession with Draco ran deeper than just your suspicions regarding his dark activities."

Harry's lips tightened into a thin line, irritation clouding his features. He and Pansy Parkinson, now Pansy Smith (a Slytherin married a Hufflepuff, and apparently ice-skating is now all the rage in the ninth level of hell), were never exactly on friendly terms, not even after the war. Civil, yes, but never to the level that he thought she would ever come to him for help - not when there was an entire Auror department at her disposal, not to mention more than a few highly reputable private investigators to be had.

"When did you last see him?"

"Three years ago," she said, relaxing a bit in her assumption that Harry's request for more information was as good as an agreement that he would take on the case. "He came by with a wedding gift for me and Zacharias, saying that it was just for me, and he wanted me to open it before the wedding."

"What was it?" Harry asked, genuinely curious, and taking out a pre-inked quill and blank parchment to begin some preliminary notes.

Not that this meant he was taking the case, of course. It wasn't even technically a case. Just a...inquiry of sorts.

"See for yourself," she replied, opening her purse and pulling out a small black box. She set the box on the end of Harry's desk, and cast the charm to enlarge it to its original size. He pulled the shoebox-sized container toward him and lifted the lid. The first item was a photograph, and he immediately knew when the picture had been taken. Malfoy and Pansy were standing side by side, arms around each other, smiling and laughing. They were wearing their dress robes from the Yule Ball in fourth year. Seeing the Slytherin so completely unguarded, appearing almost carefree - joyful, even - made something in his stomach clench.

"Why would he give you this picture in particular?" Harry asks, pulling the picture from the box and holding it up in front of her.

"I've no idea. We had a wicked fight later that night when he told me that he wasn't interested in me *like that*. It was probably the last time that he and I ever had a real conversation. After that year, he was his father's puppet and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. He had no room for anything but his family."

Harry continued to sort through the other items in the box. There was an old Slytherin tie, presumably Malfoy's, and a Remembrall with a substantial crack along one side.

"He stole that from Neville Longbottom in sixth year."

"Why?"

"I've no idea."

Harry picked up the small glass ball, examining it. The telltale red cloud meant to advise of a forgotten task tried to sputter to life, but fizzled out and died quickly.

"Pansy, there's really nothing helpful here."

"It frightened me when I first got it."

Harry looked at her quizzically.

"Well, look at it...doesn't it look like things that people give away when they're..." she waved her hand as if trying to pull what she wanted to say out of thin air, "giving up? Those things may seem like nothing to you, but they all held significance for Draco."

The look of distress on her face told Harry that she didn't mean 'giving up' as one would a poor game of chess or a lackluster Quidditch match.

"He used to have that picture up on his bedside table at Hogwarts, and you know what being Slytherin meant to him as far as his family was concerned."

"You think he was suicidal?" Harry didn't ask about what the Remembrall might have signified, but there was a niggling thought in the back of his head involving that day when they were eleven years old and Harry became the youngest Seeker in a century.

"It wouldn't surprise me if he were. His dad rotted away in Azkaban before taking his own life, and his mum died of pneumonia months later, too sad about the state of things to go to St. Mungo's for help. He was left all alone."

"He had you."

"Draco and I had a...an odd relationship. It was mostly games. Head games, Slytherin politics, sex."

Harry felt his face flush at that, irritated at his body's immature reaction. "I thought you said that after fourth year--"

"He found another use for me. *Like that*," she said, leaning forward and looking Harry straight in the eyes. "He knew that he could trust me, and I him, and that I'd never call him deviant for what he wanted to do - what he wanted *me* to do."

Harry had to stop himself asking for details, but the absurd curiosity burned his insides.

It must have shown on his face.

"Oh, don't worry. It didn't involve goats or garters. Just a bit of polyjuice and a lock of hair that the user never noticed missing."

Something in Pansy's eyes made Harry think that he was meant to clue in on what she just said, but his mind was blank. She seemed to have decided to get back on topic, however, and asked him once again if he would go and find him.

"I don't even know if I have the time, Pansy."

"You've over a month of vacation saved up, and weeks of sick time. I'm pretty sure that I know where he's gone, and I have a Portkey already sanctioned for use--"

Harry held up a hand to stop her talking.

"If you already know where he is, why don't you go and fetch him yourself?"

"Because he'll run."

"He's good at that," Harry mumbled, running his fingers along the edge of the box.

Pansy's mouth tightened into a thin line and glared. "He's been running for three years. Every time I track him down, he bolts the moment he catches sight of me. I need someone else to do it, I just--"

There was a long pause, and Pansy looked down at her hands, then up to the picture of her and Malfoy that now lay atop Harry's desk.

"I just need to know that he's okay. That he's happy. He deserves that, no matter what you or anyone else thinks," she finished quietly.

"So you want me to use up my own vacation time to go and hunt Malfoy down and find out if he's *happy*?"

"He won't run from you. He won't be able to help himself if he were to see you. He'd at least find out why you were there."

"And what exactly would I say to him, if I was to do this and I end up finding him?"

"You'll figure it out, I'm sure."

Harry sighed and started putting Malfoy's things back in the box, placing the lid on top and handing it back to Pansy. He stared at a nondescript point on the wall just over her shoulder, thinking. Did he really

want to do this? Things had been boring at work, to be sure, and a change of pace wouldn't be unwelcome, but Malfoy? Harry of all people knew that if a person disappeared of their own free will, and there was no reason to think otherwise in Malfoy's case, they didn't want to be found. Wouldn't it be best to leave him be in his own self-imposed exile? Apparently the only person missing him was Pansy, and she had moved on with her life well enough regardless.

Still, Harry had nothing better to do, and there was no point lying to himself and denying that he wasn't immensely curious as to what Malfoy had done with himself since leaving their world behind.

"I'll think about it and let you know," was all he said to her, but he was already making plans in his mind about how to best track down her friend.

And apparently, Draco Malfoy having real friends that cared about his welfare, and not just minions to do his bidding, wasn't as surprising as Harry thought it would be.

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"You're really going to do this?"

"Shackelbolt won't miss me," Harry said as Hermione handed him two more shirts to pack in his trunk. Two days ago, Harry had owled Pansy to tell her that he had agreed to go and find Malfoy, asking her for whatever information she had regarding his possible whereabouts, the Portkey that she'd already had prepared, complete with an itinerary and the location of a cottage that she had procured for him at her own expense.

"I've never been to the Isle of Skye, but I hear it's lovely," Hermione said, rolling up a pair of socks and tossing them on the bed. "I wouldn't want to go during this time of year, though. Freezing rain and sleet, ice and snow - it's too bad that Pansy didn't come to you this past summer."

"I'll be back in time for Christmas," he said, knowing her underlying concern. She had mentioned it three times since he advised her about the trip.

"Good, because Ron will have a fit if you're not."

"They're back from Romania in a few days, yeah?"

"Wednesday. Are you sure you can't put this off a few days until he gets back?"

"Can't. Pansy apparently took the liberty of booking me in a cottage already and I'm due to meet the owner tomorrow afternoon."

Hermione laughed softly, pulling an elastic from her jeans pocket and pulling her long hair up, tying it back and off her face. "Seven years ago, we would have been sure this was an obvious trap to get you killed. Funny how things change."

"Seven years ago feels like a whole lifetime."

"Hmm," Hermione murmured distractedly under her breath, intent on finding Harry's favourite pair of trainers that had probably worked their way under his bed.

Seven years ago, Harry had just killed Voldemort using Malfoy's wand, and was looking forward to getting back to his life - a life that he was sure would have included Ginny by his side.

Ginny, however, was too busy holding a grudge against Harry for going off to die without even bothering to say goodbye, and by the time she'd forgiven him several months later, Harry no longer cared - the selfish side of her having manifested in a way in which Harry could not look past, and her grudge became his grudge, albeit in reverse. When, during the last fight they had, he had yelled at her that he hadn't even told Ron and Hermione, so why would he tell her, that was a clear enough indication that she would never be number one in his life, and they both parted ways. Finding out that he had seen her on the field while he was walking toward what he thought was certain death sealed the deal for her, and they remained on friendly, if stilted, terms ever since.

They exchanged small gifts at Christmas, he went to her wedding to Dean Thomas, and he was there in the St. Mungo's waiting room while they all sat impatiently for news that their first child had been born. But there was a deep-seated underlying resentment on both their parts that showed its colours every so often. If the other Weasleys noticed it, they never said, and Harry was just as much a part of their family

as he always was. Molly Weasley was a tremendous help to him when it came to caring for Teddy, showing him everything from how to change a nappy properly to how a baby should be burped after feeding from a bottle.

Harry tried to be the best godfather he could be, and managed to see Teddy at least three times per week, if not more. Sometimes it was just a quick visit after a long day at work, other times Teddy would come and spend the night at Grimmauld Place. Tonks' mother, Andromeda, had taken the boy in after that fateful night that Teddy became an orphan, but Harry vowed to them both that he would be as much a part of the boy's life as Sirius wanted to be in his own. When Andromeda and Molly both had come into Grimmauld Place with the intention of making it fit for not just Harry, but also Teddy, Harry was grateful.

What was once Sirius' makeshift prison had been turned into a real home - warm and cozy, despite its dark history and bad memories within. "*You'll make new, happy memories to replace the bad ones, Harry,*" Andromeda said to him one day when she was hanging new curtains, and it really was as simple as that.

Teddy had had his first broom ride in the back garden at Grimmauld Place, and had his first birthday in the same room that the Order used to plan their strategies. He covered the portrait of the shrieking Mrs. Black with Teddy's elementary crayon drawings, and after several months, she simply stopped making noise. Harry wasn't even sure she was still there - he hadn't moved the colourful parchments to look. He had taken over Sirius' old room, and fixed up the one adjacent for Teddy. Harry took him every other weekend, from Friday night until Sunday evening, and he truly felt like it was the closest to fatherhood that he would ever get - so he had better not muck it up.

This time away to look for Malfoy would be the longest that he'd ever gone without seeing Teddy, and he hoped that the boy's young seven year old mind wouldn't be too hurt at having Harry gone so close to Christmas. When he'd said his goodbye yesterday, he promised to return by Christmas Eve, and that had brightened the boy's spirits enough that his hair turned red and green as he smiled.

"That should be everything," Hermione said, closing the trunk lid and sealing it shut.

"Fancy some take-away? I'm starving," Harry offered, levitating the trunk over to the bedroom door and setting it on the floor.

"Thai?"

"Perfect. From what I hear, it's all seafood and venison on this Isle of Skye. I doubt they'll have decent take-away, if they even *have* take-away."

"Still going with the Glamour Charm?"

Harry headed down the stairs to the front parlour where the Muggle telephone was, Hermione following behind.

"If he gets as scared as Pansy said he does, I figure it's the best way to find out what's going on with him without frightening him off. Besides, it should only take a few weeks of following him around and observing to get what Pansy wants."

"Is that really all she wants?"

"I understand it, really. Wouldn't you do the same if it were Ron?"

"Ron and I had a real friendship back at school; we didn't just play kinky sex games in between classes."

Harry laughed, remembering the look on Hermione's face when he'd told her what Pansy had said about the Polyjuice.

"Well maybe if you had, he wouldn't have taken so long to propose."

That earned him a slap on the arm as he picked up several take-away menus, handing them off to Hermione to choose and make the call. She snatched them from him giving him a dirty look, but the blush across her cheeks only made Harry smirk.

"I'm going to practice my Glamour one more time."

Hermione nodded, picking up the phone and dialing as Harry headed into the loo down the hall and standing in front of the large mirror. He stared at his appearance - black hair, cropped short in the back and sides but long enough on top for a tousled rather than messy appearance (Hermione's idea), and thin wire-rimmed glasses shielding his mother's green eyes. Harry didn't dislike the way he looked - less scrawny than he was at Hogwarts, but not muscular, either.

He thought he was average in every way - height, build, handsomeness. His face had filled out a bit, his jaw stronger and more defined, and he could no longer go days without shaving as he could when he was a teen. By nightfall, his five o'clock shadow was in full effect. Hermione said that he would clean up quite nicely if he ever decided to start dating again, the few relationships he'd had since Ginny having failed miserably, usually before they even got off the ground. Or bed, as it were.

With a few flicks of his wand, he was no longer Harry Potter. He was Mark Evans, Muggle, and aspiring novelist trying to finish his first manuscript - hence the holiday to the scenic Isle of Skye for some peace, quiet, and inspiration. His appearance, as well as his made-up backstory, was carefully constructed with Hermione's help. "Keep it simple, just disguise your face," she had said. Malfoy hadn't seen him in at least five years, and Harry's average shape and height worked in his favour.

Mark Evans had light brown hair, the same cut as Harry's. His eyes were a non-descript brown, nose a little more pointed and narrow than his own, and cheekbones less pronounced. His lips were a tad fuller and he and Hermione both decided not to try using a different accent. Mark's glasses had thin black, squarish frames, the kind that he'd seen on a Muggle actor while watching telly the other night, some science fiction show about time travel and aliens.

"It looks good," Hermione said, leaning against the doorway, her arms crossed. "Food will be ready in ten. Come with me?"

"Yeah," Harry said, ending the spell and heading to the front door, grabbing both their coats from the hallway closet on the way.

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"Welcome to the Isle of Skye and Fossil Cottage."

Harry peered out from beneath the hood of his parka, being pelted with sleet, and tried not to frown. When he'd met the 'owner' of Fossil Cottage at the pre-arranged spot, a hotel in the one of the larger towns on the island, Broadford, called The Hebridian, it didn't turn out to be the owner at all, but rather the owner's assistant.

An assistant named Callum Rabastan who looked identical to Draco Malfoy.

Harry wanted to sucker punch Malfoy for choosing the last name of Rabastan, after everything that Bellatrix and her sick fuck of a husband did to his family and the Longbottoms.

After choking down his bitterness at being forced into such close contact with Malfoy when he wasn't expecting it, he put out his hand to shake the blond's, muttering 'hello' and introducing himself, faking a shiver to offset his likely obvious startle at being faced with Malfoy unprepared.

He'd followed Malfoy outside before finally remembering the trunk he'd left inside, and took the moment's reprieve to chastise himself for having gotten off to such a horrible start. *'Some Auror you are, mucking up a basic recon task like some amateur.'* He dragged his trunk out to the edge of the street where Malfoy was waiting in a small car, sitting patiently behind the driver's wheel.

*'Malfoy? Driving a car? This is too bizarre.'*

"Need help with that?" Malfoy asked, the window rolled down partway to try to keep as much of the rain out as possible.

"M'fine, thanks," Harry replied, opening the door to the back seat and hefting his trunk into the car, not caring about getting water and dirt on the upholstered cushions.

The drive to the cottage was mostly silent, Malfoy pointing out various things here and there. By the time they'd reached the drive that led to the small house by the shore, the rain had slowed a bit, but the sleet was still coming down in sharp shards, hitting the side of Harry's - Mark's - face.

"It's the best self-catering cottage on the island," Malfoy said, leading them just inside the doorway and stopping abruptly, Harry nearly colliding with him. Malfoy pointed upward, his eyes still on Harry.

"There's an ammonite just here. You'll find them all over the place, hence the name."

Malfoy was pointing to what looked like a fossilized shell, spiral in shape, with little markings along its length.

"There are loads of them all along those stones we just walked on to get here, and inside the walls of the cottage."

Harry smiled stiffly as Malfoy turned left inside the doorway to lead them inside the kitchen, waiting for Harry to enter the main room before speaking again. Harry dragged his trunk along the hardwood floor, leaving it dripping just inside the doorway.

"There's a small kitchen, but you'll find it's got all mod cons. The fridge has some staple foods inside to last until you can get to the local co-op for more, and there's a gas cooker and microwave. All utensils and cookware are in the cupboards, and you should have everything you need for your stay. If you don't, I can be reached at this number." Malfoy held out a small white business card with just his pseudonym and a phone number written in black ink.

"No fireplace, but there is an oil stove in the front room that will keep you warm. The walls are thick enough, and the floor and roof are insulated enough that you wouldn't really need a roaring fire anyway."

Harry looked around the mostly white kitchen, and could appreciate the view from the window that showed the seashore outside. He followed Malfoy back through the hallway, past the front door, and into the main sitting room. There, as Malfoy had mentioned, was a good sized black oil stove in the corner, a large silver metal pipe reaching through the ceiling. This room, too, was mostly white, but decorated with dark red accents, which kept it from seeming too bland. There was a large red chair in the adjacent corner across from the oil stove, right by a large window that provided another incredible view of the sea outside. Various plants were sitting on the windowsills and hanging from the ceiling, and the sofa and rug, also dark red, all combined to make it a rather cozy front room, even in this cold.

"The bedroom is just back here. Feel free to take your coat off," he added, gesturing that Harry could leave it on the couch.

Malfoy seemed to have done this spiel a thousand times over. Harry wondered how long he had been here on this island - long enough to learn how to drive a car, at any rate. When he turned around, Malfoy had apparently already gone into the bedroom. He walked down the only other hallway in the cottage, passing a mirror and pausing for the briefest of moments to check his Glamour. *'Still Mark Evans.'* The bed in the center of the room was smaller than his bed at Grimmauld, but it was plenty big for him. He had a wayward thought about bringing Teddy here, who so loved the seaside, next summer, as they could easily fit into the one bed. It had a cast-iron white headboard, footboard to match, and there was a patchwork quilt on the bed that had the same colours running through it as the front room. A small window opened out to the tall grass at the side of the cottage, and a modest closet finished off the room.

"There's no television, but from what I hear, you won't be needing one."

Malfoy looked at him, his expression blank, and it took a moment for Harry to catch on. "Oh. Um, yeah. No, not really."

Harry saw a faint hint of that Malfoy smirk he used to hate so much, and he looked away. Malfoy didn't linger, brushing past Harry as he walked out the bedroom door into the hallway, heading for the front door.

"You can ring that number anytime, though I'm usually in bed by midnight or so, so I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't call past then unless it's for emergencies only. I'll be back round tomorrow to drive you to the co-op for more groceries, and I can show you around Broadford if you like. It's not Portree, but it is the second largest town on the island and has just as many shops and places to kill time if you need it."

Harry just blinked - he couldn't get past the fact that this completely Muggle person was Draco Malfoy, and here he is offering to drive him around town like some chauffeur or tour guide. Seven years ago, he was pulling Malfoy from the scorching grips of the Fiendfyre that took Crabbe's life, and now he's standing in front of him like a complete and utter *nobody*.

But that was what Malfoy wanted, after all, wasn't it? 'Mission accomplished,' Harry thought.

"If there's nothing else..." Malfoy said expectantly, and turning to leave when he was met with silence.

"Wait," Harry finally spoke, having no idea why he just stopped him, and trying to think of a reason. "Is, um, is there...is there a bathroom?"

Malfoy laughed. "Of course there is, I just figured that you'd find it on your own well enough. Very end of the hall near the bedroom. There's also a washing machine and clothes iron, if you need one. Bed linens and towels are in the closet as well."

"Right," Harry said, feeling himself start to fidget.

"Is that all, Mr...Evans?"

"Um, yeah, guess so."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow at eleven o'clock."

Malfoy walked out the front door, and Harry stood there, watching him walk back to the car. Malfoy opened the door of the car, and said, "Weather should be much drier tomorrow," then got inside and turned on the ignition.

As Harry watched him drive down the road that led away from the cottage, he wondered if the Malfoy he had just encountered was just as fake as Mark Evans was, or if he'd just met the genuine article.

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Harry sat at the small table in the kitchen, staring out the window as he nibbled on his toast with marmalade. He was bored out of his skull, and was regretting that he had ever allowed himself to be talked into this. Malfoy was obviously fine, and was quite content to live his life out here on this godforsaken island. Pansy needed to let sleeping dragons lie.

The day before, after Malfoy left, Harry had written a rather lengthy letter to Ron and Hermione, letting them know about his first encounter with the wayward Slytherin. He told them all about the cottage, the horrendous weather, and even his thoughts about maybe bringing Teddy here the following summer for a few days. When he was making his way around the cottage, familiarizing himself with all the little trinkets and various amenities, he came across an information card about the 'wireless broadband internet connection' that was included with the weekly rate.

Harry remembered his cousin Dudley having spent hours sitting in front of his computer before he entered his boxing phase, and asked Hermione to send him a laptop with money from his vault, including a note that she could give Gringott's to allow her access. After all, a Muggle writer would hardly be putting pen to paper to write a novel these days. No one did that anymore. If Malfoy was going to be stopping by as much as it seemed he would be, it made sense for Harry to look the part. Not to mention, maybe it would help curb his boredom, lest he die from it before getting back home.

His letter to Pansy was short and to the point, and not as kind when he'd gotten to the part where Pansy obviously knew more about Malfoy's occupation here on the island than initially revealed.

He addressed Hermione and Ron's letter, and put Pansy's inside the same envelope with a note to Hermione to please forward it on, as he was certain that she likely had never gotten mail the Muggle way before, whereas Hermione's parents often sent her mail via the Muggle post.

After rummaging about in the kitchen and discovering what food items they had left him, he'd cooked a respectable meal of boiled potatoes, sausages, and a small salad with the greens they had left for him. The owner, or maybe it was Malfoy, he didn't know, had left some shortbread and a decanter of whiskey, and he indulged in a bit of that before bed.

He'd actually slept really well the night before, which was unusual for him. Harry had always been a light sleeper, but last night he didn't remember waking even once. He chalked it up to the sea lapping at the

shore right outside his bedroom window. When he woke up that morning, he felt better than he had in months. After doing his normal morning ablutions, thoroughly displeased with the water pressure from the shower, and putting his Glamour back up, he headed back into the kitchen for some breakfast. This morning's tea and toast with marmalade wasn't half bad, although he wasn't terribly fond of marmalade in general - he preferred jam, strawberry to be specific, and he added it to the list of items he wanted to buy that day. He polished off the last of the shortbread - which he also had on the list - and folded up the piece of paper, tucking it in his jeans pocket.

He glanced up at the clock - one hour until Malfoy arrived, and he had no idea what to do with his time. The sun was shining, and the sky was no longer pelting this remote part of the earth with freezing rain, so Harry decided to venture outside and explore the grounds around the cottage.

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The grounds, in the light of early day, with no rain to mar the view, were quite spectacular. The cottage was right by the water, a stone's throw from the kitchen window, practically. Harry was wearing a button down shirt under his wool jumper, and was glad for it - the rain may have gone, but the wind was still biting.

He went down to the shoreline, kicking at pebbles and shell remnants as he went. There were four eider ducks tottering about at the water's edge, and Harry watched as they went, single-file, into the water. Small waves were cresting against the rocks along the edge of the shore, the high winds making for choppy conditions for anyone who ventured out there in a boat. He looked to his left, and further down the way was a small white cottage, smoke pouring out of the chimneystack. He couldn't imagine living here full time, though maybe that was just the lack of anything substantial to do talking. 'Why would Malfoy choose here, of all places?' Harry wondered.

The sound of a car making its way down the drive startled him, and he turned to watch the approach of the now familiar dark blue Mini Cooper approaching. Harry glanced at his watch; Malfoy was nearly forty minutes early. He waited for him to get out of the car before walking back up the embankment to the cottage walkway.

"Hope you don't mind me coming early," the blond said as he exited the car, "but I thought we might have elevenses at this little café about fifteen miles south of here. If we're not there in half an hour, it'll be packed with locals and we won't be able to get a seat."

Harry had to remember that Malfoy didn't know he was talking to Harry Potter - he was talking to Mark Evans, Muggle and aspiring author, and asking Mark Evans to elevenses wasn't that big of a deal.

"Uh, sure, that'd be great. I'll just..." Harry started, motioning to the front door of the cottage. He quickly went inside, grabbing his coat from where he'd hung it just inside the door, and when he turned around, Malfoy was practically right on top of him.

"Ready to go, then?"

"Um, yeah," Harry answered awkwardly, moving past Malfoy and heading toward the car. He heard Malfoy shut the front door to the cottage, but didn't turn back to look. All he could think about at the moment were the sharp grey eyes that were staring him down just moments earlier. Harry got into the car, fastening the safety belt, and waited for Malfoy to start the engine.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked after a few moments of silence.

"You'll see," Malfoy smiled, pulling out onto the main road.

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"This isn't exactly what I'd call small." Harry couldn't stop the sarcasm that poured over top his words, and he chalked it up to the fact that he was talking to Malfoy of all people.

"Perhaps quaint is a better word," Malfoy responded, seemingly unaffected by Harry's brusque tone. "It's called Armadale Castle Gardens. Technically, they're competition as they, too, have self-catering cottages on the grounds, but there's far more foot traffic from locals and tourists, and not as conducive to what someone like you was looking for."



Harry shrugged out of his coat as he entered the main foyer of the large building, the inside not at all what he was expecting. Everything was done up in rich tones of navy and deep green, the wooden tables and chairs a shining cherrywood. Heavy curtains hung around the windows, bracketed by large gold woven ropes with large tassels on the ends. There were several people milling about, servers as well as customers, and over half the tables were full.

"Callum! We haven't seen you in ages!"

"Aislinn, hello."

The waitress gave Malfoy a bright smile as she rushed over toward them, holding her arms out for an embrace. Malfoy smiled when he hugged her, and Harry found himself oddly riveted by the sight.

"Aislinn, this is Mark Evans. He's staying at Fossil Cottage for a few weeks," Malfoy gestured.

"Lovely to meet you. Bit odd coming here during the winter months, isn't it? And so close to Christmas?"

She looked at him expectantly.

"I'm writing a book. Came up here for, erm, inspiration."

"Ah, yes, authors, artists, and adventurers. That's all we get around here."

Aislinn took Malfoy by the elbow and began leading him into the dining room adjacent to the foyer. The blond turned his head, motioning for Harry to follow. Aislinn was a petite slip of a girl who couldn't be a day over twenty. She had long, fire red hair in a loose bun piled atop her head. Harry was briefly reminded of Ginny, but quickly stamped down any thoughts of her. Aislinn was whispering in Malfoy's ear, and he saw the blond's cheeks colour just slightly as she grinned. He wondered if the two had ever dated, not sure if he was scandalized by the thought of Malfoy dating a girl so young - not that he could blame him. She was lovely, and had a curvy figure and long legs, despite her short stature. Her thick Scottish accent made her words sound almost melodic.

"I'll put you two by the window so you can enjoy the sunshine before it goes away. Callum, the usual?"

"Please," Malfoy answered, unfolding his napkin and laying it across his lap. Harry did the same.

"Sleep well last night?"

"Um, yeah."

"It's the sea. Being so close to it. The waves lull you to sleep even if you can't hear them."

"You live close to the water as well?"

"Just up the road. White house about a quarter of a mile down from your cottage."

Harry remembered seeing such a house earlier that morning when he was outside watching the ducks.

"The one with the chimney?"

"That would be me, yes."

There were several moments of silence as they waited for Aislinn to bring out whatever Malfoy had ordered for them, and Harry watched the occasional passerby from the window. A steaming pot of tea was set on the table, breaking his idle daydreaming, and Harry looked over to find Malfoy studying him intently. It made him instantly nervous - *'Did my Glamour charm fade?'* he wondered, and excused himself to find the loo and check his appearance.

After asking one of the other wait staff where the loo was, Harry opened the door to the loo and locked it behind him, moving over toward the mirror and stepping up close to examine himself. Everything seemed in order - Mark Evans was still Mark Evans. *'Stop being paranoid, Potter. Maybe Malfoy's just looking to be looking.'* Harry took a moment to wash his hands, heading back to the dining room where Malfoy was waiting, the tea already poured and a large assortment of cakes and biscuits - several of them shortbread - on a three-tiered plate setting.

"They've coffee as well, if you'd rather," Malfoy said, gesturing to the cup of tea in front of Harry.

"No, this is fine," Harry answered, adding after another moment, "Thanks."

"All part of the service. I can't very well let you sit in that cottage every day for three weeks, can I? I at least need to show you around a bit before you forget all about me in favour of your novel."

Harry allowed himself - Mark - to smile at Malfoy's genuine tone. This certainly wasn't the same boy he'd gone to school with, and he needed to start remembering that. *'Shouldn't be too difficult - you're hardly the same either,'* he told himself, selecting a piece of shortbread dipped in chocolate.

Malfoy continued to carry most of the conversation, telling Harry bits and bobs about the Isle itself, as well as some of the local secrets, such as the regular appearance of Oscar the Otter and about the midge forecast during the summer months - Harry had never even heard of the teeny bugs, but from how Malfoy described them, they were no better than doxies on a bad day.

Harry watched Malfoy as he went on and on about the local landscape, finding himself genuinely intrigued by what Malfoy had to say. He caught his mind drifting a bit when he started talking about the Cuillin mountain range - which was another thing that the island seemed to bring out in him.

Daydreaming wasn't something that Harry found himself doing often, but he'd done it several times since his arrival just the day before. He was surprised by how relaxed he felt, despite the moment of fear that his Glamour had slipped, and decided to just go with it. He continued to listen to Malfoy prattle on, nodding his head and adding an audible *hmm* and *uhuh* at appropriate moments.

There was something oddly mesmerizing about the way Malfoy spoke - the way his mouth moved around the words flowing out. As he started his fourth cup of tea, and his fifth bit of cake, he realised that even though they had spent nearly a decade together under the same roof, there were so many things about Malfoy that he'd never noticed before.

His teeth were perfectly straight, and Harry felt suddenly self-conscious about the slight crookedness of his own bottom teeth. Malfoy had incredibly long fingers, almost obscenely so, and he gestured with them a lot when he talked. Malfoy was also the type of person with one of those stares that made you feel like the only person in the room, so intense was his focus. Harry found himself escaping their gaze more than once, looking down at his plate or over at the other patrons as Malfoy talked.

"Let me shut up a moment and you can tell me all about the book you're writing."

*'Shit.'*

"My book?"

*'Think fast.'*

"Yes, your book," Malfoy smirked without malice. "The reason you came here for peace and quiet?"

"Right. Uhm, it's...a mystery."

"A mystery? Ohh, intriguing. Can you divulge the plot?" Malfoy said teasingly, then gestured to one of the wait staff to clear their dishes.

"It's about...a spy. Looking for someone. An old friend. Sort of. Acquaintance. As a favour to someone else."

*'Go with the closest to the truth - it's easier to sound convincing.'*

"Interesting. Not exactly Ian Fleming, but still interesting."

"Who's Ian Fleming?" The words were out before he could stop himself, certain that he'd made a mistake when he saw the look on Malfoy's face.

"You're writing a mystery novel about a spy, and you don't know who Ian Fleming is?"

"Sorry, I must still be tired from the trip. Ian Fleming. Yes, of course."

"James Bond is practically a National Treasure - I'd be flabbergasted if you didn't know who he was, particularly in your chosen profession."

"I, uh, I don't read much, actually. Keeps other people's ideas out of my head. I don't want to be accused of plagiarism," Harry offered, hoping he sounded convincing after the Fleming gaffe.

"Hmm." Malfoy swallowed the last of his tea, then reached into his back pocket for his wallet, pulling out several notes to lay on the table.

"No, let me," Harry offered, reaching for his own wallet.

"Nonsense," Malfoy said, counting out some five-pound notes.

Harry stopped the movement by laying his own hand atop the blond's. "I insist." Malfoy stared at the hand covering his own, saying nothing. Harry quickly pulled back, fumbling for his wallet, surprised at the warmth of his hand where it had touched Malfoy's and hoping his cheeks weren't flushed like he suspected. *'What is wrong with you today? Pull yourself together.'*

"Suit yourself," Malfoy finally responded, eyes still downcast. "I appreciate the tea, Evans. I owe you one."

There was a sudden awkwardness in the air around them, and Harry wasn't sure why or where it was coming from. He laid a few notes on the table to cover the bill plus gratuity, and got up from the table, walking out to the main foyer where he had hung his coat. He didn't look to see if Malfoy had followed, but after he had his coat buttoned up, ready to walk out the door, he looked back and saw Aislinn talking to Malfoy, hugging him goodbye. She waved at him from her spot by the window as Malfoy walked toward him, and he waved back before opening the door to the suddenly stifling restaurant and going outside.

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The drive to the local co-op was, thankfully, short. Whatever awkwardness had settled over them was still there, and it was starting to grate Harry's nerves. When they entered the small grocer's, Harry headed in the opposite direction as Malfoy, simply for breathing room.

He pulled his list from earlier that morning from his pocket, and grabbed one of the baskets from the large crate next to the door. The market was small enough that Malfoy was still in his peripheral, and he watched from the corner of his eye as the blond seemed to browse the modest fruit section. Harry walked over toward the meat counter, and a heavysset man with a thick brown beard ambled over toward him.

"Help you, sir?" he asked, his thick brogue nearly indecipherable.

"Um, give me a dozen sausages, and...four of the lamb chops."

"It'll be ready in a moment, I'll call you when they're packaged up," the man responded gruffly.

Harry moved further down to the display of fresh fish and seafood, and advised the equally gruff but younger, slimmer man there of his choices, certain that he was probably buying more than he needed at the moment, but he could freeze everything and cook it up later - three weeks worth of meals was going to take a lot of food.

He continued his way around the shop after the butcher gave him his sausages and lamb chops, picking out various fruits, pastas, as well as staples like bread, eggs, and milk. Malfoy eventually made his way back around, but the mysterious tension seemed to have dissipated.

"Shortbread. You seemed to like it back at Armadale's, and theirs is made by the same baker."

"Thanks," Harry replied, taking the package from Malfoy and adding it to the cart. "Do you know where I could get more of that whiskey that was in the cottage? I'd like to take some back home to R- my friend." If Malfoy noticed Harry's near slip, it didn't show. "There's a distillery in Portree that we get it from direct. We can go there next week if you like. I was going to show you the capital, anyway."

"Excellent," Harry smiled, and realised there was nothing about himself shining back at him in Malfoy's serene and happy gaze - he was just Mark Evans to Malfoy, another thing that Harry seemed to need constant reminding of.

Glad to be rid of whatever awkwardness had plagued them earlier, he and Malfoy both paid for their purchases, piling back into the car, chatting all the while. Harry found himself quickly getting used to the easy conversation with Malfoy, and nearly forgot about mailing Hermione's and Pansy's letters.

"There's a post office here, yeah?"

"There's a small one up the road. Did you need something sent?"

"I've just got a letter that I need to mail."

"I can do it tomorrow - I've a stack of bills at home needing to be sent out and I'll be making another trip."

Harry floundered for an excuse as to why he couldn't hand Malfoy the envelope with Hermione Granger-Weasley's name written clearly across the front.

"I need to buy some stamps."

Malfoy merely shrugged, but Harry thought he detected a hint of a smirk.

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The drive home was spent in a surprisingly comfortable silence, and Harry found himself forgetting his reason for being on the island, content to just sit back and enjoy the picturesque views as Malfoy took them home.

When they pulled up to the cottage, Harry was actually sorry to see Malfoy go, his easy conversation easily winning against the prospect of sitting inside the house alone with nothing to do. Malfoy parked the car, but left the engine running, apparently waiting for Harry to make his exit so that he could head home himself.

Malfoy nodded, but said nothing.

"Right. Um, thanks. For driving me around."

"All part of the service," the blond smiled.

"Do you have a telly at your place?" Harry blurted out, watching Malfoy as he stared out at the sea in front of them.

"I do, but I don't watch it much."

"Oh."

Harry sat there as the car idled, the fingers of his left hand drumming against his leg.

"You'd better get that whitefish on ice," Malfoy said suddenly, and Harry took the hint that he was wasting the other man's time.

"Yeah, of course," he answered, reaching for the door handle and giving Malfoy a tight grin. He got out of the car, and opened the door to the rear seat to retrieve his bags.

He started to walk up the small pathway that led to the cottage door, stopping and turning to wave goodbye, but Malfoy was already pulling out of the drive. Something like disappointment settled inside him, and Harry chalked it up to the prospect of spending the evening in this cottage, alone, with absolutely nothing to entertain him. He hoped that Hermione's letter would reach her within a day or so, and he would have the items requested within a week. He was sure he would die of boredom otherwise, and Pansy would have nothing to show for the money spent on this cottage in her seemingly dire need to see if her former boyfriend was happy in his new life.

As he put his groceries away, the freezer now stocked with meat and fresh fish, keeping a few filets out for a fry-up for dinner, he thought about what Malfoy would do if he invited him over to eat with him. Considering all the chauffeuring that Malfoy had done for him that day, surely it wouldn't seem out of the ordinary for him to repay the favour. Harry figured that he was probably not the first temporary tenant of Fossil Cottage who had Malfoy over for a meal, especially since he lived just down the way. Besides, he needed to find out as much about Malfoy as he could if he wanted Pansy to be content in the knowledge that her old friend was doing just fine.

Harry rummaged around in the sitting room, searching for the card with Malfoy's number on it. Finding it, he picked up the phone, hesitating for just a moment before dialing.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's Mark. Mark Evans."

"Hello Mark Evans."

Harry would swear that he could hear the smirk in Malfoy's voice.

"So...I was just wondering if you had plans for dinner?"

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Malfoy had brought over a rather large bottle of white wine to go with what Harry told him he would prepare for dinner, and as he poured the last bit of it into his and Harry's glasses, Harry wondered if he

hadn't had too much to drink. His brain felt a bit fuzzy around the edges, and he found himself constantly making excuses to go into the loo and check that his Glamour was holding up.

Harry had made up numerous lies throughout the evening regarding his supposed novel that didn't exist, as well as how he decided to try his hand at writing after having had a desk job for several years previous - at an accounting firm, to be exact. He told Malfoy stories about Ron and Hermione, who became Ryan and Holly, and about his godson whom he called James. Malfoy, in turn, told Harry all about his years on the island, and how he took the position of caretaker and assistant after having rented out the very same cottage they were sitting in for a fortnight three years previous. What was meant to be a temporary stay had turned into a permanent home, and he had the cottage down the road built after falling in love with the peaceful town.

As Harry started shuffling the deck of cards for what had to be the umpteenth hand of poker, the conversation turned decidedly personal.

"I noticed that Aislinn girl seemed rather taken with you. Are you two dating?"

Malfoy smirked, studying the hand that Harry dealt him. "She's a bit young for me, don't you think?"

"Well I don't know how old you are, do I?"

"Same age as you, I suspect. Twenty-seven. Aislinn hasn't even turned twenty-one yet."

"Oh."

"Besides, she's hardly my type."

"Seemed pretty alright to me."

"Except for the fact that she's got tits."

Harry's alcohol-soaked brain took a moment to grasp what Malfoy had just said.

"Tits?"

"Tits. Breasts. Large fleshy protrusions on the chest of a female designed for feeding an infant?"

"I know what tits are, *Callum*."

"I was just checking."

Harry let silence settle over them as he arranged his own set of cards before continuing. "So you're gay, then?"

Malfoy still wasn't looking up, and Harry took the opportunity to study the man's face - the same chiseled features he'd known so well back at Hogwarts now serving to make Malfoy look distinguished instead of simply pointy. It suddenly occurred to him that the blond had taken to wearing his hair natural, no longer slicked back as it had been for so long, and it actually made him seem younger, the seemingly soft strands framing his face as he leaned forward to take another card from the deck.

"Mostly, yes."

"Mostly?"

"Mostly," Malfoy replied, looking up, his gaze suddenly making Harry feel uncomfortable, like a specimen under a microscope. "I've had girlfriends before, but I prefer the company of men. That's not to say that if Aislinn weren't five years older that I would turn her down for a date, but she wouldn't be my first choice."

"Oh?" Harry swallowed the last of his wine, his cards forgotten as they lay face up on the table.

"I would have won this hand," Malfoy smirked, setting his own cards down. "Does it bother you?"

"That you're gay or that you were going to win that hand?"

"That I like men?"

Harry swallowed thickly, his tongue feeling like sandpaper against the roof of his mouth. "No."

He got up and grabbed a glass from the cupboard above the sink, filling it with water and taking a large gulp. *'Too much wine, you idiot.'*

"I take it you're straight, then?"

"I...yes. I never really..."

"Thought about it?"

Harry turned around, and found Malfoy sitting at the table, watching him, his head cocked just slightly, grinning.

"I like girls."

Malfoy just kept grinning.

"I had a girlfriend back home. It didn't work out. She married one of my friends from school."

"Pity."

Harry shrugged, not caring enough to pretend to care in front of Malfoy.

"There was a boy that I went to school with that I was practically obsessed with," Malfoy started, and Harry felt his heart jump inside his chest. "He hated me, and I guess I hated him, too, on some level. I pulled lots of stupid stunts, trying to get him into trouble because I saw him as competition, but now that I look back on it, I really just wanted him to notice me."

"Uh huh," Harry said dumbly, desperate to get as far away from where Malfoy seemed to be leading the conversation as possible, but having no idea how to do so.

"I met him when we were just eleven, and I was mesmerized by his face, even then. He had a scar on his forehead from an accident when he was younger, and I always wanted to touch it, trace the jagged line with my finger." Malfoy was talking as though he was reminiscing about an old lover, and Harry couldn't meet his eyes, picking at the edges of the linen placemat on the table. "We fought all the time, sometimes over quite...serious issues, but I never stopped wanting him to really notice me instead of looking right through me."

Harry continued to fidget, and he heard Malfoy let out a small laugh.

"This boarding school that you went to - you never looked at the other boys?"

The question seemed jarring, out of place, or maybe it was just because Harry didn't want to answer it. His mind immediately flashed to the time he'd caught Seamus Finnegan in the showers early one morning, the other Gryffindor sitting on the wet tile floor, two fingers pumping in and out of his own body while his other hand fisted his cock, head thrown back against the wall, mouth gaping in silent pleasure as the water sluiced down his bare skin.

Harry had stayed, hidden in the shadows, watching. He couldn't look away, and his own cock had gotten harder than he'd ever remembered it being at the time, shame and arousal fighting for dominance in his body. When Seamus came, his come spurting out and running down the length of his exposed shaft, mingling with the water, Harry bolted back to their dorm, shut the curtains around his bed, and had the quickest, most intense wank of his life.

"I...don't remember."

Harry ignored Malfoy's laugh as he turned to place the empty glass in the sink, and heard the chair scrape against the floor as Malfoy stood, walking toward him.

"I'm done with mine as well," Malfoy said, suddenly standing far too close for Harry's comfort, reaching around to place the empty wineglass in the sink, his chest brushing against Harry's back.

Harry felt him move away, but when he turned, Malfoy was still standing there, an expectant look on his face.

"I'm pretty tired."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow, but Harry's obvious excuse worked.

"If you like, I can come by in the morning and take you to the Minginish coastline. There's a cliff there that people like to walk along, but it's less touristy than other spots - not that you need to worry about many tourists in early December."

"Yes. Fine." Harry wanted nothing more in that moment than to get Malfoy out of the cottage - he seemed to be sucking up all the air, leaving Harry short of breath.

Harry barely noticed Malfoy's departure, hearing the front door shut and the oppressive silence that followed. Taking his glasses off and running his hands down his face, he walked unsteadily to the bedroom, collapsing on top of the patchwork quilt, still fully dressed, sleep claiming him almost instantly.

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"Sleep alright?"

"Yes, fine."

Harry pulled his scarf tighter around his neck, grateful that the wind had died down to a respectable level but still hating the cold.

"I hope you found the aspirin in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. I thought you might have needed it this morning after all the wine last night."

Harry grimaced slightly, remembered the bitter tablets getting stuck halfway down his throat. He was so used to potions that he'd forgotten that he needed to swallow pills with plenty of liquid to get them down all the way.

"I did, yes. Thank you."

They continued to walk in silence, Malfoy seeming perfectly at ease in the cold, his smart looking navy pea coat fitting snugly against his narrow frame. Harry felt like he needed to make conversation.

"Do you come out here a lot?"

"Not so much in the winter months, no, but in the spring and summer months, I'm here nearly every day."

"Do you still think about that boy you went to school with?" The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could censor them, but the question had been plaguing him all morning, even moreso since Malfoy first showed up at the cottage to collect him for their walk.

Malfoy didn't miss a step, apparently unaffected by the highly personal question.

"I do, yes," he said, his pace slowing, and eventually stopping altogether. It took Harry a moment to realise he was walking alone, and turned to find Malfoy staring at him. "What I really want to know is if he's happy."

Harry immediately flashed back to Pansy sitting across from him in his office at the Ministry, asking the same question in regards to the man standing mere inches from him now. Something suddenly felt awkward, not right, but Harry paid no attention to it, owing up to the fact that it was simply getting harder and harder to lie to Malfoy.

"Are you happy, Callum?"

"I am, but I could be happier."

And with that, Malfoy began walking again as if the previous several minutes hadn't happened, pointing out a spot on the cliff where various flora and fauna flourished in the summer months.

Harry could leave now. He had his answer. There was no need for him to stay any longer. It had been four days, and it was pointless to keep feeding Pansy useless information about Malfoy's day-to-day activities, which largely consisted of keeping Harry company while playing Isle of Skye tour guide. The way that the trip had originally been planned didn't include Harry running into Malfoy on that first day, and he certainly didn't expect to be cooking dinner for him the second night and getting drunk while discussing their sexual preferences over several poorly played hands of poker.

He had expected to have to track Malfoy down - ask the locals in a roundabout way various questions that would eventually lead him to the wayward Slytherin. He had expected another week, possibly two, of following Malfoy around once he'd tracked his location, and simply observing. Taking notes about what he did, whom he visited, and his general way of being. It had never been his intention to end up on such friendly terms with the man he shared such a tumultuous history with, but now, having been here less than a week, he had no reason to stay longer.

Malfoy was so much unlike his former self that it didn't even occur to Harry that his total lack of a knee-jerk reaction at seeing the blond was unusual, especially for him. He hadn't thought about Malfoy a whole lot since returning his wand to him a year after killing Voldemort, but even that meeting had a shocking lack of animosity, all things considered. The truth was, he felt sorry for Malfoy. He was sorry

that Malfoy was saddled with a father like Lucius, sorry that he was forced to witness and partake in the torture that Voldemort subjected innocents to in the Manor, Draco's childhood home.

He was even sorrier when Draco's mother died - the same woman who had saved his life in the forest that day, begging for a single word of her son's well-being, and ultimately making it possible for Harry to end the world of Voldemort's terrors once and for all. He had sent three dozen lilies, anonymously, to the funeral, a woefully inadequate symbol of gratitude on his part for the risk she took for him, despite their loosely linked yet unfriendly histories.

Harry wondered now if he could be friends with someone like Draco, and as he watched him continue to walk against the brisk wind, seemingly without a care in the world, Harry realised he wanted to be friends with Draco. The past was so far gone, and so much water had passed under the myriad of bridges that Harry had built around his life. He, like Draco, wasn't the same person.

Maybe the two of them could find a common ground now, and build something worthwhile upon it. It would be nice to have another male friend besides Ron.

Harry caught up to Draco, a quick jog putting him back in sync with the blond.

"Have you ever thought about looking him up?"

"I'm not entirely sure that Harry would appreciate that."

Harry felt his heart jump again at the sound of his name coming from Draco's mouth, his refined accent making the name seem less common than it really was.

"It doesn't hurt to try," Harry said, stopping Draco with a hand on his elbow as he turned to look at him head on.

"Maybe this Harry has wondered about you, too. Maybe he's grown up, moved on, and doesn't care so much about the past anymore."

Draco said nothing, and looked out at the sea just beyond Harry's shoulder.

"Maybe this Harry wouldn't mind having another friend in his life. You can't ever have too many friends, can you?"

Draco looked at him then, and Harry felt stripped bare at the wide grey eyes staring at him, through him.

"You misunderstand me, Mark. What I wanted from Harry then, and what I want from him now isn't just friendship."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Draco had already turned away, walking briskly back toward the car. Harry followed, but didn't try to catch up with him, digesting what Draco had just told him, letting the idea roll around in his mind, finding himself oddly unsurprised by the direct revelation - perhaps it was something he'd known deep down, but never acknowledged.

Even more odd, Harry didn't find himself necessarily objecting to the idea, either.

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A letter of some sort had been shoved through the mail slot on the cottage door by the time he and Draco had returned. Conversation was stilted on the drive back, and Harry wasn't sure what had happened to put Draco in such a mood, unless his questions about Draco looking him up had put him off. It didn't seem to fit that the same man who had no qualms asking Harry if he looked at his dorm mates while they were naked would be unsettled by the simple question that Harry had asked.

Harry recognized the bright yellow envelope bearing the heading Western Union Telegram at the top - he didn't even know people still sent these things. He tore open the envelope as he walked into the kitchen, intent on having a glass of whiskey with his lunch. Sitting down at the table to read, a sick feeling plunged to the pit of his stomach as he began to read.

^^

After repeatedly trying to ring Draco and getting no answer, Harry decided he'd brave the rain that had started to fall and walk to Malfoy's house instead. He needed to get back home, to Teddy, and he couldn't Apparate without giving away his secret. If he wanted to come back here, and he *did*, then he





Harry sat down on the bed next to his godson, smiling brightly as Teddy's hair changed colours more rapidly than Harry could keep up with.

"Hey, ease up there...you need your rest."

"I thought you weren't coming back until Christmas Eve?"

"What, and leave you here to suffer without me?" Harry answered, ruffling Teddy's hair that had changed back to its normal light brown, the exact same shade as his father's. "Gran said that you were working," Teddy answered, settling back against his pillows, his cheeks flushed and looking up at Harry, eyes beaming.

"Some things are more important, aren't they?"

"Like presents?"

Harry laughed, "Yes, like presents."

"Did you have fun on your trip?" Teddy asked, his attentions turned to the small metallic figures resting on the bed sheet, the same ones he was playing with when Harry first entered his room. They seemed to be magnetic, a puzzle of sorts, and Teddy was concentrating on piecing them together, fighting the push of the polar opposite ends.

"It was alright. You'd like it there. There's an otter named Oscar in the bay."

"Can we go there next summer?"

"You know," Harry said, sitting back against the headboard and putting his arm around Teddy's shoulders, "maybe we will."

The sick feeling he felt after just Apparating home from Draco's cottage was back, the thought of returning there to be laughed at by the other man not worth thinking about. Harry shoved it down, stomping on it like wayward embers before they could start an emotional firestorm of anger and embarrassment at having let himself be so easily toyed with like that.

And to think that Harry was actually considering being his friend-

*'No matter, it's done. You don't need to see him again. You've other things to focus on now.'*

^^

Two weeks had passed since Harry left the Isle of Skye, and yesterday he found out that Hermione had known all along with Pansy and Draco had planned. Not only known about it, but was part of the conspiracy.

When Hermione first admitted to him that she knew, he yelled and screamed at her, and she had cried and tried to apologize, begging Harry to just listen and give her a chance to explain why she did it, and more importantly, according to her, why Draco did it.

*"I don't give a flying fuck what his reasons were! You're supposed to be one of my best friends, and you let them play that stupid game with me? And for what? You think **poor Harry** needs another friend? Or better yet, maybe you thought I'd suddenly decide I'm into blokes and maybe I'd let Malfoy **bugger** me after a few drinks - I'm sure that's what he was hoping!"*

*"Would you just shut up for two seconds and listen to me, Harry? It wasn't like that, I swear!"*

*"Then why don't you tell me what it was like, Hermione, because I'd sure as hell like to know!"*

Hermione had gone on to tell him about Pansy having approached her in Diagon Alley one day several months back, asking to speak with her in private about Draco Malfoy. After some convincing, they ended up having lunch together at a sandwich shop in Muggle London, near the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron. Pansy had fed her a story about how her and Draco's relationship had fallen apart, Draco's tendencies toward boys, and how Draco had eventually talked her into using Polyjuice to transform into Harry Potter and having sex.

Hermione was torn between feeling horrified, and feeling like she had somehow missed the most obvious fact in all the world concerning Draco Malfoy - he had a crush on Harry, a massive one at that, and according to Pansy, Draco was still pining after him even after all this time.

Several more lunches and afternoon shopping trips later, Hermione and Pansy both had convinced themselves that if they could get the two together, that maybe there could finally be some resolution between them, even if it didn't result in what Draco ultimately wanted.

Hermione had felt badly at first about telling Pansy of Harry's failed relationships, and how, since Ginny, he'd never gone out with much of anyone except a few dates here and there. Pansy had apparently used what she saw as Harry's predilection for tomboys, like Ginny, Cho, and the girl from the Ministry that caused a bit of a scandal with their all too public breakup, as further evidence that Harry might not be as straight as he thinks he is. Hermione balked at that, but something about Pansy's reasoning hit a chord with her, and she let herself be talked into what, per Pansy's interpretation, could be a rather happy union between the two men.

Harry didn't dare tell Hermione how close he'd come to thinking about Draco that way, some out of spite, but mostly out of fear that someone like Pansy would know that about him when he hadn't even thought about it until seeing Draco again after all that time. He could remember watching Draco drink his wine that one night, the way his lips fit around the curve of the glass. He was fairly certain that men who were totally straight didn't notice such things, and maybe he did need to do some re-evaluating of his past romantic entanglements. Ginny and Cho were both beautiful, as were the other few women he'd dated briefly in the past five years, but...he supposed there was a certain quality shared among them. They were boyish, for lack of a better term. Not particularly curvy or voluptuous, but more straight and narrow. One of the girls he dated had once made a self-conscious remark just before they'd fallen into bed about her small breasts, but Harry didn't mind - he preferred it. Ron had always teased him about that, saying he was clearly brain damaged if he didn't appreciate a "nice rack" on a woman like Madam Rosmerta from *The Three Broomsticks*.

Maybe the fact that Harry had never dated a boy wasn't because he was straight, but because it had simply never occurred to him that he could.

Regardless, he didn't appreciate Hermione or Pansy manipulating him into making that decision, with Draco no less, and he was going to make sure she didn't forget it anytime soon. He told her that he'd rather not see her until the Christmas Party, which she was still welcome to come to, but that he needed time to cool off, and he couldn't do that when every time he looked at her, he pictured her discussing his sexual proclivities with *Pansy Parkinson* of all people.

She had left his house, in tears, and Harry had gotten an understanding, if terse, owl from Ron a short while later, saying he was sorry for what happened, but that if Hermione wasn't welcome, he didn't feel right coming over either. It was nothing less than what Harry expected. Ron had left a postscript on the letter saying they were still on for their Wednesday lunches, but that Harry was obligated to buy since he'd sent home a crying Hermione for him to deal with.

At least Ron understood why he was upset, and wasn't holding it against him. They both knew that Hermione tended to meddle a bit much, sometimes.

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"Teddy, no running!" Harry shouted up the stairs as he saw his godson tear across the hallway after his new puppy.

"Sirius just peed on the carpet, Harry!" He laughed aloud, hoping his own godfather was getting a good chuckle out of the fact that Harry had given Teddy a black Labrador as an early Christmas gift, and they both decided to name him Sirius.

"Call Kreacher to clean it up," he shouted upstairs, then went back into the front room where people were starting to gather. He could hear Teddy's now-faint voice yelling for the house elf as Andromeda walked toward him.

"You do realise that you're going to have to keep that dog here, don't you?"

Harry smiled, "I do, and I'm perfectly fine with that. It'll be nice to have another warm body in the house when Teddy's at yours."





*If Harry could kick himself, he would. He opened the door, lifting the boy up in his arms and carrying him inside, waiting for Sirius to follow before shutting the door again, this time gently.*

*"Of course you can. I didn't forget. I was just...surprised down there, that's all."*

*"You seemed pretty mad," Teddy said, looking up at Harry with concerned brown eyes.*

*"Well, I was," Harry said, figuring honesty was best at this point.*

*"You don't like that man? Gran says we're related."*

*"Distantly," Harry grumbled before clearing his throat. "I just wasn't expecting to see him, that's all."*

After a few games of exploding snap, Harry took Teddy back downstairs to find that, as expected, everyone had gone. The house elves had cleaned up the mess, and unless you'd been there an hour previous, you'd of never known a party had been held there. The tree in the corner was lit up with hundreds of fairy lights, the metallic bulbs reflecting even more light around the room. He and Teddy set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and Harry made a mental note to tell Kreacher to make them disappear by morning. Teddy knew there was no such thing, but the tradition seemed to matter to him nonetheless.

In the soft light of the early morning, the tree still looked beautiful. Harry closed the curtains, wanting the lights of the tree to have as much presence in the room as possible. He went into the kitchen, fixing himself some tea and toast, looking at the clock and giving Teddy another half hour or so until he'd come barreling down the stairs, anxious to open his presents.

Still dressed in his pajamas, a worn red jumper thrown over top to fight the chill that Grimmauld Place always had in the mornings, no matter what time of year, he took his meager breakfast out to the front room, intent on enjoying it in front of the tree. Kreacher had already started the fire, and it was warmer there than in the kitchen.

Walking down the hallway, he heard a knock on his front door. Not really wanting to deal with visitors right now, he waited to see if the person would knock again. 'It's Christmas day for chrissakes,' he mumbled when a second knock came. Setting down his tea and popping the last bite of toast in his mouth, he walked to the door and opened it.

Harry shut his eyes, praying to whatever god existed that it wasn't really Draco Malfoy standing on his doorstep, holding a solitary present in his hands, complete with a big red bow.

"I'm still asleep, and I'm having a nightmare. That's the only explanation for what I'm seeing," Harry finally said.

"Teddy is my cousin's son. I have a Christmas present for him."

"Right, because you've cared so much about him up until now. It's perfectly normal for you to show up, *today*, with a gift when you missed it the first seven years."

"It is customary to give Christmas gifts on Christmas Day, is it not?"

"Whatever, Malfoy. What do you want? My feet are freezing."

For some unknown reason that Harry couldn't fathom, Draco took that as an invitation to come in, shutting the door behind him as Harry had no choice but to back away from the door.

"Considering you've got on the thickest pair of woolen socks I've ever seen, it's a wonder you can feel anything at all through those."

Harry glanced down at the socks that Molly had knit for him two years previous, scowling. "These socks are perfectly fine, thank you very much."

Draco smirked, making his way into the hallway, setting Teddy's present on a nearby table and unwrapping the scarf from around his neck, and started to unbutton his coat, the same coat that Harry had admired that day near the cliff.

"What do you think you're doing?" Harry asked, standing there flabbergasted at Draco's nerve and total lack of propriety.

"Teddy and I met for the first time last night, and he knows we're related. It would hardly be proper for me to not recognize the occasion now, would it?"

"You're a complete stranger to him!"

"We shared a bit of a giggle after your temper tantrum last night. We're as good as friends now."

Draco threw his coat across the back of the sofa in the same front room where he'd accosted Harry the night before. He followed him through, angrily ripping off the mistletoe from the overhang as he walked through the wide doorway, gaping as he watched Draco flop down into Harry's favourite chair, looking at Harry expectantly.

"Aren't you going to offer me tea or coffee? A hot chocolate would be simply lovely, thanks."

Before Harry could answer, he heard the telltale footsteps of Teddy coming down the hallway on the upper floor, his little feet soon hitting the stairs, running.

"Happy Christmas, Harry!" he said, turning his attentions quickly to the pup on the landing at the top of the stairs, trying to coax Sirius to come down.

"Just go up and get him, Teddy, he's still too nervous to come down by himself," Harry said, running a hand through his hair and wondering how to get Draco to just *leave already*. He wasn't going to let him spoil his first Christmas alone with his godson.

Teddy frowned before bounding up the stairs to fetch Sirius, being careful as he walked back down the stairs and cradling the Labrador against his chest, walking into the front room.

"Hi, Mr. Malfoy," he said, barely paying the blond any attention, as if he were almost expecting him to be there.

"You can call me Draco. We're practically cousins, you know."

That earned Draco a bright smile before Teddy set Sirius on the ground, coaxing him into play with the small chew toy that Harry had bought at the last minute before bringing the dog home.

"You hungry?"

"Yes," both Teddy and Draco answered in unison. Harry looked over at the blond and saw him smirking.

"I was talking to my godson," Harry scowled.

"Is Draco going to stay and open presents, too?"

Harry looked down at Teddy, his eyes wide and full of joy, and Harry didn't know what to say. His gaze went to Draco, who was looking at him with an equal openness in his face, waiting for an answer. He thought for a long moment about the gift waiting for Teddy on the table in the entryway, and grit his teeth.

"Apparently so."

Harry didn't wait for the look of triumph that was sure to be on Draco's face, turning to head back into the kitchen to begrudgingly make enough hot chocolate for three.

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As he waited for the milk to start to boil in the saucepan, the door swung open, Teddy, followed by Draco, coming through. Teddy sat down at the long table, putting Sirius on the seat beside him. Draco walked over closer to Harry, leaning against the countertop.

"Need any help?"

"You can make some toast, if you can manage that," he said through clenched teeth, decidedly not looking up. He added several rounded teaspoons of cocoa, followed by several more spoonfuls of sugar, stirring slowly.

"Did you know my parents, Draco?"

"I did, indeed," Draco said, and began telling Teddy various stories, mostly about Remus.

Harry tried blocking out the sound of Draco's voice, but it wasn't working. He poured the steaming cocoa into three mugs, adding a large dollop of whipped cream to Teddy's. He set them on the table, not caring that Draco's *accidentally* splashed a bit, a few drops landing on the edge of the other man's sleeve.

"Can I have some whipped cream, too?" Draco asked, and Harry could hear the smirk in his voice.

"No," he said, smug in his childishness, opening the fridge and tossing the container back inside, slamming the door shut.

Harry sat down next to Teddy and Sirius, not noticing that the boy was watching him.

"Here, Draco. You can have mine." Harry watched, stunned, as Teddy pushed his cup of cocoa in Draco's direction.

"Thank you," Draco said softly, and Harry saw him give Teddy a genuine smile, the kind that he'd given him several times back on the Isle of Skye.

Harry got up and left, not trusting his anger, knowing it would get the best of him. He wouldn't ruin Teddy's Christmas more than it already had been with Malfoy's presence.

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Teddy was, as any seven-year-old boy should be, ecstatic about the prospect of opening gifts. When he dragged Draco into the front room, he was practically bouncing with anticipation. Harry had already commandeered his favourite chair, more out of spite than anything else. Draco set his own gift for Teddy under the tree, and sat down on the sofa opposite the fire as they waited for the boy to start tearing into the presents.

Teddy seemed just as excited about his gifts to Harry as he was his own, and he squeezed into the chair next to him as he waited for Harry to open them. Harry always liked to tease Teddy about it, going as slow as possible, saying he didn't want to waste perfectly good wrapping paper that could be re-used. This usually made Teddy start tearing them open for him, even as Harry was holding onto them. He laughed as Teddy started doing just that, and Harry nearly forgot that they had an audience.

The first present was a dark green hand-knitted woolen hat, likely one that Andromeda had made for Teddy to give to him.

"It's got flaps to cover your ears, see," Teddy exclaimed, grabbing it from Harry's hands and putting it on, as if to demonstrate. "And it matches your scarf."

"It's wonderful, Teddy. I needed a new hat - how did you know that?" Harry said, tapping the boy on the nose as he grinned proudly at his godfather.

They opened several more gifts, Harry having gotten a new broom servicing kit, also from Teddy via Andromeda (for which he would definitely need to thank her - he knew they weren't cheap), and a few new drawings that Harry would put up around the house. Teddy whooped with joy when he opened the new broomstick, the boy's first one that he could call his own. Harry had chosen a newer model Firebolt, thinking of Sirius all the while as he picked it out that day, several months back.

Andromeda would likely murder him, but what fun was there in being a godfather if he couldn't spoil the boy?

Draco cleared his throat, and Harry realised that he had forgotten he was there. Teddy stopped mid-tear on the gift in his lap; he too apparently forgot about their guest until he noticed that it was Draco's gift he was about to unwrap. The boy shifted his position on the floor so that he was facing Draco fully, his back to Harry now, giving him a full view of the present about to be revealed. He watched Draco observe his godson, and there was something new behind his eyes that wasn't there before they'd started opening gifts - something twisted inside Harry's belly as he realised it was sadness, and he suddenly felt inexplicably guilty for ignoring Draco for the past half hour.

When Teddy finally got all the paper off to reveal an old wooden box, he watched as the boy slowly opened the lid, and saw several rolled parchments, at least a dozen, layered within. Harry bit his tongue, ready to chastise Draco for giving a boy his age something as boring as reading material, but then Teddy unrolled one of the papers and realised what he was looking at...

It was Draco's old school essays, specifically the ones from Defense Against the Dark Arts. He could see Remus' red scrawl in the margins, both praising and correcting whatever Draco had written about. He didn't recall getting such lengthy feedback from the man when he was Harry's professor, and when Teddy turned the page over to reveal several lines of Remus' meticulous handwriting, he could make out words like *promise*, *gifted*, and *hope*.



Draco broke the heavy silence, speaking directly to Teddy. "Your dad was my professor a long time ago. I wasn't very nice to him, but he was always kind and fair to me. I got the highest marks ever in that class when your dad taught me, because it saved my life years later, and I was always grateful for what I learned from him, even if I never said it."

Draco moved down to the floor to kneel next to Teddy, looking to see which essay he had unrolled. His voice was soft and gentle, and Teddy couldn't take his eyes off the small paragraph written at the bottom of the second page.

"That one there was an essay that we had to write on boggarts. I was scared to death to find out what mine would be, but your dad was really good at making people feel safe." He looked up at Harry then, "Even if they were scared, arrogant teenagers trying to act tough in front of their friends."

Draco turned his attention back to Teddy, and they continued to look at the various essays inside the box. Teddy was completely enamored with them, and Harry saw himself in the boy, holding onto the photo album that Hagrid had given him when he was nearly the same age, knowing what it meant to have that piece of his parents; the parents he could barely remember, and would never know.

Harry continued to watch Draco, couldn't take his eyes off him, and so many things were clicking into place deep down inside. Draco constantly tormenting him at school, the jealousy that always seemed to be covering something else, something more. Draco, who didn't give his identity away to Bellatrix, effectively saving his life. Draco who clung to him as they escaped the Fiendfyre, his grip painfully tight. Draco who, when Harry returned his wand, looked at Harry with such intensity - intensity that Harry had mistaken at the time for a certain shame at having been overpowered, but now, looking back, he knew it was the gaze of a young man taking his last look at the one thing he ever really wanted and was constantly denied. *Himself*. Pansy, Hermione - they were right. Harry's entire body felt warm with the knowledge that someone - Draco - had wanted him like that for such a long time. It was the closest thing to devotion that Harry had ever experienced, and it made his insides tingle as that truth swept through him.

His mind went to the days spent with Draco on the island, the easy conversation, comfortable silences, and almost-friendship that seemed to grow almost overnight. The way Harry's stomach clenched when he thought about being left alone in the cottage, wanting Draco to stay.

And he thought about the kiss, in front of everyone, and what it stirred within him, his early morning release as obvious an indicator as any that Draco had lit a fire within him years ago, newly stoked, and he wasn't sure he wanted it to go away. It was there all along, hiding in plain sight.

Now, Draco had given Teddy, the boy he'd never met, something that obviously meant a lot to him, else he wouldn't have hung onto them after all these years. It was a selfless gift, giving this piece of Remus to his orphaned son. Teddy, so innocent and young and full of love and trust, who had been left alone because his parents couldn't bear to raise him in a world where Voldemort existed, was now being given probably the best gift of his life by the man who had started it all, nearly got them all killed because of a stupid cabinet.

It was one of the most amazing acts of contrition that he'd ever been witness to, and Harry wasn't even sure that the other man realised he was seeing it that way.

Draco stood, dusting off his trousers and moving back toward the sofa where his coat lay across the back. He heard Teddy say thank you, his voice full of awe as he continued to look through his father's writings. Harry stood, this newfound clarity making everything extra sharp around the edges - it was as if he was truly seeing *Draco* for the first time, and not just Malfoy.

He made his way from the chair to where Draco stood, his coat now in hand, preparing to leave. Harry couldn't let him leave, not now, now when he'd just begun to see.

"Don't-" Harry started to say, gripping Draco's arm tightly. He didn't know what to say. *'I'm sorry, Please stay, I see you now...'*

Draco was staring back at him, the sadness still there, and Harry suddenly wanted nothing more than to bring back that easy smile, the one he'd given Teddy over the hot chocolate.

He leaned in, without warning, and pressed his lips to Draco's. They were warm, hesitant, and Harry closed the distance between their bodies by moving closer, pulling Draco against him, holding him close. The other man started to respond, his lips barely moving, arms slowly loosening, and Harry felt Draco's coat fall to the floor against their feet. Eyes closed, he reached his hands up to cradle Draco's face, mirroring what he had done to Harry the night before, but with a gentleness that Harry didn't even know he was capable of until now.

Draco began to relax against him, and he felt arms grip his jumper at the small of his back, desperate and strong, needing to hold on. Harry didn't waste time seeking entrance to Draco's mouth, his tongue darting out and the blond instantly responding, granting him permission to dominate the kiss, and Harry wondered how he ever lived without the exquisite taste of Draco Malfoy. It was better than chocolate, better than the best treacle tart, better than all the sweets that Honeydukes had to offer, and it was all the more sweeter because it was his.

Neither Harry nor Draco noticed little Teddy leading Sirius out of the room, and when they finally parted out of necessity for air, they were alone.

"Was that my Christmas gift?" Draco asked, breathing heavily but not moving away, his fingers still gripping the back of Harry's jumper.

"I'm afraid you'll have to take it as is, flaws and all," Harry said, half-laughing, half trying to catch his breath. "No refunds or exchanges."

"I think I'll make due," Draco answered, before pulling Harry back into another toe-curling kiss.

It was turning out to be a very merry Christmas, indeed.

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