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Chapter 1 to 50

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Chapter: 1

**Title:** Changing of the Guard

**Disclaimer:** J. K. Rowling and her associates own these characters. I am writing this story for fun and not profit.

**Rating:** R/M.

**Warnings: DH SPOILERS, ignores epilogue.** Profanity, language, slash sex, perhaps some violence, cross-dressing (but not as a sexual kink).

**Pairings:** Harry/Draco, (apparent) Draco/OMC, Ron/Hermione.

**Summary:** Need a perfect stranger? Ask Metamorphosis. Harry Potter runs the business secretly and becomes whoever's needed for each occasion. He's not sure whether he should be more surprised, worried, or amused when Draco Malfoy comes to Metamorphosis and requests an actor who can play his boyfriend so that his parents will disown him. Yet Harry has even more dangerous choices after he creates Brian, Draco's "perfect" boyfriend. Draco doesn't know who Brian is, but he's trying to find out—and now so is Harry.

**Author's Notes:** Another novel-length WiP. At the moment, I have absolutely no idea how long this will be. It contains a fair amount of humor, as you can figure out from the summary, but also its fair amount of angst. If you don't like "mistaken identity" types of stories, you probably shouldn't read this. Also, this story is set in a deeply homophobic wizarding world.

**Changing of the Guard**

*Chapter One—Metamorphosis In Action*

"*Flecto frontem."*

Harry, staring critically into the mirror, smiled when he saw his forehead begin to bend. The skin tautened even as the edges of his forehead folded inwards, tucking around his temples and leaving the bones of his skull more prominent.

And the lightning bolt scar, which was unusually resistant to glamours of most kinds, bent and shrank as the angle changed, becoming nothing more than a thin line down the center of his brow—easily mistaken for a straight scar or a worry line.

Harry chuckled and spun away from the mirror. Ordinarily, he would have just used Muggle makeup to conceal the scar, but Lucille had warned him the dinner party they were attending tonight would be held in the overheated main room of her parents' manor house. There was a *slight* chance that the Muggle makeup would smear off with sweat, or simply the warmth if Harry got too close to one of the fireplaces.

Only a slight chance, but Harry didn't intend to risk it. The caution he'd learned since the war was the reason Metamorphosis had not only survived, but throve.

Another reason, of course, was that there was no other business like it in the country, and probably not abroad, either. But Harry didn't intend to rest on his laurels there, either. He fully expected competition to Metamorphosis to open someday, and his best hope before that happened was to keep increasing his own skill and the range of services that he could offer, so his patrons would be happiest to keep using him.

He held his wand above his hair for a moment, calculating whether he should use glamours after all. Then he shook his head. Transfiguration was much harder to detect than glamours, and Lucille had told him her parents were already suspicious—which was why she had hired him in the first place. Better to use Transfiguration just in case someone "accidentally" sent a spell at him designed to remove concealment.

He spent a moment considering the wigs hanging on empty heads in the room around him, then plucked the nearest one. It was made of pleasant, unobjectionable, straight brown hair, and Harry knew it well, which meant he stood a good chance of reconstituting it as itself and not a rag when he was done with the Transfiguration. Facing the mirror again, he set about tucking his hair under the wig, carefully, methodically, making sure not a single messy black hair escaped.

"*Implico comam*," he murmured, and spun his wand in a circle above the center of his scalp.

The brown hair of the wig rustled, then began to creep about and entwine with his own. Harry stood still throughout the process, wincing now and then as the wig jerked or tugged on a follicle. Since the wig had been made of human hair in the first place, no one would be able to tell where it ended and his own hair began by the time this spell was done. Even if someone suspected he was wearing a wig, they wouldn't be able to tear it loose.

That done, he considered his face in the mirror once more, then modified the line of his jaw with

a few taps. Combined with his bent forehead, it gave him a rather haughty look—not to mention an inbred one. But Harry was playing a pure-blood, somewhat dim wizard from the Continent tonight, so that wasn't a problem.

That done, he breathed deeply to clear his mind and held his wand over his eyes. This was the trickiest Transfiguration, since he had to change not only his eye color and their size, but how well he saw. Occasionally he played a character who needed glasses, but not often. Every sign that connected the "employees" of Metamorphosis to Harry Potter needed to be eliminated before he ventured out in public, or else they needed biographies that gave them a good reason to wear glasses.

"*Viridis ad caeruleus,*" he began, and saw with a surge of excitement that tendrils of blue had begun to snake through his green eyes. He was giving Osiris Grant brilliant blue eyes. Use of striking details like that was important; the blue eyes were what observers remembered, not the man.

More carefully, clamping down on the excitement, he reshaped the skin around his eyes, until they no longer looked too large for his head—the color and brilliancy of the eyes changed the way people perceived them, so he would have to make accommodations for their sense of proportion even if he could still see with no physical pain—and then altered their angle of sight. There came the momentary, piercing pain he always experienced, and suddenly he was blinking and stepping back from the mirror. It was hard to meet his own gaze, at least in the moments before he grew used to his new appearance.

But the man staring back at him was undoubtedly Osiris Grant—scion of a very obscure English pure-blood family who had moved to the backwaters of Germany during the war with Grindelwald, a jolly bloke, fond of his liquor, but prone to talk for far too many hours about Goethe. Of course, those character details would matter far less to Lucille's family than the fact that Osiris was pure-blooded, comfortably well-off, and *male*, but Harry liked to get them right anyway. It was his right to take pride in his work, considering how painstaking he was to get it correct.

He pitched his voice a little lower. "Charmed to meet you, Lady Larentis." Then he nodded in satisfaction. That would do. He had taken lessons from one of the numerous Muggle voice teachers he'd worked with over the years until he could produce passable German-accented English. An auditory glamour was always usable, of course, and far less likely to be detected than a visual one, but Harry was a *craftsman.*

He turned to fetch a pair of boots that had slight platforms in them. Those boots would alter Osiris's walk, making it dainty and mincing and utterly unlike the free-swinging stride Harry Potter used. Harry intended to practice with them before he met Lucille tonight. It had been months since he'd had a stumble, but *still.*

"Osiris."
Lucille Larentis met him at the door to her parents' manor house, a delighted smile touching her

lips. Part of the delight, of course, came from knowing that he worked at Metamorphosis. She didn't know he was Harry Potter; no one did, and it was going to stay that way if Harry wanted to run a successful business. But he was here for the purpose of fooling her parents, she had hired him with her own money, and that was enough for her to share a gleeful sense of conspiracy with him.

"Lucille." Harry took her hand and bent to kiss it, knowing they were already under sharp-eyed scrutiny from inside. But he had played many Continental wizards before, and he understood their manners, from the proper place to kiss a date's hand to the exact angle to bend his neck whilst he was doing it. He straightened up again and tucked his hand into Lucille's arm. "I trust you are well?"

She lowered her eyelashes and smiled. She was a tall, slender, blonde witch with piercing green eyes not unlike his own in their natural state, and Harry understood why her family had simply believed, for a long time, that she intimidated any potential suitor who tried to court her. But they had not believed that forever, and so she had hired him.

"You only saw me a few hours ago, Osiris," she said, which of course wasn't true at all, but which was part of the charade Harry had told her to play. He was pleased to find out that she remembered her lines word-perfect. He had worked with people who were very far from being as good, and it always irritated him. If *they* were going to hire *him*, at least they could add the minor touches to the pretense that were all he asked of them, once their Galleons were handed over. "Have you forgotten my assurances of health that fast?"

"I will always like to look at you for myself, and assure *myself* of how well you are," said Harry, in Osiris's fussy voice. "When we are married, I intend to care for you as you never saw man care for woman."

Lucille laughed and escorted him into the Larentis manor house. The front doors were carved with stone wyverns that formed part of the pure-blood family's crest, or at least had in the days when they were important enough to make their own coat of arms matter. It had been a very, very long time since the Larentis family had had Galleons to be proud of. In isolation and genteel poverty, they clung to their pride.

The hall they emerged into was hot, as Lucille had promised, and already crowded. Harry swept an expert gaze over the room, so fast and practiced that he had already identified the exits, entrances, and several potential threats before he looked anyone in the eye.

The hall was floored with gray marble, but the walls were wood. Several hearths blazed here and there, and more guests were arriving from them all the time, with the whoosh and roar of green flames that marked Floo travel. Harry grimaced to himself. The one thing he had never managed to shed as he slid from identity to identity was his discomfort with fireplaces. But he was determined that he would work it out someday, and soon enough to create multiple personas who loved Floo travel before he was ready to retire.

Gold banners and scarlet ones hung from the rafters; nearly all of Lucille's family had been in Gryffindor House, and they claimed descent from Godric's brother. The guests included other poor pure-blood families, a scattering of Lord Larentis's business associates—he trained and bred winged horses of all kinds—and several contacts from the Ministry. Harry saw two Aurors, and pretended not to see them. They were recognizable to *him*, in their sharp movements and too-alert sensitivities, but probably not to most of the other people around them, out of formal robes as they were. And they were among the few people he had to worry about when he was disguised like this.

On the other hand, there was no particular reason they should pay attention to Lucille's fiancé, even if they *were* friends of the family. Harry had studied Lord and Lady Larentis very carefully before he agreed to accept Lucille's Galleons. They were the kind of people who had long ago bored even those who wished them well, and their best friends would greet Harry as briefly as possible, then try to escape before the Lord or Lady could descend and make their eyes glaze over.

"Lucille!"

And here came Harry's first big test. He straightened and smiled. He had not changed his lips—he sometimes didn't get it right, and he would have to appear as Osiris several times—but he had changed his smile. Osiris smiled shyly, adorably, innocently. *He* had never been through a war and sacrificed his life to save the wizards of Great Britain, after all.

Harry pushed the thoughts away. They shouldn't have been so close to the surface whilst he was playing Osiris.

Lady Artemis Larentis came to a stop in front of him and studied him doubtfully. She was tall, but had only passed her height on to her daughter. Her eyes were gray, and her hair a rather wispy brown tangle even beaten into shape with a brush and several charms. But she wasn't stupid, just average, and it was important that the man her daughter was going to "marry" impress her.

"Lady Larentis," Harry said, and sounded deeply impressed and just a touch anxious, the way Osiris would sound. Osiris was in his late thirties, and had begun to despair that he might ever get married. He didn't want to muck this up. He accepted her hand and kissed it in the Continental manner. "Enchanted."

The lady narrowed her eyes as she studied him. Harry kept his real emotions effortlessly off his face, and knew Lucille was probably doing the same thing. She didn't have Harry's practice at switching identities, but deception of a different kind came naturally to her.

"Mr. Osiris Grant?" Lady Larentis murmured the words. But then she began to smile, and Harry knew he had surprised and relieved her—exactly the reaction he had hoped to elicit. In one way, despite their suspicions, Lucille's parents were doing half the work for him. They wanted so badly to believe their daughter was engaged that they would overlook faults in their potential

son-in-law, and that included overlooking niggling doubts about how he looked.

If there *were* any. There shouldn't be, but Harry had long ago accepted that he couldn't control everybody's perceptions—just those of most people, most of the time.

"I'm so happy to meet you," Lady Larentis said, and clasped his hands, beaming. They were very neatly manicured hands, and Harry had no fears about them. For some reason, Transfiguring his nails and his fingers came easily to him. "Lucille has mentioned you, of course, but she never said you were so handsome." She sent a scolding look at her daughter.

"*Mum*," said Lucille, in the helpless tones of a teenage girl—a role she had told Harry she often played with her parents, though she was thirty-five. She ducked her head into Harry's shoulder, blushing. Harry put a protective arm around her.

"Well, she didn't!" Lady Larentis glanced up at Harry, her eyes laughing now. "You are welcome, Mr. Grant, very welcome. Just let me fetch my husband. I know he's longing to meet you." She bustled away.

"One test passed, then," Harry whispered into Lucille's ear.

She looked up at him, smiling. "And a few more to come," she murmured, barely moving her lips. "And then I can move to the Continent with Mariana, and only visit my parents a few times a year, and this acting will be *over*." Her hand briefly tightened on his, the only visible sign of disgust she would allow herself.

Harry could not really understand the distaste for acting in general—it had helped him keep both his sanity and privacy intact after his defeat of Voldemort, even before he started Metamorphosis—but he had deep sympathy for Lucille's particular case. Her parents were not ever going to accept, and therefore must not be allowed to suspect, that Lucille was a lesbian and in love with Mariana Rossemeyer, daughter of another poor pure-blood family. She had hired "Osiris" to pose as her fiancé when their suspicions had finally got too intense, and he would pretend to marry her and appear as her husband several times over the next few years, until he would finally die in a tragic accident. And of course Lucille and Mariana would actually be living together in the house with muddled Apparition coordinates that supposedly belonged to Lucille and her "husband." There would be children—but from a contract and by way of discreet spells, not actually from sex with any man. So long as there were grandchildren in the end, Lucille had confided to Harry, her parents would not actually care when her husband vanished.

Harry, closeted himself in a wizarding world that had proven more focused on family and less accepting of human differences than he had ever realized as a child, understood all too well.

"Here comes your father," he said then, and Lucille promptly turned around with a brilliant smile.

Lord Harvey Larentis was a shorter, more masculine version of his wife, leaving Harry

bewildered about how Lucille had turned out pretty enough to make *him* admire her. But he shook Harry's hand and stared at him with eyes a little sharper than his wife's.

"Grant, hmmm?" he said. "Are you sure that you're actually related to the family that left England all those years ago?"

"*Daddy*," said Lucille, in obvious despair over her father's rudeness.

"Dear," said Lady Larentis. It was just the one word and a touch on his hand, but it made her husband flush.

"Sorry," he said. "It's just—we want the best for our daughter, you know that, and not everyone represents who they are truly since the war. There have even been Muggleborns trying to pass themselves off as pure-bloods." He gave himself a little shake. "Not that there's anything wrong with being Muggleborn, of course not, but why are they so all-fired desperate to claim *our* heritage, eh?"

Harry held his temper. He had long since become accustomed to dealing with people that held Lord Larentis's particular brand of objectionable views. Lucille wasn't the first lesbian daughter he'd escorted to a party, nor the first pure-blood who had come to him for help. "I understand, sir," he said. "But I assure you, my parents have managed to give me a longing for my homeland." He let the cheapest sort of nostalgia leak into his voice. It was easy. The latest rage among pure-bloods was remembering the "past," by which they meant the days before the first war with Voldemort, when Muggleborns knew their place and so many pure-blood wizarding families had not died out, sworn allegiance to the Dark Lord, or left England.

"Well, then." Lord Larentis grasped his hand and pumped it up and down again. "And of course you'll treat our little Lucille well." Harry wondered how he could know that based on one glimpse of a false face, but kept his opinion to himself. He'd had a lot of practice at that, as well. "Do you like children?"

"I would like to have two or three." Harry smiled down at Lucille. "But my little girl has assured me she will need at least four to content her." That was another thing they had arranged before they came here: Lucille had no objection to bearing several children, as long as she didn't have to touch a man to do so, and her being the one who favored a larger number of heirs would make her parents well-disposed towards her.

Lady Larentis wiped an actual tear from her cheek and kissed Lucille. "Thank you," Harry heard her say. "Thank you for making your mother so happy."

Harry concealed a snort. Of course, since the wizarding community wasn't about to give up its disapproval of people who had sex outside marriage or didn't marry at all, it was important that homosexual, pure-blood daughters and sons remain able to access the only source of income most of them had ever thought to depend on. But it rendered him almost grateful that he had no family himself, no relatives to worry about disgracing, no people who had insisted that he choose

between them and freedom.

*Then again…*

Of the Weasleys, only Ron, Hermione, and Ginny knew he was gay. But none of them would ever betray him, and Harry had settled Ron's initial bad reaction by locking himself in a room together with Ron and seventeen bottles of Firewhiskey. He'd let Ron yell and drink and cast hexes at him until his best friend grew tired, and then Harry had managed to reassure him that, yes, Ginny knew; yes, Harry wouldn't give Ron's parents heart attacks by revealing it; and no, Harry had never for a moment desired Ron. Which happened to be true. Harry didn't go in for redheads any more than he did for women, a fact which he had figured out before he and Ginny actually had sex, thank God.

He had supportive friends, instead of complete freedom. On the other hand, he also had a peaceful life instead of complete social ostracism.

And thanks to his business, he stood an excellent chance of fooling the very people who would have disdained him if they knew one secret and revered him if they knew the other. *He* was the one who dictated the way he was treated.

That was enough.

Lucille drew him further into the room. Harry watched the way her face lit up when she caught a glimpse of her lover Mariana, and reminded himself that his playacting tonight, besides being fun and earning him some serious money, would give the two women a chance to be happy.

Yes, he did love his job.

Unsurprisingly, when Harry arrived to open Metamorphosis the next morning, in his persona of the Manager—a short, thick, heavyset man who looked to have goblin blood—there was a pile of post waiting. Harry picked it up and began to rifle through it, setting aside the obvious jokes and letters that tried to unsubtly pry into his identity.
He closed Metamorphosis for a time once he decided to take a case, preferring to devote all his energies to one complicated situation at once. Since he played "everyone" involved with Metamorphosis, it was the best thing he could have done. He wasn't stupid or greedy enough to handle two cases at once, when he might have been required to appear in two different places at the same time.

However, the most important step of Lucille's case was settled now, and he would only have to appear as Osiris for short periods at set dates in the future. That left him free to consider the pleas that had arrived in the meantime and decide which one he wanted.

Humming, he shuffled the letters into two separate piles—the rubbish and the possibles. The first envelope on top of the second pile was made of thick, creamy paper, indicating a pure-blood client. The crest stamped on the seal made Harry frown thoughtfully. A gray, study-looking M

twined with ivy and a single serpent, it looked familiar, but he couldn't remember from where.

When he opened it, he recognized the handwriting in the same vague way, but he refused to hurry himself and glance at the signature before he read the message. Hurry was not part of his business.

*May 20th, 2010*

*To: the Manager of Metamorphosis*

*Dear Sir,*

*I would like to hire you for a job. I am told that you are the best in the business of providing people the wizards they want and need, and after studying your results, I am very impressed indeed.*

*I am the son of a once-notable pure-blood family. My parents have recently tried to place unacceptable restrictions on me. I wish to hire an actor capable of playing my boyfriend. It does not matter if the man is straight or gay in reality, but he will have to be amenable to playing gay—and not mind the public notoriety that surrounds such openness in our sadly unenlightened society.*

*I am sure you wonder why I wish to do this; I have been told by those who know that you usually act to convince families that their children are straight.*

*In this case, I wish to force my father's hand. He will disown me, if I push him far enough. Then I will build up my own fortune and reputation, until he is begging to take me back. This is my idea of the perfect vengeance. My mother will require more pushing and in a slightly different direction, which I will discuss with you if you take the case.*

*Money is no object. Nor is the blood status or looks of the wizard involved, though I would prefer him not to be utterly hideous. Magical power is irrelevant.*

*I would appreciate return correspondence by June 1st. June the 5th is my thirtieth birthday, and I would like to make my first appearance with my new partner by my side at the party my parents are holding for me.*

*Sincerely,*

*Draco Malfoy.*

Harry felt his lips twitch into a smile. He laid the letter carefully aside and smoothed the paper down with one hand.

Then he made himself reach for the next envelope. He would look over the others. He would not

rush into a decision.

But in his heart of hearts, he already suspected what Metamorphosis's next case would be.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you very much for all the reviews!

*Chapter Two—Need a Perfect Stranger?*

Draco met the owl in the gardens, holding up a steady arm as the bird angled towards him. It was a great horned owl, but bleached white as a snowy, with a silvery sheen to the feathers. This distinctive bird came from Metamorphosis, and Draco tried to still his own excitement with a deep breath. Just because the Manager of Metamorphosis had responded to his letter didn't mean he'd accepted the case. He could have been returning a polite refusal whilst he concentrated on solving somebody else's problem.

Draco's hands really were steady, and his mind really clear, when he opened the letter. If this plan failed, then he would contact Blaise, who was living abroad now, and ask *him* to pose as his boyfriend. Blaise would think the whole thing was a scream, and since he didn't live in England, being ostracized there wouldn't bother him.

He held onto his calm until he opened the letter and scanned the first lines.

*June 1st, 2010*

*Dear Draco Malfoy:*

*I am happy to tell you that Metamorphosis will indeed accept your case.*

Draco closed his eyes and let his head fall backwards. He exhaled a long, shaky breath, The owl on his shoulder shifted a little and stuck a talon in his skin as if reminding him not to faint.

The moment of weakness was past quickly. Draco had become an expert at concealing what he felt in the last few years, so his parents didn't even suspect he was tired of their restrictions and ready to rebel against them. But his real emotions remained alive, shimmering, under the surface, so he read the rest of the letter with a cool face and an increasingly fast heartbeat.

*I have several actors who may fit your requirements. If you will meet me in the Hog's Head at one this afternoon, I will be happy to show you their photographs and discuss other requirements*

*you may have, as well as payment.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Manager of Metamorphosis.*

Draco nodded, more than satisfied. The letter was courteous but not overly so, which would have smacked of smarm. And there was no crass hinting about a certain amount of money now. That would be settled when they met, in the way that pure-bloods had always preferred to do business. Draco wondered idly if the Manager was a pure-blood.

He had three hours to get ready.

First, though, he needed to locate some owl treats for this magnificent bird, and then he would write the letter and have the owl carry it back. He stroked the feathers once, with an impulsive affection, and walked back towards the Manor.

His mother was reading in the large back room that stretched three-quarters of the length of the house, and served at once as both study and conservatory. She looked up when he came in, and raised her eyebrows. "That's a rather fine owl," she said. "A new purchase?" Her voice was not, of course, edged with concern. The Malfoy family had kept its money after the war, and even increased it in recent years.

Draco chuckled. "No, just Pansy being extravagant. She's invited me for tea this afternoon." The lie flowed smoothly from his lips, even as he looked at Narcissa affectionately. He had become very fond of his parents as he prepared to shock and betray them. They were so much *themselves* that he found pleasure in interacting with them, as totally unique personalities.

He hoped absently that the actor chosen to play his boyfriend would have such a personality. He already knew what he wanted, but there was no reason that Metamorphosis should be able to provide every single tiny aesthetic liking to match his request. He would be happy enough if they met the broad outlines.

"Well, don't be late, then, dear."

Narcissa's smile was brilliant. She never had given up hope that he would marry Pansy, though Draco knew Pansy preferred the Muggle lover she kept in secret to anyone the wizarding world could offer her. And though Draco himself slept with both men and women, Pansy would not have been his first choice. She was a dear friend, and that was all she was.

"I won't," he said, and went to fetch owl treats, parchment, and ink. He knew he wouldn't seem suspicious now. That was the wonderful thing about telling a lie close enough to the truth to seem easily believable: other people saw you acting just as you were supposed to act and accepted the lie even more.

*I wonder if the Manager of Metamorphosis is as good a liar as I am?*

Harry stepped into the Hog's Head, in his guise as the Manager, precisely at one. Aberforth glanced up, saw him, and grunted once, nodding before he looked away. He had done business with the Manager before, and so long as Harry and his customers were quiet and neat and left generous money, he'd protect their right to privacy fiercely.
Harry located Malfoy at once, but only because he had so much experience with glamours. Malfoy had cast a half-shield over his table that hid his distinctive hair and made nothing very interesting seem to be happening in that direction. Harry felt an eager smile slide over his face. To work with someone talented in disguise spells would be *exciting*, since that brought up the chance that he could see through Harry's own.

Then Harry reminded himself he wasn't supposed to be having such thoughts. It was the Manager here at the moment, not Malfoy's boyfriend, and Harry had to play that part to the fullest. He shifted the portfolio under his arm, transferred the lemon sherbet he was sucking on from one cheek to the other, and then marched towards Malfoy's table.

Malfoy saw him coming and rose to his feet. The move surprised Harry, though of course he didn't allow that to show on his face or in his stride. He would not have received such courtesy a few years ago; he didn't think anyone would have.

*But you are not Harry Potter, and this is not the boy you knew.*

Decidedly not, Harry saw, when he reached the table and put out his hand, to have it shaken firmly. Malfoy had grown into the features that had once seemed so narrow and angular for his face, and then grown beyond them. He looked hardened now, rugged, though so far as Harry was aware, he managed a business instead of working in the field. And yet his jaw and chin were also chiseled, making him look like one of the exquisitely modeled male statues that were one of Harry's few luxuries in his own form.

Harry reminded himself not to be a fool, and nodded briskly once, then sat down on the other side of the table. Malfoy took the seat opposite him with a fluid economy of motion. Studying him, Harry rejected one of the imaginary personas he'd brought along right away. Malfoy would need someone who could keep up with him to make him look good on a dance floor or even just strolling along a street, and that persona had a bad leg.

Malfoy might not be *aware* he needed a companion like that, of course. But Harry was used to reading people and suiting their unconscious as well as their conscious requirements.

"Mr. Malfoy." Harry raised a hand, and Aberforth was there with mugs of butterbeer. If Malfoy found the drink too distasteful or lower-class, he didn't say so, though he did place the mug in front of him untouched. *Probably prefers Firewhiskey*, Harry thought. *Possibly something else.*
"It's a pleasure to meet you. Now. I believe you said in your letter that you wanted someone who would not mind playing gay, someone not too hideous?" He waved his wand, casting a privacy charm around the table, subtle and nearly undetectable.

Malfoy blinked. "Your magic is impressive, sir."

"Call me the Manager. It's the only name I have." And it was. Harry had never bothered to come up with a name for the form he originally met all his clients in when he only needed a title. "Thank you. Long practice." He began removing parchments from the portfolio and arranging them in neat stacks on the table, spelling away the wet rings of former mugs where they might have been a problem. "I have seven candidates for you based on your initial requirements. They are different in personality, looks, blood status, magical strength—"

"I said blood status and magical strength didn't matter." Malfoy's voice had cooled, as if he suspected Harry hadn't read his letter thoroughly but was too polite to say so aloud.

Harry glanced up and winked. The Manager had grotesque winks, but at the same time they were so cheerful they encouraged his clients to play along. It worked as usual, and he saw Malfoy relax with a little huff. "Oh, I know that, sir. But Metamorphosis is about finding you the *perfect* stranger. If we can suit your preferences in any way, then we will." He leaned back. Each pile of parchment now had a photograph on top of it, wizarding photographs displaying Harry in various identities he'd created but hadn't used yet. "Take your pick, sir. The files should tell you everything you need to know."

Draco was very carefully hiding how impressed he was, though he was sure the squat, fat little Manager could sense it. Said Manager reminded him of a cross between Flitwick and Hagrid. His hair and beard were flowing, wild manes of red on his tiny body, but he wore a neatly tailored set of gray robes and spoke with an accent that indicated he'd had the very best schooling. Draco could easily ignore what someone looked like when they were offering him everything he wanted.
He began to glance through the files. The Manager leaned back in his seat and pretended to ignore him, leaving Draco as much privacy as possible when they still shared a table. Draco felt a moment's wonder. Metamorphosis really *was* as good as all his friends had promised.

The first photograph confronting him was of a short, sandy-haired wizard with a shy grin. His file said he was Thomas Ledbetter, half-blood, of an age that would put him several years behind Draco in Hogwarts. He admired Quidditch but had never been able to play it. He admired and envied pure-blood culture and had studied it extensively. His magical strength was normal. His personality was retiring, calm; he preferred to let his partners take the lead.

Draco frowned thoughtfully and moved that parchment under the others. Ledbetter was potentially interesting, but Draco thought he would probably need a more fiery partner to stand up to the assaults Lucius and Narcissa would launch.

The second photograph made Draco's mouth go dry and his groin ache. The wizard, leaning against a wall with one boot poised on it, glanced up at him once and winked, then arched his neck back and licked his lips with a lascivious, cat-like yawn. His skin was deep black, so black as to seem blue, but he didn't *quite* resemble any of the Black people Draco had ever met. His

hair was fiery red, probably dyed, and his robes clung to him so tightly as to seem indecent. His eyes were brilliant, deep green. He was Purity, no last name, Muggleborn wizard, entirely self-educated—his family had refused him permission to go to Hogwarts, and indeed hadn't liked having a wizard in the family at all—fond of dancing and sex and yelling at people.

*Probably not*, Draco decided regretfully. He could have some good times in bed with Purity, and the name was wonderful, but he wanted to give the appearance that he was simply gay and did not care about his parents' opinions. Enraging them, as Purity would do, was not on the agenda. This was a deliberate rebellion, but the whole point was that his parents would not think it so.

He glanced up to find the Manager watching him politely from the corner of an eye, hands curled around his stomach. "I do have some more specific requirements, if you'd like to hear them," he said.

The Manager nodded, not even showing a hint of anger that Draco hadn't finished looking at the rest of the files. "What are they, sir?"

"I need someone who can act polite no matter what kind of shit my parents—or other people—happen to throw at him," Draco said, beginning to tick the points off on his fingers. He would have felt uncomfortable indulging in such a childish behavior before almost anyone else, but the Manager relaxed him. "I need at least moderate magical strength; I find it arousing." He shrugged. "I still don't care about blood status, but I would prefer someone who *knows* pure-blood manners, whether or not he was born to them. I need a *versatile* man, capable of fitting into both my manor's dining room and a Quidditch crowd well. Looks—I don't want an incredibly handsome man, because I don't want others fighting with me to flirt with him, but too ugly and people will wonder why I chose him, and maybe suspect this isn't real. Of course, he should also be a good liar."

"What about in bed?" the Manager asked, without turning a hair. He had nodded to all of Draco's other points.

"I'd prefer skill there, as well, of course," said Draco. "But if you have a straight actor willing to play gay who meets all the other requirements, I'll forego that. We don't have to sleep together, after all, only convince others that we are." He leaned back in his seat, feeling a smile widen almost unconsciously across his face. The Manager was someone he could show his emotions to and not worry about their coming back to bite him; in fact, it was for the best that he show his emotions, so the Manager could honestly evaluate what Draco needed.

The heavyset man hummed under his breath, then flicked his wand and gathered up all the stacks of parchment on the table. Draco's heart gave an extra thump. "You have no one who will fit my requirements?" he asked tightly.

"I do have someone." The Manage looked him right in the eye. His eyes were a faint, watery blue, but sincere. Draco relaxed again. "But before I introduce him to you, I need to know one more thing. You said in your letter that your mother will need to be pushed in a different

direction than your father. What did you mean by that? The answer might disqualify the candidate I present to you, depending."

"Depending?" Draco raised his eyebrows.

"He really doesn't feel any sexual interest for women," the Manager said dryly. "If he's required to flirt with someone as experienced in the social scene as your mother, I can't guarantee he'd be able to fool her."

Draco laughed aloud. "No flirting required!" Then he sobered, and thought for a moment as to how best to explain it, rehearsing the words he'd already gathered.*Yes, they will do.* "My mother has a faith in me that my father does not," he explained. "Lucius is aware of the tension between us, though I'm confident he has no idea what I plan to do about it. My mother isn't. She thinks I'll always come around to honoring the family's wishes and putting my own desires second if at all, no matter how long it takes me. It will be hard to convince her that I'm *serious* about this, because of her hope. She'll hang on to her perception of me long past the point where my father has cursed my name and told me to get out of his house. And unless we convince her, she'll eventually wear Lucius down before I've made my own independent name and fortune."

"Your own independent name and fortune is very important to you," the Manager noted.

"Oh, yes." Draco leaned forwards across the table. "My father *hates* admitting he was wrong. He still won't admit that he was wrong to get us involved in that stupid war, on the losing side; the farthest he's gone is to no longer admit he was right quite so loudly. And now he is pressuring me to break off my business because he's found I deal with people who aren't pure-blooded." Draco could feel his lip curl. "He believes I'm his obedient little son, his *puppet*, Lucius Mark Two. I want to show him that I'm my own man, and then I want him to*crawl* to my feet, begging me to accept the Malfoy name and inheritance again."

"You're his only son," the Manger said softly. "I know how important that is to pure-blood families. You're certain he won't just make his peace with your apparent sexuality in order to retain you as heir?"

"Hates to admit he's wrong, remember?" Draco shook his head. "And this would mean admitting he was completely wrong about where my *interests* lay for almost thirty years. Besides, a truly gay son, which he'll think he has for a while, would be of no use to him as far as perpetuating the Malfoy line goes."

"So you need someone who can stand up to your mother, the tears and the long waiting she might employ, and someone who can brave your father's rages," the Manager said. "Someone almost fearless, in other words." He smiled a little. "I have the perfect candidate for you, as long as you don't mind that he was in the equivalent of Gryffindor House at his own school."

Draco laughed, thinking of a few past lovers. "House is the last thing that matters to me now."

"Very well." The Manager concentrated for a moment, then flicked his wand. A file appeared floating in midair beside him. The Manager handed it over with a little bow. "I give you…Brian Montgomery."

Harry felt prickles of excitement running up his chest like Jarvey feet as he extended he folder. Brian Montgomery was a persona he had created soon after the beginning of Metamorphosis and had never dared use, because he was just a little too much like Harry Potter. The last thing Harry could have afforded at that juncture, when people still thought they knew him, was for someone to connect his name and Metamorphosis.
But it was ten years now since most people had seen Harry Potter acting as himself in public. Harry was confident certain impressions had passed off. People would remember him as the hero or not at all.

And Brian Montgomery was no hero.

Malfoy's eyebrows rose as he read the file. Harry leaned back in his seat, grinning, though in the Manager form that manifested as only a tiny smile. He could have recited the details in his sleep:

Brian Montgomery was a half-blood, son of a Muggle and a witch named Emma Handler who'd run away from home very young to live among Muggles, apparently because of "troubles with her father." His parents had moved restlessly outside the British Isles and then back, following his father's work in the developing computer business, but after the age of eleven Brian had stayed firmly ensconced at a very small wizarding school in New Zealand, called the Five Dragons. He'd left with honors in New Zealand's equivalent of the N.E.W.T.s, specifically in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. Potions had been his worst subject. He didn't think he was very good at flying, because he could never master certain specific turns.

Having come into a small legacy as a present from a grateful, rich friend whose life he'd saved in their seventh year together, Brian had immediately used it to move back to Britain and absorb the wizarding culture he considered his own despite so many frequent moves. He was a master of manners and pure-blood social culture, of difficult spells, and of most of the subjects taught at Hogwarts. He'd considered being an Auror, but decided regretfully that he wasn't quite *that* good with curses.

He'd decided to go on the Muggle stage when his money ran out, and found out he was extremely good at it. (That was actually true; Harry, as Brian, had starred in a few Muggle plays and had people applaud him. He didn't enjoy it that much, but Brian did, and it was important to build as much experience as possible that would stand up to a fact-check). But he still considered himself a wizard first and foremost, so he hired out as an independent curse-breaker and hex-remover, and did well there, too. He was most proud of his ability to fit in anywhere at a few moments' notice. His lying ability helped with that, but so did his very good memory for faces and names.

His magical strength was great enough that he was capable of overwhelming the more sensitive wizards he worked with, like Seers. That didn't bother Brian. He accepted it as a limitation, and

set up shields around himself when he had to. He was also very good in bed, but he used that without stint to overwhelm his lovers.

The photograph showed him with messy black hair that was Harry's and a face that resembled Harry's in outline, though with just enough features turned slightly different ways to render the resemblance hard to grasp. The lightning bolt scar became a thin red line on *his* forehead, souvenir of the incident in which he'd saved his friend from drowning and banged his head on a rock. His eyes were brilliant blue and danced mockingly up at the viewer. He conveyed irrepressible energy and buoyant self-confidence, probably too much. He'd written down as his greatest fault that he really needed to learn to shut up and listen more often.

Harry had hesitated to use Brian all these years, but he'd always been proud of his creation and never dreamed of discarding him. And now…

Harry gave the Manager's small smile again. He knew that expression. On Malfoy, it was less than it was on many of his clients; he had almost perfect control of his face. But his gray eyes widened a little and took on a gentle, dreamy luster, and he had reached out as if to caress the photograph. That he hadn't completed the gesture didn't matter.

*Hooked. Another victory for Metamorphosis.*

Draco barely heard the Manager asking him if Montgomery was suitable. He had a hard time tearing his eyes away from that grinning, excited, *exciting* face. And the biography…God. He was tailored for Draco.
He would have been suspicious if he hadn't heard before about how good Metamorphosis was. He didn't care if this man was lying a little in his biography, as long as he could actually practice what he preached.

Draco glanced up with a narrow smile. "He's perfect," he said. "And price is no object." He shrugged. "I can't say how long I'll need him. I'd suspect at least a month, maybe two."

*And I definitely can't say how long I'll want him.*

The Manager nodded. "Then the usual fee is seven hundred Galleons."

Draco reached for his moneypouch without a blink, now and then casting a glance at the photograph. Montgomery winked at him, casually licked a finger, and smeared it across his lips.

Draco felt himself harden.

*Yes. Oh, yes.*

Harry raised a little eyebrow as he accepted the money. Malfoy hadn't winced at the price. He must be even more taken than usual.
*Well, that's all right. After all, I'll provide him with absolutely everything he needs.* Harry hid a

smile as he watched Malfoy lean back in his seat and stare a little longer. *And it'll be my pleasure to do so.*

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews! Just to answer a few questions I've gotten several times: this story is updated every three days, and Harry and Draco are *equal* in this story; I don't write dominant/submissive or top/bottom dynamics.

*Chapter Three—Brian*

Draco cast a *Tempus* Charm, and then stopped and stared at the numbers floating in midair. He sighed. It was literally the same *minute* as it had been when he cast the last charm.

He banished the numbers with a flick of his wand and collapsed into his chair, casting a spell that would create the sensation of warm, massaging fingers down the back of his neck. He sighed in bliss as they worked, and kept himself focused only on that feeling for what he knew had to be several minutes.

*Will Brian be willing to do this for me, I wonder?*

And just like that, his thoughts were back with the man he was meeting tonight for the first time.

Draco opened his eyes and glanced around the room. It was a small, furnished flat he'd taken in North London to be closer to the city headquarters for his business. He was not enough of a fool to invite Brian to the Manor for their first meeting, and this was only the fourth of June, the night before his birthday celebration. Draco had been able to slip away from his parents easily enough; they were trying to surprise him, and didn't want him around at the moment anyway.

Brian was supposed to be here at the dot of eight. And it was only seven-thirty, and already Draco felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin.

*And wouldn't* that *be a nice sight to greet him with as he walks through the door?*

Draco grinned wryly and rubbed the back of his neck himself as the spells faded. He really had to calm down. He knew already that he was anxious to make a good impression on Brian. The man had certainly made a good impression on *him*, and had done it with no more than a photograph and words on a page.

But he wouldn't make it snapping and dancing like a horse with a fly bothering it. Besides, why

should he worry? He was Draco *Malfoy.*

*Though not for much longer if the plan goes the way I want it to.*

Draco leaned back and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling. Perhaps he should think about that. What other than his money and his name would work to impress a man like Brian?

*You mean, other than your dashing good looks and your ability to move like a god on a broom and on the ground and your ability to lie and your self-confidence?*

Draco laughed at himself, silently. Yes, that sounded like a good start.

Despite his determination to exist free from his father's shadow, he still wasn't all that used to standing on his own. He hadn't believed, until the moment when the Manager left the Hog's Head promising that Brian would meet him for the first time in three days, that his plan was really going to succeed. At least, not *this* plan. He could have used Blaise.

But he had Brian.

Because no one was there to see him, Draco wriggled like a child in his chair from excitement.

Harry glanced at the photograph of Brian lying on the table, and frowned thoughtfully. The shade of blue in those eyes was one he'd achieved almost by accident, not through the usual color-changing spells; those had been early days, when he was still experimenting in the desperate hope of finding a mask that would make him comfortable enough to wear it for always. Of course he hadn't found one. Of course he had found it was better (and more profitable) to slide from mask to mask like a butterfly constantly emerging from the chrysalis, and he had done so ever since. He just hoped he could recreate that blue.
But if he had thought it impossible, he would not have accepted this job.

Finally, he used the same incantation to alter his green eyes to blue that he usually did, but thought emphatically of the twilight color of Brian's eyes as he did so.

And it worked, of course, the blue chasing out the green in a great wave, like the wave of color that flooded the sky when the sun was setting. Harry laid down his wand and smiled at himself in the mirror for a moment, then spun to face the sets of robes behind him.

He stood in the great closet at the back of the Metamorphosis shop, the one in which all the tools of his trade led their own quiet, independent lives until he called them together and assembled them into something new. Robes, wigs, shoe supports, wands of different woods, "characteristic" glasses and watches and monocles and brands of cigarettes, face makeup, portable glamours attached to a certain strand of hair that could be placed among his own, books to look studious, manuscripts of different lives and tips from voice acting lessons…Harry could feel his own gaze softening and turning fond as he looked around. When he had decided to open Metamorphosis, he had decided to *commit.* Maybe he could never quite find the identity he wanted for himself,

but he could create thousands of attractive or interesting or wondrous ones, and to do that, he needed the best equipment possible.

When he'd found the set of dark, practical robes he wanted, he faced the mirror again, took another look at Brian's photograph, and felt a slight shiver of both danger and delight as he realized that he need not alter anything else, at least as far as looks went. He had already changed his face so that it bent at the required narrow angles and his lightning bolt scar was thinned to a narrow line. The man looking back at him from the mirror *was* Brian.

In appearance.

But then, Brian was dangerously close to the real Harry Potter in personality, too—or at least to Harry Potter as he had become over the last ten years, in those flitting moments when he was trying on masks and had not yet gone to exist behind one.

He frowned thoughtfully at himself in the mirror. "Are you sure you want this job?" he asked aloud. "You like being Brian too much, and you're not even on stage yet. That could be a problem."

But of course he was taking the job, because he had *already* taken the job, and Metamorphosis never failed in its commitments. Harry laid his doubts aside as casually and easily as he had laid aside his loneliness for years, because they were Harry Potter's doubts, and he was not Harry Potter right now. He picked up Brian's wand, ash with a core of Antipodean Opaleye scale—they made wands differently in New Zealand—and smiled into the mirror.

"Ready?" he asked in Brian's voice, slightly deeper and huskier than his own normal one. "We have a pure-blood to go stun."

At the dot of eight, a knock came on the door of the flat. Draco jumped up, and then swore viciously under his breath. He was *not* nervous. No, damn it, he was not.
And just like that, the nervousness drained away. For some reason, Draco usually did shake right before a major event—such as closing a business deal—and right after, but never during. His body reacted to the imminent danger as it *should*, with steel.

Coolly, he checked the hang of his robe sleeves and conjured a small mirror to check the expression on his face, all the while waiting for Brian to knock again. He didn't, and Draco's reflection in the mirror gave a slow smile.

He liked that.

He strolled casually across the room to the door, and opened it equally casually. He caught Brian aiming his wand at the door, halfway through the spell that would have created a peephole in it.

Brian straightened up at once, but didn't bother trying to look guilty. He was smiling. "You must be Draco Malfoy," he said. "I've heard of the hair."

Draco felt an immediate thrill tingle straight through to his gut, where it tightened. Brian was the walking, breathing emblem of his photograph, and more. No picture could have captured how he looked Draco directly in the eye, smiling slightly, making the action not seem rude, as it would have from most people, but the natural thing to do, because it was the way one interesting person would look at another. And they were both fantastically interesting, weren't they?

Draco put his hand out without knowing consciously that he was going to do so. Brian clasped it and shook it heartily, looking around the room in interest as Draco escorted him inside. He only stopped and stared at the artwork on the opposite wall, though, a combination of marble sculpture and bodies executed in ivory paint, all of which rotated slowly back and forth to reveal couples embracing each other. Since the couples included men with men and women with women, it was fantastically scandalous, of course, and one of the many reasons that Draco had never invited his parents to this flat.

Draco tensed, wondering if Brian would reveal his own discomfort with the idea of two men having sex after all. But Brian only whistled slowly and glanced back at him over his shoulder. "You have an original Peccadillo," he said happily. "That must have cost a hell of a lot."

The tingle in Draco's gut became a warm throb. He was startled to realize that he was regarding the man not only with excitement, which of course he'd felt since he saw the photograph, but with *affection.* No one Draco knew save one or two of his friends would have recognized the artwork's origin, and then only because they'd heard Draco talking it up for months before he bought it.

Of course, Brian *had* studied the pure-blood culture of wizarding Britain, and spent a small fortune doing so.

*And he's a bloody brilliant liar, remember? Time to slow this down a bit, I think, so I don't fall headlong into a trap.*

"Would you care for something to drink?" he asked, keeping his tone as cool as the slowly turning marble bodies of the picture across the way. "Or should we act as the businessmen we are and forego such simple pleasures?"

Draco was controlled, but Harry could read him. That was probably only because he was stunned and worried by his own response to Brian, so he was reacting more slowly to cover his emotions than he otherwise would have.
Which meant Harry had about half a second's lead-time, realistically.

And he knew exactly how Brian would respond to an offer like the one Draco had just made, because Brian could banter with the best of them. He looked straight into Draco's eyes and said earnestly, "Oh, I hope there'll be nothing *simple* about the pleasures we enjoy."

Draco's eyebrows crept up. He didn't blush. Harry hadn't expected him to; still, he had to admire

such fine masking.

"Let me understand a few things," Draco said softly, taking a step towards him. Harry recognized it as his attempt to take charge of the situation. In most personas, Harry would have backed down and let him do so, in order to make him feel more comfortable. But ultimately, such an action would backfire with the Brian persona. Draco needed someone fiery enough to stand up to his parents. He must be convinced that Brian could do so. "Exactly how eager are you to go to bed with me? And do you understand the finer points of your assignment?"

Harry rose to his full height, which in both his own body and Brian's was almost exactly the same as Draco's. Maybe a hair of difference separated them, and Harry couldn't even have told which way it ran. His entire attention was focused on the man across from him, focused and throbbing like his blood.

"I understand*everything* about my assignment," he said, and let a tone of faint contempt through, because Brian didn't take well to attempts to bully him. "And of course I'm eager to go to bed with you. You're an attractive man. I don't quite see, though, how you took a bit of flirting as a strip-tease."

Draco's nostrils flared. He was not grinding his teeth together, Harry knew, but only because of his exquisite control. He licked his lips, already thinking of ways he could test that control.

Then he reminded himself that he was supposed to be thinking Brian's thoughts. Well, those probably were Brian's thoughts, so Harry believed he was still all right.

Draco began speaking again, and Harry snapped his attention back to him; it would be fatal, with a client, a partner, an opponent like this, to miss anything he said. "We *will* do other things on this assignment than sleep together. Do you understand?"

"No need to treat me like I'm stupid, Draco." Brian dropped the teasing banter and faced Draco full-on, since he apparently needed to be reminded of what Metamorphosis had provided him. "I understand that the primary goal here is to help you win free of your parents. If sex comes along with that, it's a nice bonus, but not something central. I'll do my job, and I'll have fun doing it. I won't let you make me feel guilty for having fun. And I don't like it when someone attempts to condescend to me. Got it?" Harry allowed just a tiny bit of a New Zealander accent to leak through on those last words, and he made his whole face firm and challenging. Draco had to understand that Brian would insist on an equal footing throughout this whole case, or their partnership was likely to collapse in ruins before it faced its first test.

Draco could hear the blood buzzing in his ears. The only thing clearer than that sound was the voice of the man across from him.
The infuriating, stubborn, *wonderful* man across from him.

Draco had never felt a push and pull like this. No one had ever figured out so quickly exactly what he was doing when he tried to intimidate them and thrown it back in his face. Those who

*could* figure it out were too concerned with pleasing him, mostly to hold onto the money he'd invested in their businesses, to object.

But this man could and did object.

*No doubt the Galleons I've already handed over to the Manager have something to do with that,* Draco thought, but the flash of Brian's eyes burned his cynicism to death. Yes, this man would have fit into Gryffindor. He was unamused by Draco's attempt to take over their interaction, and unafraid of challenging him.

Draco cleared his throat and inclined his head. "It appears that we've got off on the wrong foot," he said. "I do apologize. I suppose I needed to see what you would do if I pushed."

Brian grinned at him, emotions apparently shifting like a whirlwind with Draco's simple apology. "Push back."

Draco was glad he wasn't near a piece of furniture at the moment. The words and the grin in combination had given him the most delicious images, and he would have been tempted to grip the back of a chair or a couch—a weakness he couldn't afford in front of someone like Brian.

"I'd like to discuss what will happen when we arrive at the Manor tomorrow," he said, and motioned Brian towards the chair he'd been sitting in before the other man knocked. Brian nodded and sat down, looking grateful even for that favor. It was the least servile gratitude Draco had ever seen, and he wondered how the man managed it. "You know we'll need different strategies to handle my mother and my father—what are you doing?"

Because Brian was sniffing the chair, a rapturous expression on his face. He looked up, his lips parted in a silent laugh. "*I'm* sorry," he said. "I got distracted. This is where you were sitting before I arrived, right?"

Draco slowly nodded, wondering how in the world he could have known that; the chair didn't keep an impression. Perhaps he had managed to create a peephole in the door after all. That was something Draco would have to check before he left the flat.

"It smells like you." Brian shrugged. "Which is to say, good."

Draco barely held back from licking his lips. *The man is an actor,* he reminded himself.

But the chair really *didn't* keep an impression, and it wasn't unknown for wizards to have such keen senses. Particularly if they'd cast charms to enhance them, which Draco would not have put past Brian. He raised an eyebrow. "With such a good nose," he said, "I'm surprised you didn't do better at Potions."

Brian ducked his head and muttered something.

"Pardon?"

Brian sighed dramatically. "The *real* reason I didn't do better at Potions was this adorable boy in my class," he said. "I had a crush on him years before I knew what a crush was, or that having one on a boy meant I was probably gay. He hated my guts, of course, and regularly thrashed me at Quidditch, which I joined just to impress him; I'm not very good at flying. I shouldn't have mooned after him that way." Every line of his face reflected both regret and a nostalgia that kept the regret from being real as he peered up at Draco. "I *promise* I'm past that stage now."

Draco relaxed a little. A weakness. Brian *did* have a weakness, then, but one that shouldn't affect the way they handled his parents. "Let me get you something to drink."

"Oh, you don't have to get it yourself—" Brian started to stand.

Draco reached out and put his hand on the other man's for the second time. Now he could pause to enjoy the contact, the warmth and a sharper kind of lightning cutting into him through the fingers.

*His magic.*

Holy God, Brian's was the strongest magic Draco had ever felt. He had evidently placed it under shields, probably not wanting to overwhelm Draco in the first moments of their meeting, but a touch left him no place to hide. Draco shuddered and shivered, caught between fear and desire. Such power provoked ideas of fighting or surrendering to it, with no in-between. Of course, Draco would make sure there was a middle ground where he could comfortably exist. He did not surrender.

And then Brian covered Draco's hand with both of his, and bent to kiss his wrist.

The lightning coursing up Draco's arm changed its flavor. Now it was sweet, gentle, protective—and fragile in places, as though Brian were showing Draco where he didn't have many skills and someone could punch through his defenses. Of course, someone would only show their defenses like that if they were utterly confident they could win the contest anyway.

But at the moment, Draco hardly cared. He withdrew his hand slowly and gave Brian his first genuine smile since the other man had walked through the door.

"No, please," he said. "Let me."

Harry was just as happy to let Draco fetch him a drink from the neat, sparkling kitchen that lay off to one side of this room. He needed a moment to lean back in the chair and recover his breath.
Merlin, he was taking risks like an *idiot.* Once he got completely into a character, he spoke and acted like that character to cover any unanticipated gaps in the biography that might arise. So, though he hadn't thought Draco would really ask why a good nose would correlate with poor

Potions ability, he had let the "Brian" part of himself answer without thought.

And of course the story was one that could have belonged to Harry Potter—in part, anyway. Harry honestly hadn't noticed the younger Draco the way that Brian claimed to have noticed *his* crush. But he had been rivals and competed at Quidditch with him, and that was closer to the true story than he would usually put in a persona's mouth.

And then he had let Draco feel the full strength of his magic, not only through the touch but through the kiss—and that was something he *never* did. Most of his clients didn't care about magical strength, so Harry simply shielded it, or they wanted someone they could overwhelm. When Harry acted as a bodyguard, then his clients wanted someone who could protect them, but that required only moderate force. Knowledge and experience were more important to the frightened than sheer strength; they were always the ones who questioned him most extensively about his characters' backgrounds.

But Draco had wanted someone powerful, and Harry had reached out the way Brian would have: full-hearted, impulsive, showing him what was there, who exactly he had to conflict with and get aroused by.

It was in-character. But it was so close to his real identity as to make Harry worried. He was *not* Harry Potter in a mask to Draco. He was Brian. And he must remain Brian no matter what, no matter the temptation to be otherwise.

"Here you are."

Draco brought out a glass of a delicate wine, and Harry took it, sniffed it, and sipped it gratefully. Draco's eyes challenged him to identify the year, flickering back and forth between Harry's face and the wine like that, so Brian said, "South le Fay, 1967."

Draco laughed and dropped into a chair opposite from Harry. "You *are* good. Tell me, will you be as good when we confront my parents tomorrow?"

Between one sentence and the next, he could slide from humor to seriousness. Harry admired that. He folded Brian's face into an earnest smile. "I hope so. But why don't you tell me more about them? I only know what the Manager told me. Will they go as far as hexes and tears the first night?"

Draco shook his head and sipped his wine. "My father will ask me what I'm doing with a man, but he'll do it privately. He won't want to ruin the party no matter how much of a public spectacle I make of myself." He shot Brian a warning glance. "Stay out of it."

Harry nodded and sipped his wine.

"Then he'll try to bribe you," Draco said calmly. "He'll think that I hired you for some low amount of money, and if he can double it, you'll just go away."

"Which won't work," Harry muttered.

Draco flung him a challenging glance. "Even if he offers you more than what you're picking up working for Metamorphosis on this case? He's capable of it."

"Money doesn't matter to me much." Brian met his eyes again. "You've felt my magic. I could be rich if I wanted to. I don't want that."

"Lack of forethought?" Draco's face wore the startled, half-pitying expression that many rich people used around those who didn't particularly value Galleons.

"Lack of ambition." Brian smiled. "I won't succumb. Is it threats yet?"

"It will be. I have no doubt that you can handle yourself, particularly if you let him feel just a bit of your magic. Don't display all your surprises the first time, of course." Draco settled back, eyes half-closed.

"Of course not," Harry snapped, and let Brian sound just a bit offended.

Draco smiled lazily, and shut his eyes fully. "Then comes my mother. She'll have confronted me alone by that time. Almost surely she'll ask for a dance with you, hoping to show you up in front of her guests. Then it'll be time for sparkling wit and conversation. I hope you're up on the latest pure-blood scandals."

"Always." And that happened to be true for Harry as well as Brian. He read the newspapers both to give credence to a variety of his personas and because it often gave him advance warning of what cases might come to him next.

"That will be all they try for tomorrow night. It will become more serious later." Draco opened his eyes, and Harry was pinned by the intent gaze, sharp and gray as a needle. "And of course, you'll accompany me in dancing, in talking, in doing whatever's needed to convince them you and I are happy lovers."

Harry smiled. "That won't be a problem at all." And he let his gaze turn appraising, delighted when Draco returned it.

Draco leaned against the door of the flat when he'd shut it behind Brian—after the conversation about what they'd do at Malfoy Manor tomorrow night, they'd exchanged only a few inconsequential pleasantries—and shook his head.
His heart was pounding. His body was alive, alert, aware, in a way he'd never noticed before. Thoughts scattered through his head like shooting stars.

Brian was not the most handsome man he'd met, nor the most fit, nor the most talented at witty banter. He was the most powerful, but that meant little—beyond increasing Draco's personal

enjoyment—when he wouldn't use that power to win money and fame for himself.

But he was the most *interesting* man Draco had ever met.

And Draco was now wildly grateful for the charms he'd cast a few hours before Brian arrived, to keep himself from showing visible signs of arousal. He strode towards the loo now, removing them as he went, and sighing as his blood resumed its natural flow.

Things were going so *well*, he thought they called for a celebratory wank.

Mind full of blue eyes and messy hair and a stubbornness that wouldn't back down, he started the shower with a tap of his wand.

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Chapter: 4

Thanks again for all the reviews! I know this chapter's a bit early, but I won't have as much time to write tomorrow as I thought I would.

*Chapter Four—Draco's Birthday Party*

"The flowers are looking well."

Narcissa started and looked over her shoulder, then came laughing to Draco and put her arms around him. "Naughty boy," she murmured into his neck. "You know that you weren't supposed to be here until tonight, and you *definitely* weren't supposed to see the flowers I'd arranged until then!"

Draco embraced her with one arm whilst he critically studied the flowers hanging in a gathered knot on the walls every three feet. They were all pale—lilies, white roses, narcissus, and a variety of white snapdragons his mother had developed in the Malfoy gardens. Draco smiled, a little. The flowers complemented the décor of the Manor and the pale colors of Malfoy hair and skin, but they also spoke a very particular language that most of the people at the party would understand: Draco was pure in magic and bloodline, with no major scandals attached to his name since the Wizengamot had declared him innocent of willfully helping the Dark Lord twelve years ago. A fine husband, the flowers would suggest in their own, sly way. A fine father for children who would also be unspotted in magic and in bloodline.

Draco *did* wish there was a way to break with his father without hurting his mother. On the other hand, Narcissa's choice of flowers showed why that was impossible. Narcissa had ignored hundreds of gentle hints in the last few months that Draco was uninterested in early marriage,

and probably wouldn't choose a bride, if he took one, purely on the basis of magic and family. Draco had spoken bluntly more than once when he found out gentleness didn't work, and still Narcissa shut her ears and did not listen.

She had her vision of the perfect son, even as Lucius had his. Hers was less slavish than Lucius's, but still didn't include a Draco with an independent thought in his head.

"The flowers do look beautiful, Mother," Draco said with perfect truth, and kissed her on the cheek. He stepped back and cast a glance at the door of the large ballroom that was kept shut up most of the year, other than for the house-elves' weekly cleaning. Narcissa immediately stepped in front of the door and made a shooing motion at him.

"You go get yourself ready for the party," she said. "Make sure your robes fit. Make sure your teeth are clean." Draco rolled his eyes. He'd showed up to one dinner party when he was *four* with a piece of egg still stuck in his teeth, and his mother had never let him forget. "And make sure your date is on time." Narcissa spoke those last words with a soft smile.

That was another thing, Draco thought, as he gazed steadily and sadly at his mother for a moment. He'd said more than once that neither of his parents knew the person he'd arrive with tonight, and yet Narcissa had somehow convinced herself it would be Pansy, mainly because Pansy didn't dare take her Muggle lover out in public and Draco still spent some time at her house.

And because Narcissa wanted it to be Pansy so *badly.*

Draco loved his mother, but her desires and wishes did rather get in the way of reality.

"My date will be here on time," Draco murmured, turning away to climb the back staircase that led from the ballroom to the upper floors of the Manor. "Which is to say, fashionably late."

"Of course she will be, dear," Narcissa said happily from behind him. "I'm sure her mother taught her well."

*Actually, I'm the one who suggested that,* Draco thought, and let his mind caress and sweep over images of Brian, now that his back was turned and his mother wouldn't see his smile.

Harry looked at himself in the mirror, and frowned. No, he didn't like the hang of those dress robes after all.
And he was *not* being fussy, he told himself, as he cast off that set of robes and Levitated another out of the closet in his bedroom at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. He simply wanted to make a good impression at a pure-blood party; no one should be able to accuse Brian of a lack of taste or class. He'd spent this much time before on costumes for meetings with other clients.

A *whoosh* from downstairs made Harry straighten, eyes narrowing. There was always the chance that this would be the day some reporter figured out a way past his wards, or connected

But then Ron's voice called up the stairs, "Harry? You there, mate?"

A flick of his wand, and Harry banished the robes to his closet, then concealed the closet door itself. In a moment, his bedroom looked like the ordinarily messy room Ron knew it as, and not a second Metamorphosis. Harry leaned out the door and shouted down the stairs, "Up here!" Ron grunted, and Harry heard him clomping up the steps. He cast a glance at the mirror, just to make sure he hadn't already altered the lines of his face or changed his eyes to blue and then forgotten them—but he hadn't. He relaxed.

Neither Ron nor Hermione knew he ran Metamorphosis; nor did Ginny, for that matter, though she had been with him long enough to see how fascinated he'd become with glamours and disguises as a way of hiding from the press. Harry had tentatively broached similar ideas with them a few times in the past, when he was just starting to run the business. Hermione's disapproval had been immediate. "You should be *yourself*, Harry." She'd even tried to urge him to come out publicly before she saw a few real examples of what his life would be like if he did. And Ron agreed with Hermione, as he did on most things that were not Quidditch.

Harry *needed* Metamorphosis—needed to be free to move away from the bland, forgettable, *residual* life he had as Harry Potter—but he couldn't expect either of his friends to approve that need. It didn't matter. When he was Harry, and he always was around them, he loved them dearly.

Ron entered the room, and Harry set the thoughts aside. He was not Brian at that moment, or the Manager of Metamorphosis, or anyone else his friends didn't know. He was Harry Potter, recluse, former hero, unfortunately gay friend of Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. (Hermione had kept her last name even though she'd married; she'd said matter-of-factly that there were quite enough Weasleys working in the Ministry already).

"Hey, Harry." Ron smiled at him and leaned against the doorway. "Mum wanted me to invite you for dinner tonight."

Harry grinned at Ron. Ordinarily, he would have accepted; his assignment with Draco already looked to be more of a day-focused than night-focused job, because Draco wanted Brian to appear with him in public as often as possible and to as many people as possible, and visiting popular tourist sites would do that better than visiting isolated dinner parties. "Sorry, but I can't, Ron. Already got an engagement to go over the legal documents for the Charity."

Harry, so far as his friends knew, devoted most of his time to the Charity, an organization that tried to mitigate the worst excesses of the Ministry under Voldemort. In reality, whilst a good deal of the money from Metamorphosis entered the offices of the Charity, it almost ran itself; the people Harry had hired were more than competent and cared passionately about their work. But it was a convenient mask.

Ron rolled his eyes. "You *do* realize that normal people have a life beyond work and a few visits

with friends during a week, Harry?"

Harry laughed, genuinely amused. "And you'd put me and 'normal' together in the same sentence?"

"Well, no, probably not," Ron had to concede.

"And Hermione? You know she works even more than I do."

Ron's face broke into a grin, and he did a little tap-dance. "Well, she's got more of a life now than she's ever had," he said, and winked.

Harry raised his eyebrows, then launched himself across the room at his friend and hugged him hard. Ron hugged him in return, pounding his back. Ordinarily they avoided touching so much since Harry had announced his orientation to his friends, but this was a special occasion.

"Congratulations!" Harry said, drawing back and grinning at him. "So Hermione finally decided her career was slowing down enough to have a baby?"

Ron nodded, flushed with obvious pride.

"When's she due?"

"Six months from now." Ron laughed, this time probably at Harry's surprise. "You know Hermione. She used every spell and every test—even one of those Muggle things—to be *sure* she was actually pregnant. And she also found a spell that tells the baby's sex." Ron beamed at Harry. "We're going to have a little girl."

"Wonderful," Harry said. "And let me guess. You'll name her Lavender."

Ron's flush, in retreat, returned, and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Never going to let me forget that, either of you," he muttered.

"It was one of your stupider moments," Harry said comfortably. "Or should I say months?"

Ron snapped back, and they enjoyed a few more minutes of banter before Harry urged him gently out of the house. Then he turned, opened his closet, and reached for the set of robes he'd decided on as he was ribbing Ron about his obvious drooling over a blonde witch a few years before. He swept the robes around him, checked the hang in the mirror, and smiled slowly.

Yes. The robes looked even better when he'd acquired Brian's eyes and face again. Draco hadn't told him any specific color to wear, just to choose something tasteful.

"It *is* tasteful to have half the room panting after you," Harry told the mirror, in Brian's voice.

Draco glanced towards the ballroom with a small smile. Twice now Lucius had urged him to enter, no doubt hoping that Draco would fall over when he saw the number of guests his parents had invited and the effort the house-elves and his mother had put into decorations, but Draco had resisted on the very good grounds that his date wasn't here yet. Lucius, grumbling, had finally taken Narcissa's arm and entered, to the sound of aborted cheers as the crowd realized Lucius wasn't Draco.
Draco was wearing a set of very pale blue robes, so pale they could be mistaken as off-white in certain lights. They were in a pure-blood cut that had been traditional when his great-grandparents were children. He knew he looked like an ice statue, and that he would impress some of the marriageable women no doubt gathered here to impress *him*.

*I'll just have to make it clear I'm taken.*

Right on cue, a set of brisk footsteps advanced up the path that led from the gardens to the back of the house, where Draco had waited. He turned around expectantly.

Brian stepped out of the shadows.

Draco felt the breath blasted out of him. Brian had chosen dark blue robes, in a color that made his eyes shine with an almost unearthly glow. They were tight enough to hint at scandal, but not quite invoke it. At the same time, Draco could see the soft shine of built-in loosening spells; Brian could adjust them for dancing and no doubt for dramatic effect. At the moment, the dramatic effect mostly came from the cloak he wore, also a brilliant dark blue, edged with silver. Brian handled it with a grace that Draco had only ever seen rivaled by Severus Snape.

An unexpected nostalgia for his old professor struck him, but that quickly melted in the face of Brian's quiet, delighted half-smile on seeing him. Severus had been dead for twelve years, and Draco had made his peace with the memory of him. This man in front of him represented the height and richness of life.

"I trust this is acceptable?" Brian said, and reached out to clasp Draco's hand, lowering his eyelashes in an absurd parody of a shy maiden.

"More than acceptable," Draco murmured, pulling him closer, "and you know it. Let's have no false modesty, shall we?"

Brian grinned at him. They were almost the same height, a rare thing for Draco—he was a little past six feet—and to have those brilliant eyes only a few inches from his own shook him. He knew he didn't show it, but for him to feel the emotion at all was startling and disconcerting.

"Of course not," Brian said. "I *know* I have a lot to be proud of." He ran his eyes down Draco's body for a moment. "And I'm not the only one."

Draco quirked a smile. Once again, it wouldn't do to show how affected he was, but Brian *did* make him feel more than he'd felt around anyone in a long time, and there was no reason he

couldn't admit that—to himself, of course.

"Then I assume you are ready for our first venture into public as a couple?" he inquired, and held out his arm. Brian put his hand on his elbow and gripped firmly, a grasp that quieted any fears Draco might have had about Brian being less than masculine.

"Let's go impress the shit out of them," Brian said.

Draco bit his lip to stop laughter at the vulgar word combined with the neatly-cut robes and the glittering decorations of white and silver and ivory hanging around them, and led Brian towards the ballroom. They paused for one moment outside the door so Draco could tap out the code that alerted his parents he was about to enter, and he heard the thick, expectant silence ebbing back and forth on the other side, broken by excited giggles and hisses of admonitions to be quiet.

Brian stood relaxed and quiet at his side, as poised as a cat. Draco nodded at him and cast the spell that would fling the door open.

They stepped into the middle of a shout of, "Happy Birth—"

And then the shout died as they realized the robed figure striding along beside him was, in fact, male. Draco and Brian paced up an aisle of staring guests towards his parents, and except for the stamp and thump of dragonhide boots, the room was *utterly* silent.

Deliciously so, in Draco's opinion. He raised his eyes to see how his parents were taking this, and nearly laughed aloud.

Narcissa had both hands clapped to her mouth, like a Muggle woman startled by a mouse. Lucius stared back and forth between his son and his son's date with his jaw literally dropping, a sight Draco had never seen in his lifetime.

Then Lucius's eyes narrowed and he stood taller, as poised in his own way as Brian. Draco knew the thoughts flashing behind those gray eyes, because he knew his father. Lucius would be thinking this was some kind of trick or joke. The "male" date on his arm was really Pansy Parkinson Polyjuiced. Or Draco had cast a complicated glamour and would remove it in a moment to reveal his chosen fiancée; this was simply his rather scandalous way of introducing her, to be sure his parents knew his choice was *firm.*

Something more would be needed to convince his father, Draco knew.

And then Brian's arm curled around his shoulders, and Draco realized his thoughts had been anticipated. He turned, lifting his head in response and half-closing his eyes.

Mrs. Malfoy looked as though the roof of the ballroom had fallen in and the beautiful ivory-colored cake on the far table had begun to melt. Lucius Malfoy, on the other hand, looked as if he wanted to kill someone.

For a moment.

The very shortness of his reaction told Harry what kind of denial they were dealing with here. He'd seen it in Ginny's eyes when he'd first confessed he was gay, even though she'd suspected. No, not *really,* Lucius's brain was telling him. His son could not *really* be gay, to the destruction of all Lucius's hopes for him.

Time for an undeniable demonstration.

Harry reached out and put his arm around Draco's shoulders. Draco turned towards him, reading his mind, flowing in accordance with his thoughts. The feeling was extraordinarily eerie, but Harry allowed himself to dwell on it for just a moment. Then he was Brian, daredevil Brian, full of generous good-hearted ideas combined with a cool understanding and love of high culture, and with not a care in the world for his public reputation, because he aspired to neither political power or marriage.

Harry leaned in, thinking like Brian, moving like Brian, and kissed Draco Malfoy for the first time.

It was a perfectly aligned kiss, as Draco could not display any weakness before his parents and Brian would display no weakness before these people who would tear him apart if they had the chance. Harry's hands cradled the back of Draco's head. Draco's hands rested along his cheeks. Neither of them appeared weak. Neither of them appeared as if he were simply leaning back and *letting* himself be kissed, as if he were the girl in the relationship—an outsider perception of gay relationships so prevalent that Harry knew he would have to combat it, no matter how untrue it might be.

Harry had intended a perfectly chaste kiss, too. Let Draco's parents and guests understand that passion between men could be calm and dignified.

And then Draco's mouth opened, and Harry realized the change in plans—Draco must have decided they were to play a couple so strongly joined that his parents would not have a hope of separating them—at the same moment as his tongue curled around Draco's.

Thought drowned for a moment. Harry gloried in a taste that made his nerves greedy. He pushed closer without thought, and felt Draco stand firm and push back; he wouldn't allow himself to be bent backwards. Draco's hands had by now buried themselves in Harry's hair.

*Let them,* Harry thought dazedly. *It's not a wig, it doesn't matter—*

Draco tugged demandingly and leaned forwards. Harry met him, angling his nose out of the way.

The taste rushed back into his mouth again, along with Draco's tongue. It didn't have a *flavor* that Harry could describe, though he had kissed some men who actually tasted like salt, like mints, like various combinations of fruits. It had the exciting, fleshy taste of the inside of a cheek, but

Draco didn't simply stand still and *let* himself be kissed. He strove, he dived, he twisted; he was kissing Harry as intently as he'd ever played Quidditch at Hogwarts.

Harry called on stern self-control as well as his hold on Draco's shoulders to keep himself standing. Finally, slowly, they drew back, Harry licking his lips to make sure no strings of saliva connected them. Really, that would be *all* they needed now, when the silence had broken into furious shouts of protest.

He met Draco's eyes, and nearly staggered at the heat in them. Draco had deliberately dropped the mask of control so Harry could see how the kiss had affected him. So far as Draco was concerned, Harry knew, the chances that they would go to bed together had just jumped.

And Harry's own anticipation of his pleasure when they did so was so keen that he had to take a moment to recover Brian's poise. When he did, he winked at Draco and turned cheerfully away, stepping forwards to extend his hand to Lucius.

"You must be Lucius Malfoy," he said, dropping his voice into a husk a few degrees away from flirtation. "It's obvious where Draco gets his good looks from."

Draco had to work very hard to keep from laughing aloud when his father recoiled from Brian's hand the way he would have from a reaching serpent. No, scratch that, Lucius would have been more pleased with the serpent; he had kept magical snakes as pets more than once.
And then Brian had said the *perfect* thing to convince Lucius that his son's date was shameless about his sexuality. In fact, Brian stood there with the perfect little puzzled smile on his face, too, as if he could not comprehend why Lucius had refused the compliment.

Then he shrugged and turned to Narcissa. Draco met his mother's eyes and felt a stab of guilt when he saw the tears in them. But he had known this would happen. If Narcissa had been a little more alert, a little less resistant to Draco's hints that his future included more than a marriage exactly like his parents', he wouldn't have had to do this.

"You're Draco's mother, of course," Brian said, and his voice was soft and gentle. He might not like women sexually, Draco thought, but he could care for them. "Draco's told me so much about you. Can I shake your hand, please, if you won't allow me to kiss it?"

Narcissa fell back on the social instincts that had served her so well in the past for surviving embarrassing situations. She held out her hand, and Brian, after a glance into her eyes, clasped it in both of his and shook it instead of kissing it. He knew that would be a presumption right now, Draco thought.

He knew an awful lot.

Including *exactly* the right way to kiss. Draco was grateful his robes were no tighter.

*Where has he been all my life?*

He stepped forwards and put a hand on the small of Brian's back, turning him to face the others—old schoolmates, friends of his parents', pure-blood wizards who had emigrated from the Continent to Britain when so many of their distant relatives died in the war and left houses and lands vacant. Their faces were without exception blank, or stunned, or filled with loathing. Draco wished, for a moment, that Blaise had consented to come to the party. Draco would have enjoyed the sight of one person laughing his arse off.

"This is Brian Montgomery," Draco said, "my partner and my lover. I considered this night, a decisive one in so many ways, the perfect time for introducing him."

He smiled blandly in the face of the increasing expressions of disgust. *They only look like that because they've never kissed him. Even if it was only once.* He tightened his hold on Brian's waist a little.

"Are festivals normally this silent?" Brian asked in a loud whisper. "I thought this party was to *celebrate* your birthday, after all, not mourn it."

And there was the perfect way to move past the awkwardness, Draco thought with gratitude. Brian was charging into the thick of things, taking the brunt of the guests' dislike on himself. It was a Gryffindor thing to do, or whatever House he'd been in at the Five Dragons.

"You're absolutely right," Draco said. He turned his head to the side to slide his lips through Brian's hair. Soft and clean and *wild*. Draco wanted to brace his hands in that hair and tug.

*I'll have the opportunity later,* he promised himself. So far as he was concerned, Brian wasn't leaving tonight before they did something to ease the tension throbbing between them and in Draco's groin after that kiss.

"I promised you music, didn't I?" Draco continued, though they hadn't agreed on any such dialogue. It built naturally off the way they stood beside each other and the horrified silence around them—the shouts had died when both Draco and Brian refused to respond to them—and, yes, the tension. "I promised you dancing?"

"Yes, you did." Brian caught his arm and grinned up at him. "What about the Estival?"

Draco's mouth moved in a smile entirely without his permission. The Estival, named after a word for "summer-like,"was a fast, lively dance with a constant change of lead. Brian could have chosen nothing better to show that they didn't *care* about the emotions around them.

"Done," he replied, and flicked his wand. The first notes of the traditional Estival tune began to sound from behind the large mirror hanging on the far wall.

And then Draco took Brian's arm and led him to the dance floor. Brian moved with an easy, rolling stride, his eyes brilliant. Draco gave up after a moment of battling and let his exhilaration

consume him; he could always work it out in the dance, after all, and no one else would have to know.

*I like him. I want him. I do not at all object to his presence at my side.*

Of course, *saying* that was an impossibility at this stage. Brian was a skilled actor and liar; Draco could not forget that, no matter how many times he seemed to move in time with Draco's secret thoughts. Draco had to find out more about him before he let him further into his affections.

And Draco was very good at getting truth from his dancing partners.

*Now let's see if it's more than an act to* him.

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Chapter: 5

Thanks again for all the reviews!

I'm afraid I still can't say how long this story will be.

*Chapter Five—The Dance*

Harry knew this dance would be something special the moment they began.

He'd danced the Estival before, with people he'd been hired to escort, with attendees at parties where he'd been the bodyguard or the token dark, handsome stranger, and by himself when he'd played an entertainer for a witch who wanted her dance to be the talk of the season. He knew the steps. He knew where the music unexpectedly changed, bubbling like a fountain, imitating the sudden rise of summer out of spring, and where it slowed down again like the descent of long, lazy summer evenings.

But knowing was one thing, and *knowing* was another.

Draco's body *knew* the dance. He moved with perfection, and yet the perfection wasn't mechanical, the kind of stance that Harry tended to fall into whenever he had to portray a dancing persona. He always held his arms the correct distance from each other, but it seemed a natural coincidence they fell where they did. When he clasped Harry close and whirled in a circle, it seemed to happen because he wanted to do it, not because the dance called for it.

Harry, half-breathless already, felt his joy and his magic surge and blend together, lending extra force to his muscles. Draco demanded the best effort from him, and Harry gave it willingly.

It was necessary for the deception, he told himself, meeting Draco's eyes and nearly laughing aloud at the warm calculation he saw there. Draco needed someone who could complement him, so that was what he should have.

And if ever Harry's mask was going to fall off—which it would not, because he would be so cautious to prevent it—it would not be whilst he was *dancing.*

Draco did indeed learn much about Brian by watching him dance. But the messages were so thick and came so fast that he had to divert part of his attention from the Estival to comprehend them.
And he didn't want to do that. There was a current of energy flowing between them that *demanded* focus. Draco found himself tempted, for the first time in a long time, to simply fall into the moment and enjoy it without considering what lay beyond—to move as if they had no audience.

He could not, but he regretted that he could not. So he sacrificed a shade of the artistry with which he would have liked to dance in order to study Brian. From the wide, amazed eyes fixed on him, Draco doubted Brian noticed that Draco's performance was not actually his best.

Brian was responding to Draco. He could have danced this by himself, but not as well. Draco could see that in the slightly harsh turns his wrists sometimes made, as if he had to consciously remind himself where they went. It resembled the care taken over a language by someone who wasn't a native speaker.

*He did say that he had studied pure-blood culture, and wasn't born to it natively.*

He also didn't have the flair for keeping track of two different audiences at once that Draco did. His gaze almost always stayed on Draco, and solely on Draco. He was performing for their audience only because Draco was, and he could follow in his footsteps.

*That could be a problem. Or maybe it's only a result of that Gryffindor-like instinct he's demonstrated so far. If he can throw my parents and wizarding society off-balance, I don't care if he does it in exactly the way I do. Of course, I'll have to compensate for any weaknesses that come up with his method.*

Draco kicked into a high, hard turn, one that required Brian to turn at the same time and come around at precisely the same moment to lock his hand in Draco's. It was the first true test of any partners performing the Estival. Up until that point, they had traded the lead rather than acting in the same way simultaneously.

Draco felt curiosity bubbling in his throat, thick as stew. Would Brian manage this? And would it be more interesting to see him succeed or fail? Whatever happened, Draco was sure it would not be *disastrous.* Brian was too good for that.

*And so am I.*

His hand swung around—and warm fingers clasped his, then slid to his wrist, even as Draco clasped Brian's in return. Startled, he met Brian's gaze and only then realized he had anticipated failure instead of success. Brian winked at him and fell into the next part of the dance, this one requiring a long series of three-quarter steps—three steps sideways and one forwards, or three beats of dancing with their profiles towards one another and one beat of facing. Draco narrowed his eyes, almost daring to squint and make his face appear sour to anyone watching in order to be sure of what he was seeing.

Yes.

Brian was dancing *better* than he had been before they completed their spin. His movements were just a little more natural, and he didn't keep his gaze exclusively on Draco. It was as though he had already begun to learn from Draco how someone born to pure-blood culture performed the Estival, and no longer needed as much help.

If he could learn that fast, if he was not simply remembering a skill that had grown rusty…

Draco felt a tightness in his groin and a dryness in his mouth. He could not have said whether caution or excitement was the uppermost emotion in his mind by the time they turned through a final measure and the dance ended.

There was no applause, of course, save for that to be found in the quick sound of their own breathing and the rustle of their robes that moved with it. But then Brian flicked his eyes past Draco's head, and Draco saw his father stalking towards him with a face like a stormcloud, and he could name the emotion uppermost in him after all.

Glee.

As they had agreed, Harry left Draco to his father's tender mercies whilst he leaned back against a wall and waited for Narcissa. Other people glanced at him, and certainly gossiped about him, if the muted hum of busy voices was any indication. But no one approached him, until Draco's mother slipped around them like a deer and came to a halt in front of Harry, staring at him. Harry could read wariness and confusion behind her eyes. She was less certain than she had been that Draco had brought a man simply to anger his parents, because Brian danced too well for Draco to have selected him by chance.
That, of course, was the direction Draco wanted his parents' suspicions to tend in, Harry knew. If they once suspected this were a deception, the whole point would be ruined. So Harry held out his hands to the sides, performing a deep, formal bow that once would have been used to claim hospitality of the pure-blood mistress of a manor house, and then drew out the gift from his robes that would pay for that hospitality.

Narcissa uttered a cry in spite of herself, like a snared little bird, though she quickly cut it off. Her hands trembled as she accepted the gift and held it up to the light. Harry watched her with a

small, anxious half-smile on his face; Brian would want to know whether his gift passed muster with a woman who had good reason to be picky.

It was a golden oval, studded here and there with faint scarlet traceries and blue jags like the shadows of flames. They might have been painted on, but if so, the colors were richer than anything found in the normal run of palettes.

As it happened, they *hadn't* been painted on. This was a phoenix egg, hollowed of its contents and preserved with charms so it wouldn't crumble the first time a hand touched it. Harry had found it in an old Muggle antique shop. The Muggle thought he was selling some miniature ostrich egg and had no idea of its true value, so Harry had got it relatively cheaply.

It was *not* a cheap gift, however, and from the bewildered look Narcissa was giving him over the top of the egg, she must not have imagined how he could afford it.

"I—Mr. Montgomery, this is a princely gift," Narcissa said, and seemed to get some of her breath back. She lowered the egg to rest against her waist. "More than I could have expected when I was welcoming a new friend of Draco's into the house."

Harry, opening his mouth to agree, saw the trap in the words just in time.

"Not only friend," he murmured, and shifted to lean his weight more heavily against the wall. He could be very formal with his gifts and his words, but his posture wouldn't improve until he was sure that he was welcome here. He knew Narcissa would see that as the subtle rebellion it was. Indeed, her nostrils were already pinching shut, as though to shut out an offensive smell. "Partner and lover, as Draco announced to you."

Narcissa uttered a laugh that might have passed muster if Harry hadn't been listening very closely for the edge of despair in it. "Mr. Montgomery, you must understand that until today, I had no idea my son *liked* men."

Harry straightened and opened Brian's eyes very wide. "Are you sure, Mrs. Malfoy? He told me he had tried to offer you hints, even as he kept our relationship secret out of thoughtfulness's sake. He finally chose this drastic method because he thought it the only way of proving he meant what he said."

Narcissa's face drained of color. Harry supposed she was remembering the hints Draco had tried to offer her in the past, and perhaps taking them seriously for the first time. He was glad. Though he didn't like the sight of a woman like Narcissa in pain, if she could take some of the blame on herself, Draco's relationship with her would be easier to repair in the future.

"I—" Narcissa cleared her throat. "Draco is a Malfoy," she said firmly. "He knows how things work. I would not have objected to discreet affairs on the side, as long as he kept them *discreet.*" She turned eyes that shone like nails on Harry. "And because you obviously have familiarity with our manners, Mr. Montgomery, I would have expected you to remind him if he slipped. Why did

you not discourage this plan the moment he thought it up?"

*She assumes it was all Draco's plan. Good.* The last thing Harry wanted was Lucius or Narcissa thinking Brian was clever or dangerous. They had to see Draco as the motive force behind this in order to respect him and not convince themselves their poor son had been tricked and deluded by the lover he was infatuated with.

"I have remained quiet and secret for a long time," Harry said softly. "But I was tired of it. And when Draco decided that he *had* to make the announcement—" He looked towards Draco and conjured a good expression of hopeless love, one he'd practiced in the mirror at Metamorphosis until it looked right. "Could you have refused him, do you think, if you were in my position?"

Narcissa recoiled. "I will never be in *your* position," she said, and her voice had gone frosty.

Harry gave her a gentle look, and leaned forwards. This was not exactly the strategy that Draco had outlined to him the first time they met, but then again, the moves he expected of his parents had changed the moment Narcissa went to confront Harry instead of allowing Lucius to do so first. "We both *are* in the same position, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "We both love Draco."

"A man who loved him would not permit this," Narcissa said. She moved the word *man* around in her mouth as if it were a toenail-flavored Every Flavour Bean. "He is making a fool of himself."

"Is he?" Harry moved his head so he could rake his eyes over the people in the room. Most of them were still talking in small clusters, but some had moved to the dance floor. None of them really looked at Draco and Lucius. Their glances, when they gave any, were reserved for Narcissa and Brian. Harry barely resisted the temptation to nod in satisfaction. "I don't see that. I'm the unknown here, the one who runs the greater risk. It will take some time yet for Draco to lose the respect of the people here, if he ever does." Anyone who paid attention to Draco's business practices and the way he could read people would continue to respect him no matter what his parents thought, Harry knew. They might think of him as disgusting, but they would not underestimate him. "Draco wanted to do this, Mrs. Malfoy, and I have faith in him to have accurately predicted the consequences. He's decided he can live with them. Who am I to question that decision?"

"Who are you indeed?" Narcissa speared him with a glance. "I would feel much more confident if I knew more about you."

Harry smiled and spread his hands. "My past is an open book, Mrs. Malfoy." *Quite literally.*

"Who were your parents?" Narcissa demanded. She was moving more openly and aggressively than Harry had thought she would, but then, she had been badly shocked, and no one had come close enough to hear them yet.

"My father was a Muggle. Daniel Montgomery." Harry wanted to laugh in spite of himself at the

way Narcissa contracted into herself, as if Muggle heritage were something one could catch. All pure-bloods were ridiculous about that, really. No matter how interesting Harry found their culture and how much sympathy he had with the plight of their gay sons and lesbian daughters, he would never see how they could simultaneously believe dirty blood was inherent to certain people and act as if it would infect them. "My mother was a witch named Emma Handler who ran away from her people at a young age."

"Pure-blood?" Narcissa rapped out.

"Of course." Harry met her gaze calmly. One Handler family in wizarding England had died out entirely, running into an advanced age with no young children left. The other had moved to Ireland ages ago and somehow got mixed up with the Troubles in Northern Ireland; apparently they were strong Catholics. Either way, Narcissa would not find it easy to trace and disprove Brian's claim. Harry had made sure of that before he chose the name of Handler.

"That my son would sink to dirtying himself with a half-blood," Narcissa said. Whether Harry was meant to hear it, he wasn't sure.

Brian would not have remained silent on hearing it, though, so he leaned forwards and scowled ferociously. "That's *Draco's* choice," he said. "Of course you have to care about it, but you can't expect me to stand here and not object."

Narcissa's eyes glowed with a spark of anguish for a moment before she bowed her head to hide it. Then she held out a hand. "Perhaps you would favor me with a dance now, Brian?" she asked, casting a glance at the dance floor. "I do not think this song is as lively as the Estival, but one must be able to move to more than one measure."

Harry took her hand, admiring the way she had had tried to deflect him from her hostility. Her use of his first name could be read as a tacit apology for the remark about half-bloods, instead of the lulling of him she hoped to make it into.

He had to admire her motivation, too. She did not care so much about *her* public embarrassment as she did about Draco's, and if she could show him that his new partner was unfit for him, she could separate them with less pain for her son.

"With pleasure, madam," he said, and kissed the back of her hand. Narcissa loosed a tiny, trembling breath, and then fixed a smile on her face and led him to the floor.

It was a long waltz that Harry knew perfectly well, and he disappointed Narcissa by likewise dancing it perfectly, and seeming to enjoy himself.

"Father," Draco said, with the calm coolness that Lucius had taught him in their dealings together.
Already the anger had vanished from his father's expression. Lucius nodded and raised a hand. A house-elf appeared next to him, bowed, and handed over a glass full of the mixed juices of rare

fruits that Lucius had recently taken a liking to.

Draco laughed silently to himself. Lucius was showing off how much command he had over the house, subtly reminding his son that *he* still controlled the property Draco would inherit someday. But his mask was not perfect. If he had wanted to express true confidence, he would have ordered wine.

But that would be a gesture of foolish bravado in this case, and Lucius knew that, and Draco knew he knew that, and Lucius probably knew that he knew that Lucius knew. So fruit juice it would be, and a crack in the façade.

His father didn't say anything for long moments, simply sipping at the fruit juice and closing his eyes at the taste. When Draco had been younger, tactics like that had frustrated him incredibly. Now he waited for Lucius to speak, his gaze as distant and calm and faintly amused as he really felt.

Lucius gave up on waiting for him to speak first after perhaps two minutes. "You realize that I can't allow this to continue, Draco," he said.

Draco quickly changed his notion of how much his father really knew him. Lucius thought of Draco as a copy of himself, yes, but Draco had had no idea that Lucius still thought him responsive to *threats*. Draco hadn't been that cowardly in a long time, and his father was a good enough player to notice. So he hadn't *allowed* himself to notice, because there would have been no reason to use a tactic this clumsy if he hadn't expected it to work.

"I realize that you think that, yes," Draco said, "and that you would never forgive yourself if you didn't comment on it."

Lucius's gaze came too quickly to him, flickering, sharp. There had been a time when Draco had lain awake at night in a cold sweat, dreading to attract that gaze. But that time had passed.

He was thirty years old today. Really, he ought to have claimed more independence than he had. So far, running his own business and conducting his love affairs in private had been enough for him. But now he was striking out on his own, and Lucius must be brought to realize that by force.

"You do not know what you will do to your mother if you continue to press this *lover* of yours on the world."

Draco was amazed. *Still* threats? Well, unless this was a long-term strategy of Lucius's—and Draco thought he would have noticed if his father was planning something like that—he might as well hit hard during this moment of weakness.

"I know exactly what I will be doing," Draco said. "I watched her face when Ernie Macmillan was suspected of cheating on his wife with another man." The rumor had not been true, but it had

taken Macmillan more than two years of stiffly upright behavior to remove the tarnish from his name. Really, rumors of one's sexual orientation had become one of the blunter political weapons in the wizarding world since the war. A means the older generation used to control the younger, Draco thought in disgust. People like his father always *had* believed too much in control, rather than allying with the powerful men and women growing up under them and ensuring they carried the older generation's ideals forwards into the future.

He fell silent, watching his father's face, letting Lucius absorb the implications. Draco knew about the damage he would inflict on Narcissa, and that was not enough to stop him.

Lucius growled under his breath. "Do you know what damage you will be doing to the family *name*?"

"Oh," Draco breathed. "*Yes*."

He had to be careful, he knew; he had to be delicate. He must not let his father suspect that he *wanted* to be disowned. So he put a bit of glee but a lot of challenge into his tone, as much to say that he wanted to take the Malfoy name away from Lucius and stamp his own signet on it.

Lucius tightened all through his body, like a slamming gate. He nodded once, his eyes fastened on Draco, then flicked his gaze towards the corner where Narcissa was still talking to Brian. Brian didn't look at all bothered, flustered, or worried. Draco felt another small squirming of happiness in the bottom of his gut. He put it politely aside before it could show on his face.

"A young man," Lucius said, "of no family. He is at least a half-blood, perhaps a Mudblood."

"His father was Muggle," Draco said, vastly amused. Didn't Lucius *realize* he would have made sure of his lover's heritage long before now? "His mother was a pure-blood witch of once good family, now sunken. I suppose I might have partially chosen him out of a sense of nostalgia."

Lucius stiffened still further at the covert reference to the Dark Lord. "Rich, I suppose?" he said.

"Oh, no," Draco said, and this time gilded the top of his tone with disappointment, so that his father would fall right into the trap, and try to bribe Brian.

Lucius raised an eyebrow and said, "Such a failure of taste, Draco. One could condemn you for that, if for nothing else." And he turned towards the dance floor, as if bored of the conversation. Brian was dancing with Narcissa now, Draco saw, keeping the steps flawlessly.

Lucius had already made a subtle signal to one of his friends near the front of the muttering crowd. The friend had two daughters just out of Hogwarts. They were to be his distractions, Draco knew, people he could not comfortably ignore for fear of offending good marriage prospects, whilst his father approached Brian alone and tried to intimidate him. Perhaps Narcissa would face him at the same time, and add tearful pleadings to Lucius's quiet offers. His parents worked well together, Draco thought. He had watched their buried love and their trust in each

other act to control the social circles in which the Malfoys moved for years.

He allowed only a slight tremor of disquiet to trouble his mind as he turned to the Moonstone family. He had not prepared Brian to encounter both his parents at once.

Then he had to smother a grin.

On the other hand, nothing had prepared his parents to encounter Brian.

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Chapter: 6

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Six—Handling*

Narcissa twirled Harry to a stop with a slight tug of their joined hands and a bow. "Excuse me for acting like this," she murmured; the music was still playing. "But my husband is coming to separate us. I think he's jealous."

She had *just* the right mixture of amusement and anxiety in her tone, Harry thought in admiration. He knew that part of the reason the Malfoys had maintained respectability in recent years was because no one had ever found enough evidence to charge them with crimes that would stick. But Narcissa's social cleverness must also have an awful lot to do with it.

"Oh, dear, I hope not," was all Brian would say, so it was all Harry said, and he turned to watch the advance of Lucius.

Lucius, of course, was angry about his son, and not his wife. That was shown by the way he stared into Harry's eyes, and the absolutely blank expression of his face. He would have moved in with a half-smile and glancing, teasing insults if he really suspected Harry of trying to steal Narcissa away. Or he would simply have cut into the dance and humiliated Harry in silence by showing him how to *really* win a pure-blood witch's heart in a waltz.

Harry waited, wondering if he was supposed to be intimidated or impressed by Lucius. *Neither,* he decided. Draco had told him his father would try to bribe Brian, and Brian shouldn't react. Fair enough. Harry would play the brash adventurer all the way through and refuse to back down from threats, either.

So he yawned just as Lucius opened his mouth to speak, making sure it looked accidental. Lucius halted, literally seeming to stop between one stride and the next. Harry raised his eyebrows and

bowed a little. "Mr. Malfoy? Is something wrong? Mrs. Malfoy told me you might be jealous of the time I've spent in her lovely presence. I hope she wasn't right."

Lucius's left cheek bent inwards, as if he were chewing on it.

Harry gave him a hopeful, irritating smile.

It was hard to keep his eyes on Marigold and Alice Moonstone, Draco found. He constantly wanted to look over their shoulders, towards the small, tight tangle of people in the center of the dance floor, and see what was happening between his parents and Brian. He had certainly experienced similar desires before, but he'd never had such trouble in suppressing them.

*Brian brings out the childish, the impulsive, in me. That may or may not be a good thing.*

Marigold abruptly got his attention by giggling at her sister and then putting a hand casually on his arm. Draco glanced down at her fingers and then up her arm at her.

"You're very brave, Miss Moonstone," he said.

"Brave?" Marigold fluttered her eyelashes at him. She was practicing to become the sort of woman Narcissa was, Draco thought critically, mostly because she wasn't particularly strong in magic or wit and so would need to rely on her beauty. His mother, though, had a mind behind the looks. Marigold hadn't so far displayed evidence of that. "I don't know what you mean. Every woman in this room wants to do that. I'm just the one who *got* to." Some more giggling. Behind her, Alice, whom Draco suspected to be the intelligent one of the family, looked stranded somewhere between boredom and disgust.

"Brave to touch a man that everyone else has decided is defiled by the touch of a male lover." Draco leaned towards her and lowered his voice. "Doesn't my entrance with Brian make you wonder what we *do* together? How much passion I've found with him, passion that I won't find in a woman's arms ever again?"

Marigold's face paled, and she let go of his arm before she thought about it. Alice didn't move forwards to take her place, but Draco saw the way her mouth twitched with trying to suppress a smile.

"I—" Marigold coughed, and then bravely launched into a recitation of facts her father had probably whispered to her just before Lucius motioned the family over to keep Draco busy. Despite his mockery, Draco had to admit her courage really wasn't bad at all. She would have made a fine Chaser in Quidditch. "I've heard of such things happening among Muggles. Some men just *have* to find out what—sex—with men—is like…" Her voice trailed off in spite of herself at the forbidden words, but she rallied quickly. "But they come back to their wives, because there's an emotional connection between men and women that there never is with the same sex. Men and women *complement* each other. The differences are exciting. You don't get

those differences with someone who's like you." She looked defiantly up at Draco, as if challenging him to prove how much of a pervert he was by disagreeing with her.

Draco smiled. The smile probably struck Marigold as reassuring, because she sagged a little. Alice bit down on her own smile.

It was for her sake, more than her sister's, that Draco began his explanation.

"A good evening, Mr. Montgomery." Lucius obviously saw no reason to take the falsely conciliating road of using Brian's first name. "I suppose that you know what I have come over here to speak to you about?"

"Your son," Brian said innocently. "I can't imagine what else we would have in common." He brightened. "Unless you like Muggle theater, of course. I'm quite fond of it. I've acted in several plays."

Lucius's mouth curved with fury. "Yes, quite," he said. "What you must have realized is that this is a rather different stage from any you've entered before."

"Well, no." Brian gave the room a distinct, appraising glance, and surprised several people looking at them into looking hastily away. "When Draco told me that he wanted to come out at his birthday party, I studied the guest list and *did* learn who would be here. I've faced hostile audiences before. And of course I've studied pure-blood manners to within an inch of my life."

Lucius flicked a glance at Narcissa. Narcissa gave a minute shake of her head back. Lucius half-closed his eyes. Brian thought he could read their signals, though he wasn't sure of the precise meaning. Lucius had asked if Brian was a pure-blood; Narcissa had replied that he was not; Lucius had despaired of the disgrace their son had brought on them.

Now, Lucius said in a tight voice. "A hostile audience does not begin to describe it. This is not a play, Mr. Montgomery. This is Draco's life."

Brian thought of the way Draco had looked when describing how his father and mother would act, and smiled a little. *Draco knows that very well.* "I know that," he chose to say instead, so he wouldn't betray the pride in his voice, "and so does Draco."

"You can do great things for him, to make up for so nearly ruining him tonight," Lucius said. He had apparently decided to be oblivious to small nuances of voice, Brian thought. That was probably the result of an unchallenged reign in his social circles for far too long. He no longer thought someone could seriously bother him, so he did not have to notice the small cues that indicated they could. He reminded Brian of his manager on a small play called *The Sunflowers;* she'd had the same trick of ignoring signs of illness or real distress, because she thought all actors only wanted lead parts and would do anything to get out of playing minor characters. "And you can have—well, let us say a reward for those things? A gesture of understanding

between two people."

"Ah," Brian said. "You're trying to bribe me."

Lucius's nostrils flared in spite of himself, and then he shook his head with a charming smile. Brian had to admire the smile. "I would not put it that way," Lucius said. "You are a man of gestures. I saw that when you were dancing with Draco. I would not extend my hand in friendship to you—"

"With a Galleon clasped in it," Brian said helpfully.

"If I thought it would simply be rejected." Was Lucius grinding his back teeth together? It certainly sounded like it. "You made so many graceful turns in that dance. You looked like you would have been the perfect partner for Draco, *if only you were female.* Will you give us a chance to find that partner for Draco, by backing out now? I admit your persistence. I admit your fitness for accompanying him, save in two respects only."

"My sex and my blood." Brian made the words a challenge.

Lucius hesitated, then gave a small shrug. "Yes, Mr. Montgomery." He wore a slight self-deprecating smile, and he cast a wry glance towards Draco, as if to place the blame where it belonged. "If our son did not tell you we are very traditional in terms of marriage and courtship, then he did you a disservice."

"Oh, I'm not going to *marry* him," Brian said.

"Really?" Narcissa blurted, and then looked ashamed of herself for doing so. Brian felt a bit indulgent towards her, though it was her own blindness that had landed her in this situation. It was her love for Draco that made her snatch at any chance to "free" him from scandal.

"Of course not. There's no such thing as marriage between two wizards." Brian leaned an arm on nothing, a gesture he'd stolen wholesale from one of the Muggles cast opposite him in *The Sunflowers,* and grinned. "We'll just have to compensate by having lots and lots of passionate sex."

Lucius actually looked as if he would fall over. Brian cheered inside, but noted to himself that it would not be this easy in the future. Lucius had not expected a challenge like this at all, and thus he was reacting badly. In the next few days, he would have the time to recover his balance and think of other tactics.

"You will—you will not—" Lucius was choking.

Narcissa came leaping to his rescue, her voice swift and soft as a leopard. "What he means, Brian," she said, "is that we cannot stand to hear talk of such disgusting acts in this house."

"But you *would* be happy to listen to blow-by-blow accounts of Draco's involvement with a young woman?" Brian cocked his head, politely baffled. "Pure-bloods are even stranger than I realized."

"Mr. Montgomery." Lucius was capable of making his name sound like invective. Brian had to appreciate that, too. "Speak to me plainly. Will you take the gesture of goodwill I offer you—which amounts to several hundred thousand Galleons—and leave my son alone, agreeing to never come near him again?"

Brian flung him a scornful glance. "Really. You can't put a price on love for people like me and Draco. You should know that."

Lucius turned and stalked away. Narcissa remained, her hands twining around each other. The gesture looked anxious, but Brian knew she was bracing herself for a war.

"You should have taken the money," Narcissa said quietly. "This was your last chance to get out unscathed."

"You assume scarring bothers me," Brian said, and briefly brushed his fingers along the line on his forehead. "I earned this saving a life. How much more would I not risk for the man I love?"

Narcissa regarded him with clear, disarmingly intelligent eyes for a long moment. Then she turned and walked in her husband's wake.

Harry surfaced with a gasp. He'd *become* Brian for those few minutes, submerging himself completely in the created personality. Narcissa was observant, and she had been close to Harry Potter, once, in the Forbidden Forest. He could not take the chance of reminding her of him.

But Brian was so close to his own personality, his own impulses and his own answers to questions like that—if he had ever had the opportunity to answer them—that it had felt oddly as if *Harry* was there all the time, behind the thin mask. It had been a deep drowning, but not as deep as it should have felt.

*Let Brian take over,* Harry counseled himself. *He's the one Draco hired, not you.*

He glanced around for a moment, and then went in search of Draco. The party was already dissipating, with people drifting out the doors, as if the sight of Brian not running from the room or at least writhing in shame disgusted them. Harry thought it a good time to retreat and plan their strategy. Draco's parents had already done unexpected things.

Draco materialized beside him, so suddenly that Harry started in spite of himself. He turned around and managed to smile. Draco gave him a single, intense look in response, then smiled, too. His arm shot out and curved around Harry's waist.

"Come up to my room, and you can tell me all about it," he said. "I've already done my part in

disillusioning one young woman for this evening."

Harry followed the path of his gaze, and saw a young witch weeping hysterically into the shoulder of a slightly taller one who was probably her sister. The sister patted the sobbing girl soothingly, but she was watching them speculatively. She winked when she caught Brian's eye, and then grinned at Draco.

"*That* one has some sense," Draco commented approvingly. Then he turned and faced Harry. Harry blinked at the heat shining openly in his gaze, the same heat that had burned between them in the dance. His body was reacting to it, and Harry thought a moment, then decided not to prevent it from doing so. Draco was far from blind to the tension between him and Brian. He would expect Brian to be aroused.

"It occurs to me," Draco said, his voice soft and heavy as smoke, "that you haven't given me a birthday gift yet."

"I did bring one," Harry said, recovering his wits a little. He had an ivory statue of a siren that he'd used as a prop in another Metamorphosis case eight years ago, a statue that actually came to life and sang bewitchingly, to charm anyone who listened except the owner. Harry had refurnished and resculpted the statue a little; even those who had seen it in action eight years ago should not think it was the same one. "Would you like to see it?"

"Oh," Draco whispered, bowing his head so that his lips brushed Brian's as he spoke, "very much so."

Amazingly, Brian didn't seem to realize what the invitation to Draco's room implied, much less the asking for a gift. Draco had known witches as dim as Marigold who would have responded to that.

But then, Brian was probably more conscious of the distance between them, the fact that they were united only in purpose and didn't *know* each other that well yet. He had been in a House like Gryffindor, after all. And Gryffindors tended to only have sex with people they knew and trusted well.

Draco knew enough. He felt—*bold* was the only word for it. He was certain that sex would not become a disaster area between them, because nothing where they worked together and agreed could be a disaster area. It would not entangle Draco's heart further; he was an expert at separating his heart and his bed. And it would leach out some of the tension that at the moment crackled between them like leashed lightning and might make Draco do something stupid.

If *Brian* began to fall in love because of this, that would just ensure Draco had more control and more latitude to choose his own path.

But—it felt oddly as if he didn't have to choose. As if he could leap off a cliff and trust Brian to

catch him.

That was the impression Brian's acting was meant to create, of course. But Draco trusted himself as a reader of character. He read a great deal of truth in Brian; he was having to use *himself*, and not his acting skills, to answer the demands of this assignment, because it was such an important and difficult one.

This once, Draco thought he could take the risk. Now the difficulty was in engaging Brian's impulsive nature and disengaging that Gryffindor-like generosity that would only get in the way.

"Your room is beautiful," Brian said, openly staring at the tapestries that fringed Draco's walls. They depicted hunting scenes for the most part, hunts where the quarry and pursuers changed from scene to scene; in the one nearest the bed, stags rode on the backs of people, hunting some slender golden creature that was a mixture of cat and bird.

The bed wasn't bad, either, if Draco did say so himself: a basin-shaped confection of green cloth and silver curtains—not House affiliation; he just liked the colors—with so many charms for warming and softening and comfort worked into the covers that Draco couldn't remember all their names or the order of their casting. He stepped around in front of Brian, directing his gaze towards the bed with the motion of his body.

"So are you," Draco said softly, and moved in for another kiss, wondering if this one would be as exciting without an audience.

It was better. Though surprised, Brian seemed to have realized at last what Draco wanted, and he opened his mouth eagerly, his tongue plunging forwards.

Draco groaned. There was so much *wetness* building between them, and so much heat, the way that Draco was used to feeling only when he was naked and lying on top of someone else. His hands tightened, and he realized he was gripping curls of Brian's savage hair, so tightly it must hurt. But Brian only leaned, pushed, shoved into him, and grasped Draco's neck and hips in return, and the delicate touch of erection on erection contrasted wonderfully with the fierce joining of their mouths. Draco sighed.

Brian pulled back. His eyes were ablaze, his voice rough as he whispered, "On the bed. *Now.*"

Draco went, well-pleased with himself. He had no objection to being made love to, unlike the foolish men he had sometimes dated who thought they had to be absolutely in control to prove their masculinity. Draco knew he was very masculine. No one else's opinion mattered.

Brian stripped with a flap of his hands and a snap of his wand that made Draco blink. He felt a moment's regret—he would rather have liked seeing that slender, visibly muscled body emerge slowly—but then he lost himself in the contemplation of tight, flushed skin, and straight legs and arms that pointed directly to the erect cock in a glory of dark hair.

Brian stripped him the same way, and spent a moment just staring. Draco arched his back and stretched his arms over his head, showing how unself-conscious he was. "Are you coming?" he asked.

"Not quite yet, I hope," Brian said, and then he strode over to the bed and fastened their mouths together once more.

Harry had written Brian's lovemaking skills into his biography. The reason he had felt confident doing that was not that he had thought Draco would test them so soon, but because Brian *was* so close to him, and that was the way Harry made love.

He focused all his attention on his partner, always, and so that was the way he looked at Draco now. He let his fingers touch every small line of muscle, both nipples, the line of Draco's jaw, the curve of his neck, and expressed his wonder and delight in what he found openly on his face. Draco, lying back on the pillows and staring at him, gradually became more and more rapt, his eyes glazing, as he seemed to lose awareness of anything that went on outside the bed.

*Good.* Harry wanted him to. Everyone should have a chance to feel like the center of the universe once in their lives. Harry hoped he gave his partners an experience like that in his lovemaking.

He followed the path of his fingers with the fingers of his other hand, and then with his tongue. By the time he was kneeling on the bedspread, applying his tongue gently to the prominence of Draco's hip, Draco was bucking gently but steadily. Only his immense self-control held him back from going faster, Harry thought.

His object was to give pleasure, not to torment and tease, so he passed his tongue one final time along the ticklish skin over Draco's ribs and then swept it over Draco's balls, up to the tip of his cock, and then down the other side. Draco gasped. Harry knew he heard satisfaction in the sound, so he repeated the movement, light and fast, and then held the head of Draco's cock in his mouth and sucked lightly, using only tongue and lips. Then he let Draco butt against his covered teeth, and against the sticky and wet ridges of his gums, and against the roof of his mouth, until Draco's face showed his passion at white heat.

Then Harry pulled away, turned Draco gently but inexorably onto his knees, and applied his tongue to Draco's flanks and his fingers to Draco's arse. Lubricant was easy enough to conjure with a tap of his wand. Harry used some that would make the experience more pleasant for Draco: warm and sticky, not the cool rubbery stuff that some gay males of Harry's experience unfortunately used. He skirted the edge that would have made Draco desperate, touching his prostate only once or twice, using three fingers and pumping steadily, soothing and encouraging with his tongue on Draco's outer skin.

When he slid himself in, it was slowly, with soft broken words that didn't mean anything and which Draco didn't need to mean anything; the point was that Draco could hear them, and know

*he* was causing them. Then Harry smiled, drew back, took a moment to revel in his own warmth and pleasure, and plunged forwards.

Draco could not remember feeling like this. The pleasure had risen slowly, steadily, an enveloping wave, never becoming uncomfortable. The point of this was not to come; Draco didn't long for his orgasm and only his orgasm like he usually did. He could have stayed like this literally forever.

Then he felt the powerful thrusts of Brian's hips, and the flexing and bunching of his own muscles as he accepted the thrusts, and he shivered. The warmth was changing, spiraling higher, but still not painful. Draco shook his head in wonder and buried his head in his arms, folded in front of him.

"Draco. Look at me." Brian's voice was a husky gasp. He didn't try to hide how affected he was.

Draco turned and looked back over his shoulder, though it was difficult to convince himself to shift that much. Brian was thrusting with the strength of his hips and his back alone. His arms were crossed behind his neck, his eyes half-shut, his head tossed back so Draco could see the entire gleaming expanse of his body.

"Look," Brian whispered. "No hands."

And he rolled his hips in a precise movement he must have practiced, and Draco *came*, just like that.

He was gasping as the warmth surged through him, as golden sparks burst behind his eyes, as he drifted down softly and slowly. Brian froze behind him for a moment, and his hips thrust one more time, not punishing but simply hard, inexorable.

Then he drew out of Draco, turned him over, and peppered his face with kisses, as if Draco were the one who had done all the work. He dipped one hand down, scooped up some of Draco's come from the bed, and stuck his finger into his mouth.

"Have you been eating chocolate?" he asked.

Draco, sated, enthralled, *pleased* as he had never imagined he could be, reached Brian up and drew him down into a kiss as the only fit answer to that question.

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Chapter: 7

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Seven—Exceptions to the General Rule*

Harry opened his eyes when the sun rose; he usually did, even on those assignments when he could sleep later. He liked to wake up, make sure there was no danger and nothing drastic had changed, and examine his immediate surroundings before he went back to sleep.

Now, though he drew Brian's wand and carefully cast a few detection spells, he couldn't find a trace of foreign magic in Draco's room. Harry nodded in satisfaction. Apparently, Draco's parents weren't desperate enough yet to intrude into their son's private quarters, even—or especially—when they must have guessed what he was doing there with his new boyfriend.

Harry turned on one elbow to stare down at Draco's sleeping face. A stir of the excitement he'd felt last night came back to him, and he frowned.

He had gone along with Draco's passion because it seemed as though Brian would. Brian was more spontaneous, more liable to get excited, than Harry himself was. And there was no great distrust holding him and Draco apart.

But there were moments when one of Harry's roles could seem like a thin mask over reality. That had happened once when he played a bodyguard, and the person stalking the woman he protected, the Seeker for the Kenmare Kestrels, had tried to kill her young children as well as her. Harry's own rage at the thought of innocents being threatened had nearly shattered the cool, professional competence that Ursula Windwood had the right to expect of the man she'd hired.

And last night, how much of Brian's passion had been his own?

*Too much,* Harry thought with a light shake of his head. *I stand a danger of falling into a pool that I normally avoid.*

It was true that Draco was fantastically responsive in bed. But Harry hadn't come into this job to find a partner; he would do that as himself if he wanted a permanent relationship, which so far he'd never yet yearned for. He had come into this job to get Draco disowned by his parents, and he should focus on that.

The obvious conclusion: Brian could join Draco in bed again, as Draco would be suspicious if he didn't, but not in the same way. Not so intimately that *Harry* nearly lost himself.

He sat up. He'd write out a note that recounted last night's conversation with Lucius and Narcissa for Draco, and then leave it pinned beneath his gift, the statue of the siren. He started to smile as he considered how to phrase the truth in Brian's bombastic style.

An arm settling heavily, possessively, against his chest halted the plans whirling in his head.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" Draco whispered into his ear.

*Shit,* Harry thought in self-loathing. *You really should have noticed that he was awake.*

He shoved Harry away in the next instant and donned the mask of Brian, who would not be embarrassed to be caught like this. He turned around and stared at Draco, raising an eyebrow. "Out, of course," he said. "I certainly wasn't about to go downstairs and try to chat up your father."

Draco smiled, but he could feel suspicion blossoming in his mind, dragging itself out of the intense haze of pleasure he remembered from last night. Brian certainly could make love.

But he could do other things, too, and Draco should not have let himself forget those other things.

"Do you have such a busy schedule that you couldn't wait until I was awake?" he whispered. He had woken up the moment Brian moved from beside him, and he knew the man had spent a few minutes silently contemplating his thoughts before he sighed and sat up. Draco wanted to know what those thoughts had been.

If he had become so involved with Brian in such a short time, the only acceptable response was for Brian to become more involved with *him*, too.

"Actually," Brian murmured, "I've blocked out most afternoons and nights for you as long as I'm working with Metamorphosis. But I *do* have a life of my own, as you know." He grinned. "And some friends who will be waiting impatiently to ask me questions. I told them I was going to do something spectacular. They won't be expecting my name in the papers, though."

Draco narrowed his eyes a little, but kept his voice delicate. "Then take me along to meet these friends." His fingers traced the line of Brian's waist. No, he hadn't put on any clothes again after they'd come. They had spent the night tangled together absolutely naked, a privilege that Draco didn't allow many of his lovers.

"No," said Brian.

Draco blinked, for a moment thinking the word an answer to his thoughts, and then he remembered his own demand. He frowned and withdrew his arm from Brian's chest. "What?"

"You purchased my services to help you get disowned." Brian stared calmly into his face. "You didn't purchase my friends. You didn't purchase every single moment of my time. Besides, the point of Metamorphosis is to provide you with a perfect *stranger*, remember? We aren't supposed to get intimately involved in the details of each other's lives."

"I'll have you meet my friends," Draco said, deepening his voice from the shout he wanted to give. The shout was hardly the way to convince Brian, who had shown himself not readily susceptible to intimidation.

"And that's your choice." Brian shrugged a little and pulled back. "I won't have you meet mine."

Draco smiled a little, acknowledging that he had moved too fast and got out of his depth. He was used to people who ultimately gave in to him. The few friends of his who weren't like that, namely Pansy and Blaise, didn't have anything he wanted badly enough to require him to manipulate them, and they preferred free association, too. Brian had warned Draco that he would push back. That was abundantly clear now.

Brian would need a different tactic. Draco didn't mind having an equal, he told himself; he just needed to be sure *he* wasn't the one falling under the spell.

"Very well," he said. "But tell me what my parents said to you before you depart, so we can plan for Lucius's next attack."

Brian blinked, but went with the rapid shift of subject, recounting the conversation word-perfect. When Draco stared hard at him, Brian shrugged and murmured, "I'm an actor, remember? Play instructions are harder to memorize. Some of them don't make *near* as much sense as that conversation did."

"Hmmm," said Draco. *Really.* "I'll meet you at two in Diagon Alley."

"Good enough." Brian waved his wand and lazily Summoned his robe. "Where?"

"Oh," Draco said, "I think you'll be able to find me."

Brian kissed him before he left, with the assured confidence of a boyfriend who assumes it's perfectly all right. Draco wasn't sure if he found that attractive or not. He lay there thinking about it before he shook his head, got up, and went to take a shower.

He had an outraged father to confront. He expected breakfast to be entertaining.

Harry gratefully altered his face to have the right angles again, and then spelled his eyes from blue back to green. His lightning bolt scar spread across his brow once more. Harry spent a thoughtful moment looking into the mirror, then shrugged.

He had just thought that he knew *himself* less than he knew any of his created personalities, but that was the point. He had made up those personalities the way novelists made up their characters; there was no reason he shouldn't know all about them. But the personality he had left…

Harry snorted.

The person he had *been* had died with Voldemort. When he'd had some time to pause and think after the final battle, he'd realized he didn't really know what to do with himself when Voldemort wasn't threatening him. The other man had defined his life for so long. Harry had planned, acted, reacted, thought, loved, related, solely with the thought that Voldemort could kill him someday. If he hadn't done that all the time he'd been at Hogwarts, he'd certainly done it since Sirius died.

Where did the shadow go when the light that had cast it was gone?

And then the media had descended.

Harry had thought he understood would it would be like from the fuss over his entry into the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and the accusations of his insanity during fifth year. Those occurrences gave him no idea of the reality. This time, he wasn't a young wizard competing in a dangerous sport or a potential future Dark Lord; he had *saved the world*, and it seemed that was something Britain hadn't seen in too many lifetimes.

Many, many times during that frenzied last year of school, when they somehow caught pictures of him in the showers in Gryffindor Tower, when he couldn't play a game of Quidditch because the number of admirers on brooms was too great, when someone had broken his hand with a spell that attempted to force him to sign a thousand autographs, Harry had wished Dumbledore was still alive. Had people lauded him like this after he defeated Grindelwald? Harry longed to ask. How in the world had he *dealt* with it?

McGonagall, as Headmistress, had done her best, but she couldn't keep everyone determined to have a piece of Harry out of the school, even with the strongest wards; desperation and cleverness together let them find a way inside. So Harry, aware that he might literally go mad with all this attention—he had lain with his wand against his throat in the darkness too many times—found his own escape.

He began to study masks, glamours, disguise charms, spells that altered the color of eyes and hair and skin, spells that had originally been meant to conceal disfigurements and scars and a lack of magic. He observed the way that people, even the importunate reporters who badgered him, walked and talked, stood and moved their hands, met other people's eyes or didn't. He took personality as a plastic cast and poured new materials into it, imagining what he would be like if he had grown up with parents, in France, with only one leg, with a permanent grudge against the world. (He thought he almost deserved to *have* that last one).

And he learned he could become other people, and those other people saved his life.

When he was Robert Barrington, walking down a Muggle street in Muggle London, no one troubled him. When he was Sheila Hacklestein, a sixteen-year-old witch bitterly complaining because her parents had chosen to keep her at home instead of letting her go to Hogwarts, a few people murmured sympathetically, but no one looked at him the way they looked at Harry. When

he was a hunchbacked drunk crooning into his glass at the Three Broomsticks, no one even cared about his name, as long as he had enough Galleons to pay for his drinks.

Harry ran further and further away from himself, until at last he saw the Harry Potter part of himself as the most hollow personality he owned, just the dressing robe he put on between a bath in one persona and the clothes of another.

And then he had opened Metamorphosis, and that had done well, and he had discovered that he had a talent for acting and lying, for being someone other than himself. Maybe that talent wasn't natural, forged instead in the fires of desperation, but it was real enough now.

He had to be Harry for a short time this morning; he wanted to catch Hermione before she went to the Ministry and tease and congratulate her on the coming child. But he could be Brian again this afternoon.

Harry hummed softly under his breath as he chose one of the robes that Ron and Hermione would expect to see him appear in. Acting like a shell of a person wasn't so bad, when he had knew he had full, rich personalities he could change into with a few flicks of his wand. And Ron and Hermione gave the Harry Potter shell life it never could have had without them.

"Morning, Father."

Lucius greeted him with a perfectly cool face as Draco strolled into the dining room. "Hello, Draco. Did you have a restful night?"

"More than I've had in some time," Draco said, and chose a seat a few chairs away from his father. The table was large enough that he could have sat near the far wall if he wanted, but Draco didn't want to appear eager either to get away from Lucius or cozy up to him. He ran a hand through his hair, which he'd left deliberately damp from the shower, and smiled at the house-elf who appeared with a cup of tea and the mixture of several different kinds of meat that Draco liked to eat in the mornings. He picked up his fork and ate a few bites, aware of Lucius reading the newspaper instead of looking at him.

*He can do that if he wants. It doesn't make the charade any less a charade.*

"It feels so much better to have the secret out in the open at last," Draco continued, sipping his tea and glancing at the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. They were carrying some story about a Quidditch match where the Seeker had fallen from his broom and been rescued by one of the opposite team's Beaters just in time. His party had taken place too late the night before for it to have made the lead article, Draco judged. But that would alter by this evening. "To know that I'm not deceiving you about my future plans."

"I see no reason that those future plans should change," Lucius said, in a deceptively mild voice.

"Why not?" Draco lifted an eyebrow and plucked a strip of ham loose from a strip of sausage. "You have to admit that you never expected me to turn out gay."

If he hadn't been watching closely, he wouldn't have seen Lucius's knuckles turn white where they gripped the paper. He had obviously used the night to talk over some things with Narcissa and rebalance and reorient himself. Draco was reluctantly impressed. He would have expected the shock to last longer.

"Of course not," Lucius said. "But gay men can still marry and father children. It has been done for years, in times when attitudes—and laws—were stricter than they are now."

Draco knew exactly what his father was talking about, and though he smiled without effort and continued eating, he felt a sharp spark of disgust at the base of his brain. It was no longer actually legal to imprison a wizard or witch just for being gay, though parents could still legally disown them for no other reason. Lucius quite obviously wished that the lawmakers of a generation or two back had not been so permissive.

*More subtle threats. But still threats.*

"Unless they're utterly sexually incompatible with women, then yes, they can," Draco agreed. "But there is no draw for them to get married, no attraction, as there is for straight men. And I have no intention of getting married."

Lucius laid down the paper and gave him, at last, serious attention. His face was still a mask of serenity, of course. Only long experience made Draco sure that his father was ready to explode with fury and frustration at having one of his most-cherished plans contravened.

"You must," Lucius said. "You know that the continuation of this family depends on you."

"What about Maxwell?" Draco countered innocently, just for the sake of seeing his father flush a bit. Maxwell Malfoy was the bastard son of Lucius's father's younger brother, half Muggle and less interested in magic than machines. He kept in touch with the wizarding world, but erratically. And he was the only other possible Malfoy heir besides Draco.

"He is not pure-blooded," Lucius said. "He has not been raised within our world. Why will you force me to state the obvious, Draco?" His face was pained, apparently appealing to an invisible audience of parents over his impossible child. "He will not make half the heir you will."

"But to be your heir," Draco said, leaning forwards and speaking seriously, "I would need to marry and have children of my own. *One* heir by himself isn't enough. It's the continuity, the line, that's important." He had heard those words from the time he was five years old. Lucius had wanted him to understand that he was not the center of the universe. Instead, the Malfoy family, the larger unit Draco was a part of, was the center of the universe. "Maxwell is superior to me as your heir because he's straight." *Is he ever.* Maxwell had apparently had two children already, and yet he wasn't married. At least he was supporting both of them, which was more than Draco

could say for what Maxwell's father had done. Quintus Malfoy had deserved to die in that hippogriff accident.

"Your sexual orientation makes no difference to me," Lucius said.

*Yes, it does.* Draco was absolutely certain of that. Maybe his mother could speak those words with some truth, but not his father. Lucius hated being wrong too much; he hated not being able to predict what his son would do next. Therefore, Draco watched his father with pardonable suspicion.

"This—stunt—can be recovered from. It need not change the course of your life," Lucius continued, sounding calmer now. "You can give up this Montgomery, or retain him on the side if you must, but you will marry. You will have children. True, your orientation is an unfortunate fact, but it will change nothing."

*Well.* Draco had counted on his father's vast stubbornness. He simply hadn't predicted that his father would try to paint him over like a hole in the plaster.

"You think there are still women who will have me, after last night?" he asked, pretending to play along for a moment.

"Alice Moonstone did not seem overly horrified," Lucius said, his face and his eyes sending out subtle beams of pride in his son.

"She's twelve years younger than I am," Draco pointed out. "Just eighteen."

"That only means she is still in her prime for bearing wizarding children," Lucius said firmly. "You know that children born when their mother is younger than thirty tend to be Squibs less often. I have wished you married before now, Draco, but at least your delay will not affect your children as much as taking an older bride would." He relaxed into a smile.

"Ah," said Draco. These were calculations he had heard all his life. He was as tired of them as he was of everything else about his father's dominion. "I am sure I would find this discussion more interesting *if* I intended to marry." He finished his breakfast and stood, a house-elf appearing at once to take the empty plate and cup away.

Lucius looked at him with a face empty of expression for a moment. Then he said, "You may think that," and picked up the paper.

Draco stepped out of the dining room and stood still for a moment, eyes shut, to all appearances enjoying the fall of sunlight through the large window at the back of the house. In reality, he was calming his anger. Making a mark on Lucius's obstinacy was like trying to chisel diamonds with a piece of chalk.

"Draco?"

He opened his eyes and smiled down at his mother, who had come up beside him without even a rustle of her gown. She did not smile back. She held out her arm and said instead, "Walk with me in the garden for a while?"

Draco stepped out beside her into the sunlight. It was a beautiful June day, so warm that Draco would have thought it already past midsummer if he hadn't known better. The sky was that rare, high, pounded blue of cobalt. The few clouds visible glowed as if made of gold. He followed his mother into the maze of lilies and roses that sprawled across the front part of the gardens.

Narcissa finally said, in a murmur just above a rustle, "Draco, how could you do that to us?"

Draco looked thoughtfully down at her head. He understood exactly what outraged his father, but his mother was a more complicated personality and always had been. "Turn out gay?" he asked. "I didn't plan that, really. It just happened." *And so far as I'm attracted to men, that's true. I'm just leaving out the part where I can find women attractive and sleep with them if I want to.*

"Announce it in such a fashion," Narcissa said, and this time she was whispering. "Publicly embarrass your family. Put our future in jeopardy."

"It was the only way I could think of that Father wouldn't be able to dismiss," Draco said, stroking the inside of his mother's elbow. *The first step on the road to my actual dismissal as the Malfoy heir.* "Otherwise, he would have ignored it. As if ignoring something changes the reality. I'm sorry you got caught up in it, but you know that many of your dreams for me are the same as Father's."

His mother pulled him to a stop with surprising strength, and then stood looking up at him. Her face was as pale as the lilies around them, but her eyes were as strong as the sun. Draco looked down at her, uncertain what he was about to hear.

"Not exactly the same," Narcissa said quietly. "I do want you to be the patriarch of a successful pure-blood family, committed to keeping our heritage and traditions alive in a world that wants to destroy them."

Draco did not say, though he wanted to, that maybe if the pure-bloods hadn't done such a fine job of making others hate them by serving the Dark Lord in two wars, then maybe those traditions wouldn't be in danger. He just held his mother's gaze.

"But there is something that comes before all that," Narcissa said. "Something your…your Mr. Montgomery said to me last night, which I discounted at the time but have been thinking on since. I want to see you happy, Draco. I want to see you standing free of your father's shadow—which is there, even if Lucius does not mean to cast it—and independently, on your own."

Draco tilted his head curiously. It was far from the first time that his mother had said she wanted

to see him happy, but the other wish was a new one. "Then why did you encourage me to marry someone exactly like Father did," he asked, "a beautiful pure-blood witch? Why did you encourage me to *live* exactly like he did?"

"Because I thought that would lead to your freedom in time, when Lucius died if no sooner," Narcissa answered. "Lucius became free of his father in the same way, and Abraxas was yet more overwhelming." She hesitated. "However, he died whilst Lucius was still a young man, younger than you are now. I had not considered before how much room that might have given Lucius to grow."

"He will not give me that room," Draco said. "I must take it."

"I would wish you luck," said Narcissa, "except that I do not believe Mr. Montgomery will make you happy. Nor will living as an exile from so many of our social circles in the wizarding world. Come back, Draco. You may not find your freedom right away, but you will only find it, ultimately, along with your happiness, here."

Draco kissed his mother's cheek, overwhelmed by love for her. She was brave and sympathetic in ways his father would never understand. Were it not for the marriage assuring his own existence, Draco would have passionately wished she had found a husband more suited to her. Lucius and Narcissa *worked* well together; Draco was not at all convinced they *lived* well together.

"Does this mean you will reconsider?" Narcissa breathed.

"No." Draco took her hands. "Brian does make me happy, Mother. And I can stand the exile." *Since I will recapture the people who despise me now in ways that Father cannot even imagine doing.*

Narcissa gave him a steady stare, then took her hands away and went into the house.

Draco smiled and cast a glance at the white marble clock in the middle of the garden. Still short of noon, and therefore a few hours away from his meeting with Brian. He would take a long, slow shower, swing briefly by his business to see what was happening, and then prepare himself for another meeting with the man who—

Intrigued him? Frustrated him? Complemented him?

*All of those. And he makes me happy as well, at least for now.*

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Chapter: 8

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eight—Yes, Right in the Middle of Diagon Alley*

"And you'll come to dinner in a week?" Hermione's voice held the determined cheerfulness Harry was used to hearing from his friends whenever he had to refuse the first two or three days for a meeting they offered him.

"Of course," said Harry, mentally reminding himself to tell Draco that he couldn't go anywhere in public next Sunday night. He leaned over and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "Congratulations again on the baby, by the way."

Hermione smiled at him, a faint blush creeping across her cheeks that made her look much more like the girl he remembered from Hogwarts than the formidable witch who had dragged the Department of Magical Law Enforcement kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. "Thanks for saying so, Harry. And I'm sorry that I didn't tell you earlier." Her hand rose to rest on the very slight swell of her belly. "I just wanted to be *completely* sure."

Harry nodded. He understood that. And he understood, too, that though the bonds connecting him with his friends were still deep, he no longer stood so close as to have a right to expect immediate news of them.

"Thanks for lunch, Hermione," he said, and clattered down the stairs of the house that Ron and Hermione had bought just two years ago; Hermione had insisted they live in a flat until they earned enough money to really afford a home. They'd chosen a good place to live, Harry had to admit. The house was in Ottery St. Catchpole, about ten minutes' walk from the Burrow, with three bedrooms, a spacious kitchen, and three rooms that had probably been meant for other purposes but which Hermione had turned into libraries.

Harry paused for a moment, his hand leaning on the door, and questioned himself, as he sometimes did, about whether he would have preferred this fate for himself to what had actually happened.

As always, though, the answer was *no*. It suited Ron and Hermione, but for him it was too staid, too peaceful and unexciting.

Not changeful enough.

Harry Apparated, whistling. He was due to meet Draco in an hour, and doubtless Draco would want him to be on time. Maybe he'd even let Brian give him his birthday gift, which Harry hadn't found a chance to suggest before he left the Manor.

Draco idled some time away outside the apothecary, critically studying their selection of

ingredients. Really, was it so much to ask that they keep the owl feathers they sold *straight?* Even one vein out of alignment could have serious consequences for any brewer who knew what he was doing.

A hand clapped him on the back, making him start. Ordinarily, Draco also would have turned around with a soul-killing glare for the person who had dared to accost him like that, but the fact was, few people *would* dare to do that. Which meant it had to be Brian, and it would be bad for the public reputation of their "love affair" if Draco was seen acting at all coldly to him.

*Even when he does deserve it,* he thought, and fastened a bright and happy smile to his face before he turned.

"Hullo, lover," Brian said, with a ridiculous smile, and leaned in for a kiss. Draco blinked for only a moment before he accepted. He had vowed to come out as gay, after all. This setting was more public than his party had been, but did it make that much difference?

Given the silence that immediately spread all around them, maybe it did. Draco could hear robes rustling as some of the shoppers beat a hasty retreat. He directed half his attention to that and half to Brian's slow, languid kiss, without much of the heat he'd displayed last night. This was more for the watchers, who only had to be shown two men kissing, than to convince a hostile and perceptive audience that they were in love, Draco thought.

The realization was bracing, but also oddly comforting. Brian really did have some sense of strategy, and Draco didn't have to be afraid to work with him. And if Brian could hold himself back so effectively in the middle of physical passion, then Draco didn't have to worry about his own decision to refrain more than he had last night.

*Last night was pleasant, but it can't happen again.* The more Draco had thought it over in the ensuing hours, the more certain he was that he'd moved too fast and tumbled into bed in a way that let Brian exercise a certain amount of control over him.

Something sharp and painful struck Draco's shoulder. He reared back from the kiss and turned in the direction it had come from.

A large, magenta-robed man stood there, his hand already retracting behind his back to grip his wand. He'd flung a stone, but guilt warred with self-satisfaction on his face. Beside him stood a tall, slender woman, probably his wife, who was staring at Draco and Brian with flared nostrils and a decidedly pinched expression about the lips. Her hands were over her daughter's eyes, shielding them, Draco thought, from the dangerous sight of a different kind of love.

"Do you know what you've just done?" Draco asked, addressing the wizard.

"Stopped you from indulging in *that* kind of nonsense," the wizard snapped back. He had his wand out now, and though it shook slightly, he didn't look properly afraid. From that, Draco discerned the man must not have recognized him. "Look, you can do it in your private orgies all

you want, I don't care, but do you really have to do it in front of young, impressionable *children?* There's a difference between freedom and perversion, you know."

"It's a little late to cover her eyes, isn't it?" Brian asked with a lazy yawn, stepping up beside Draco. He faced the witch, and though he smiled, his gaze was hard. "After all, she already saw the ugliest thing she possibly could—her father attacking two strangers who had done nothing to him."

The witch just gasped at him, but her husband was quicker to take offense. He shouldered his way forwards, blocking his wife and daughter entirely from view. He was probably drawing strength from the curious crowd gathering around them, too, Draco thought, certain that Draco and Brian wouldn't dare strike back when someone would immediately set to on them.

"You're going to go away now," he said. "And you're going to thank whatever perverse fates made you—*that* way that I'm such a nice man. I could have let you go with boils on your bollocks, you know."

"My name is Draco Malfoy," Draco said, smiling, and then waited.

It was remarkable how quickly the wizard's face turned white. Draco wondered for a moment, amused, if he would faint. Yes, he could afford to be amused. The sting was already fading from his shoulder, and he and Brian held the upper hand here already, though none of these cretins had known it until now.

The wizard swallowed. Then he said, "I've bought—I've bought some of your products."

"Yes, exactly," Draco said. "And I'm sure you know about the charm that I put on all of them before they're sold."

"That's a rumor," the wizard whispered. "No one could possibly be *that* powerful. You can't—they belong to us now. We've put our own enchantments on them. We've trusted our lives to them."

"Alas," Draco said, with a dramatic sigh, "I'm afraid you'll find that Malfoy Machineries simply *isn't* like, say, a bookshop. You can't alter the nature of the products that much with your own spells. If I commanded it—if I felt sufficiently insulted by someone trying to imitate barbaric Muggle customs in the middle of Diagon Alley, for example—then they'd rear up and strangle you, or bite you in strategic places, or—"

"All right," said the wizard, and he seemed to swallow his pride and his anger in the same moment. The only thing left on his face was the fear. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Malfoy. I never would have—I didn't know."

"Ah," Brian said just as Draco was about to gracefully accept the apology, "but you *would* have if he didn't have the power to stop you, wouldn't you? You'd have flung that stone and rejoiced in

it."

Harry didn't think he could have helped himself from voicing the words even if he had wanted to. And it was important to stay in character, wasn't it? Brian was as much like a Gryffindor as he could be whilst not actually being part of Gryffindor House. And he would be outraged at the implication that it was all right to treat someone shabbily if he didn't have the power or money to make you sorry.

In truth, the sudden smack in the face with the prejudices of the wizarding world after Harry had avoided them neatly for years shocked him nearly as much as it had when Ron had first yelled at him about being gay.

The wizard in the magenta robes simply stared at him, however. The witch, who had moved to the side, was now covering her child's ears. The little girl stood very still in her mother's embrace. Harry thought she was trying to hear as much as possible, but he couldn't be sure.

Draco put a heavy hand on his shoulder. Harry didn't have to look at him to know he was *not* pleased by Brian's interference. The increasing weight of the hand and the sharp, short hiss into his ear told their own story.

But Harry had eyes only for the large wizard. He wasn't *fat* like Uncle Vernon, but they were built on the same lines, and the woman could have been Aunt Petunia with a few changes of facial features and a little lengthening of her neck. And Harry knew all too well how his relatives would have reacted to the least hint that his sexual orientation wasn't normal.

Then Draco's hand pressed down harder, and Harry snapped himself back to the present, to reality, with almost physical force. What in the world was he *doing?* Brian or not, Gryffindor or not, Draco had still hired him to shock people and help Draco to weather that shock, not confront ugly ideas wherever they reared their heads.

More importantly, he had hired Brian Montgomery for that, and not Harry Potter. It was probably just the difference in playing a gay man and playing a straight one, Harry thought, persuading his ruffled feathers to lie flat.

"I suppose I shouldn't talk about hypothetical situations," he said lightly, and stepped back with a slight nod at the large man. His memories and the sensations of being Harry Potter were folded up and tucked into the back of his mind like the discarded robes being tucked into the closet at Metamorphosis. "I've never been any good at analyzing them. *That's* the reason I failed the one Muggle science course I ever attempted."

The wizard appeared bewildered by what had just happened, but obviously had no desire to stay close to Brian and Draco for very long. With one more tight, respectful nod at Draco, he turned around and hurried his family away.

And then Draco turned Brian to face him.

Brian met his gaze as calmly as he could. He saw the urge to condemnation melting out of Draco's eyes, being slowly replaced by something cooler and more thoughtful.

"When I hired you to play a gay man in public," Draco murmured, "I had no idea how hard it would be for you."

Brian grimaced. "I really have no excuse for that." He couldn't suggest that Draco find someone else, as even Metamorphosis didn't have two people so well-suited for this role, but he could attempt to explain what had happened. "I knew someone almost exactly like him once—in my childhood before I settled into school at the Five Dragons, in fact. And I saw him striking out at people who didn't deserve it. That inspired a hatred in me for anyone who'll attack out of cowardice and not principle."

Draco gave him a very faint smile. "And you think *I'm* acting out of principle? I was in Slytherin in school. I'm certain that you know something about Slytherin."

Brian nodded. The papers immediately after the war with You-Know-Who had carried lengthy stories of the trials taking place, and the reporters derived some sick pleasure out of noting House affiliation. In almost every case, it had been the Slytherins who had been the Death Eaters, or at least the people who funded Death Eater activities.

"You're acting from the highest cause of all," he said.

"What's that?" Draco moved a step closer, his eyes apparently absent and fond but in fact scrutinizing Brian's every gesture closely. It was an effort not to twitch. Brian reminded himself to breathe, and also not to forget how very dangerous Draco was.

"Annoying people," Brian said.

Draco tossed his head back and laughed aloud. It was a calculated gesture, for the benefit of their audience, but even so it reassured Brian that Draco wasn't truly irritated with him. He smiled back at Draco and let his arm be taken as Draco led him away from the apothecary and further into Diagon Alley.

He didn't know what Draco had planned, but whatever it was, it was certain to be fun. And Brian hoped he could make up somewhat for almost spoiling everything when he accosted that bigot.

Draco always enjoyed entering Lolla the Lapidary's. She had the most marvelous gems—not only colorful but magical, not only large but finely-cut, not only beautiful but useful—sitting about openly in her shop. Draco had seen would-be jewel thieves pause inside the door and stare about in bewilderment, struck with dazed greed and not knowing which treasure to snatch first.

The correct answer, of course, would have been "none of them." Lolla hadn't stayed open this long without developing her own very special anti-theft spells.

Even better, Brian blinked and glanced around the shop once, then turned to him with bright, questioning eyes. Draco, reveling in the sense of a momentary advantage over him, put an arm around his shoulders and swept him further into the shop.

Lolla was already advancing to meet them, a small witch in a brilliant blue robe dusted with animated stars and moons that would have put Albus Dumbledore's garments to shame. She had red hair, obviously dyed, that flowed most of the way down her back, and a high, piping voice. She always reminded Draco of a very intelligent fairy. "Mr. Malfoy! One of my very favorite customers! Back for that sapphire I showed you last time?"

"I still can't afford it, Lolla," Draco lied politely, and then leaned heavily on Brian. Brian set his feet not to stagger just in time and gave him another glance. Draco smiled at him. "I need a gift for a friend of mine. What kind of jewels do you think would look best with his eyes?"

Lolla promptly turned around to stare at Brian with a yellow, owl-like gaze, blinking now and then as she examined him. Brian flushed. "What are you getting me?" he whispered to Draco, shifting his weight to his right foot.

"A good question to answer," said Lolla. "The color of the gems depends on their location. Is this to be a bracelet, a locket, a ring, a necklace—"

"A ring, of course," said Draco. "We are men, after all."

Brian sent him a quick, grateful glance, but he was shaking his head a moment later. "I can't let you spend this amount of money on me, Draco," he said. "What would your parents think?"

Draco silently congratulated the other man. The first part of that question was doubtless genuine, but the second managed to subtly spread the news to Lolla's inquiring ears that Draco and his parents were at odds. The more widely *that* was known, the more Lucius's pride would be irritated, and the sooner his stubbornness would crack.

"I do make my own money from my own business," Draco said lightly, "so such things are less of a concern to my parents than they might be."

Brian nodded, but said, "You said something about Malfoy's Machineries to that wizard we encountered earlier." Draco looked sharply at his face, but there was no trace of his unusual outrage there. "What exactly do you make?"

"You haven't bought one yourself?" Draco decided that that could be another of his gifts to Brian when the time was right. And perhaps that was a clue to Brian's past as well. Few wizards who didn't have house-elves could avoid knowing what Malfoy's Machineries were, whether or not they used them.

Brian shook his head, looking apologetic. "I tend to spend my money on more books about pure-blood culture."

Draco smiled to indicate he thought this a worthwhile endeavor, and rubbed Brian's shoulder blades to get used to the feel of the man's muscles bunching and relaxing under his hands. Lolla had already bustled off to fetch a selection of rings, but Draco knew she had eyes. She would see what was happening, and be instrumental in spreading the news—but she wouldn't refuse to serve him. He was one of her best patrons.

"I got the idea from house-elves, actually," he murmured. "There are so many wizards who wish they could have them, but can't afford them and don't have relatives to inherit them from. And then I learned about Muggle labor-saving devices, and the immense trouble they've gone to to avoid having to wash their dishes or clothes by themselves, or sit in the darkness at night, or even clean up their own houses.

"I created small enchanted objects that will perform a single task. Books that will dust all the other books around them. Portrait frames that will make the paintings inside them look more bright and real. Showerheads that always spray pleasantly warm water. And so on. They're much more convenient to use than charms that half the wizards in our fine land have to look up, and in some cases the functions they perform have no equivalent in any common spells."

"That doesn't sound so strange." Brian stepped away from Draco's hold to examine a tray of emeralds that gleamed on their deep blue cushion on top of a crystal pillar. "But why did that idiot say that their lives depended on their machineries? And did you mean what you said about the objects attacking anyone who insulted you?"

Draco followed Brian with his eyes. His movements were slow, unhurried, but definite. He was taking a few steps away from Draco, asserting his independence. Draco found himself glad; he would have disliked a partner who hung on him and needed validation from Draco to find value in his existence.

*Always assuming he does not have more independence than I do.*

Draco had never worked a balance so delicate before, keeping Brian within reach and useful to him whilst making sure he was not taken advantage of himself. He had to admit it was exhilarating.

"I meant it literally, yes," Draco replied. "I want no one using my own products against me. Patrons of Malfoy's Machineries may buy whatever they like, but they cannot change the enchantments—and if they ever harm me, then every single machine they own would attack them." He wandered towards Brian again, and of course Brian moved so that the pillar with the emeralds was between them. Draco didn't mind. "As for how someone's life might hang on them, I suspect the man was speaking metaphorically, though there are a few machines that he might have bought which are more dangerous than the others. But it's easy for people to become

addicted to convenience. They wouldn't want to give up my machineries no matter what they might have to put up with to keep them."

Brian abruptly stood and turned around, his lips slightly parted. Draco admired the thin line of the scar on his brow. It really kept his face from being *too* perfect, and therefore Draco wouldn't persuade him to use a concealment charm on it.

"*That's* how you're doing it," Brian breathed.

Draco leaned towards him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I wondered why you would start a business that sounded so ordinary." Brian stepped around the pillar, his eyes brilliant, apparently having no objection about being closer to Draco when he had solved a puzzle about him. "Likely to make you rich, of course, but hardly suiting the vast ambition you seem to have. And now I understand. You rule their lives better than you could with the most addictive potion. There would always be some people who didn't use the potion, after all. But nearly everyone uses your convenient little objects. They're bound into a web that they'll find much harder to get out of. And if you change your selling practices, then everyone suffers—or benefits."

"Yes," Draco said. He was a little surprised Brian had seen the major purpose of his business so clearly, but not displeased. *Well, mostly not displeased.* "And of course, it serves other purposes."

Brian nodded thoughtfully. "It could make you allies, too. If your customers heard that someone was threatening you, or just withholding materials and magic you needed to make your machines, they could intervene for you."

Draco did not narrow his eyes, but only because his control over his features was so exquisite. That was an advantage even Blaise and Pansy had only seen when he explained it to them, after their initial strenuous protests that selling things so mundane was unbecoming for a pure-blood.

*How intelligent is he? How discerning? How much trouble could he make for me if I trust him too much?*

And something else had begun to bother Draco, too. Of course he could not know every wizard in Britain, and of course Metamorphosis had a sterling reputation for finding the perfect stranger for every situation. But someone like Brian—intelligent, magically powerful, educated, daring enough to risk public ostracism, so much his equal in every way—should have come to Draco's attention before now.

*Where is he from? Where was he hiding? Who is he?*

Brian was not entirely sure he liked the calculating look in Draco's eyes when he looked at him. It was a relief to turn away and examine the rings Lolla had brought out of the back room.

Of course, Brian at once saw the silver ring with the brilliant blue sapphire that would match his eyes best, and of course he had to pretend to ignore it and reach for another, surely less expensive ruby ring. But Draco stopped him with two fingers on the back of his hand, and picked up the sapphire ring to slide on his finger.

"I couldn't," Brian said, dismayed to hear real distress in his voice. It would have been much better to sound playful. "It's too expensive."

"It's perfect," Draco whispered into his ear. Brian stopped his shiver with an effort. "And I'll pay a little extra for perfection—as you should well know."

Harry briefly surfaced from behind the mask of Brian, to think about the things that Brian could not. *Damn. It seems I've intrigued him* too *much. He's accepted that Brian can see things he thought he'd miss, so he'll push him harder, demand more of him, and be watching him more closely.*

The only solution was to *be* Brian as hard as he could be, and help Draco so well that Draco would attend to his own affairs, the problems he had gone to Metamorphosis to solve in the first place, rather than probing too much into Brian's past. The mask would need to become flesh even more than usual in the next few weeks.

So Harry vanished again, and it was Brian who smiled, and turned his head until his hair tickled Draco's nostrils, and said, "If you're sure. *I* got perfection without paying for it."

Draco's two fingers moved, stroking the back of his hand, and his pupils dilated just a little.

Then he stepped away and nodded to Lolla that they'd take the silver ring.

Brian couldn't help it; he smiled as Draco turned to face the front of the shop and bring out his Galleons. Difficult, skin-prickling, delicate this surely was, but at the same time it was so much *fun.*

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Nine—Insanity*

Harry chuckled as he studied the pictures on the front page of the *Daily Prophet.* He knew Draco

had been disappointed that they hadn't been there during the first full day of Draco's dating "Brian," but he had consoled Brian—and himself—with mutters about the *Prophet's* not having the ability to cover a birthday party that took place so late in the evening, when most of the reporters were worn out from a day of spying.

He had his wish now.

The largest photograph was, of course, of Draco and Brian kissing in the middle of Diagon Alley, looking properly lascivious whilst they did it. The headline above the picture screamed, *DRACO MALFOY—GAY?*

Harry rolled his eyes and took another bite of the warm, buttery toast Kreacher had prepared for him. "If they don't know yet, good luck to them in finding out," he muttered.

The article beneath the picture was as full of reactions as, surely, even Draco could have hoped for. There were onlookers to the kiss quoted, as being full of "shock' and "horror." There were statements from "Mr. Malfoy's schoolmates," about how they had always suspected Draco Malfoy of being a ponce. There were "regretfully, no comments from Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, who could not be reached as of this morning."

Harry read down a few lines, and then nearly snorted crumbs out his nose. They'd interviewed *Ron*, either because someone at the *Prophet* had remembered the feud between the Weasley and Malfoy families, or because he'd simply happened to be nearby when the reporter was looking about for a quote.

*"Yeah, I can't say it's a surprise," Ron Weasley, an Auror in the Ministry, said flatly. "I always did suspect there was something—off—about Malfoy in school. No one could be that disgusting naturally. Who knew he'd turn out a shirt-lifter, though?*"

Harry blinked and took a swallow of tea so fast it burned his throat. Then he set down the cup and wrung his hand for a moment.

He felt—odd.

Of course, it was probably just from the collision of his two worlds, which were normally kept so separate that Harry never had to worry. He moved in pure-blood circles most of the time, since they were primarily the ones who had the money for Metamorphosis and the likelihood to hear of the business from their friends. That had been why he hadn't known about Malfoy's Machineries beyond a vague notion that such a business existed; middle-class wizards, the ones without house-elves, were Draco's best customers.

*Ron commenting on Malfoy! And on you, though he doesn't know it! That's funny, right?*

Harry shook his head briskly and rose to his feet, calling for Kreacher to dispose of the remaining tea and toast. He had a few errands to run before he changed back into Brian and met

Draco for lunch.

He hoped his stomach would stop jumping before then. He would never be able to concentrate properly on irritating Draco's parents if it didn't.

"One hundred," Draco said idly.

His mother's hands tightened around the book she was reading, but she didn't look up.

Draco leaned against the large window at the back of his house, one hand over his eyes as he studied the line of the glittering ward strung across the gardens (and across the roofs and walls of the entire manor, though he of course he couldn't see that from this angle). Yet another owl, the hundred and first, was fluttering in holding a smoking Howler in its talons. The moment it hit the ward, it pinwheeled, squawking, and hit the ground with a thump. The birds had recovered and flown away each time, but the Howlers remained on the ground, bursting into harmless chatter that no one behind the ward could hear. The house-elves kept Apparating in with frightened squeaks and cleaning away the ripped bits of envelope and the minor fires that the smoke from the Howlers had started.

"One hundred and two," Draco said, as a great horned owl struggled futilely to stay aloft.

There came a sharp crack. Draco turned around with one of his concerned masks pasted over his face. "Mother, are you all right?" he asked. "Surely you didn't crack the spine of the book?" Narcissa had slammed the book, which Draco had reason to know was a rare one—he had gone out of his way to procure it for his mother when she had said she was interested in Greek culture—down on her lap.

"I cannot comprehend how you can make a *joke* of it," Narcissa said, low-voiced, trying to catch his eyes in that gaze she'd hooked him with yesterday. But this time, it didn't have the same effect on Draco. He'd seen the first real results of his campaign this morning, when his parents went rigid and silent over the *Daily Prophet* article, and he was feeling too cheerful and superior to let their disapproval hurt. "I could understand if you had tired of Lucius's high-handedness and wished to stage a rebellion. I can understand getting that friend of yours, Blaise, to help you. I can understand your getting drunk one night and swearing an unfortunate vow that compels you to do this. I cannot—I *will* not understand how you can bear to treat this as a joke."

Draco smiled a little. "Tell me, Mother, if you had really and truly loved Father but your parents hadn't approved of him, wouldn't you have had the strength to bear a few Howlers? Even to laugh at them, knowing they couldn't touch what lay between you and the *man* you loved?" He gave the word man a little extra emphasis just to see what Narcissa would do with it.

His mother stared at him. Then she said, "There was never a chance that Mother and Father would not approve of Lucius. He was wealthy and pure-blooded."

"But what if they had?" Draco pressed. "After all, being wealthy and pure-blooded doesn't guarantee one's good qualities. Great-Uncle Quintus was dreadful."

"The situation did not arise." His mother stood and gathered her skirts around her. She did take the book carefully back to its shelves, Draco was grateful to see. She was not yet irritated enough with him to start mistreating his gifts. "Lucius was all that my parents could have wished for me."

*Was*? Draco thought, but he was more interested in pursuing his own battle than his mother's past for right now. "But if it *had* happened?" he asked. "If, say, Grandfather Black hadn't taken to Lucius for whatever reason, and had forbidden you to marry him?"

Narcissa turned around in the doorway. Her face was white and tense, her eyes sharp as the sapphire Draco had picked out for Brian yesterday. That was the part of the article that had affected his mother most, Draco knew, the mention of his buying the ring. She could dismiss the kiss as a publicity stunt, but a gift that expensive was meant for people who *mattered.*

"I was responsible with my heart," Narcissa said. "I took care not to fall in love with anyone whom my parents would have deemed unsuitable."

Draco blinked and stared at her for a moment. "And you think I should have done the same?" he asked.

"Of course." Narcissa folded her arms. "Neither your father nor I looked forwards to depriving you of the Manor and our approbation, Draco. I have dreamed for some years now of meeting your bride."

"I don't think hearts can be controlled in that way," Draco said. "And I don't know one person my age who thinks it, either."

He had spoken the truth, so far as he knew, and a truth that he thought his mother had long ago acknowledged. He did not expect her head to bow, and a light behind her eyes to extinguish.

She turned and left the library without another word.

Draco glanced back at the ward, frowning a little, and then cursed as he watched yet another Howler drop. He'd lost count.

Harry looked up at Malfoy Manor in the sunlight, and shook his head. The house seemed far more impressive in daylight than it had at night. He wondered if part of that was his memories of the short time he, Ron, and Hermione had been held captive here during the war, but then discounted it. No, he hadn't been here long enough to form any trauma.

Hermione, now…

Harry shivered as he walked up the long gravel path to the front doors, past gardens that obviously knew it was summer. How would she feel if she knew he was working with Draco Malfoy to alienate his parents? Would she be pleased that social harm was striking at the Malfoy parents' pride, their most valued possession, or would she stare at Harry with betrayed eyes and ask how he could help anyone from *that* family?

*Enough!* Harry told himself, and the thoughts thinned like morning mist before the sun and vanished. *You* are *in a strange mood today.* He looked down at the sapphire ring glittering on his hand, and smiled as he remembered the ceremonious care with which Draco had slid it onto his finger yesterday. *You know that you can't tell her anything about this life anyway, not with the way she reacted to your using glamours during your last year at Hogwarts.* Hermione had actually cried when she couldn't persuade Harry out of disguising himself for simple trips to Hogsmeade; she had thought Harry should outface the press and force them to accept him for who he was, a simple man who had no desire to play hero. She hadn't understood that Harry had no strength left for that kind of battle.

*So she'll never know, and she'll never be hurt. And neither will Draco, considering the fun he had with you yesterday.*

Harry slowed to a stop in front of the immense doors and knocked briskly. A house-elf opened them up at once and stared at him, then began wringing its hands.

Harry recognized *that* sign from Dobby when he'd tried to tell Harry what he could about the Malfoys, as well as from Kreacher when he'd accidentally burned the toast. "Let me guess," he said, in Brian's husky voice. "You've been told by Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy not to let me in, but Master Draco Malfoy said you were to do it."

"The good visitor understands!" the elf wailed, bowing his head into his arms. "And Mips is so bad!"

"You've done nothing wrong," Harry said. Hermione had never persuaded him to free Kreacher, because Kreacher seemed genuinely happy to stay and serve Harry after the war, but she had made him more attentive to the feelings of house-elves. Harry knelt so he and Mips were eye-to-eye. "If you could tell Master Draco I'm here, I'd be more than happy to wait outside until he comes to fetch me—"

"You'll do no such thing."

Harry couldn't help it; his heart beat a little faster when he heard that voice. He stood, making it a swift, casual movement that nevertheless showed his chest and forearms to best advantage. He knew from Draco's slightly narrowed eyes that the other man had noticed. He responded by strolling towards Harry down the staircase that loomed not far back from the doors, letting his robes swirl around him and show, not disguise, the action of his lean, strong legs.

Harry felt a throb of want coil through him like a hot wire. He didn't show that, of course. Brian wouldn't, in a competition/dance/half-relationship like this, and Harry would not betray feelings that could draw him deeper into emotional intimacy than Draco was willing to go.

*You're not Harry, remember? You're Brian, here.*

"I would hate to come between you and your parents, Draco," Brian said, running a hand through his hair so that it stood up more disreputably than ever and making sure the sapphire ring flashed in the sunlight coming into the gardens. Draco's eyes followed the flash, distracting his attention from Brian's face in the moment it took him to settle his expression into an appropriate leer. "Though I might not object to coming in *front* of them."

Draco felt himself smile without his conscious volition.

God, he felt so *alive* when he was near Brian, and it wasn't only the sexual tension that wavered up and down like a wildfire fanned more or less by the wind between them. Part of it came from not knowing exactly what this man would say or do next, when Draco had been around most people in his social circle long enough to predict exactly that. And part of it came from the pulse of magical strength that Brian kept thoughtfully shielded, but which flashed now and then with blinding power, like that damn ring.

*Don't let him control you. If you do end up falling*—and after some very interesting dreams the night before Draco had let the possibility have a corner of his mind to play in—*then it must be mutual.*

He stepped forwards, past a squeaking, bowing Mips, to catch Brian's hand. He bent and pressed a kiss to the back of the other man's knuckles. Only if someone was standing next to Draco and staring over his shoulder could they have seen the tip of his tongue darting out and lightly scraping Brian's skin.

Brian's breath caught in a most satisfactory manner. Draco lifted his head and studied the blue, blue eyes. Lust was there, yes, but held down and forcibly muzzled. He smiled and let his fingertips trail down Brian's wrist before he faced in the direction of the dining room.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Of course," said Brian, and offered his arm, elbow crooked, just as Draco had offered Brian his arm for the birthday party. Draco rested his hand lightly on the other man's, and together they proceeded down the corridor to the dining room, which Draco did not remember being so long.

He found himself taking longer strides than normal, inflating his lungs as if to catch more of a breath of air. Was that just an attempt not to feel overwhelmed by Brian's magical aura, or did having this man at his side make Draco really feel he could take on the world? Perhaps both. Draco certainly knew he had never felt so invigorated, so refreshed, so eager.

"Have either of your parents done anything else unexpected?" Brian asked, directly into Draco's ear, in that mid-level voice that was actually softer than a whisper.

"My mother seems to believe that I should have chosen who I fell in love with more carefully," Draco said, and took the chance to skim his hand down the back of Brian's neck. "She actually believes that one can control one's heart. If I had fallen in love with a woman whom they deemed unsuitable, I would have evidently been expected to give her up."

Brian chuckled. "Hence this deception, which will give you, in the end, the freedom to marry whom you want to marry."

"You believe that a goal?" Draco breathed back. The door to the dining room was in sight. Narcissa and Lucius would just be sitting down to lunch. It was a routine that Lucius never varied, except on the odd day when he had to attend a Ministry function in the morning.

"Of course." Brian halted for a moment and stared at him. "You have told me that your father will take you back someday, when you have amassed enough power and money to make him beg. That means that you *do* intend to join the Malfoy family again. And that means continuing the line with an heir."

Draco narrowed his eyes. He had not said that specifically to the Manager of Metamorphosis at their meeting, but it was not a hard thing to extrapolate from the information he'd given.

"Of course," he said, and Brian smiled at him and swept on.

Draco followed, keeping his frown to himself. Why was he so unsettled by the words Brian had spoken? Discussed openly between them or not, they were only a natural path for Brian's mind to tend, he told himself again.

*Perhaps,* he decided as Brian threw the dining room doors open and led in Draco as if they had just both earned Orders of Merlin, *I am not used to hearing someone who fits so well with me speak as if he were strictly temporary.* Certainly none of the men or women Draco dated before had ever done it, even the ones who knew they didn't stand a chance of getting his parents to accept them.

*This is another place he could have an advantage over me, if I let him.*

*Careful, Draco. He is temptation itself, but he could too easily be a rival instead of a lover.*

Brian savored the looks on Lucius and Narcissa's faces as he and Draco walked in. It was clear Draco had not told them Brian was coming, and they looked now as if the Muggle Prime Minister had appeared in the middle of their drawing room and demanded to know why they weren't paying their taxes.

Then Lucius recovered himself, and scowled. Narcissa looked down at her lap and began pulling her fine linen napkin to pieces.

*Lucius it shall be, then.* Brian focused most of his attention on him as he bent a little and kissed Draco's ear. It was an affectionate gesture, of course, but more than the kiss he and Draco had shared in front of his parents, it was a *protective* gesture. And Lucius wouldn't take kindly to seeing his son in the protection of another male. It would inspire him to think all sorts of horrible things about Draco's masculinity.

And that made him underestimate Draco all the more, and brought him one step closer to cracking. Certainly the way that all the blood left his face made the cracking seem imminent. Brian smiled cheerfully at Lucius, then turned and bowed to Narcissa. She was flicking her eyes between him and her husband, and on her face was no expression at all.

"Lovely to see you again, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "I wanted to thank you again for the dance the other night. I can't recall having a more gracefulpartner." On cue, Draco's elbow dug into his ribs. Brian paused and looked at him consideringly. "A more graceful *female* partner, I meant, of course," he said, and gave a winning smile.

"Who told you," Lucius said in a low, rough voice, "that you were welcome in my home?"

"Oh, I didn't think I was," Brian said. "I thought I was welcome in *Draco's* home. Unless he lives elsewhere, of course, in an even more magnificent manor house, and just lets this one to you. In which case I'm heartily sorry for intruding on you, and very vexed that Draco didn't tell me the truth." He turned around and frowned at Draco. "*Very* vexed, do you hear me?"

Draco's shoulders shook, once. Brian could tell that he was working hard not to sob with laughter. He looked up, now, and shook his head slightly, making his blond hair tumble around his face like the sculpted curls of a marble statue. "This is my home, yes," he said. "But I did tell you not to expect the best of receptions from my parents."

"Ah, yes." Brian sighed gustily as he looked at Lucius. "I suppose you can't get along with me for the space of even one lunch?"

Lucius firmed his lips in a thin line, obviously already regretting his outburst. Then he nodded once and looked away, as if bored. Brian saw one hand tremble slightly, as if he was reaching for his wand, but he didn't actually take it out. More probably, he wanted a distraction. Of course, picking up the *Daily Prophet* just now would give him anything but that, Brian thought with a small smile.

"We never did get to start the conversation I intended to start the other night, Mr. Montgomery," said Narcissa in a suddenly bright, cheerful voice. Brian looked at her, and thus gave up to Draco the right to draw out a chair for him. Brian sat down with a brush of his hand over Draco's shoulder, not taking his eyes from Narcissa all the while. "I am curious about your past. You are

obviously accomplished in pure-blood manners, and yet I've never seen you in any of the social circles we frequent."

Brian chuckled companionably, and took Draco's hand under the table. He gave it a questioning squeeze, and Draco squeezed hard back. He was all right with letting Brian take the lead, for now. "I'm afraid that my study of your culture has been more theory than practice so far, Mrs. Malfoy. I've read so many books I can't even remember all their titles, and I've been to parties as an uninvited guest." He grinned as Narcissa looked scandalized. "And of course, since I met Draco, I've been keeping out of the spotlight in hopes of not attracting attention to him." He gave Draco a tender look. "I can't say how glad I am that all the feigning's done."

Draco gave him a small, amused smile; only the two of them would understand the joke in that sentence, of course. His fingers turned, lightly trailing across Brian's palm. Brian caught his breath.

*Damn, the smallest touch from him affects me.*

Narcissa had asked another question, though, which gave him an excuse for turning his attention away from Draco. "But surely, so accomplished you are, so *handsome*, I should have seen you somewhere before?" Another linen napkin had appeared next to her plate; Brian wondered idly if it was the result of a house-elf's silent appearance or a convenient spell. She spread the napkin smoothly across her lap.

Brian shook his head regretfully. "Thank you for the compliment, but my life has been so varied that it's unlikely." Narcissa's eyes narrowed slightly; she would know that Brian was hinting at how restricted the Malfoys' movement had been since the war. They could still host parties and attend them, they still attended Ministry functions and did their exotic shopping, but they had their finger less on the pulse of Britain than they had had before the war, and evidently Narcissa realized it. "I've acted in Muggle theater, taken lessons in several different obsessions before they ceased being obsessions, and in general lived my life like a normal wizard. I never knew there was anything extraordinary about me until Draco—"

The food appeared on the Malfoy parents' plates, just as had happened at Hogwarts. A moment later, full plates and glasses appeared for Draco and Brian, as well. Draco squeezed his hand, indicating he had asked the house-elves to provide this. Brian smiled and kept speaking to Narcissa without missing a beat.

"—*showed* me there was. I've polished my accomplishments up for him." He winked. "And done a thing or two about my looks, too. Though not as much as he did for me yesterday." Guilelessly, he held up the ring. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Narcissa muttered a strangled compliment. Lucius was completely silent, and Brian looked at him to gauge his reaction.

He was in time to see the Malfoy patriarch lowering his wand to his lap, and to trace the line of

sight along which he'd been pointing it. It had been aimed directly at the salad of fresh vegetables on Draco's plate, out of which he was about to take a bite.

Seething—and Brian could do that, because he wasn't someone to hide his anger—Brian seized Draco's wrist and shook his head when Draco stared at him, tossing his head in the direction of Lucius. Draco understood in a moment, his eyes turning as cold as the moon through rain.

"Do you mind," he asked, putting his fork down and leaning forwards, "telling me what exactly that spell you just cast on my food *does,* Father?"

Brian rejoiced at the anger in his voice. *He's my equal in so many ways. In this, too.*

And just to give Lucius the discomfort of facing the two of them united, Brian turned around and sent a scowl of his own at the end of the table.

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Chapter: 10

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Ten—Changing Minds, Changing Faces*

Draco had already moved his wand in a subtle pattern that should detect poison or harmful magic in his food, even though he was apparently keeping his complete attention focused on Lucius. Brian was enough guard for the moment, and Draco was curious to know what spell his father would have thought worth the risk.

A moment later, he laughed.

Brian turned towards him, bristling, and shifting so that he put his body as a shield between Lucius and Draco, Draco noticed. "Are you well?" he asked in a low voice.

*What was he in his former life? A bodyguard?* Brian's biography for Metamorphosis had not mentioned anything like that, but Draco was coming to accept that Brian's biography had, well, lied. He put the suspicions away for later; they weren't appropriate for the luncheon table, and besides, he was too amused at the moment to seriously consider them.

He leaned around Brian and addressed his father. "An impotence spell? Really, Father, did you think that would stop me?"

Lucius's eyes were the color of the stone in the ancient dungeons of the Manor, which Draco's

grandfather Abraxas had been the last one to make regular use of. He clenched his hand on his wand, fingers moving like worms.

Draco studied him in silence, aware of anxiety coming from both Brian and Narcissa. Brian's was more open than his mother's. Of course, he had no reason to think that hiding the emotion would benefit him at the moment.

*Does he think it at other times?*

Draco pushed the thought away impatiently. Fascinating as the mystery of Brian was, he couldn't attend to it right now. Far more important was understanding why his father had done this.

"Why?" he said quietly.

Lucius abandoned the silence and severe posture he'd adopted, perhaps because he could see it wasn't gaining him anything. He folded his hands in front of him, letting his wand fall to his lap, and gave Draco a patient smile.

"You and I both know that this is a pose," he said softly. "That you are what I raised you to be. That you are angry at me and acting out your anger the only way you know how, by pretending to be gay."

Draco felt a light frisson of nervousness. By accident, his father had almost guessed the truth. But he allowed none of that to show on his face; outwardly he was all solemn, serious attention, tempered by the amusement Lucius's choice of spell had caused him. Brian touched his shoulder for a moment, then leaned back in his chair, apparently deciding that he could mimic Draco's calm so long as there was no immediate danger. Draco spared a flick of a thought for how marvelously they managed to communicate when silent, the two of them. It had taken his parents years to develop that ease.

"Relationships between men can never be as deep and passionate as those between men and women," Lucius said. "There is no weight of tradition behind them, no rites and ceremonies to mark the passing years, and most importantly, no future—no children. It is lust that ties you to Mr. Montgomery, and only that." He flicked his eyes sideways at Brian the way he might look at a crushed ant, to be sure it was dead. "He told me so himself. Without the ability to—ah—*perform* in the bedchamber, what you call a love affair will fall apart." He nodded, as though gesturing to an invisible audience. "I know."

Draco bit his lip. He clenched a hand under the table. He blinked for a moment at his mother, who was as pale and stern as a pillar of salt.

It was no use. He burst out laughing.

Lucius drew back in his chair like a serpent who had suddenly realized the piping notes were just shrill music after all. Draco opened his mouth to say something, and realized he couldn't, not yet.

He put his head down on his arm and wheezed. It was one of the most undignified things he had ever done, laughing at his parents like this, but the extent of Lucius's refusal to understand sat in his belly like a Tickling Spell and wouldn't be dislodged.

Brian hovered above him the whole time, hand stroking Draco's hair now and then, body obviously still interposed as a protection in case Lucius decided to try something else. Draco smiled a little as the laughter began to subside. They would be having a talk after lunch was done, and he knew exactly what questions he wanted to ask.

Finally, he lifted his head and said, "I hate to disappoint you, Father, but it's not only passion that binds us together. You once again have mistaken humor for reality—not surprising, as your sense of humor is not one of your many virtues."

Lucius had decided to freeze. Not a single expression crossed his face; not a single gesture disturbed the straight lines of his robes.

"I'm in love with Brian," Draco said, and flung an arm around Brian's shoulders, a gesture he never would have made ordinarily. (Well, yes, if he was drunk and with Blaise, but that was *Blaise*). Brian went a little stiff with the strangeness of it, but relaxed a moment later and even leaned his head on Draco's shoulder, kissing his neck. "Love can't be defeated with an impotency spell." Draco let his smile fade and arched an eyebrow. "But Brian, as you have seen, loves me back, and he's loyal and protective. I would advise you not to try that again, if you value your pride and body intact."

Brian lifted his head, apparently wanting to add something to the conversation. Draco glanced at him encouragingly. It would be a hilarious threat, he was certain, as all Brian's interactions with his father were hilarious.

But Brian said nothing. He stared at Lucius, and then he removed one of the shields that he'd tightly wrapped around his incredible magical power.

Draco gasped. The room had suddenly filled with a heavy, overwhelming pressure, like the kind that built up right before a mighty summer storm. Draco could remember casting the sky uneasy glances when a storm like that blew up whilst he was playing Quidditch, and turning his broomstick back to the Manor, although spells would have allowed him to continue playing in the rain. One simply didn't quarrel with clouds like that.

And one didn't quarrel with the way that Brian focused the magic to a narrow beam on Lucius, either, until Draco saw his father's hair lift and stir in a wind that no one else felt.

Draco was panting, his hands digging into his knee and Brian's shoulders, respectively. He had never heard of magic this strong, never *realized* that someone could create an effect like that without a wand or a word. Oh, one heard about bouts of accidental magic, and the magic of a love sacrifice like the one Potter's mother had made to save him, but the wild, chaotic nature of that magic was as proverbial as its strength. The most frightening thing Brian had going for him

was his *finesse*, his ability to channel the power that must be straining at his shields to get out—especially with the shields as tight as they had been every time he'd been in Draco's presence. He hadn't even let them down when they had sex, Draco realized.

He was panting for a different reason at that thought.

Lucius might have stupid notions about what relationships between men actually entailed, but he was wise enough to retreat when he had dignity to lose by remaining on the battlefield. He rose, never taking his stare from Brian, and then turned and walked away from the table, leaving his visibly untouched food. His entire manner said that he did not care to eat in the presence of plebeians.

It might even have been convincing, Draco thought, if only Brian had not stuck his tongue out at Lucius's back.

And then the shield coiled around Brian's power again, with a snap like a curtain descending on a stage, and he turned about and tapped his wand on Draco's plate. The cursed salad vanished. Brian smiled at Draco, then at Narcissa. "Is there a chance of having the house-elves fetch you more food?" he asked.

His voice was pleasant, calm, normal, as if *nothing had happened.*

And that brought Draco's feelings of desire and wonder and amusement at his father's expense to a crashing halt. He nodded, and called for a house-elf. One came at once and replaced the food in front of him with something more suitable.

He picked up his fork and returned to eating. His mother seemed intent on remaining where she was, but she ate without speaking. Brian did the same, as if his sole plan was his hearty enjoyment of the meal—the fresh salad, followed by a chicken lightly breaded and covered with a sauce of several wild herbs.

Draco's mind, meanwhile, was buzzing anxiously. Yes, Brian's finesse was incredible. So was his power. He was everything that the Manager of Metamorphosis had promised Draco, and more. Draco had no fears about Brian's ability to fulfill the task demanded of him, difficult though it might prove to be.

But it simply made no *sense.* Someone with that kind of power could have made his living anywhere, doing anything. Sure, he didn't have to be rich, but in that case he could have devoted himself to the good of the poor and made a sterling reputation. And with Brian's protective instincts, that seemed a natural thing to do.

Wizards this powerful didn't come out of nowhere. They were *known*, by name if not by sight, and Draco should have heard of Brian Montgomery long before this. He knew the names of the two most powerful wizards in England now—or perhaps one should say the two most powerful witches, given that they were both female—and no one he'd met had given him the notion there

was a third.

Something was very, very wrong here, and Draco couldn't discount the notion that Brian had come to trick him, perhaps ensure Draco was disowned in accordance with some other plan. He would have to be more careful than ever.

Luckily, suspicion was a good infatuation-killer.

Harry found himself resurfacing abruptly out of Brian. Narcissa had not asked him any more of her polite, fencing questions, had gravely accepted his bow over her hand, and had departed the moment the meal was done. And then Draco had taken him into the library to share the delicious chocolate dessert the elves had provided with a glass of brandy.

But something was wrong.

Draco no longer met his eyes quite as steadily as he had, and there was a heaviness in the back of his voice, lilting until now. Harry frowned a little as he spooned up the chocolate and curled his tongue around it. Draco gave the lascivious gesture no more than a glance before he leaned back in his chair, sipped his brandy, and began an interrogation.

"Some of the questions my mother asked you are very good ones," he said. "And we should come up with answers to them in case they're ever asked in the future." He smiled a little, and it would have convinced Harry if not for the shadows behind his eyes. "Or maybe the truth, if that would distress my parents more. So. Where do you live? There are some quarters that would absolutely *scandalize* my father."

*He's suspicious. I don't know why, but I know he is.* Harry crossed his legs, Brian's legs, and gave Brian's charming smile. He would have liked to go over his behavior at lunch in his mind and see what had tilted the balance in Draco's estimation of him, but he had to keep his attention focused on their contest of wits to have a hope of winning it. "Worse than any quarter that might scandalize your father," he replied. "I live in Muggle London." And that was actually true, given the location of Grimmauld Place.

Draco only blinked like a lizard, and then added a smile a moment later. *I'm not perfect,* Harry thought, *since I obviously made a stupid mistake, but neither is he. I wonder if his mother would notice the way he's slipping?* "And why would you choose to live there? It's far from most employment you'd find."

Harry grinned. "It's close to the theater," he said. "There are times it's absolutely *necessary* for me to see a play, or I'd go nutters. And of course, if I want to conduct business with wizards who wouldn't be seen dead in Muggle London, or order yet another book on pure-blood culture that I haven't read, there are always owls."

"Hmm," Draco said. "And since you know so much about our culture, you've never thought of

moving into it and making a name for yourself?"

"Theory before practice, so far." Harry spread his hands. "Maybe, once this month is over, or however long you need me for, I'll make sure that I get into more of your circles." Then he laughed as if in recollection and picked up another forkful of chocolate. "Assuming that anyone will have me, when they'll all know my sexuality."

Draco went a little stiff, the way his father had, gazing at him. Harry gazed back and wondered if he knew how much he and Lucius really looked alike.

"Someone like you could go anywhere," Draco said. "Even with your sexuality. There are people to whom other things matter more. The way you smile. The way you joke even as you retain the most impeccable manners. The way you make love." His voice softened on the last words, and he produced a sultry, secret smile that took Harry in for an instant. But then he said, "Surely that would be a more entertaining life than disposing of hexes?" and the instant was past.

"I mentioned that I don't have much ambition, right?" Harry laughed aloud at the look that appeared on Draco's face at that, though he hadn't meant to. "Believe me, it's frustrated enough people before you. One of my friends—well, more of an acquaintance now, we quarreled too often—got on me about that when I refused to become a professional actor. 'But think of all the *money* you could earn,' went his refrain. 'The *fame*.'" Harry gave a shudder that had nothing of deceit about it. "And I told him I didn't want that, and he couldn't understand why. Why should I have to produce a reason for not wanting strangers knocking on my door day and night and madwomen flinging their knickers at me, screaming that they love me? It's strange that it's the people who don't want to be famous who need to defend themselves, not the ones who insist being known is everything."

Draco wanted to snarl. Every single question he probed with was met and turned away, in the fashion of a duelist. Brian's eyes were gleaming with challenge, in a way that said he knew exactly what Draco was doing.

And Draco was discovering that someone as determined as he was, as clever as he was, as good a liar, was not such delightful company after all. Brian should have betrayed *something* by now, beyond the strength of his magic. Something in his airy answers must be fabricated. Draco longed to produce a startled expression, a flinch, a sudden darkening in his face.

Nothing, and nothing, and nothing. Brian sat there eating chocolate and not even attempting to protest the sharpness and directness of the questions. In fact, Draco had the distinct impression that he was being humored.

He hated that impression.

He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. Time to take a different tack, and test just how much control he might actually have over Brian's emotions, since he seemed to have none

over his mind. "Here is the first great division I've found between us," he said. "Blood status is nothing to me anymore, we both seem to have much the same background, I think we're close to the same age…" He let his voice trail off invitingly, but Brian only nodded for him to continue. He even had an excuse, as his mouth was full. Draco waited an extra moment to speak, to be sure none of his exasperation would show. "I *am* ambitious, however. You've already heard about the power I intend to accumulate, and you know a little of how I intend to do it. I would need someone by my side who believed in the same things I did, who could be a support to me whilst I did them."

"And I wish you good luck in finding her," Brian said amiably. "Or him, I suppose, if you want to irritate your parents even more after I'm gone." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I've been matched with men who didn't match me. It's fun for a time, but it always burns out. You're right to say that you need someone who can keep the relationship blazing with you." He winked. "Me and you, we're a different sort of fire."

Draco felt the seductive warmth that had attacked him several times before around Brian try to take over his mind again. He shook it off. But the desire was still there, when he thought about the taste of Brian's skin beneath his tongue and the way that powerful body had thrust into him and how Brian's humor had followed them into the bedchamber.

*That is another advantage if I win and make him more interested in uniting with me than serving whatever goal he came here with,* Draco thought. *I'll have someone I desperately want, and I can satiate that lust in safety.*

For now, though…no.

And as Brian didn't think Draco considered him important, it might be well to reject the sexual tension between them for a time and see what happened. How much would Brian miss it?

"I hope I'll find him or her as well," Draco said. "In fact, there are a few people I have my eye on once I've finished getting myself disowned."

Brian blinked, and for a moment, just a moment, the brilliant blue eyes were flawed like cracked glass. *Ha!* Draco thought. That warmth swept through him again. Just knowing Brian was jealous, even if he wouldn't openly betray it, comforted Draco. Or had he been merely startled?

*It's comforting all the same,* Draco told himself firmly.

"Oh," Brian said. He looked into his glass. "Are you sure that many women will have you after you've apparently announced your orientation to all and sundry?"

"There are pure-blood women who would marry a pig if it had enough money," Draco said firmly, and changed the subject. "We should discuss the next place you're going to be seen with me. Annoying my parents in their own home is all very well, but I don't think my father will be taken by surprise again. After today, he'll have to treat our relationship as a serious threat."

Brian nodded slowly. "Do you think we'll get invitations to parties at all? Should we go to one you're invited to and display ourselves?" He was already grinning again, Draco thought, in a mixture of disgust and admiration. "Or would it be better to go out to restaurants and the like and encourage the press to find us?"

Draco smiled a little himself. "A mixture of the two," he said. "I was invited two weeks ago to a party set for tomorrow, at Clothilde Castle. A midsummer festival, supposedly, but actually an excuse to meet and mingle and stare. The invitation hasn't been rescinded yet. Let's go there. And the day after that, we'll go out for lunch in Haut Alley. There are some restaurants there that are simply splendid, both in the food and in the chance of being noticed."

"Will we be in any physical danger the way we turned out to be in Diagon?" The smile dropped off Brian's face. "I want to be prepared. Your father—" He shook his head. "An impotence curse *is* rather childish, but there may be people who would do more. And they'll have a chance to see us coming, and to prepare."

"Not much danger in Haut Alley," Draco responded. He fought off the warmth again and reminded himself that this was a *business* arrangement, and maybe an assassination opportunity, too, for whoever Brian really served. "The height of expression there is a cold stare. But at the party? Among pure-bloods who bear each other grudges from the war and earlier, going back a hundred years, and in a castle warded against the Ministry's detection of any spells? Oh, yes."

"I'll be prepared, then." Brian stood and drained his glass. "I should be going. I promised a friend that I'd meet her this afternoon."

"Do your friends know about this?" Draco asked, gesturing around the room, but meaning more than that, and ready to pounce on any insufficient answer.

Brian was too smart to pretend he didn't know what Draco was talking about. However, he only smiled and said, "They'd have to be blind and deaf not to by now, wouldn't they?"

Draco let him go, with only a small kiss on the back of the hand. Brian didn't seem to take this amiss, and waved cheerfully as he walked out the doors of the Manor. Draco stared after him, and let his fingers curl white-knuckled behind his back, since there was no one to see.

*He was jealous. I know he was.*

Then Draco turned and strode rapidly towards his bedroom. Sitting down, he wrote a long letter to the Ministry, taking on the name of an obscure pure-blood witch whom Draco happened to know had lost most of her fortune in the war. However, she'd been so unimportant to both sides that the request shouldn't ring any alarms. The witch, in the letter, tearfully described an infant son lost thirty years ago, perhaps found again, and asked for the birth records of anyone who would be his age now.

It was a preliminary step. A basic step. And perhaps a useless one, Draco admitted to himself, as he watched his owl winging out of sight. Brian's parents had moved so often that his birth records might be missing or destroyed or lodged safely in another country, and finding no wizard by the name of Brian Montgomery on record would not prove that one did not exist.

But it was a step Draco needed to take, for his own peace of mind.

Harry sighed and leaned against the door of his closet, stretching the kinks out of his back. Draco might think his chairs encouraged an upright posture, but they were bloody uncomfortable to sit on for hours.

An owl tapped at his window, and Harry went idly to open it. Hermione had said she'd write to let him know when they decided on a name for their child. Or it might be George, asking if Harry wanted to come visit the joke shop, or Mrs. Weasley asking him to dinner.

It was a plain envelope instead, bearing only his name. Harry eyed it curiously. He had a ward he'd perfected a long time since to exclude any and all fan post, based on the spell's reading of certain words through the paper, such as "autograph." This must be an extraordinary letter to have made it through the wards. It could not have anything to do with Metamorphosis or the Charity; any letters addressed to the manager of either organization went automatically to the headquarters of the organization instead.

He stuck his thumbnail beneath the unornamented seal and opened it.

*Mr. Potter:*

*I recognized you the moment you made a spectacle of yourself in my home today. I was near enough to you in the Forbidden Forest that terrible day to feel the magic returning to your body, and there is only one wizard in Britain who possesses power of your caliber. Add to that your looks and the scar on your forehead, and the game was easy to win. I am only amazed that my son has not yet reached the same conclusion I have.*

*You will meet me in Diagon Alley in two hours, so we might discuss together your reasons for pulling off this charade, and what is to keep me from telling Draco the truth. If you do not meet me in two hours' time, I shall simply walk down the corridor that separates our wings of the house.*

The letter dropped from Harry's numb fingers. He did not see the *Narcissa Malfoy* at the end. He didn't need to.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eleven—Braided with a Skein of Truth*

Harry stood with his head bowed for long moments, his wrists resting against the wall, his breathing so shallow that even he could barely hear it. The house went quiet around him, as if in sympathy. Kreacher banging about somewhere in the distant interior was a loud sound.

Narcissa's words burned and fluttered and flamed in his head. He could accuse himself of stupidity in revealing his magic—though he had done it out of sheer frustration, wanting to *break* the stone wall of incomprehension revealed in Lucius's eyes—or he could panic, but the feeling that consumed him at the moment was sheer uncertainty. He had never known, when he lost control of his secret and was exposed to the world, that it would happen so *fast.*

Then his head came up, and he blinked. Narcissa knew that Harry Potter was Brian Montgomery. She didn't know *why*, or she would simply have gone to her son and explained the end of the game. That had to be why she was contacting him, to gain the answers Draco couldn't give her.

And there was no sign that she knew about Metamorphosis.

Harry's heart began beating again. Losing one disguise, though painful and frightening, would hurt him less than losing his entire variety of lives.

He stooped and picked up the letter, reading through it again, observing it as carefully as he had ever observed any of the clients who met with the Manager to demand a perfect stranger. Then he nodded. He could understand Narcissa. Animated by love for her son—and Draco had said that she cared more about him as a *person* than his father did—she wanted to make sure he was safe and happy. Harry Potter accumulating blackmail material on Draco, or perhaps "persuading" him with magic to ruin his reputation as he had been doing, could not be borne.

She would come to the meeting focused on the effect this deception would have on *Draco.* The chances that she would care a great deal about Harry's past or inner life beyond the terms necessary to explain his disguise were miniscule.

And Harry had already invented a lie that she could believe—braided with a skein of the truth, to make it ten times stronger than either lie or truth would have been on their own.

Harry cast only a gentle glamour that directed human eyes the other way after he Apparated into Diagon Alley. Someone staring hard at him would still make out Harry Potter, scar and all, but few people cared to look that hard. Harry was an ordinary person, a distinctly uninteresting figure to those who came to Diagon Alley as much to collect gossip and rumor as to shop.

Harry lowered his eyes as he paced towards the center of Diagon Alley, where he was certain Narcissa would look for him. It wouldn't do to seem to be hiding from her. Of course, it wouldn't do to seem too eager, either, or she would begin to suspect that.

He didn't want her suspecting him. He wanted her *disdaining* him.

Luckily, Harry had a ready-made mask to cause her to do so: his public reputation in the last ten years. He'd become a recluse, barely seen outside Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, fleeing any public occasion when the cameras came out. Everyone knew he ran the Charity, but most considered it an obsession, given the time he was said to spend on the most minute details. Harry had encouraged the spread of rumors that said he was a little deranged at the end of the war, either because he had coped badly with his fame—which was only the truth—or because of the many friends he had lost.

It was a pathetic man who approached Narcissa now—and he had seen her, standing in front of Madam Malkin's and barely pretending to peer into the window, her cool stare warning away those who might have questioned her as to her business. As always, Harry folded up the cleverness, the spirit, and the desires that animated his disguises and tucked them far beneath the surface. The lie he had created to sell her was one that implied only powerful magic, because she had seen that and he could lie about it no longer.

He could acknowledge that he had been careless. For whatever reason, perhaps simply because Draco was the only client he had spent this length of time with and the only client he'd had such extensive sexual contact with, he had behaved as if he could do whatever he wanted and not have his disguise pierced. He had been foolish, and this was the price he must pay: from now on, he could not simply sink into Brian and act with abandon. He would have to be Harry Potter behind the mask forever, careful and controlling, maneuvering Brian like a puppet.

He regretted that, but the destruction of one persona was so much better than the destruction of all of them.

"Mrs. Malfoy?" He made his voice tripping and uncertain, and removed the glamour as she turned her head towards him. He swallowed, lowering his eyes at once after a single intense look from her. "You said you wanted to talk to me." He practically mumbled those words, and could *feel* her curled lip in the silence with which she responded.

She turned with a snap of her robes and led him towards a small shop Harry had never been inside, mostly because it only catered to pure-blood women. He had ordered his fair share of robes and gowns from it, however. It was famous for its privacy. Harry let out a tiny sigh of relief. He had been half-afraid that Narcissa would want to do this in the middle of the street, caring more about embarrassing him than she did about the public reputation of her family.

Narcissa warned the two witches who started forwards to help them with a sharp look, and they took one of the elegantly curtained waiting booths alone. Narcissa drew the curtain around the

table and then cast two privacy spells Harry wasn't sure he could have bettered himself. Of course, he was much more practiced in glamours and Transfiguration than Narcissa was, probably. One couldn't be good at *everything*.

That done, Narcissa laid her wand down on the table, keeping her hand on top of it, and stared at him. "I want the entire story," she said.

Harry nodded and looked down at his hands. "You probably remember that I came to return Draco's wand to him the summer before we all went back to Hogwarts for that new seventh year," he whispered.

"Vaguely, yes," Narcissa said, her tone implying that she had no reason to count this memory as among her most important.

"I—I saw him," Harry said, making his voice breathless, "and the seed of an obsession was planted. I had never paid attention to what he *looked* like before. Now I did." He bowed his head further, until he knew he looked like a dog who had got into the family's rubbish bin. "I kept thinking of him, and thinking of him. There were probably signs of it even before that, during our sixth year, when I followed him all over the school." He produced a blush; by this time, thanks to all the innocent personas he'd played in the past, it was easy. "Soon I couldn't have a night where I didn't dream of him. I couldn't have silence in my head through wondering what he would say to me if I went up to him and told him that I wanted to be his friend."

Narcissa was silent for long moments. Then she asked, "And you never tried?" Harry could hear the incredulous tone in her voice.

Harry shook his head miserably. "In the end, I was a coward," he admitted. "My fear was as great as my obsession. So long as I stayed away from Draco, I could *imagine* him smiling and accepting me. I could even imagine him returning my feelings." He paused; Narcissa had made a tiny sound of disgust. That was not the disdain he wanted, but it was on the right path towards that emotion. Harry moved on, hopeful and not showing that hope. "But if I went up and asked him, I knew the reality would smash my little dreams. I don't think I could have survived that."

"How pathetic," Narcissa said.

Harry let his head sink further. The silence must speak for him: yes, he knew it was pathetic, and yes, he had done it anyway.

"And so," Narcissa said, "you have become his boyfriend through this—obsession you have with him?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I knew he would never accept *me*, but when I realized he sometimes slept with men, I thought I might have a chance. I worked. Oh, how I *worked* to find out what he wanted!" Time to send a tiny glow of shamed pride through his voice. "I worked to become *all* he wanted, the perfect man for him—the one he would want to sleep with and talk to and dance

with and maybe spend the rest of his life beside, if I was luckier than I've ever deserved. And it worked, didn't it? You've seen him with me—"

"With Brian Montgomery," Narcissa corrected harshly. "How do you think he would react if he found out it was you?"

Harry covered his face with his hands and uttered a dry sob. Beneath the thickening mask of the desperate man, the aspect of his personality that had created Metamorphosis watched critically. *How does it look? Is she buying it? Don't seem too melodramatic, remember, or you'll strain her suspension of disbelief.*

"That's what I thought." Narcissa's voice cracked over him like an iced whip. Harry heard the slight creak of her leaning back in her chair, the rustle as she shook her head and her hair brushed against her shoulders. "He has no idea that this is you, does he? He thinks Brian is real."

"Yes, he does." Harry wiped at his cheeks and let his hands drop to the table again. Probably better to show himself on the verge of tears rather than actually shedding them. Narcissa would think even this Harry Potter should balk at showing weakness to an enemy so deadly. "I've—there are a few holes in the mask, but he hasn't cared to probe at them yet. Brian's too perfect."

Narcissa nodded, eyes narrowed. "And your goal was simply to spend time with him? Not embarrass him?"

Harry shook his head, letting his own expression shine with earnestness. "Spending time with him is enough for me. I count down the minutes when we're parted." He turned his hand to show Narcissa the golden watch clinging to his wrist. He hadn't felt equal to leaving Grimmauld Place without some kind of prop after all. It had been simple enough to alter the original names on the hands, the names of another of his personas and her "lover," to his and Draco's. The hands crept slowly towards the TOGETHER on the far side of the watch face, whilst a window towards the top of the watch helpfully displayed how many more minutes were left.

The watch had worked, Harry knew, when he let his eyes rise timidly to Narcissa's face. She looked just the right mix of disbelieving, disgusted, and amused. She glanced away from him as if the sight of him might taint her, and tucked a hand into the folds of her robes.

"I can hardly believe," she said at last, "that you have all this power and yet are content to use it simply to take a place at Draco's side."

"Most people don't know I have this power," Harry whispered, adding another thread of truth to his lie. It was one reason he had not suspected someone would catch on immediately when he displayed his magic in the Malfoys' dining room. Harry Potter was talented at a few specific spells, but he had never done anything extraordinary except play Quidditch very well. He'd defeated Voldemort with a *Disarming* Spell, hadn't he? Not even a proper Unforgivable Curse. It had been luck and his mother's love that saved his life, many people thought now, not any great

magical talent. Harry had aided and abetted the rumors as they circulated, not wanting anyone to immediately suspect him if he had to let his power show through a disguise someday.

"But you have not enchanted him? You have not done this to hurt him?" Narcissa's hand curled around her wand in an unsubtle threat. Probably she thought that subtlety would be wasted on the man across the table from her, Harry thought.

"No," Harry said. Another piece of truth. "I don't even really understand why he wanted to go public with our relationship." He let his voice rise, and then bit his lip when it would have become a tearful wail. "I knew something like this would happen. I knew my disguise might break the moment I was on display before many more eyes."

"And yet, you went along with it."

Harry shut his eyes and let his head sag a little. "I told you," he whispered. "I'm in love with him, even though I know he doesn't feel the same way about me, even as Brian. I would do anything to make him happy. He wanted to do this. Yes, I went along with it."

"I think I can guess what he wants," Narcissa said, but she didn't voice it. She sat in silence instead, eyes half-shut, thinking. Harry clasped clammy palms together and sat waiting for her verdict, the very picture of nervousness. Behind his mask, of course, his magical self coiled, ready to do something drastic if he had to. He wasn't very experienced in Memory Charms, but he would Obliviate Narcissa rather than let her come near the secret of Metamorphosis.

Narcissa opened her eyes at last. "I do not wish to interfere with my son's plans, if they are what I think they are," she said. "If it becomes necessary to cut them short, then revealing your true identity will only be a factor in that. And his accomplishing them may depend on your presence."

Harry blinked, but said nothing.

"Therefore," Narcissa went on grimly, "you may have two weeks from today to spend with him. I will keep your secret—until the moment when I think you are trying to hurt my son, or until the moment when the two weeks are up. Then I expect you to gracefully withdraw, and never try and contact Draco again. He will be hurt enough from being fooled so long, God knows. Do we have a bargain, Mr. Potter?" Her voice showed that they had damn well better have.

Harry reached across the table to clasp and kiss her hand. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," he whispered. "Thank you, thank, *thank* you—"

Narcissa's fingers spasmed in his. Then she yanked her hand away from him and wiped it on her robes. Harry didn't mind the open gesture of contempt. It said he had got his way, and she believed in him, the him who was obsessively in love with her son and actually a waste of magic.

"Two weeks, mind," she said. "Or sooner than that, if it turns out that *I* judge you have done something wrong."

Harry bowed his head again. "I understand."

And she took down the privacy spells and was gone, leaving Harry to sit where he was for several minutes before he tried to follow. Alone, he draped a few glamours about himself to hide the color of his eyes and the scar, and to alter his height. Then he stood and left the shop.

First he made sure Narcissa wasn't in sight; then he strolled up the middle of the alley. He was grinning.

Narcissa probably did suspect the truth: that Draco was fighting to be free of his father. And that was probably a goal she supported. Until she knew for certain that "Brian" was not necessary to Draco's achieving his freedom, she did not want to take him away, or distract her son in the middle of a pitched battle. On the other hand, neither would she allow the deception to continue forever. So she had made the best compromise she could.

She had accepted the persona he'd built as Harry.

Despite the difficulty it would be to perform with knowing as well as suspicious eyes on him, despite the fact that two weeks did not at all fit Draco's timeframe of one or two months, Harry was intensely relieved. He had escaped the revelation he most dreaded, where someone broke him open as *all* the personalities behind Metamorphosis. He still had the center of his life. And if he had to sacrifice a persona to keep that, what did it matter? The person he felt most sorry for was Draco, who would have to face the fact that he had been tricked. But he would get over that and go on as Harry would get over his irritation at himself for having revealed his magic in the first place.

Draco sighed and laid down the records he'd requested from the Ministry, shaking his head. He'd looked carefully for every possible name Brian could have been registered under at birth. There was absolutely nothing. So far as the Ministry was concerned, Brian Montgomery didn't exist.

Of course, so far as the Ministry was concerned, many things didn't exist, from people forced into the Dark Lord's service against their wills to justifiable uses of the Imperius Curse. So Draco could not yet lay aside his suspicions that Brian's birth *was* recorded, just under a different name.

And what would he have to hide?

Draco shook his head, baffled once again. Spells could hide looks, make it easier to run from the past, conceal a physical deformity—but there were no spells Draco knew of that could give someone Brian's magic, or knowledge of both pure-blood and Muggle culture, or intelligence. Someone like that should have been able to make his way in the world *without* hiding, no matter what he looked like. And if he was deathly afraid of his enemies finding him, he never should have displayed his good traits. They were the sort that caused rumors. Draco was certain his father was searching even as he was, trying to find out what powerful young wizard, about thirty

years old, would want to hang about and seduce his son.

*I'd like to know that myself, actually.*

Draco rose to his feet and stretched out the kinks in his back. He had to accept that he would not know the truth about Brian's identity today. Perhaps some clues would emerge when they went to Clothilde's Midsummer festival. Brian would be dropped, then, into a room full of pure-blood wizards and witches who had some warning that he was coming, and so wouldn't be too stunned to interact with him, as the guests at Draco's birthday party had been.

*Perhaps this entry into social circles is what he's been angling for. Perhaps I'm not the primary goal at all, but a convenient means to accomplish whatever is.*

Draco smiled as he began to pull off the casual robes he'd worn that day. He knew it was not a nice smile. He would show whoever had sent Brian that he disliked being used. And there were a number of ways to achieve that, from forcing Brian to reveal his true identity to seducing him away from his true allegiance.

*I would not mind having him at my side for a good long time—if we could trust each other fully, if his loyalty was to me first and not to his masters, if I knew more about him.*

*If, if, if. Nothing is certain yet. On the other hand, nothing is impossible.*

Harry nodded and put down the newspaper he'd been reading. All day long, he'd been digging into old *Daily Prophets* he'd saved over the years, mostly so that he could know what events had occurred on certain dates and appear sufficiently knowledgeable to the people who'd hired him. This time, he went through looking for interviews with Draco Malfoy, or stories in which Malfoy appeared, or accounts of the Death Eater trials and how well Malfoy had emerged from them. As a result, he now had many more details of what Malfoy was like as a *man*, rather than the boy he had known.

Draco was courteous in public, witty when he thought he could get away with it; the wit increased as time put distance between him and his trial for serving as a Death Eater. He appeared charming but ruthless, expressing just the right amount of regret when Malfoy's Machineries drove a few smaller magical businesses out of existence. He hid his emotions so well that Harry doubted any of the reporters had seen anything real from him. For that matter, Harry was not sure that *Brian* had, except the sexual attraction that blazed between them. And that was a purely physical tie.

Draco was guarded, careful, close, aloof, and discreet to the point of never seeming to have love affairs at all. It was to break from that part of his public reputation that he'd chosen to hire Brian, Harry decided. His father had evidently mistaken "discretion" for "compliance" and thought Draco would never give him any trouble.

All this knowledge made Harry rather cheerful, though he was sure Draco's vengeful streak from Hogwarts was still alive and well. The way his enemies went down just after they had annoyed him was too convenient to be real. (Of course, Draco made sure not to leave evidence that would link him to his enemies' destruction). That could mean trouble if and when Draco discovered that Harry was Brian.

On the other hand, his self-containment and self-possession meant he wasn't likely to be *hurt* by Brian, either. Their going to bed together had been a one-time mistake that Harry knew Draco already regretted. Now he was pulling further away, and Harry meant to help him do more of that after tonight.

With a small smirk, Harry picked up the severe black dress robes he'd chosen for tonight and began to change faces.

Draco opened the door of the Manor himself when Harry stepped up to the porch. Harry had just enough time to notice his calm expression—Narcissa had kept her word and told him nothing—before the sight of the robes Draco was wearing made his throat try to close up.

Draco was displaying white, the color of unspotted reputation and bloodline, as if he had every right to wear it. Of course, his conformation to such traditions was arrogant in the extreme after his public display of his sexuality. And if one looked closely, there were silver edges to his robe sleeves and hems that both hinted at powerful magic in the pure-blood code of colors and ruined the whiteness of it all. The fact that the white and silver made him shine like some sort of ethereal spirit and brought out the gray of his eyes was almost an accident.

"Shall we?" Draco's voice was low as he stepped down the front stair and offered his arm to Harry. His face was also neutral for long moments. Then he smiled, and the smile was dazzling.

Harry nodded. He needed some concentration to loop his arm properly through Draco's, and to look away from that pale, handsome, elegant face.

And a new thought darted into his head—new not only for this particular situation, but for any time he had ever adopted a Metamorphosis guise.

*Draco won't be hurt by this, but I may be.*

The sight of Narcissa watching from a window as they Apparated away made him all the more uneasy.

Draco had not missed the way Brian's eyes widened or his breathing sped up when he opened the door. He'd deliberately chosen the robes that would not only make a statement, but make him look his best.

He Apparated them both to Clothilde Castle with a warm ember of smugness glowing in his belly. *Really,* he thought, addressing Brian's unknown masters, *if you wanted to succeed, you shouldn't have sent a man I can seduce, let alone given me such excellent motives for doing so.*

*Let the games begin.*

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twelve—Overwhelmed*

Harry lifted his head to do a quick, professional sweep around the room the moment he and Draco came out of the Apparition. Unusually, they had been able to Apparate right into the middle of Clothilde Castle, instead of having to walk in from outside. Harry wondered what kind of pure-blood witch would trust her guests to come through her wards like that.

Then he remembered Helena Clothilde's reputation, and grimaced. *Someone who wants excitement on a few nights of the year more than she wants safety. I do recall reading that she had tight wards up most of the time.*

"All right?" Draco's knuckles grazed along his left shoulder blade, a tickling touch that made Harry want to squirm and arch into it, or else step away. He held himself still enough to do neither and turned to smile at Draco instead. For whatever reason, Draco was still suspicious of him—and Harry could admit that it was probably because of the magic he'd shown off yesterday. Flinching away or acting skittish would increase the suspicion.

"Yes," Harry said in Brian's voice. "Just making sure that I know where all the exits are, so you can make a quick one if I manage to embarrass you with my dancing."

Draco's eyes narrowed a little. "But you won't, will you?" he asked, and his voice had become one that reminded Harry of Narcissa's, chill and soft as snowfall. His arm went out, his hand settling on the small of Harry's back. He leaned nearer, probably intending to make Brian tremble with his breath brushing against the shell of his ear. "I've seen the way you can dance. After the Estival, don't tell me that you won't be able to manage a simple pavane."

"Ah, but does Clothilde Castle favor the simple pavane?" Harry got his revenge by whispering into Draco's ear in turn. And he *did* shiver, whilst Harry managed to look as if he remained calm and unaffected. "I had heard that the mistress sets many traps, and having a dance change in mid-step is one of them."

Draco wrenched himself away, but left his hand in place, and stared directly into Harry's eyes for a moment. Harry stared back calmly. He had been around enough Legilimens in the past few years to know in an instant when someone could read his mind, and Draco couldn't. He was simply trying to yank the secrets out of Brian by the sheer force of his presence.

The competitive gleam in his gray eyes, which almost turned angry as he surveyed Brian, reassured Harry. There was already a distance between them. Whether the best happened and he managed to get Draco disowned in two weeks, or whether it was the worst and he simply had to vanish, discarding the Brian identity along the way, Draco was unlikely to press the matter further and try to find him.

"I'm starving," he said, turning around to face the table on the far side of the room, behind a scene of milling pure-blood wizards, where the food waited. "Both for a taste of food and for the taste of opposition. Are you coming?"

Draco could not believe how angry he had become, and how quickly. Brian had really done nothing more than turn the game Draco was trying to play back on him, and then give him a quick-eyed glance of contempt that showed how little he relished such game-playing. But most of Draco's partners were so eager for his attentions—at least by the time they came to *this* stage in a relationship—that that had never happened before.

*I want him,* Draco thought, stepping up so that he could walk beside Brian and leave no doubt in the minds of his observers that they were together. *I want to conquer him, I want him to give himself to me, I want to know the truth of who he is, I want to* make *him tell me the truth, I want him to acknowledge me as his equal—*

There were so many longings that Draco found his mind spinning as he tried to name them all. He had never felt such intense and variegated desire.

He did have to pause, then, and wonder whether Brian's magic could have created such a desire in him. Could this be the extreme of sexual longing caused by enough power? Or could he have taught himself a spell that would seduce the person who was part of the family he probably hoped to get revenge on?

But Draco prided himself on not being *simple* to please. There was no one thing Brian could have focused the spell on to ensnare him, and so far as Draco knew, attraction spells were impossible to cast otherwise. They needed a scent, a lock of hair, a certain way of speaking, to begin the enchantment, and then the victim would convince himself he was falling in love *after* he had become attracted to that initial focus.

*Falling in love?* His father's skeptical voice echoed through his head. This was Draco's own tool of concentration, the one he used whenever he thought he was getting too far into a business transaction or a conversation and losing his composure. *There's no need to suspect yourself of*

that*, and you know that Brian couldn't simply have compelled you to fall in love with him. That's not the way it works. Step back and look at the situation rationally. Don't let your irritation at his coolness control you.*

So Draco stepped back and looked at the situation rationally as he kissed the hands of a few witches in passing and fetched himself one of Clothilde's exquisite chocolate confections from the food table. And he saw a man whom he wanted and wanted to want him back. That was probably the simplest of his desires.

Draco smiled wryly into the chocolate as he watched Brian leaning on the table and entertaining the small talk of a young wall-eyed wizard, one of the Greengrass family, who probably thought he was wildly courageous for approaching Brian. *What is the way to make him want you back?*

*Make yourself irresistible, in all aspects. You know he admires courage.*

Draco dusted crumbs from his hand, a slight movement that brought the attention of the conversational partners to him. He stepped forwards and bowed to the young wizard. "Care to dance?" he asked, in a voice of normal volume that nevertheless caused a perceptible drop in noise around him.

The young wizard promptly went pale and looked as if he would sick up. He backed away a little from Brian, gaping. "I—" he said, and then snapped, "*No!* I'm not gay!"

"Excuse me," Draco said, smiling at the young man. "An easy mistake to make."

An undercurrent of laughter moved through the watchers as the youngster fled. Though they had to disapprove of the sexual choices Draco had made, they could admire the cool dismissal Draco had just affected—never outright *saying* that he thought the young wizard was gay for talking so intimately to his partner, but implying it. And he had shown that he was not afraid to refer to the scandal that had filled the *Daily Prophet* to brimming for the past few days.

For Draco, though, the best reward was to turn around and see Brian's eyes fixed on him for just a moment with surprise and admiration. Then he blinked and the emotions were swallowed into that intense blue, but they had been there. Draco felt a stirring of interest, and he gave Brian a slow smile that briefly caused the other man to stare even harder.

*Brief is still a beginning.*

Draco put out an arm, and made sure his own look was so direct that Brian couldn't take it as anything but a challenge. "Care to dance?" he asked softly.

Brian tilted his head to the music, and a moment later his eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second. This dance was one that, unlike the Estival, required one partner to lead. Draco, as the one extending the invitation, was the one who would play that role. If Brian refused out of fear of being seen as a woman, he would lose the challenge as much as if he stepped on Draco's foot

with every turn.

Brian squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. Draco felt a curl of lazy delight travel through him. Brian held out his hand in return. "Of course," he said. "What else are we here for?" And *that* comment made a few of the people near him scowl, since, after all, he had just dismissed them as being uninteresting to talk to.

Draco drew Brian near with an arm around his waist again, and pulled him out onto the floor. They found their place in the dance without pause: this was one that Draco had known all his life, and Brian seemed to have studied it extensively.

Brian moved in Draco's arms without looking away from his face, quite unlike the demure, blushing demeanor most young pure-blood witches would have been taught to exhibit. All the same, he let his body flow where Draco directed, stepped when Draco turned him, and made no attempt to claim the lead. Draco had to hold back a harsh, panting breath when Brian even fully completed the step that made his neck arch back so his head rested on Draco's shoulder.

The thought of all that power surrendering quietly to him—even though he knew Brian was doing this under protest and so as not to cause a scene—made his head swim. Draco turned his face to the side and flicked his tongue against the skin just under Brian's ear, hidden from their audience, in revenge. Brian shuddered, and moved into the next step with just a bit more force than necessary.

Draco was enchanted, but, having achieved some of what he wanted, wasn't so caught up in the dance that he didn't notice one of Helena Clothilde's dependents angling towards them with her partner, meaning to trip them up. He was in a position to keep his balance no matter what happened, so he kept dancing, wondering how Brian would handle it.

Harry had never had much of a tendency to connect dancing with sex, but he was fast coming to see why other people might. Those people had obviously all danced with Draco Malfoy.

*I should be grateful that he didn't touch me more often during the Estival.*

He wasn't *completely* blind to the effects of the people moving around him, however—that would have been stupid, when he was trying to put some distance between Brian and Draco—and so he saw the witch who was moving as if she would trip Brian up, step on his foot, or snag the hem of his robe. Harry snarled inwardly. At the moment, with his body humming and his skin sparking, he wasn't in the mood either to confront or to politely ignore her.

He took the next step a little faster than normal, causing Draco's hands to briefly slip from their positions on his shoulder and waist. That allowed Harry to reach out with one leg as the witch turned her back on him, thanks to the dance, and step on the hem of *her* robe, so deftly that someone would have to be looking in exactly the right direction to know he was to blame. And the bodies all over the floor made "exactly the right direction" already crowded with dancers.

The little witch squeaked as she suddenly tripped, one of her delicate shoes tangling with her robes. There was a great deal of floundering momentum, which caught up her partner as well as her, to Harry's vicious delight, and it ended up with both of them on the floor, breathless, the witch's robe ripped beyond repair. A round of smiles worse than open laughter traveled the faces of the guests, and the witch stood up again with her cheeks flaming, no longer interested in hindering Harry.

"Well," Draco said suddenly into his ear. Harry stiffened. Of course they had kept moving as the dance required, but Draco was stepping a little closer than he *needed* to right now, his hands sliding up and down Harry's flanks, his fingertips questing gently for his ribs under the cloth, his chest and hips cupping Harry's back and arse as if made for them. "I hadn't thought you had quite that Slytherin streak *under* the Gryffindor one. You give me more and more surprises all the time." His arms tightened. "And they make you all the more interesting."

Harry shuddered in spite of himself, the skin under his ribs twitching. He was sensitive there—not quite ticklish, but prone to excitement when someone touched him, which had been a wonderful discovery when he first started having sex with other men.

*But it's not a response that belongs on Brian,* Harry reminded himself. *He has his own sexual kinks, and those are the ones you need to play out, even if it's only acting now, and not becoming the person who feels those things.*

He took advantage of the next step of the dance to swing himself out wide and away from Draco, though not enough to break the flow of the pattern, even as Draco had come close to him but still within the rules. He lowered his eyes to the floor and said softly, "Please, no false compliments from you. Anyone could have seen what she was doing." He raised his gaze abruptly, and caught Draco off-guard, blinking, as he had intended. "Just as anyone can see what *you* are," he whispered harshly, hoping to recall Draco to a sense of the intensely interested audience around them. He *couldn't* try to seduce Brian on the dance floor, no matter how much he wanted to, because they were there to show off for other people, not to snog each other.

Draco was as close as he ever had been to saying, "Fuck it!" to the public display he was trying to create and finding a nice, private place to finish what built higher between him and Brian with every movement.

But he *was* still showing off. And he thought he had a new tactic to try, since the dance was ending.

"You're right, of course," he said, and clasped Brian's hand for the final bow. "Allow me to proceed with a little more subtlety."

And he went towards the food table. Behind him, he could feel Brian hesitate, but he followed almost at once, probably worried about ruining their new joint reputation by seeming to

participate in a lovers' quarrel.

Draco had already seen the woman he wanted standing not far from the table, sipping a glass of wine and talking with her sister. At least, she *had* been talking with her sister. Now Alice Moonstone faced Draco with a raised eyebrow, whilst Marigold faded desperately into the background.

"What do you want?" she asked in a low tone, even as she painted a welcoming smile on her face. "I know that you're strutting and showing off for him, not me."

"At the moment," Draco said softly, leaning one elbow on the table and smiling down at her, "he's being rather unreasonable. Expecting things of me that I can't give, considering we're in public." Alice blushed; Draco let her. He was sure she was the right choice for this stage of the game. She *understood*, much more than her sister did, and she was pretty and the right age. "I wanted to talk to someone I knew wouldn't look at me as if I were covered with maggots, and who has some idea of the risk I'm running."

Alice frowned. "He *doesn't* know the risk you're running? But how could he not, if he's paid any attention at all to the newspapers in the past few days?"

"He's an outsider to pure-blood society," Draco murmured, bending closer to her. She was wearing some sort of perfume that smelled good. If she had been male and half as exasperating as Brian—all right, if she had *been* Brian—he might have been interested. "He doesn't really understand these things as well as he thinks he does. To him, it's all sort of a grand joke."

And Alice did what he had hoped she would do, and leaned around Draco to frown at Brian. Then Draco leaned closer to her and turned his head so that it would look as if he were kissing her ear. Alice, no fool, blushed at once and yanked away, but the damage had been done. The silent interest in the room soared to new heights as everyone waited breathlessly to see what Brian would do.

Draco was rather wondering that himself. This was a ploy to get the man jealous, because he suspected that jealousy would draw on both all that lovely Gryffindor rage and all that delicious Slytherin cunning, and result in an explosion. But he wasn't sure. If Brian's coolness prevailed…

From the expression on Brian's face, it wasn't about to.

Harry snarled before he could stop himself. The elderly matron who had been walking towards him froze at the sound, and then tried to walk away again without making it obvious why she had done so. Harry himself had taken several steps forwards before he really realized what he was doing and how his actions would be interpreted.

And then, of course, he had to go with the game, though he scolded himself for feeling Harry's jealousy instead of Brian's. But maybe Brian *would* feel this way, if only to keep up the pretense

that he and Draco had been lovers for months…

Harry himself was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the tangles of deceptions and false personalities and personas here. But he'd made his move, mistaken or not, and he could think of no way to back out without making himself, and by extension, Draco, look foolish. And that wasn't possible when he had to get Draco disowned as fast as possible. Any false step could take more time than they had.

*Damn it.*

So he gave in to his natural instincts, and felt more like an actor than ever doing so as he stepped up beside the young witch and scowled at her. "I suppose you don't realize how long we've been dating?" he asked, so that everyone in sight could hear.

The witch blushed again, but her chin came up. She was going to give him something of a fight, then. Good. Harry was glad. That would make this look more real.

It had nothing to do with wanting to make her look bad for flirting with Draco, Harry told himself. He *didn't* want to do that, and anyway, Draco had done all the flirting and he knew it.

"He simply told me you didn't understand him," the witch said. "I think a man is to be excused going to another person to complain about that, when his partner won't listen."

She had defenses of her own, of course. Implicit in the way she'd phrased her response was the comparison of Harry to a nagging wife. And now a bolt of real anger tore through him, as the jealousy had been real a moment ago (*and probably still was,* said that voice in the back of his mind that always kept track of what Harry was thinking and feeling, no matter what persona he'd played). Draco had compelled him to accept the woman's part in the dance, too. Harry didn't *like* this. *He* was the one who was supposed to be in control here, the one with the real knowledge of what was happening, the Manager of Metamorphosis and thus the one in control of a hundred extra lives.

He wasn't a wife. He didn't fit any of the stereotypes of gay men. And from the way Draco was raising his eyebrow at Harry right now, he was interested in seeing Brian prove that.

Harry lunged forwards and wrapped his arms around Draco, dragging him closer. Draco had time for a startled gasp—not loud enough to reach the ears of anyone else, of course, because he wouldn't betray his surprise to them like that—before Harry fastened their mouths together as Draco had done at his birthday party.

With Harry's anger and jealousy behind the kiss, it was more thorough than it had been before, and thus more knee-weakening, and thus more real. Harry could feel sharp tingles passing through him as he twined his tongue around Draco's, and when he began to thrust his tongue sharply into Draco's palate and cheeks and against his teeth, there could be no doubt of what he was asking for, mimicking, hinting at. Draco's hips surged forwards and pressed against Harry's,

letting him feel his growing erection.

Harry felt smug for just a moment, glad that he had asserted his control again and that Draco was reacting as strongly as he was.

And then his magic rose, following the anger as it often did, as it had the other day when he made Lucius's hair flutter back, and flowed into the kiss. And Draco's magic rose in response—something that had never happened before for Harry, with *any* partner.

Suddenly a pulse of power as irresistible as an electrical current joined them together, flowing directly through their mouths, across their tongues, down their throats. Harry gasped, staggering, and then groaned as pleasure gripped his body and shook him like a wet sheet. His mind was *expanding* at the edges, filled with glimpses of Draco's emotions, flooding them over and encompassing them into his own. It wasn't quite a telepathic or an empathic link, but it was very close.

Draco made a hungry noise at the same moment, and his arms tightened around Harry's shoulders and waist. Harry felt his surprise and wonder at the exchange, his amusement as he confirmed Harry's jealousy was real, and then the pleasure that took him like the tide.

And the pleasure fed back into Harry's own, and *multiplied.* Their magic was not simply doubled, but squared, and with it the effects. Harry was whimpering steadily now, uncaring about their audience, his fingers digging into and stroking across warm skin; his hand had got beneath Draco's robes somehow. So cool on the outside, he thought dizzily, but so melting *soft* beneath, and hard, smooth skin across hard bone, and—

Emotion, sensation, obliterated thought. He couldn't stay here any longer. He could barely maintain a hold on himself so he didn't throw Draco down in the middle of the dance floor. He tightened his arms around Draco and Apparated.

Draco gasped as he jolted down, mainly because it separated his mouth from Brian's for a moment. Dazed, he looked around and realized they were in the middle of a quiet, dark room, but still with the gray stone of Clothilde Castle's walls encompassing them. Brian had Apparated them sight unseen to the first destination that would serve—another sign of his extraordinary power. Most wizards needed the sight or at least an extended description of their destinations to arrive there without Splinching.

*On the other hand,* Draco thought, as he reached out to tangle his hands in Brian's hair, *maybe we Splinched our common sense.*

Brian was falling to his knees. He snapped his fingers, and Draco's clothes vanished from below the waist, leaving the neatly severed upper part of his robes to dangle on his chest. Draco whooshed out his breath, trying to be angry, but he couldn't really be so, and Brian gave him a slow, predatory smile and a wink that showed he knew it.

Then their magic reconnected across the space between them, enclosing them in a wall of golden sparks, and urgency took them again. Brian reached out and grasped Draco's erection, closing his eyes and opening his mouth. The expression of bliss on his face reminded Draco of someone about to take a bit of the most delicious dinner they'd ever tasted.

Incoherent amusement came back to him. Brian wouldn't bite, he was saying, and then his mouth closed around Draco.

And Draco was lost.

He threw his head back as Brian sucked, the muscles of his throat rippling, pulling, *demanding* a response. Once again Brian's magic was traveling through his mouth and his tongue, but this time it went straight into Draco's cock, spreading out to engulf his balls. Draco bucked his hips off the wall. He could no more have kept them still than he could have made the earth stop turning, and normally he prided himself on his control when he was getting a blowjob.

But this was hardly normal.

He tangled his hands into Brian's hair and directed his head back and forth, because he *had* to be touching him. From the moan he received, vibrating directly into his groin, Brian *liked* being guided like this. And then he swallowed, licked twice around the tip of Draco's erection, swallowed again, and cupped Draco's balls, rolling them.

More magic rose from his palm. More magic soared across Draco's mind. The very human heat and wetness of Brian's mouth concentrated down to what felt like a single point. He was sobbing for breath, trying to swim against the roaring tide of power and silky hair and silky skin and *teasing*, the magic was *teasing* him, as Brian's finger swiped gently up towards his cleft.

Draco twisted like a fish in the talons of an eagle, and the inevitability of his orgasm was the best thing he had ever felt in his life—

Surpassed only by the orgasm itself a moment later, which seized and wrung and *broke* him, leaving him shocked half-unconscious by pleasure.

Harry had wanted to shove one hand down his own pants to take care of himself, but he couldn't take his hands away from Draco's crotch. He wanted to draw back a little, regain his sense of autonomy, concentrate on his partner's pleasure and not his own the way he always did, but he couldn't get any distance. He wanted to do something more sophisticated than just suck a few times, but he couldn't control the sloppy, eager way his mouth moved.

And then, when he made Draco come, he came himself, untouched.

Harry cried out hoarsely, his throat clamping down around Draco's erection, his body shuddering

again and again as his hips pumped. He *still* couldn't take his hands from Draco's body, and he felt spectacularly unbalanced, both mentally and physically, as pleasure blinded him and ravished him away from his hold on composure. He whimpered continuously as he came, the magic drawing out his pleasure.

He had never felt so good in his life.

A moment later, when the magic began lazily to untwine from between him and Draco, having given them all the intense emotional sharing it wanted for the moment, he had never been so terrified.

*He* liked having his head taken and guided that way when he was giving someone else a blowjob. *Brian* didn't. But Harry hadn't even been like himself when he'd simply given in and given himself up to the sensations. He *didn't do that*. There was always a distance between him and his partners. There had to be, or Harry might get caught up in the sex and do something he couldn't afford as either the person he was playing or himself.

He withdrew his hands from Draco at last, shaking. He wanted to flee, but his muscles were full of languor, and his magic was still ebbing and flowing back and forth like a tide whose moon had disappeared. He shuddered, licking his lips. He had swallowed Draco's ejaculation without even noticing.

Draco seized his arm, and pulled him to his feet.

Harry looked up, thinking that perhaps Draco had found the experience frightening, too, and was about to reassure him it wouldn't happen again.

Instead, he found himself thoroughly, expertly, insistently, gently kissed. One of Draco's hands was cupping his chin. The other urged his head back and rubbed the skin just beneath his ear, the place that had made Harry shiver before. Now, before he knew what he was doing, he opened his mouth and offered Draco more.

It was *impossible* not to do that, not with what they'd just shared. It would have gone against Harry's every instinct as a Gryffindor and as a person to refuse to be open to Draco after that.

But the fear still remained, and it increased when Draco leaned towards his ear and whispered, "You were really with me this time. *Thank* you."

And Harry understood that he might have more of a problem on his hands than Narcissa's knowledge of Brian's identity.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirteen—Backbiting and Forward-Looking*

Draco had never felt such vast disbelief as he did when he and Brian walked back into the great hall of Clothilde Castle, arm-in-arm. He paused and sniffed the air, trying to decide what it smelled like. Salt and frost, probably. With one accord, the room was trying to sweat or freeze them out.

*You can't do that anymore,* Draco thought, tightening his hold on Brian's forearm as the memory of that incredible pleasure spiraled through him. *There's nothing you can do to me that I'll feel the force of, not next to that.*

Then he saw a familiar face glaring at him from a nearby pocket of people, and grinned. Inwardly, however, it had the effect of putting some frost on his glee at last. Of course there were people outside the bedroom, and of course they had still to be dealt with. He shouldn't let his confidence carry him away.

He leaned towards Brian, aware that everyone in the room was watching him do so, and resisting the impulse to preen under the attention. "That woman over there is Pansy Parkinson," he whispered into Brian's ear. The other man shivered. Draco wanted to crow. He gave himself a moment to get over that before he continued. "One of my oldest and dearest friends, and at the moment she's probably furious because I didn't tell her about this beforehand. Shall we go over and introduce you to her?"

"If you like." Brian's voice was soft.

Draco pulled away enough to stare into his face. Brian met his eyes, then frowned and looked down at his hands. "Yes," he said, more strongly. "I'd like to meet her."

Draco thought he might know what was wrong. He ran a hand up the other man's arm. "I don't plan on kicking you out of bed in a month," he said. "Or a month beyond that, even." That was as much as he was willing to commit to, since even now he could not say if his alliance with Brian would be a permanent one, but surely Brian understood *that* and needed only a few mild words to soothe his anxieties. "You need not fear that this meant more to you than it did to me. How could it, when our magic made us open to each other like that?"

Harry bit down on his tongue. Otherwise, he might have screamed, *And that's exactly what I'm afraid of!*

The worst thing had happened that could. Harry had forgotten that this was just a job, but that

wasn't a disaster. There had been a few jobs in the past, usually early ones, where the same thing had happened. But his client had always retained the proper emotional distance, and that had helped Harry find his way back to solid ground.

Now *Draco* had forgotten that he'd hired Brian, that he was paying him, that this could never become the kind of relationship his casual touches and shining eyes since their—experience—said it was already. And without help, how would Harry get out of the morass he'd sunk himself in?

Especially when he had to find a way to do it without really *rejecting* Draco? What they'd shared was too strong to let him live with his conscience if he did so. He'd seen too many of the vulnerable places Draco usually kept secret, and that had to be respected and reciprocated.

*Why?* Harry snarled at himself.

*Because it does,* said his conscience in an implacably Gryffindorish way.

But of course he could show none of that conflict to Draco. Though obviously he couldn't count on Draco's desire to live a pure-blood life—which included guarding his emotions—the way he thought he could, he would just have to work around this. He would *have* to find a way.

*And you've always found a way before,* his memory reminded him. *You made a life—lives—for yourself the way that no one thought Harry Potter could after he killed Voldemort. They said he would be forever defined by that one deed. Instead, he's created multiple definitions of himself.*

Harry lifted his head. Yes, he could *do* this. And he would watch closely and observe. Possibly the people in Draco's life who distrusted him, including Narcissa and Pansy Parkinson, could actually become his allies.

In fact…

The seeds of a plan sprang up in Harry's mind then, and he smiled sincerely at Draco and took his arm with a will. "I do know that," he said. "And since I'm going to stick around for a while, I'd better meet your friends, shan't I?"

Draco didn't nuzzle against Brian's neck in gratitude only because he had such a strong will. But that will wasn't enough to prevent him from smirking as he guided Brian towards Pansy. She really *did* look furious. This would probably be better than the time Draco had spelled half the Hufflepuffs' hair pink using one of her cosmetic potions, and hadn't told her beforehand he'd be doing so.

"Draco," she said, and inclined her head stiffly. Her companion was, of course, not her own lover; *that* man was a Muggle who couldn't come to pure-blood parties like this. Draco gave the date a single, dismissive glance; he had watery blue eyes, a long-jawed face, and, of course, an

expression of horror, but it was not a very *interesting* expression of horror, the way some of the faces around them wore, so Draco did not feel compelled to pay attention to him. "I suppose your—friend—needs an introduction?"

"Of course." Draco stepped a little behind Brian and put his hands on his shoulders. It both made him look strong and protective, utterly joined to his "boyfriend," and gave him an excuse to touch Brian. "This is Brian Montgomery. And you should know, Pansy, that he's not my friend. He's my lover."

Several people around them turned away at that. Draco swallowed a smirk. So they could watch him and Brian kiss in the middle of the dance floor and then come back only twenty minutes later, but the *word* disgusted them?

*Of course,* Draco thought a moment later, struck by a realization he'd never had before. *So much of what happens under our noses—under the noses of people like my father—is simply not talked about. Silence is the great weapon we all employ against the things we don't want to deal with. To announce it aloud is more shocking than doing it, because not speaking about what you did would allow everyone else to ignore it, too.*

His hands tightened on Brian's shoulders. He didn't plan to deny him. He didn't plan to let him go, either, though Draco suspected it would take more than just seduction to make Brian realize how much had changed.

That was all right. The emotional bond that had connected them had let Draco feel Brian's own delight and wonder, and not a shadow of the ulterior motives he would have expected if Brian was indeed working for someone else. And really, was *that* very likely? Draco had to admit that it probably wasn't, not when he himself had approached Metamorphosis and picked the actor. The Manager had only suggested Brian. He couldn't have known beforehand that Draco would require someone like this; nor could he have known how soon Draco wanted him or how long he'd need him.

So he probably didn't have any mysterious masters after all, and Draco could laugh at his own suspicions. And that meant Brian was *his.*

He came back to the present to see Brian bowing courteously to Pansy. This, of course, meant she'd refused to extend her hand to him. Draco clucked his tongue, stepped around Brian, and picked up his best friend's fingers, which lay limp and cold in his. Then he forcibly connected them with Brian's, who had obediently held out his own hand when he realized what Draco was doing.

"This," Pansy said remotely, staring over Brian's head, "is undoubtedly the stupidest stunt you've ever pulled in your life."

"There have been a few that were worse," Draco said, and moved so he was leaning into Brian's warmth this time. He wanted it. And he saw no reason to deny himself that, not when everyone

at the party *knew* they were lovers, now.

"Not many." Pansy flexed her fingers, trying to pull her hand free, but Brian did keep it for a moment longer. Draco noticed a devilish shadow in his blue eyes. And of course, when Pansy abruptly gave her arm a hard yank, Brian let her go without a fuss, blinking innocently, and making it seem to any observers as if *Pansy* had been the rude one.

Pansy narrowed her eyes at Brian for a moment, then raised a falsely sweet smile to Draco. "If you'll just fetch drinks for us, perhaps I can get to know your new—Mr. Montgomery a little, Draco?"

"Why shouldn't you send your date to get the drinks?" Draco asked, and leaned more fully into Brian. "I'm comfortable here."

"But a gentleman always obliges a lady," Pansy said. "Or ladies." She looked directly at Brian now.

"How fortunate that I'm not actually a woman, the way you're trying to imply," Brian said helpfully, flashing her a sweet smile that was a better mask than hers. "I assure you, Draco can *feel* that I'm not a woman."

Pansy's lips tightened. Interestingly, Draco noticed, there was no disgust mixed in with her expression, just hostility and wariness. Perhaps she thought she could not actually show much disgust, since Draco knew about her Muggle lover—a person most of pure-blood society would also have distrusted—and she knew he had slept with men before this.

"Oh, all right," she said. "*You* go, Joshua."

Her lantern-jawed date stared at her. "And leave you here with these—*queers*?"

"I can assure you," Brian said, peering over Draco's head, "neither of us is at all interested in your girlfriend. You ought to feel better leaving her with us than anyone else in the room." He swept Joshua up and down with a glance that said he couldn't have offered much competition, should Pansy decide she wanted someone else.

Joshua stiffened, but stamped off, looking both irritated and humiliated. Draco smiled. Pansy had made a long tradition out of harassing the women he'd taken as dates to parties when he hadn't been interested in them at all; it was only fair that Brian should return the favor, even if he understood nothing about the tradition he was participating in.

*He fits into my life so well already. What objection can Pansy make?*

From the way her jaw worked, she had thought of a few.

Pansy took a step close to Draco the moment her date was out of sight. She had lowered her voice, but Harry made out every word anyway, sharp as cut glass. "How could you have done this?"

"Oh, it was quite easy," Draco said, with a laziness in his voice that snared Harry's attention at once, because it was new. He'd held himself at least a little aloof in every conversation they'd had so far, or at least every conversation in the hearing of someone else. Now he could relax, and he did not care who knew it. It was more than the languor of great sex, Harry thought. *He feels safe with me.* "There's this process called dating, you must have heard of it—"

Pansy shook her head. There was no joking in her expression at all. Harry liked her the better for that. She was really concerned about Draco, perhaps in the same way Narcissa had been. Yes, she could be an ally in urging Draco away from him and back towards his normal life. "Nothing is worth what you're giving up by acting out against society in this way, Draco. *Nothing.*"

"I don't know about that," said Draco, and casually linked his hand with Harry's. Harry had not even realized he'd curved an arm around Draco's chest, his fingers splayed in the middle of his stomach. Draco made the gesture as if he'd done it a thousand times.

*And he probably does feel like he has,* Harry thought, experiencing another surge of irritation and resentment against himself for having allowed things to get as far as they had. *That connection we just shared allowed us to skip over some of the preliminary steps to intimacy. He probably feels like we're real lovers, real friends.*

Harry felt the beginnings of pity. They weren't, of course, and it would hurt Draco all the more if he were allowed to go on believing that they were—or to *start* believing they were. Harry had to extricate them both from this situation, somehow.

Pansy's eyes came up and lingered on his face, as if she were trying to see what in Brian made him worth Draco's risking his social reputation, or trying to identify him. Harry gave her as inviting a look as he possibly could.

Some spark caught in Pansy's eyes, and she nodded to herself. "Well," she said in a normal tone of voice. "If you really are insistent on being with him, Draco, then I should get to know him, don't you think? *Someone* needs to warn your—lover—" Her voice cracked, but she still said the word. Harry was impressed. "Of your many bad tendencies."

Draco straightened and blinked at her, then turned to give Harry a suspicious look. Harry blinked back at him. Of course Draco would wonder what had made Pansy suddenly sound accepting, but he could not think it was anything *Brian* had done, especially when he had teased her just a moment ago.

"Oh, do go on, Draco," Harry said in Brian's voice, making himself sound amused and gentle. "I'll have to get to know your friends sometime, won't I? They're part of your life, and so am I."

Draco smiled a little, with an edge to it that Harry didn't entirely like or understand. "Yes, you are," he said, and leaned in to brush his lips against Harry's cheek. That motion hid his murmur into Harry's ear. "You *are.* Don't let her belittle you or guilt you into going away."

And he stood and sauntered casually towards a group of people who were trying to pretend he didn't exist. Harry smiled. At least he would probably have fun.

He glanced quickly around to make sure that Joshua wasn't coming back, then gave his full attention to Pansy. "I want Draco to be happy," he said. *Enough of dancing around the subject and playing games with it. We probably won't have long to talk.* "Tell me how I can extricate myself from his life and still leave him that way, and I'll follow your advice."

Draco could feel the excessive concentration of the group he approached, which included Marigold Moonstone and some lesser Clothilde relatives. They were trying to freeze him out, cut him without even refusing to look at him. They just all *happened* to be looking in a different direction.

"Hello," he greeted Marigold. She gasped and clutched at her skirts, but didn't glance up. Her cheeks were awfully red, of course. "We had a discussion of gay sex the other night. Now you've had a chance to see how part of it works. What did you think? Do you still believe that I need a woman to make myself excited?"

"Stay away from her." A young man shouldered forwards and planted himself between Marigold and Draco. Then he seemed to realize exactly what he'd done and flinched, but lifted his chin and tried to pretend to courage. "She's practically a child still, and I've heard all about what your kind do to children."

"Someone needs to correct the myths that circulate about gay men, I see," said Draco, even though the insult had irritated him, much as the fat wizard's insults in Diagon Alley had. But he'd signed up for this when he decided to come out, or pretend to come out. "Either we're so busy fucking men that we never look at women, or we prey on children of both sexes because that's just the way we *are.* Marigold's female. You must have noticed," he added helpfully, because the young man had stepped away from him and practically slammed his head into Marigold's breasts.

"You can't confuse me, you *creature*," said the young man, and tucked his hands under his elbows as if the gesture would make him look stern instead of defensive. "You'll say all sorts of things that *sound* reasonable, and then you go away and get stuck up the duff. Or stick something up there." He looked ill thinking about it. Then he paused, shook his head, and burst out, "*How* can you do that? Do you have the least idea how many *diseases*—"

"There are just as many diseases to be got from the normal process of sex, as I understand it," Draco said, and looked for just a moment at some scars near the man's mouth. They were probably the remnants of childhood pimples, but they could as easily have been from some of the

more, ah, wart-like illnesses traded around through sex. The people around the young man went purple or scarlet or white as they thought the insult deserved, and he clenched his fists.

"You—" said the man, and then shook his head, as if he could not find the words necessary to speak his outrage. "How dare you speak about that subject in front of young maidens," he settled for whispering at last, indicating the blushing Marigold.

Draco gave a lazy shrug, successfully resisting the impulse to turn around and see what Pansy and Brian were doing. "You were the one who brought it up."

"Extricate yourself," said Pansy, and tapped her fingers against her arm, as she might have if she'd had a fan. She would have looked good with one, Harry thought. The pug-faced girl he'd known in school had grown into a stern, majestic woman who appeared more at home in her formal robes and surroundings than half the pure-bloods here. "Why would you want that, if you love Draco so much?" Her lip curled on the word *love*, but again she managed to say it, and again Harry was impressed.

"Because the process of coming out was nothing like I thought it would be." Harry shook his head, and made sure his best expression of remorse appeared on his face by thinking of Hester Rann, his most melancholy persona. "I thought it would grant Draco at least *some* happiness. He told me it would, that he couldn't lie to his parents anymore and that he wanted his friends to know who he really was. Instead, both his parents, not just his father, have turned against him, and he's losing status, even if he doesn't realize it." He shuddered a little and closed his eyes. "As you said, there are some sacrifices that nothing is worth."

Pansy said nothing. Harry kept his eyes shut. Opening them would make him seem too eager. Besides, he wanted to marshal his thoughts, which would need to go in one of two directions dependent on her response.

"Thank you, Joshua, yes, he's been fine, go away," Pansy said abruptly, and Harry looked, because he wanted to see if Joshua would actually go. He did, after a sheep-like blink at Pansy, and he took one of the drinks he'd fetched with him. Pansy sipped the other. There were limits to her politeness to Brian, Harry supposed.

"Well," Pansy said at last, "I would not have expected you to understand how much status and participation in our world mean to a pure-blood wizard, especially since the war." She took a step away from him. "We're besieged, you know this? The wider wizarding world has no reason to like us unless we assimilate and stop keeping to ourselves. And our culture will be gone in a few generations if we do that."

"I know," Harry said softly. He chose his most earnest expression this time. "I hadn't realized until now just how well Draco fit into this world, because we always met outside of it—by necessity—and he seemed separate from it. Now I do. Now I see, even if he can't, the way he's losing pieces of himself." He shook his head. "I want to add to his life, not detract from it. And

I've tried during the last several days to think of some way I can do that, but I can't. And Draco refuses to pretend to break up with me and go back into hiding the way I wanted to do. He's committed to this. All or nothing."

"I think I might know why," Pansy murmured. "His relationship with his father was rocky even before this."

"But does he deserve to have *every* relationship cut off, merely so that he can stay with me?" Harry asked. "His mother? His friend Blaise, whom he's mentioned a time or two?" He caught her eye. "You?"

"He does not," Pansy said. Something had relaxed behind her face. Harry thought she'd probably decided that "Brian" wasn't tricking her, or at least that he cared more about Draco than she'd thought he could. "Talking about lovers standing alone against the world is very romantic, of course, but Draco's life has no room for that kind of romance."

Harry felt himself flood with frantic relief. Draco's friends all agreed that his liaison with Brian was much better as a temporary arrangement. And of course it would be abbreviated anyway, by Narcissa's knowledge of his identity.

"I will try my very hardest to give Draco the freedom and independence and happiness he needs," Harry said, "if you'll help. But I'm afraid I don't know how to make him stop paying attention to me just like that."

"He won't," Pansy said with quiet certainty. "Not if you mean enough for him to come out with you like this." She paused, her expression calculating. "You really are willing to sacrifice your relationship with him?"

"I love him more than my own happiness," Harry said. And that was the way Brian would probably have felt if he existed, so it was not really a lie.

Pansy nodded. "I'll owl you, then. I'm afraid I don't have a plan at the moment, either." She paused and stared hard at Harry. "I would draw back in small ways if you can. The expression on his face when he entered the room…he won't let you go easily."

"But I'm wrong for him," Harry said, a little surprised. He had thought Pansy would say that, past a certain point, Draco would give Brian up in disgust, particularly if he figured out that Brian had been plotting against him.

"He thinks you're very, very right," Pansy said. "It's a delusion, of course, but his delusions can be powerful. Be careful."

*Goddamn it, why do things like this happen to me?* Harry thought. *Who would ever have believed that Draco Malfoy, of all people, might think he's falling in love with a hired actor?*

"I'll try," Harry said. "But I can't withdraw from him completely now. I just—can't."

"Then leave most of the plan to me," Pansy said, and patted his arm soothingly. "You'll only have to agree to do what I tell you to."

"You've had enough time to get to know each other, certainly?" Draco said, suddenly appearing at Harry's side.

Harry's breath caught in spite of himself. Knowing he had been inside Draco's mind and emotions as well as his body made a difference for him. He wasn't sure if it was in danger of falling in love, too, but if so, he knew why. His arm went around Draco's waist, and he bowed his head to take in the scent of his hair, unconscious of his actions until he had performed them.

He looked up to find Pansy shaking her head slightly, but she said, "Yes, Draco, I think we understand each other and our relationships to you quite well now."

*Please, I hope so,* Harry thought. *Because I don't know if I'll be able to get out of this on my own, no matter how necessary it is. No matter how much I know it would hurt him less to lose me permanently than to find out who I really was, and that he'd been betrayed.*

Draco turned his head so his chin rested on Harry's shoulder. Harry closed his eyes and drowned.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Fourteen—Counterstrike*

Harry spent a few moments pacing his bedroom when he returned to Grimmauld Place. The rest of the evening had been nothing very remarkable. Draco had introduced him to a few more "friends"—none, he had informed Harry in a whisper, as close to him as Pansy—and they had shown varying mixtures of shock, resignation, disgust, and despair. Their hostess, Helena Clothilde, had nodded on them frostily from a distance, and after that everyone was a bit more polite.

And then Draco had led him out into the great entrance hall of Clothilde Castle before he would let Harry depart, and kissed him sweetly, slowly, his hands working into Harry's hair and his thumbs rubbing the back of his neck. His face when he leaned away from Harry was more open than it had been since they'd started this pretense.

"I'll see you later," he said softly.

And Harry had nodded and somehow managed to Apparate home without Splinching himself—how, he didn't know, when his mind was so full of Draco.

*Draco. Damn it. The problems began the moment you started thinking of him as a person instead of just a client. Sympathy with the clients' problems is fine. Being happy that you can help them is fine. Caring about their lives as if they were going to be part of* your *life forever is not, and you know it.*

Harry growled under his breath. He knew it, yes, but it didn't seem to be something he could help in the case of Draco. His feelings were braided with the other man's. When Draco smiled, Harry felt the echo of the expression like a warm throb just below his sternum. When Draco seemed genuinely distressed by some of the things said at the parties (it showed in the way he drew in his breath sharply before he answered), Harry had to stifle the impulse to drawl back at the offender in Brian's voice. After all, Brian had no social reputation to maintain.

And Harry could accept, now, that it was too late for him to leave without hurting Draco.

*But there is still lesser pain as opposed to greater.*

Pansy had known Draco a long time. Draco had trusted Harry enough to leave "Brian" alone with her instead of insisting on being present every moment. She probably knew facets of his character Harry couldn't begin to *imagine.* He was the one who had intruded into Draco's life, whilst she had always been there.

Harry knew that this problem was his own fault. He shouldn't have trusted to Draco's emotional control so much. He should never have had sex with him. He shouldn't have assumed that Draco could encounter a man who really was perfect for him—apparently—and not want something more.

As it was Harry's problem, it was up to him to *fix* the problem, to look out for the future that Draco seemed to be neglecting at the moment for the purpose of having fun with Brian. He could not do everything—that was why he would need Pansy and Narcissa's help, and he had already sent an owl off to Narcissa, playing on the story of the lies he'd told her and bewailing the fact that he didn't have the strength to extricate himself when he *knew* it would be the best thing for Draco—but he made a set of resolutions then and there:

No more sex. It just distracted them both and made everything more muddled.

Display a few of Brian's *faults*—the way he flashed forth his quick temper without completely understanding a situation, for instance. Show Draco that Brian wasn't the perfect man he'd thought he was, and he might have to give up too much to be with him, even if he still wanted to.

Manipulate Draco in some obvious and clumsy ways he could easily discover. That would lead

to greater distrust on Draco's part and more cautious evaluation of Brian's potential as a long-term partner.

Harry could not be *emotionally* closed to Draco, not any longer, not after what they'd shared. But he was still lying. His ideal of completing every job perfectly was already tarnished. He would walk the thin line between what his principles would permit him to do and what they wouldn't, and do everything permissible.

He realized he had come to a halt in front of his mirror and was staring into it, as though the face with the scar on its forehead and the green eyes could tell him something Brian's could not. Harry glared impatiently at himself.

"*You're* the one who caused trouble," he told the Harry Potter who still lived inside him, thin and tattered as a rotting curtain. "*You* were the one who let your libido get the better of your wariness, and if you didn't have this ridiculous Gryffindor sense of fair play, things wouldn't be so hard."

The face in the mirror said nothing back. Harry intensified his glare, then realized how silly he was being and whirled away, clattering down the stairs to talk to Kreacher about meals for the next day.

No matter how hard he tried to kill himself, his own preoccupations and limitations, when he vanished into a new personality, some of them insisted on clinging to life anyway. It was very frustrating.

Draco leafed slowly through the Ministry records, shaking his head with each page he turned. No Brian Montgomery had applied for an International Floo passport in the last thirty years, either, or given evidence of his having achieved wizarding education comparable to the level of British NEWTs in another country, or acted in any wizarding theater.

*You knew he was a liar,* Draco thought, leaning back in the chair. *He probably didn't expect you to look into his background because this was just a job, and so long as he did his job perfectly, why would you care who he really was?*

He had cared, at first, because Brian might be spying on him or manipulating him for some larger purpose. And now, when his feelings had changed completely, the lack of evidence was still vexing.

Draco reached across the table and tapped another stack of parchment with his thumb. The Argus Association, a company specializing in keeping an eye on every single prominent family line in Britain, had been happy to send him information on the Handler family for a modest fee. The Handlers were pure-bloods and had nothing to hide. And none of the family had had, in the last eighty years, a daughter named Emma.

There could be explanations. But Draco was beginning to think that most of them were not very

comprehensive ones.

And then there had been the *familiarity* of Brian's magic last night, the way it had sparked and connected them. Draco was certain he had never made love with this man before under a different name, but he might have met him. And yet, at the same time, wouldn't he have *remembered* meeting him? That kind of magic could not easily be hidden.

*Questions, and more questions, and they only open into more questions yet, without answers, as if I were a rat running in a maze.*

Draco rose restlessly to his feet. He still had some hours remaining before he would go to Haut Alley with Brian. At the moment, he thought he needed to do something *else* than sit brooding on paperwork, which meant swinging past Malfoy's Machineries was out. Perhaps he would go play Quidditch in the garden, or swim in the large pool that magic kept heated and free of ice year-round. The house-elves had supposedly managed a new piece of spellwork to counter the intense cold of the water that always assaulted Draco when he first jumped in, no matter how warm it was.

He paused with one foot on the stairs, his eyes narrowed. There was a stranger in the house; he could hear a voice flowing out from the direction of his father's study that definitely should not be there.

Now Draco had a problem. He could hardly approach Lucius's study without alerting his father that something was wrong. Indeed, Lucius had probably not put up a privacy spell in the first place only because Narcissa was out and Draco had assured him he'd be up in his own study all morning. The moment Lucius heard footsteps, that would change.

And Lucius was also very successful at detecting eavesdropping spells, a trick he'd taught Draco.

Draco sat down where he was on the steps and silently drew his wand. Rather than casting a spell to bring the sound of the voices closer to him, the usual means of overhearing a conversation, he sharpened his own hearing. He winced when he could hear a spider climbing on the walls somewhere above him and the muffled squeaks of house-elves preparing lunch in the kitchens, but that was just the price he would have to pay for listening to his father and the stranger. Lucius probably wouldn't take this tactic into consideration; he was politely but implacably against everything that caused him inconvenience, and assumed Draco was the same way.

*Assuming I'm your mirror image has caused you quite a few problems, Father, and yet admitting you've been wrong would cause you more,* Draco thought, and leaned an elbow on the banister as he listened.

"…rather an extraordinary request, Lucius," the stranger was saying. Even listening hard, Draco didn't manage to identify him. "After all, you know that social pressure accomplishes most of what you want to do."

"Social pressure is no longer enough," Lucius said tightly, "not if my son feels free to flaunt his disgusting behavior in the face of his marriage prospects."

Draco's fingers tightened around the railing of the spiral staircase.

"Well, that's true enough," said the stranger in a conciliating fashion. People often sounded like that when Lucius had offered them money. "And looking through the books is not such a hard task. What's the name you want for this organization?"

"Counterstrike." His father sounded as if he were relishing the word. Draco wondered sourly if it had taken him all night to come up with it. He tightened his fingers on the railing again and stared unseeingly at the brilliant sunlight cascading through the enchanted windows in the entrance hall.

"I like it," said the stranger, sounding pleased. "Neutral. Almost….polite."

"It will be the most polite organization you can imagine, to counteract my son's rudeness," Lucius said. "Excuse me a moment." And he must have realized he'd better not chance Draco coming down the stairs, and cast a privacy ward after all, because no matter how hard he listened after that, Draco couldn't hear anything new.

He stood slowly, ending the spell that had sharpened his hearing, and exhaled several times. He had to consider what he'd heard in a rational frame of mind, in order to tease out all the possible nuances from it.

Lucius was forming an organization to counter Draco's rudeness. And given the stranger's comment about social pressure, it was probably specifically to act against homosexuality. The reference to the books could only mean that the organization would busy itself with looking up all the laws about public homosexuality that the Ministry didn't enforce any more, having trusted to the small size of the wizarding community and its concern with prestige to keep people from doing such disturbing things.

Lucius was fighting back, but not directly, the way Draco had assumed he would—offering bribes and threats and even curses if Draco didn't act like the proper heir he had brought him up to be. His father had evidently decided that such personal opposition was unwise, given how much he had to lose by it. Instead, he would work behind the scenes, as he had done during the years after the Dark Lord was first banished.

*Cleverer than I thought, Father. But I am more clever still.*

Draco stood and headed back to his study at a brisk pace. It seemed he'd be spending the afternoon with Brian after all, but not at lunch.

Harry sighed in relief as a small tawny owl landed on his windowsill and held out a letter to him.

Though a letter sent to one of his personae had never yet failed to find its way to him, thanks to certain modifications he added to his wards when he took up a new Metamorphosis case, there was always a first time.

Pansy wrote a neat hand, with slightly slanting letters that Harry imagined must have given the teachers at Hogwarts considerable relief after essays full of chickenscratch.

*Mr. Montgomery:*

*I have come to the conclusion that the best way to secure Draco's status is for you to stop impressing him. This may sound easier said than done, but in reality, Draco will be free to think only two things about such an occurrence: that you really do not know as much about how to suit him as you pretend and that your victories so far have been based on luck, or that you are deliberately playing him for a fool. He will become contemptuous in the first case, angry in the second. I advise you to have spells on hand ready to deceive or distract him. At worst, you will need to secure your escape from a very angry Malfoy.*

Harry snorted a little. Losing a physical contest with Draco was the outcome he worried about the least. Draco simply did not have the power to trap and hold Harry in any place where he didn't agree to stay.

*You will, of course, want to know why I think these courses of action will be efficacious. I have seen Draco in relationships before—including, briefly and disastrously, one with me—and I know how his mind works. He is not usually so incredibly relaxed as he was with you last night, but he does pass through an initial period of suspicion, during which he believes the relationship must end at any moment, followed by a smug period in which he wants everyone to see and acknowledge what a prize he has won (and realize they cannot have it for themselves whatever the cost). This is the stage he seems to have reached with you, but in a way I have never seen before, because he is so insistent on showing you about.*

Harry snorted again. The stages Pansy described were visible in Draco, but she had assumed they'd extended over a much longer time than Draco and "Brian" had actually been dating.

*But it is in Draco to hate being played for a fool, and he never forgives someone who has become intimate with him and then turns out not to be as he imagined. (In this he is more like his father than he knows).*

Harry winced. Then he shook his head. Why should the thought of not being forgiven by Draco hurt so much? Of *course* he was going to get hurt. His own feelings weren't important. What was most important was Draco's freedom and lesser hurt; Harry had to inflict a wound on him that he could grow past and get over.

*My own sin was minor: I happened to be honest to him on an issue it would have been better to shut my mouth and look wise about. He flew into a temper tantrum. He had conceived me to be perfectly obedient to his will, and that the only thoughts in my head were thoughts he had put*

*there. What irritated him was* not *my contradiction of his opinion; by then he had learned that the world would often contradict him. But he had not predicted my contradiction. He had thought he knew me in every way. He will think he knows you by now. Simply show him that he does not, that some of you was a lie or that all of you was, and the shock of it will separate him effectively from you.*

Harry let his eyes fall half-shut and chuckled a little, though not without pain. It sounded as though the most effective method to make Draco forget about him would be simply to tell him that he was Harry Potter.

But that would lead to the unraveling of the whole secret of Metamorphosis, and Harry could hardly have that. He was not about to sacrifice his entire life for a few days of pleasure.

*And, yes, all right, exceedingly deep emotional connection. But I went into this knowing it would be a bit of fun at most. I have only myself to blame that I wanted it to be more than that.*

He opened his eyes and read Pansy's last paragraph.

*I do not trust you, and thus I will be taking some precautions of my own to ensure that Draco is not too badly hurt by this. If you attack him physically or probe with magic into his mind, be assured I will hunt you down.*

*Pansy Parkinson.*

Harry relaxed a little. He did not intend to attack Draco physically or probe his mind. And if Pansy was the kind to act on suspicions instead of reality, Harry was still confident he could protect himself.

He reached for a quill and sat a moment, smiling as he remembered the handwriting he had chosen to adopt for Brian. Yes, the pretense was dissolving, and this would be a mask he couldn't wear again, but it still could give a few fine performances before it was hung back on the wall.

He bent over the parchment and began to write, thanking Pansy for her advice and telling her it agreed with the conclusions he himself had come to.

*That's Brian. He knows he was hired out of Metamorphosis and that nothing can be permanent. Pansy lacks the first piece of knowledge, and Draco the second. I am ahead of both of them in the never-ending game.*

If he thought of it as a game, he knew it would hurt less. It always had.

Draco sat back and considered the letter for a moment, then nodded. It laid out what he had overheard from Lucius's conversation with the stranger in neat, simple terms, and gave evidence and support to his speculations. It told Brian that they would need to get together as soon as

possible and plan on how to challenge Lucius.

*Or Counterstrike, rather, since he has chosen to let others do his dirty work for him.*

Brian would probably write back without the slightest idea that something was wrong. But Draco intended the letter to accomplish more than that. He sealed it in an envelope and called for a house-elf.

One appeared in a moment, bowing low—Rini, who usually tended the gardens. Draco raised an eyebrow. The elf squeaked, pulled its ears, and said something shrill and incomprehensible about most of the other elves being involved in preparing Master Lucius's lunch right now.

Well, a garden elf was better than none. And the task Draco wanted to request of this one was not a usual job for any elf in his service. He leaned confidingly forwards, and the elf's eyes followed his hands and body intently.

"I need this letter delivered, Rini," he said. "But I need you to give it to an owl you can track."

Rini stared at him with big eyes, then blinked twice. "*I* is tracking?" he asked.

Draco nodded. "I need to know where the person this is addressed to lives, but I think he'd have set up wards against the normal methods of tracking owls. So I need you to follow the bird and keep him from knowing of your presence." He lowered his voice mysteriously. "Do you think you can do this properly, Rini? It's *very* important."

Rini sucked in his breath.

"Important to the future of the family," Draco added, which could be true for all he knew. "And important to my future, too." That was certain. Draco wanted Brian, but he needed to know who Brian was in order to have him. The other man remaining in a position of power over him—even though that position at the moment seemed to consist mainly of knowledge Draco didn't have—was not acceptable.

Rini puffed out his chest with the breath he drew. "Rini can do it!" he proclaimed. "Rini is following small insects in the garden from flower to flower, to find their eggs and destroy them! Owls is much bigger. I can track them."

Draco smiled. "Good. Remember, secrecy is essential. You can't let him sense you, no matter what happens. If you think he's going to sense you, then retreat from the house the owl enters, even if you haven't seen his face. Then come back and give me a full report. If you *can* see without being seen, remain hidden and spy him out, then come back and show me that face in an image. Can you do this?" House-elf magic was fully capable of all the things he was asking, Draco knew. It was a matter of making sure Rini understood his instructions, so he didn't come back with some awfully sincere but half-baked result.

Rini bobbed his head furiously. "Track the owl!" he squeaked. "Remain hidden! Retreat if he might notice Rini and report to Master Draco! Come back if I sees him and report to Master Draco with his face!"

"Good." Draco held out the letter, and Rini snatched it and bolted from the room. Draco leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes for a moment. In a way, it felt dishonorable, this spying on Brian—not at all the sort of thing Draco had expected to have to do to someone with whom he had shared that emotional connection last night.

But he was not seeing the whole Brian, that was certain. And he wanted to. Even if the truth infuriated him, Draco needed it. Because this was about more than defying his father, now, and Draco had never been one to play games with his personal future, however careless he might look from the outside. Pansy had been foolish enough, at one point, to think he'd dumped her because he was enraged. But Draco had done it because he knew she was not what he wanted, what he *needed*, to make his way in the world.

*And Brian is?* the skeptical part of his brain asked.

Draco laughed to himself. "He is certainly closer to it," he said aloud, and then stood up and strode towards the Malfoy legal library. He would make himself familiar with all the laws against homosexuality that Counterstrike might dig up and decide to use.

"Master Draco!"

Draco jumped. He had been so deep into one of the legal books he'd discovered, conducting a running disagreement in his mind, that he hadn't noticed Rini's return. He sat up now and stared at the house-elf. Rini was practically bouncing on his toes, which Draco thought was good odds he had succeeded in his mission.

"Did you find him, Rini?" he asked, forcing himself to relax again. Human excitement tended to further excite house-elves, until they simply ran around in circles and squeaked and relayed nothing coherent at all.

"Yes, yes, Rini did!" Rini puffed out his chest again. "Rini was *smart!* There was a hole for a house-elf in his wards, and Rini waited until his house-elf went out, and then Rini sneaked into the hole and persuaded the house to accept him!" He nodded importantly. "Is elf magic. Very strong. No wizard guards against it."

Draco felt his eyebrows rise. Brian was living in Muggle London, and he had a house-elf? "And what did you find?" he asked, his voice eager despite himself. "What does his face look like?" He had to remind himself that Brian *could* be using his true appearance, and the image of his face would tell Draco nothing. But if it was different in even a few particulars, Draco might at least be able to discover who he was related to.

Rini waved a hand in front of him, and an image appeared, hovering in the air a few inches from Draco as if drawn on a piece of parchment.

It was Harry Potter's face.

Draco's fingers, clenching into a fist, ripped a page from the book he held.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Fifteen—A Maze of Reactions*

Draco did not know how long he sat there with his eyes closed, his fingers clenched around the crumpled page. Enough time to memorize the feeling of crushed paper, at least, and the oddly sharp ridges it made where it pressed against his skin.

Then he opened his eyes. Rini had departed, perhaps wary of how Draco would treat the messenger who had brought the bad news. Draco glared at the far fireplace through a haze of rage, his panting shaking him like a bellows.

He knew what he had to do, but he knew he could not remain in the library to do it.

Carefully, he smoothed out the page he'd torn from the book. Then he lifted his wand and cast a spell that would make the glue in the book's binding "remember" that this piece of paper was supposed to be part of it. He watched as the page settled back into place, severely wrinkled but no longer torn. Draco nodded, feeling a fragile satisfaction likewise settle over his rage. He would leave no signs that would tell his parents how sharply this revelation had affected him. He would *not* show weakness.

*Ah, but you showed weakness to Potter, didn't you? He knows how damn grateful you were for Brian sucking you off and staying with you through it, instead of withdrawing emotionally the way he seemed to when you had that first bout of sex.*

*Potter has had his cock up your arse.*

Draco half-shut his eyes and shook his head a little. No, he could not and *would* not think such thoughts until he was in the privacy of his own room. He could not change the past; he could not cause himself to have never shown his vulnerabilities to Potter. He could only prevent further, future exposures.

Carefully, he walked down the upstairs corridors, heading for his bedroom. He glanced down the stairs a few times. It would be his fate, he was certain, that his father would be walking up and down the entrance hall beneath him, engaged in pondering business matters, or that Narcissa would have decided to head outside to the gardens because the house-elves were not caring for them properly.

But no one else appeared. Draco was able to step into his bedroom and shut the door behind him with no one giving him a single curious glance.

He locked the door. He set up wards that would both warn him of anyone else's approach and conceal the noise he intended to make and the magic he intended to unleash from casual observation. He worked coolly, his eyes shut, enjoying the way that his mind moved smoothly over the plans that would protect him. There were some precautions he had not forgotten to take, *some* ways in which he was still the careful, clever Slytherin he'd always thought himself.

Then he whirled and flung a fiery curse at the opposite wall.

The curses were coming so fast after that that Draco lost his ability to distinguish one from the other. He was screaming most of the time, a raw, wordless sound, and the rest of it growling under his breath or moaning in a sound compounded of both rage and pain. He watched his walls partially melt, the wood catch fire, and important knickknacks of ivory and porcelain fly to dust. He didn't care. Magic could come later and repair it, repair all of it.

Magic would never be able to repair his shattered pride, or save him from the embarrassment that seared through him when he thought of Potter, laughing smugly to himself in his London house, cherishing the memories of how he had fucked Draco Malfoy.

And how Draco Malfoy had *let* him, had practically *begged* for it from the moment when he saw "Brian" in his dress robes.

*He looked so much like himself. The scar was a little different, the eyes blue, but* it was him. *How in the world could I let myself be attracted to someone who looked like him?*

Draco ranged up and down his room, only now and then flinging a spell. His racing thoughts had taken over from his desire to throw magic and watch other things suffer as he was suffering.

*Why did he do it? Revenge, obviously. What other motive could he have for sleeping with me?*

But that simple argument slammed into a number of other questions, which would have to be answered if Draco was to understand the role Potter had suddenly assumed in his life. *How* had Potter become the Brian Montgomery Draco had chosen at Metamorphosis? He certainly couldn't have known ahead of time that Draco would pick a person so like him. And how had the Manager received a picture of Potter looking like that in the first place, and the lying life history that seemed to make sense, to explain so much of the way Brian thought and reacted?

And why had Potter done things that would win him no revenge whatsoever, like sucking Draco? Fucking him was one thing; Draco knew plenty of people, even gay men, who assumed that the man getting fucked was no better than a woman held down and raped, that he had no power. He could imagine Potter wanting to do that to him just so he could laugh about it later with his cronies and fans. But kneeling down? Taking Draco's cock into his mouth? Letting Draco fuck *him*, as he had been doing, even if it was a different orifice?

There was no answer to that, either.

And if Potter's main goal had been concealing himself in order to play a long game on Draco, then why had he shown his magic so openly and easily in the dining room a few days ago, when he'd come for lunch? Why had he seemed genuinely angry that Lucius had tried to put the impotence curse on Draco's food? Hell, laughing at Draco as he struggled with that curse would have afforded him great amusement. And all he would have had to do was simply not mention to Draco that he'd seen Lucius casting a spell at his salad. Draco himself had not noticed his father's wand, carefully concealed under the table.

And—

Where had Potter learned to *act*, for God's sake? The Potter Draco knew in school had blushed violently red when telling a lie. Where had he learned to act and think like a Slytherin? How he had learned the pure-blood dances as well as "Brian" had? There really *was* evidence of long study there; Potter hadn't simply acquired a few rudiments of cultural knowledge and then attempted to pass himself off as an expert.

Draco supposed he could say that Potter would put his all into the preparation of a practical joke, even to the extent of learning about pure-blood culture and making himself a wonderful dancer. Why not say that, if he had already decided that Potter had dressed himself up as a non-existent half-blood wizard in order to get back at Draco?

But that still failed to mesh with the fact that Potter had apparently managed to change his essential nature in order to plot this vengeance. Draco could imagine Potter *wanting* to do that; who wouldn't want to have the superior qualities of pure-blood culture, like the superior emotional control? He just didn't think it was *possible.* Potter was Gryffindor to the core. He'd try and try, but he'd make a mistake, and in a setting like the drawing rooms and dining rooms of the pure-blood social circles he'd chosen to enter, there was no room for a mistake.

There *had* been mistakes made, Draco thought, remembering Potter's show of magic, and the way he'd reacted to the insults of the fat wizard in Diagon Alley, and the openness of his magic and mind whilst he'd sucked Draco. But those were the mistakes he would expect of someone wrestling with a Gryffindor nature under a Slytherin mask—mistakes of passion and outraged principle. The most important point was that Potter shouldn't have been able to get to the point of making them at all if his Gryffindor nature was the only one he had.

*So he has something else. He has the ability to lie. He has the ability to act. He has the ability to fool you—*

Draco felt his head come up, his eyes widening. He felt as if he were looking at himself from a distance, observing his expressions the way he might a stranger's. He could imagine exactly what his face looked like at the moment.

*He's fooled everyone. Remember all those rumors that he's become a recluse who can't even leave the house? Remember those rumors that he defeated Voldemort with luck alone, and his mother's love? Some people said they felt his magic after the battle, that it was powerful, but they got scoffed at. After all, everyone* knew *Potter wasn't a prodigy, that in fact he was rather weak and pathetic for the station fate had granted him.*

Draco swore softly. This time, he didn't send a curse at the wall. He was too involved in working out the implications of the "knowledge" which "everyone" possessed about Potter.

*He's planned this for years, hasn't he? He spread those rumors to enable him to move around more easily. People will underestimate him, and assume that any powerful young wizard who appears on the scene certainly couldn't be Harry Potter. I didn't think about him once, even though I knew Brian was about my age.*

The admiration mixed with Draco's rage and his puzzlement, adding yet another confusing element to the maze of his emotions.

*How much else has been planned? What else has he learned? He's a different person than I assumed he was. He slipped around me, but he shouldn't have had a chance at that kind of pretense at all, and I know he did. And if our relationship had remained strictly a business relationship, I wonder if he would have slipped?*

Draco didn't think so. He prided himself on judging *some* things accurately, and if he had misread Potter in every particular, then he should give up trying to understand him at all. He would therefore assume that the connection which had flourished between him and Potter as their magic and emotions poured across the gap between their minds was real. Draco had felt the passion, the delight, the need to *give* himself that Potter was feeling, and that had been one reason it felt so much better than the physically satisfying but still distant fucking he'd had from Brian.

Draco clenched his fists. *So part of him is real. Part of him is the man I don't want to give up.*

*But which part?*

Another corridor of possible reactions and responses opened up in front of him. Before, there had been two: turning Potter's trick back on him and taking vengeance, given the knowledge of his true identity Draco now possessed, or feigning ignorance for a bit longer whilst he used "Brian" to further his goals. Either way, Draco knew it could not be an open reaction. He had Lucius to

defy, and for that, he needed Brian's help. This charade could not simply stop, no matter how outraged Draco was about it.

Now there was a third possible course, harder and more complex than the others, but perhaps more worth it. And really, the difficulty and complexity just made it engage Draco the more. This was how he had felt when he saw the untapped market Malfoy's Machineries could occupy. There were things to *do*, barriers he could honestly trust himself against, rather than having to pretend they didn't exist because of the codes of polite society.

*Figure out which parts of Harry Potter are worth it. Figure out what really makes him think and react and respond, and then make him yours, the way you wanted Brian to be. You still felt that way even as you doubted more and more that Brian was real.* And Draco had started doubting that when he realized how little mark Brian had left on the world in any recognizable shape; it was one reason he had asked Rini to look at the face the inhabitant of Brian's house was wearing. *Now you know there's a real person there, one you never managed to win over, one who managed to fool you for a damn long time—a few days is a damn long time, given your brain—one who's managed to fool everyone around him for at least ten years.* Draco could not remember when he had first begun to hear the rumors that Potter was weak and skittish, but it had been an accepted truth by the time they were twenty. *Think of having such a partner, sharing so many of your strengths but also possessing several you don't have.*

Draco thought about it.

And he nearly fainted with the wave of excitement, lust, joy, and eagerness to court and possess and have and *share* which washed over him.

He clenched his fists and, for the first time since he had entered the room, sat down, taking a chair near the hearth. He started the fire going with a wave of his wand and then propped his chin on one hand, once again subduing the racing emotions so he could *think* about what this course might mean, if he decided to pursue it.

It would mean he would permanently appear gay in many people's eyes, since he would be sharing his life with another man even after he had broken free from Lucius's control. He either could not marry, or he could not marry right away. His sexual orientation would come to seem carved in stone, rather than the clever ploy Draco had eventually intended to have it seen as.

Did he *want* to get married? Was continuing the Malfoy line more important than finding a partner who suited him perfectly?

If Potter could ever be persuaded to suit him, of course. Draco still needed to discover his motive for disguising himself. If it was petty vengeance, then he was confident he could destroy that and introduce Potter to the greater joys of partnership; he had already done so on the sexual front. If it was because Potter acquired much-needed Galleons by working for Metamorphosis, then Draco could promise financial support in return for Potter's emotional and mental support.

*And if it's something more complex, which it is probably is? Potter would not develop this mask and this system of rumors for any small goal, though maybe it's a goal that only makes sense to him.*

Draco nodded slowly. That would be another problem, convincing Potter to abandon something which mattered deeply to him in favor of openness. Perhaps the solution was not to convince him to abandon *all* of it. Draco could use an ally who knew about masks, and ways to create them. Potter could remain disguised to a good portion of the world, if he wanted.

But Draco would demand emotional honesty from Potter towards *him*, and he would demand that Potter appear in public at his side as Harry Potter. If Draco would run risks with all the intense prejudices towards homosexuality in his real identity, he damn well wanted Potter to do the same thing.

*So you'll be courting him at the same time as you're not letting him know you know and seeking his help against Lucius. You'll have to decide whether you want to get married, or whether this liaison will be permanent.*

Draco decided he couldn't answer that last question yet, because he didn't know how much of the true metal Potter contained, and how much was deception, fantasy, delusion. When he *did* know, then he would also know whether he wanted to lean his strength on Potter forever or not.

*What else must you do?*

Discover the truth about Potter, of course. Learn what he had been up to in the last ten years. Probe the memories of people who really knew him, or people who might have observed some of the truth but had not put the pieces together.

Draco grimaced at the thought of contacting Weasley and Granger. It was a temptation, because they must know the most, but he shook his head after he'd considered it for some minutes. They sill distrusted Draco too much, and they would at once tell Potter about the contact, which would undermine Draco's plans entirely.

*Unless…*

Draco sat up.

*He used a mask to get close to me. What if I used a mask to get close to him?*

*I can't give them any hint I might be a press reporter, or they'll shut tighter than Mother's mouth when she sees a Niffler. But if I can play the person desperately, and truly, interested in Harry…if I can take my true emotions and write only false words…*

There was merit in the secret admirer idea, Draco thought. Still, he put it aside for now. He would have to work it out perfectly before he tried it, as it was likely the least whiff of something

off would send the Weasleys retreating wildly.

*What else?*

Draco nearly chuckled aloud at the next thought. *I'll have to show myself off, of course, to convince Potter he'll be getting the best of the bargain if he stays with me. He still thinks this won't be permanent. I'll wager anything that's why he wanted to be left alone with Pansy last night: to plan some way to get out of this. He knows he's too close. That magical exchange we had, the words I spoke, must have worried him.*

So. Draco would layer two deceptions—that he did not know Potter's true identity, and that he was "innocently" showing off—on top of the truth, and possibly three deceptions if he chose the secret admirer idea. Meanwhile, Potter would be flaunting his disguise, trying to get Draco to see and make decisions about "Brian," not about him, and probably trying to lessen the instances of his true personality breaking through his mask.

It was a game so complex and so tangled Draco could hardly stand the thought of it.

*I cannot wait to begin.*

He took down the wards and called the house-elves to repair the damage he'd done to his room. He didn't feel like repairing it himself; his mind was whirling along too fast for mere action with his wand to be satisfying.

One of the elves edged gingerly into the room, holding out a letter. It had come with an owl whilst he was inaccessible, Draco judged from the creature's squeaking. It would be Brian's letter, of course. Potter's.

*How much of them is really the same person? The looks are different, but I know the intelligence, the magic, the knowledge of pure-blood culture, are Potter's.*

He opened it and scanned the writing, smiling a little, willing to see deception in the dots above the i's. Potter/Brian expressed concern over the formation of Lucius's organization and told Draco he could meet him at two, either in Malfoy Manor or at a small pub he knew a few turns off Diagon Alley, called the Dragon's Head.

Draco held back the mischievous impulse to suggest they meet at Brian's house. After all, Potter had seen where Draco lived; Draco should get the chance to see where his lover lived.

But said suggestion would only panic Potter now, and Draco had no interest in that. He gave a quick agreement to the pub and took the letter to the Manor's owlery himself. As he watched the bird wing away, another surge of anger made his muscles tighten.

*He fooled me. How dare he pretend to enjoy the sex, to like and understand me? How dare he pretend to be gay?*

Draco drew a deep breath, and reminded himself that the pretense was probably less than he thought—probably less even than Potter thought. Besides, he simply didn't have the time to be angry. There was so much to do.

Harry peered thoughtfully into the mirror. He'd had to conquer a brief impulse to show up at the pub as himself and let Draco discover the truth that way. As Pansy had said, it would be the swiftest end to the relationship between them.

He shook his head, knowing it was only Narcissa's letter which even had him considering the plan.

*Mr. Potter:*

*Reports of what you and my son did at Clothilde Castle have reached me. You continue to entice him to fall in love with you despite my ultimatum. It is clear that I cannot trust you. Therefore, I have shortened my timeline. You will leave him a week from now, or I will reveal the truth to him the following day.*

*I will not help you in this.*

*Narcissa Malfoy.*

Harry loosed a short, hard breath and ran a hand across his scalp. It messed up his hair, of course. That was such a *Harry* gesture, the kind of thing a schoolboy would do. One reason Harry hated his own personality was because of how childish it was. He still had unsophisticated thoughts. He still made mistakes. It was the Harry Potter in him that had been responsible for his mistakes with Draco, not the Brian.

If he could vanish into Brian and cease to exist as himself, he would, happily.

But even that was not a true solution. Ron and Hermione and the other Weasleys would miss the mask he had constructed for them. Harry would miss being able to become the other people he had created through Metamorphosis.

*But if you were really Brian, really subsumed, then you would have Brian's likes and dislikes,* argued a tiny voice Harry did not hear often, the voice of ultimate temptation. *You wouldn't remember Ron and Hermione's need, or your need to become other personas.*

Harry turned slowly towards the hidden cupboard on the other side of the room, opposite from the closet full of robes. He spoke the soft words that unlocked the cupboard, words his friends would never guess. They probably thought he'd choose one of their names, or his parents'. Voldemort's and Nagini's would be unexpected.

Harry knew both of those would have destroyed him if they could.

And in this cupboard lay the thing that could destroy him, if he ever found his own existence intolerable.

Harry lifted out the shining bowl, which looked like a Pensieve constructed of dark stone. Inside it lay shifting black water, apparently, though it was as thick and reflective as the surface of liquid memories. Harry stroked the sides of the bowl and stared at it.

One book he'd found hidden in the bedroom belonging to Sirius's mother had described a process by which a person who created a disguise could *become* that disguise. It required the use of glamours, Transfiguration, a potion, and this—a Dark magical artifact, a Pensieve that swallowed memories, which the user had to construct with his own wand.

Harry's hands tightened subtly on the sides of the bowl.

If he used the spell and the potion and this artifact in combination, Harry Potter would cease to exist. His memories would become those of the persona he chose, and so would his body. There would be no going back.

Harry took a deep breath and set the reverse Pensieve carefully on its shelf, then shut the cupboard again. His parents' names *locked* it. Harry thought he could do them that much honor, because each time he turned away from the cupboard, he had chosen to remain Harry Potter for a little while longer.

Harry knew what Hermione would say if she knew about the Pensive. But it was healthier, Harry thought, than to have nothing like that around the house at all. Each time he looked at it, he withdrew from it, because the dark Pensieve reminded him of what he could be losing. It was rather like an alcoholic keeping one bottle of wine around as a test of his strength, or a suicidal person trusting himself with a knife.

The *promise* of escape was there, but Harry was ninety percent sure he would not take it.

He shook his head, and started to become Brian, leaving the problems of Harry Potter far behind. Brian had problems of his own, sure, but *he* knew how to handle them.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews

*Chapter Sixteen—In the Dragon's Head*

Draco stepped into the pub and glanced around twice before nodding his head slowly. He supposed the Dragon's Head could be called a normal place, without any large offense against good taste saved the stuffed dragon's head hanging from the ceiling. *Hungarian Horntail? Or Welsh Green?* The head had decayed somewhat before the wizard who preserved it applied any magic, and shreds of discolored skin clung to the bony eyesockets and long, pointed fangs. Draco did not think this aided patrons in discovering the dragon's species.

"Welcome, welcome, sir. May I escort you to a table?"

Draco turned to the bartender hastening towards him, a small, plump witch whom he was gratified to discover recognized good breeding when she saw it. "Perhaps you can," he said, "if the man I am here to meet has not already arrived. His name is Brian Montgomery—"

"Oh, yes, sir," said the witch, and Draco was intrigued to see a mixture of horror and delight in her eyes. "Him what's been in all the papers!" She looked at Draco, seeming to recognize him as the other person in the papers then, but didn't do anything other than to wave her hand at a table on the far side of the room. Brian rose to his feet when he saw Draco, smiling extravagantly.

Draco never took his eyes from the other man's face as he made his way towards him, even when he had to duck the corner of the dragon's jaw. He wondered idly what the proper description of his relationship with Harry Potter was now. Were they rivals? Lovers? Partners in the confrontation of extreme social prejudice against anyone who dared to kiss another person of the same sex in public?

"Draco!" Potter said, somehow managing to slur his name, which Draco had never thought possible, and then flung his arms around Draco and planted an enormous, smacking kiss on his cheek.

*At the moment, the proper description would be "drunk*," Draco thought incredulously. He had decided that Potter was too good an actor to *want* to lose control around him. Wasn't he worried they would end up in bed together again if he consumed alcohol in Draco's presence?

"Brian?" he asked, barely managing to say the proper name in his surprise. "Are you all right?"

"Just—just the news and all." Potter took a deep breath, then tilted the bottle of Firewhiskey he had back and gulped noisily from it. "Your father," he explained, when Draco went on staring at him. "Counterstrike." He shivered, and his fingers tightened on the bottle. "This is a bigger task than I ever imagined it would be. I mean, we're fighting for you to be free of your parents, that's one thing, but now we're *crusaders*?"

Harry watched the expressions on Draco's face as he took yet another drink of the Firewhiskey—or seemed to take one. In reality, a very useful little spell cast on the mucous

membranes of his throat caused the drink to vanish as it touched them. Harry was proud of that spell, one he'd managed to rework and perfect from a book Hermione had given him for his birthday two summers ago. It had taken him a while to make sure all his saliva wouldn't dry up along with the liquids he put into his mouth, but eventually he'd "taught" the spell to distinguish between those substances native to the human body and foreign ones.

It was a unique variation on a spell that had been uncommon in the first place, and that meant Draco was unlikely to sense it.

Harry had felt his senses stream into high alert the moment Draco stepped into the pub. Something was *wrong.* He paid too little attention to the dragon's head, which had made Harry gawp the first time he entered the place. His gaze was too focused and alert on Brian's face, too searching. He leaned back with his fingers steepled in front of him when they sat at the table, which was a gesture Harry could see Lucius making, but not Draco, particularly not when they were involved in fighting something as devious as Counterstrike. Draco always showed more of excitement, of life; his gestures in serious situations, like the meeting with the Manager of Metamorphosis, included leaning forwards and make small sideways motions of his hands. *This* was more the way he had behaved immediately after Harry showed off his magic in the Malfoys' dining room: restrained because he was dealing with an onslaught of his own thoughts and emotions at the same time he was attempting to deal with the person in front of him.

Just as he hadn't understood exactly what was wrong that time until he realized how Draco must view his magic, Harry didn't know the exact nature of the burden Draco was laboring under now. It could not be that Narcissa had told him the truth; Draco would have stormed in then, or simply cast a painful and humiliating curse whilst Harry wasn't looking. Any lesser disaster, Harry was confident he could deal with, even if he didn't understand the cause.

"Brian," Draco said soothingly, "it's not that bad."

*Even the way he says my name is wrong,* Harry thought, fighting the temptation to cock his head to the side the way he usually did when playing thoughtful. Right now, he was playing drunk. *I wonder if he has second thoughts about the blowjob, too? Too intimate for him, too open. A man like Draco Malfoy rarely lets people close.*

Harry felt relief score his insides. Draco's own wariness would make Harry's decision to retreat from him easier. He was more likely to decide Brian's uncouth, rude behavior now was reason to let him go.

It was relief, and *only* relief, that made his throat ache as if he had swallowed acid, Harry told himself, and tipped the Firewhiskey bottle up again. Those other emotions didn't exist, didn't belong to the persona he was acting out right now.

Potter did have better acting abilities than he had realized, Draco thought, and folded his fingers like his father so he wouldn't tap them on the table in his agitation and give himself away. If he

hadn't possessed the knowledge he did, he might even have believed that Potter really *was* drunk. After all, it would fit Brian's personality to indulge in extraordinary gestures of despair, and this was certainly one of those—drinking in public where anyone could see him and someone disgusted with his behavior might be tempted to take the opportunity to settle the score. Potter had chosen a convincing, purposeful act that really left him in no danger whatsoever if he needed to move fast.

*But what is his purpose?*

*To drive me away, of course. A Malfoy can't have a partner who's a drunkard, and he must know that. I was right. The connection between our minds meant I came too close to finding out who he really was, and he's scared. Trying to make me think my choice of actors wasn't such a great choice after all, trying to disassociate himself from me.*

He really must find out how Potter managed to swallow all that alcohol and yet keep from getting drunk, Draco mused as he reached out a hand now and laid it on Potter's wrist. A Sobriety Charm cast beforehand wouldn't do it; Draco knew that from painful experiments during his own teenage years.

"Brian," he said softly, and waited until the other man's blue, blue eyes met his. Potter had green eyes, but they were the same intensity of color as these and had the same direct, steady gaze. The more Draco studied Potter in his mask, the more surprised he was that he hadn't recognized the other man at once. "I don't think this is wise, do you? We can't let my father see that his action caught us by surprise."

Potter snorted, rolled his eyes, and dragged his hand away to tip the bottle into his mouth again. Draco narrowed his eyes as he watched, but no, the Firewhiskey really did flow into his throat, not vanish just before it did. *Extraordinary.* "No one will know we're drinking over *that*," Potter muttered.

"Which *we* are you referring to?" Draco asked, lifting his eyebrows. "Do you perhaps have a small man in your pocket?"

Potter slammed the bottle down with a clink that made the witch who owned the pub glance over at them, then leaned forwards. "I got *something* in my pocket," he said, with an exaggerated wink. "But it's not small!" He giggled and lunged over the table to plant a kiss scented like rotten meat on Draco's lips.

Draco clenched a fist and waited until Potter drew away from him. The tactic to irritate him was working, in one sense; Potter's rudeness pricked along his dignity like a spur on a horse. But that was the effect Potter *wanted* to achieve, and, as such, Draco would not allow him to achieve it. He had to make a habit of evaluating Potter's movements now and countering them on principle, unless they seemed more likely to serve Draco's purposes than hinder them.

*He makes me change my plans, my reactions, my feelings, every instant,* Draco thought, and for a

moment wondered if he could stand a lifetime of this.

*Perhaps simply start countering these tactics, and he will realize that he needs to do something else—something that might be more serious, but less annoying.* This time, when Draco reached out and snared Potter's wrist, he didn't allow himself to be shaken off.

"My father is conceited enough to think we're drinking over him, even if we aren't," he murmured, and then waved his wand and cast a Sobriety Charm on Potter. The other man couldn't quite hide a wince as the spell gripped his mind and forcibly cleared it. Draco clamped his teeth down on his lips so they could not twitch into a smile. A Sobriety Charm on the sober had less effect than on a truly drunk person, but it was still uncomfortable. "Should we go elsewhere to discuss Counterstrike, or do you consider yourself capable of having a serious discussion in the presence of alcohol?"

For a moment, Potter sat with his eyes closed, breathing lightly. Then he reached out, sighed, and covered Draco's hand with his. "Thank you for that," he said softly. "I—panicked, I suppose. I've never been good in a crisis—"

*Liar,* Draco thought fondly. *Such a liar.*

"—And resorted to a solution that used to be a lot more frequent with me than it is now." Potter smiled, but his eyes were shadowed. Draco thought the shadow was probably pure Brian. Potter, with his need for control over what other people thought of him, wouldn't allow himself to drink often. "I'm ready to discuss this rationally, I promise." He squeezed Draco's wrist in turn and leaned forwards until Draco had to struggle to keep his eyes from crossing. "So. Do you have ideas of your own about what our strategy against Counterstrike should be, or do you want to hear some of mine?"

*Quick on his feet. Ready and able to switch strategies when he realizes that the one he's using right now isn't working.*

Draco shuddered a little and knew his voice was hoarse with lust—though lust composed of far more than simple physical longing for sex—when he replied, "Let's hear your ideas first."

Harry smiled. That required some doing, when what he really wanted was to grimace, but he did it. He'd done harder things, after all, including pretending that everything in his life was normal and fine when Ron and Hermione made pointed inquiries, and spinning a delicate fabric of lies concerning the people who worked for the Charity and his relationships with them.

He thought he should have been able to force Draco to back off with his acting. Or, correction, he should have been able to do that if Draco meant nothing to him. But even he had sensed a certain desperation in his gestures, a falsity to the acting that undermined him. Draco *did* mean something to him—too much, given how he would despise Harry if he knew the truth about *any* of this. So Harry gave up the pretense of panic for now, and began another long-term plan

instead. If he could not make Draco think Brian too uncouth and low-class to associate with, he could and *would* trick Draco into grand plans that needed his support and then desert him in the middle of the action.

Oh, he would take steps to ensure that Draco's life wasn't endangered, of course. But if he got Draco involved in fighting Counterstrike with an effort that needed two to continue and then buggered off, Draco should despise Brian with all his heart and soul as a result. And it would cut off a pattern of acting that obviously wasn't working.

Harry was also confident of his ability to weave a plan that would draw Draco in within the week's deadline that Narcissa had given him. And sudden, strong action now was likely to draw Lucius's attention and make him more likely to disown his son. Harry could see no drawback to acting as if he meant everything he was saying for a time.

"There's one advantage to not actually being part of the pure-blood social circles, though it *does* rather limit the opportunities to practice one's dancing," he said, with one of Brian's flashing smiles at Draco. Though not one of Harry Potter's usual expressions, it did not hurt to smile like that. What hurt was seeing Draco respond instinctively, and knowing that he wouldn't respond to the real Harry Potter the same way.

*The real Harry Potter is nothing but a cloak of shadows over a figure of ashes, and you know it.*

"What's that?" Draco whispered, leaning near enough that his breath stirred the hair just above Harry's ear. Harry shivered and resisted the urge to toss his head back. Draco found all his sensitive spots without even trying, which wasn't half-fair.

*I'll just have to do the same thing,* Harry thought, and moved his thumb so that it brushed across the center of Draco's left palm. Draco's breathing deepened. Harry murdered the wish that he could hear that sound forever, instead of just for another week, and soldiered on.

"You notice what the gathering undercurrents are before the pure-bloods notice it themselves," Harry explained. "There are some things that even people as clever as you are can't notice, Draco, probably because you belong to scattered social groups and rarely step outside them." *A compliment can't hurt. And it might relieve some of the futile large wishes if I make the small ones come true.* "People across all sorts of circles and factions and families in Great Britain are getting tired of the constant social pressures against their freedom of expression."

Draco blinked for a moment, but said, without a change in tone, "Self-expression is a fad imported from Muggles, really. Traditional pure-blood culture deals with *restraint*, the control of the self."

"Traditional pure-blood culture, yes," Harry said. He was speaking utter truth now, as far as he knew, except about the vantage from which he had observed the culture. He'd had plenty of chances to interact with it in the past few years, far more than Draco could have dreamed of, and probably more than Draco himself had had. Draco was as limited by his insider perspective as

the member of any other small group in the larger society. "And I'm sure that worked fine for your parents, and it *still* works fine for them. Probably it would have kept working for the younger generation, too, if not for the war."

"The war didn't sever the continuity of our culture," Draco snapped back instantly. His brow was furrowing, and Harry knew he didn't like the direction the conversation was heading, for multiple reasons. "We're still determined to hold on to things like the dances, the marriage customs, the funeral customs, the—"

"And that's praiseworthy," Harry interrupted impatiently. *Yes, his vision is just too entwined with the barriers, perceiving the barriers as part of reality.* "But dances and marriages and funerals are something different from the perspective that being gay is disgusting, Draco. Or do you really disagree with me?" He stared hard at Draco, waiting. What Draco said next would determine the argumentative tactics that Harry had to use on him.

*You sound almost as though you believe it, Potter,* Draco thought, and bit his lips to keep from smiling. Or perhaps he would have blurted out something unfortunate? In truth, Potter's words had stunned him and set him back on his heels. He was no longer as sure as he had been that this newest attack was just another strategy to push him off-balance.

Potter leaned too near, spoke too persuasively. His eyes blazed as if he had spent time thinking about this, and constructing arguments—another skill, like disguise, that Draco never would have associated with the Boy-Who-Lived. Didn't he just cast Disarming Spells at people he disagreed with, and have those spells kill them by incredibly lucky coincidence?

*You cannot make assumptions about him,* Draco thought. *And yet, that is what you keep doing.*

"Imagine that I do agree with you," Draco said. "Imagine that I think certain—shopworn—attitudes unfortunate, and less important than the customs that we have preserved for centuries. What of it? That attitude is a rooted part of pure-blood culture now, and you *cannot* imagine people would be much more eager to give it up than to give up the way we get married. With the population lower than it was before the war, there are some new converts to that attitude, in fact." Draco felt his mouth fill with a sour taste. People like Marigold Moonstone, who really believed not only that men and women needed to sleep together to have children, but that men and women could find satisfaction only in each other. Whoever had thought that one up was clever, Draco admitted grudgingly. Some adolescents who would fight against the notion that they should have children merely to boost numbers would swallow pretty words whole.

"You haven't listened to me, Draco," Potter said, with an iron patience in his voice that Draco was inclined to call the first indication of Potter's true personality he'd received. Brian would have laughed his sarcasm off, or reached out and touched Draco's cheek to show he appreciated his perspective. Potter simply spoke on, with a determination to share his thoughts that Draco found irritating and charming both at once. "There *is* a division in pure-blood society now. The

people who believe that homosexuality is wrong and that breeding is all-important are mostly *older.* People like your father, your mother."

Draco opened his mouth for a moment, thinking of Marigold, and then closed it again—because all the other names that filled his head were, indeed, people of his parents' age. He thought of Pansy, with her Muggle lover, and Blaise, with his refusal to care what other people thought of him. Though neither of them was doing *exactly* what Draco was, those rebellions also showed them reluctant to conform to society's codes. Pansy hid her lover, but if she had been the perfect daughter of tradition that her mother and father wanted her to be, she never would have thought of finding a Muggle attractive in the first place.

And there were others. Draco had found some of his lovers among half-bloods and Muggleborns, but not all of them. Constrained by the ancient idea that the only *woman* you were supposed to sleep with was the one you were married to, other pure-blood sons sometimes turned to each other for physical release, or out of curiosity, or simply because men in the exact same predicament were unlikely to betray them. And Draco had known some pure-blood girls who made a regular habit of sleeping with their own sex, too. Since some of the old guard actually thought two women couldn't have sex together because of the lack of a cock, they were even more likely to assume "close friendship" between their daughters than they were between their sons.

"Say that I thought you were right," Draco said. He knew the tone of his voice had changed, but he couldn't help it. Brian—Potter, damn it—

*Does he have the slightest clue how dangerous he is? He could change the world by himself if he had the ambition.*

And maybe he did now. If there was one thing Gryffindors tended to care about, it was social injustice. Draco licked his lips, and it was his turn to lean closer, seeking out the lights and shadows in those brilliant eyes, noticing all the things that Potter didn't want him to notice.

"Is there any way of gathering all the disaffected into a single movement?" Draco asked. "It hasn't happened so far, despite fairly severe oppression. We do things like sleep with our friends under our parents' noses for thrills instead." He smiled and let his fingers play over Brian's knuckles. "Or go to Metamorphosis."

"Metamorphosis is closed for right now, so that temptation is shut from them." Potter was still speaking with the firm tone that made Draco's cock stir. *He could be so much, just by himself. I know at least some of Brian's qualities are innate to him. Why does he hide behind a mask instead of using them? The publicity can't be* that *bad, especially with his lies absorbing part of the brunt.* "And I think what's held them back so far is the lack of a leader—and a sparking incident. If you look at Muggle history, revolutions are quite often only *potential* until someone makes a stand, or refuses to be dragged from his home, or fights back against the police during a bar raid." Potter smiled for a moment, probably at a private recollection of some Muggle history book he'd read. Draco wanted to know what it was.

He *wanted* quite a bit, he thought. *Down, boy.*

"So you suggest a sparking incident," Draco murmured. "But from what *I've* studied of Muggle history, you can't really plan revolutions."

"I don't think we need to, in this case," Potter said, half-closing his eyes. "Like I've said, the rebellion is there. Suppressed. And your generation is not significantly weaker in magical strength than your parents' generation, nor are they wanting in understanding of the world. We need to show people that the stand can be *made*, that's all. Preferably in a place where younger wizards outnumber older ones."

Draco laughed in spite of his resolve not to, because the perfect location had immediately suggested itself to him. It seemed almost as if the world were organizing itself in obedience to his and Potter's wishes.

*That is not so,* he reminded himself, because that dangerously twisted thinking might easily take root in his brain. *It is only that Potter is teaching you to see in new ways, and so you look with open eyes at things that were present all along.*

"You know a place?" Potter's eyes were narrowed, his smile devilish.

Draco nodded.

Draco hummed under his breath as he entered his bedroom. He and "Brian" had spent the rest of the afternoon planning, and chosen a place, a time, and a specific action that would spark the rising they wanted to happen.

He was certain, now, that Potter's intelligence and strategizing ability and understanding of pure-blood culture were native to him. But was his sense of humor part of his disguise? What about the way he sometimes sneaked looks at Draco, nearly in spite of himself, as if his brain needed those glimpses to work? Or the way he had reached out and caressed the back of Draco's hand, absently, during the times when Draco expressed some doubts or worries about the plan?

The more Draco thought about it, the more he became convinced that Potter had some deep reason to hide himself—and that the reason would not be easily discovered.

He would, he thought, send a letter to the Manager of Metamorphosis. That was even more of a long shot than writing Potter's friends; Metamorphosis closed whilst handling a case, and the Manager typically replied to no owl post until the case was done with. And he might not know the truth about Potter's identity even if Draco could reach him, or be willing to answer questions.

It didn't really matter, Draco thought. It was still worth trying, because anything was worth trying to win the contest against his father and to have Potter.

*I'm fully engaged on all levels. There's no drawing back now.*

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Chapter: 17

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Seventeen—Theater-in-the-Round*

"Draco!"

Draco turned around, curious. He'd been just about to leave to meet Potter for their little riot when his mother caught him at the top of the stairs. That was unusual. She'd seemed reluctant to speak to him in the past several days, avoiding his company altogether at most times and staring at him oddly when she couldn't. Draco wondered if she was looking for signs of Imperius.

"There is a question I should have asked before and did not," Narcissa said, as if that would make up for her sudden oddity in accosting him. She had her hands folded into the sleeves of her robe. She wore pale green-gray, the shade of olive leaves, which washed some parts of her complexion out and gave others a startling presence, like white flame. Draco knew she was in a complicated mood whenever she put those robes on; no one name would be able to cover all her emotions. "Are you very much in love with him, Draco?"

*What a question.* Of course, at no time in the past few weeks would Draco have been able to answer that with the complete truth. It was only a few of his reasons for holding back the truth that had changed.

He bowed his head and folded his arms across his chest, giving the question the deep, serious consideration Narcissa would have expected from her son on a matter so important to his future. Draco didn't think it was his imagination that his mother's eyes grew brighter as the moments passed, but whether it was with happiness or tears or feverish impatience, he did not know. Narcissa had her tells, just as Lucius did, but those tells were the clues to a richer and subtler inner life than Draco's father possessed, and Draco could not always be sure he was reading her perfectly.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Our relationship has become more complex than I anticipated since we made ourselves public." *To say the least.* "I would say I do not think the same thing of him now that I did four weeks ago." *And isn't that an understatement. Four weeks ago I had never heard of one of him and considered the other a pathetic weakling.* "But what my thoughts and emotions have settled on…" He gave a little shrug and smiled at his mother. "They haven't

told me that yet."

Narcissa loosed a harsh, trembling breath, and one of her hands clenched tight enough that white patches flared along her knuckles. The other reached out, half-crooked into a claw, and caressed Draco's face. He stepped forwards, caught it, and pressed a fleeting kiss to her palm.

"Is there a purpose behind this question, Mother?" he asked softly. "Is there something I can do for you? Is there something else you want to know?"

Narcissa looked away from him and shook her head slightly. Her eyes still had that deep shine Draco could not really understand. "No," she breathed. "I need more information before I make up my mind, but that information cannot come from you."

Draco watched her for a moment. He disliked considering his mother on the opposite side of the game he was playing—he had long since accepted that Lucius belonged there—but she should know that if she tried to interfere with Draco's independence, he *would* push back.

"Very well, Mother," he said. "Enjoy yourself today." He knew she had an appointment with a pure-blood witch of her acquaintance to talk over gardening, one of the hobbies she had steadily been taking over from the house-elves in places where wizard magic could handle the flowers better. Draco approved. No one, pure-blood or not, could make parties the center of her life *all* the time, and Lucius would never have stood for his wife working in a trade or going to anything so common as a Quidditch game without his accompaniment, to lend her dignity.

*I still don't know if I want to get married or not, but I* know *I don't want a marriage like my parents'.*

"And you, Draco," Narcissa said, and gave him another wan smile, and traveled down the stairs, lifting her robes around her as if she were suddenly afraid she might trip. Another sign of her emotions, Draco thought, but he did not believe nervousness was the most prominent of them.

Then he thought of her last words, and grinned. His mother knew he was going to the Theater-in-the-Round with "Brian." She did not know what he intended to do there.

*I wonder if the rumors or the papers will tell her first?*

"You've received the money, then, I take it." Harry was glad he could sound amused in front of this boy and not have to hide the emotion. It would have been hard, given how much astonishment still shone in the boy's face.

"Oh, yes!" Raymond Nusante nodded several times, then seemed to realize he must look a fool and stopped, putting his hands over his mouth with a discreet cough. His eyes were brilliant with that astonishment still. Nice-looking eyes, Harry thought absently, a darker brown than Hermione's, though lately Harry had found himself preferring a paler shade. Nusante's hair

curled around his robe collar, and though he had obviously tried to scrub up a bit before the appearance of his first play, a natural grubbiness haunted the corners of his mouth and the backs of his ears. "I couldn't believe that Draco Malfoy was willing to support *me*, you know? I mean, our families don't even know each other that well!"

Harry felt his smile turn melancholy for a moment. Nusante was only nineteen, an idealistic playwright still convinced his words could change the world. He reminded Harry strongly of himself, before Harry had realized how much pain and tradition went hand-in-hand in the wizarding world, and how much simpler it was to adapt himself to the people around him rather than demand that those people change to suit *him*.

*Your supposed revolution won't change anyone's life, but it might give a few more people courage and strength to make the change for themselves,* Harry reminded himself. *Just because you chose to hide and divide your life doesn't make it the best solution for everyone.*

"In this case, it has everything to do with orientation and very little with blood," Draco's smooth voice said behind them, and then an arm curved around Harry's waist and a kiss was pressed to the back of his neck. Harry leaned towards Draco before he could stop himself, then remembered it was all right. Nusante would be expecting some sort of display like this, both because the papers had prepared him and because of what Draco had paid him to do.

Harry tilted his head back and let his hair brush against Draco's cheek, the best way to return the kiss from his current position. Draco's eyes deepened slightly in color, burning like a thundercloud ready to release a storm. Harry blinked, startled. Draco hadn't had a reaction to such a simple touch before. Perhaps he was falling in love, becoming more emotionally and sexually involved with Brian.

*Six days, now,* Harry reminded himself. *Six days, and he'll be free—furious and betrayed, but free. He'll go on to make a happier life than he could have with me, since he'll also have his freedom from Lucius. And everything will move much faster after this.* Besides the money they had planned for Draco to send to Nusante, Harry had made a few preparations of his own that Draco didn't know about.

"Well," said Nusante, sounding somewhere between impressed and aroused, "I'll be sure to do my best."

He bustled off, from the alley in which they stood, behind the theater, through a door that Harry assumed led backstage. Harry shook his head. Nusante was the proper choice for this—gay himself, burning with the urge for revolution and in contact with friends who were the same, and desperate enough to stage his play as he'd written it that he'd both accepted Draco's money *and* rushed the production to make sure it would still take place in two days. Harry just hoped that the tide of events wouldn't crush him.

"Stop worrying," Draco whispered into Harry's neck. "I can't stand it when you look worried."

Harry felt laughter bubbling up his throat in spite of himself. "Because you know it means a nasty surprise for you?" he asked, and turned around to grin at the other man. "I *am* better in a crisis than you are."

Draco's eyes narrowed slightly. "You claimed the opposite when we met in the Dragon's Head."

"I was playing a *role*," Harry said in loud, aggrieved tones. "Besides, I'd been *drunk.* You can't expect me to make sense all the time in a situation like that."

Draco's eyes narrowed further. Harry was glad to see it. Let him notice all the small inconsistencies in Brian's behavior and wonder what caused them. Then, when Harry brought down the axe, Draco could look back and convince himself he'd seen it coming all along.

For the moment, however, Draco seemed less inclined to call him on it—perhaps because the play was due to start in a few minutes. He looped his arm through Harry's and drew them along as if they were entering his parents' house. Given that this was currently the most prestigious theater for most of the pure-blood social circles, Harry supposed the comparison wasn't so far off. "Shall we?"

Draco had been to the Theater-in-the-Round several times, and he had to admire its elegance and sense of style. The stage stood alone in the middle of masses of seats, a polished block that resembled marble but was made of some material far less slippery. The seats themselves had thick cushions rather like sitting on three of Draco's own pillows, and spells cast on them that subtly guided the sitter's line of sight past the heads of taller people or around awkward corners. House-elves using magic that muted the sound of Apparition appeared at regular intervals to offer a choice of champagne, fresh fruit, and several fine wines. The ceiling of the theater was a great gathered knot of soft colors, which ran in veins throughout the pale wooden walls and seemed scarcely noticeable until they blossomed out above the seats. Draco had sometimes spent more time admiring the decorations than the play itself.

Now, however, his attention was all for the stage. He had made sure he and Potter were seated close to the stage, despite the sight spells, but at an angle from it. Draco didn't want to miss a moment of the audience's reaction, along with the actors' gestures.

Nusante had originally written a play that explored the nature of homosexuality boldly, breaking the myths about it down one by one. Then the manager of the Theater-in-the-Round had forced him to remove most of the plot and insert dirty jokes instead; the male characters had switched from lovers to friends desperately in search of the women who would make them complete, and fighting against the *impression* that they were lovers. Draco had heard of the changing of the play through Pansy's gossip a month before, and at the time, other than a slight roll of his eyes at the general incapacity of his peers to deal with anything complex, he hadn't thought much about it.

Now, of course, he did—since he had been the one to think of contacting Nusante by owl-post

and offering him a vast sum of money if he would stage the play exactly as he had written it, but still on the original date. And Nusante had managed. It helped that the actors he was working with were all friends of his, part of the same idealistic circle of artists who, ten or eleven years younger than Draco and Potter, hadn't yet accepted that prejudice against homosexuality was the way of their world.

*It's the way of the world for the moment, anyway,* Draco thought, a smile tugging at his lips. *I refuse to believe I can change everyone's mind even with Potter's help, but we might—as soppy as this sounds—be able to make a difference.*

Potter shifted next to him. Draco glanced casually at him and saw that Brian's brilliant blue eyes were narrowed, surveying the theater with the same neat, precise motions one would expect of a professional bodyguard. Draco snorted silently to himself. Had Potter gone in for Auror training before he'd become an actor? And why hadn't he *stayed* an Auror? It would have suited him better.

*Of course, he did fool me for a time,* Draco thought, and preened a little. *I'm sure the reason he suddenly lost control of himself is his increasing emotional involvement with me. Not so easy to play a role when part of you wishes you were playing reality, is it?*

The other side of that thought was that Potter *would* have continued to fool him if not for his emotions. He could have remained unaffected by Draco, and Draco never would have known the truth. He frowned and shifted in his seat to rid himself of the thoughts, and Potter's eyes immediately snapped sideways to look at him.

"Uncomfortable?" he asked in that deep voice Draco thought he had adopted specifically for his Brian disguise. Draco had spent the past few days trying to recall Potter's voice from Hogwarts, and he was sure it didn't resemble the one he heard now. Or it was *like* Brian's but subtly different, the way Brian's scar and eyes were like Potter's. "I'm sorry to say we can't take care of that in public." His gaze lingered on Draco's groin.

Draco willed himself *not* to become aroused. It did seem as if it had been forever, instead of a few days, since the party at Clothilde Castle and the intense pleasure he'd felt then, but he would not surrender to his body's demands.

*Potter is dangerous, oh yes. I will fall for him even as I try to make him fall for me—and it could be one-sided if I am not very careful. He cannot think clearly around me, no, but I suffer the same problem.*

Paradoxically, the revelation of that danger came closer to making Draco hard than Potter's glance had. He had wanted someone who was his equal for some time; he had simply not believed he would ever find one.

He held Potter's gaze, and let his eyes reflect his own lust and longing and affection as he said quietly, "Not in public, no. But I may ask, later, for something we have not shared yet."

A tiny but perceptible shiver coursed through Potter, though his face did not change. Draco was certain he was picturing the things they had shared so far and wondering what might lie beyond them—and the images in his mind were getting more intense, if the way he suddenly looked away from Draco and stretched his arms above his head was any indication.

"Ask away," Potter said, in Brian's casual, teasing way. "That doesn't mean you'll get it."

Draco chuckled and let his arm drop on Potter's shoulders. "Irresistible asking is somewhat a forte of mine. You would not believe how many doors open when you smile in the right way."

Potter shot him a wary look, half-defensive, but just then the coruscating colors in the knot above and the veins along the walls began to dim, and a single intense beam of light concentrated attention on the stage. Draco leaned back and surveyed the room, looking for the faces of the people Nusante had promised would be there, to swing the inevitable volatile reaction to the play in the direction they wanted it to go. Were those the wizards and witches leaning forwards, fists on their knees, breath coming fast and shallow?

Draco certainly recognized some of them. He pictured the reaction they would cause today combined with their reaction of their parents when they found out.

He imagined Lucius's reaction.

He smiled.

The play was apparently titled *In Search of Love.* Harry thought the title bland, but from the moment the two actors appeared on stage—two men about the same height, both dark-haired, giving each other furtive, hot-eyed glances that made him think they could be partners in real life—the plot wasn't.

The two actors exchanged low words at first, enough to reveal they'd been thrown out of a pub for "lewd" behavior. The part of the audience that didn't know what was about to happen next laughed; the part that *did* know stirred in anticipation.

The character named Frank turned to the other, gesturing with a wildly swinging hand. The other character, Peter, stepped out of the way, frowning at him, and shook his head, though because Frank hadn't asked a question, the reason for his negation wasn't immediately apparent. Harry nodded thoughtfully. The two men were skillfully building the undercurrents of a long and complicated relationship; they used their bodies and their faces as much as their words, the way acting *should* go. Harry had seen many Muggle actors who relied only on the dialogue when he was building Brian's background in theater, and always had to hold his tongue on the impulse to correct them. Acting came from the body outwards, or it wouldn't seem real.

Then Frank stepped forwards, cupped his hand around Peter's cheek, and said something

deliberately too soft for the audience to make out. Peter stared at him, eyes narrowed slightly, and muttered, "You won't really do it. Coward."

The audience's laughter had a sharper edge to it this time.

Frank leaned forwards and pressed his lips against Peter's. Peter gasped once, then pressed into Frank and worked his arms around him, sliding a hand down to squeeze his arse.

Shouting immediately filled the Theater-in-the-Round. Most of it consisted of variations on cries of disgust at first; then Harry saw Nusante's plants surging to their feet, chanting and yelling in support of freedom of expression and an artist's right to create plays as he pleased. The advocates for moral uprightness turned and gaped at them. And then, of course, one of the supporters on one of the sides—Harry thought it was probably theirs, but he couldn't be sure—flung a hex.

The darkness of the theater exploded with colored light, with beams of brilliant curses and flying pieces of hair and skin. Harry took a step away from his seat and Draco's reaching arms, lifted his wand, and pointed it at the ceiling. Closing his eyes, he drew on the memory of some of the spells he'd used when playing a bodyguard and then flung all his magic behind the incantation that left his lips.

"*Comprimo dira!"*

A thick mist, green as the Killing Curse, briefly spread through the Theater-in-the-Round, and Harry heard several confused and alarmed cries. He couldn't pay heed to them, couldn't even look to see if someone had done something stupid in the moment between his choosing of the spell and his casting of it. His eyes were tight shut, his body braced against the rush of power through his limbs and blood. This was the most forceful spell he had cast in years, and it had to cover a wider area. Small and targeted Transfigurations and glamours were much less draining, and required a different kind of finesse.

At last the spell ended and Harry reached out to brace himself with one elbow on the back of his seat, opening his eyes. Hexes still flashed and exploded in his line of sight, competing with the floating afterimages of the magic, but this time no skin or hair or blood joined them. Harry smiled wearily. His spell suppressed any hex that caused serious bodily or mental harm, and any spell classified as a curse. Out on the streets, people would be able to hurt each other, but not whilst in the theater, and that included the Aurors who might show up any moment to arrest someone.

Draco's arm curled around his waist, and he snarled into Harry's hair, "You didn't tell me you were going to do that."

Harry yawned before he could respond. He was shivering now, and drowsiness crept across his mind like a wave. He always needed to rest after he used that much magic. "Because you would have said that we should cast the spell together," he murmured. "And there would have been too much arguing about how much power you should contribute and how much power I should. And

the Aurors would have found traces of the spell on your wand when they examined it. This way, I'll be the only one with any evidence against me."

Draco was silent for a long time, standing there as if he didn't care about the hexes flying around them. Given that he'd already constructed a sturdy Shield Charm and he probably knew exactly what Harry's spell had done, maybe he didn't. Then he said, "But I'm the one who gave Nusante money for the play. They'll have something against me anyway, if they decide to investigate."

"You couldn't—" Harry had to pause in his speaking as a jaw-breaking yawn took over his mouth. He shook his head in irritation and went on. "You couldn't know that a riot would be the consequence of your brave decision to support freedom of expression. Casting a spell like this suggests that *I* did. Now. Go home. I'll go back to *my* house and await the Aurors. They won't hurt me." They wouldn't be long in coming, Harry knew. That much magic would make tracing his magical signature easy. He already had a bolthole prepared in which Brian could wait and give himself up meekly for a short term in a holding cell. Since they would discover his spell had *contained* the harm done and that his presence in the theater was linked only to Draco's funding of the play—and Harry was confident he could lie his way out of any trick question they put to him—they would have to release him shortly.

Draco was silent again. Harry rolled his eyes. *He has to choose now to be chivalrous.* He locked his hands on the back of his seat and braced his legs. "See? I can stand on my own. Go now, Draco, please, or neither of us might be in any condition in a few days to share those things you mentioned." He looked over his shoulder, smiling, into Draco's eyes, or thought he did. It was somewhat hard to tell with dizziness spinning in his mind like a maelstrom and his eyesight opening and closing like a Muggle automatic door. "I know they hate you for your name, but *I'll* be fine."

"Like hell," Draco said softly, and tightened his arms around Harry, and Apparated them out of the Theater-in-the-Round.

Harry yelped as he was pulled along, and again when they popped out of the Apparition onto the winding path that led up to the front door of Malfoy Manor. He tried to pull away from Draco's hold, but Draco held up his wand and pressed it against the side of Harry's neck.

"You need to rest after a spell like that," he said. "And I don't fancy the notion of *either* of us getting into legal trouble when Counterstrike is moving. Sleep."

One pulse of magic from Draco's wand, and Harry dropped into oblivion, still slightly astonished that his plan had not worked the way he imagined it would.

Draco waited until he was sure Potter was quite asleep, hanging in his arms like a bundle of rags. He stared at his face for a moment. He had not even thought about what might happen to their potential allies, caught in the middle of a riot like that, but Potter had, and had taken steps to ensure that no harm came to them.

Pure-blood young witches and wizards, mostly, whom he had no reason to like.

Draco touched Potter's forehead, the thin line that should have been a lightning bolt scar. What he had said was true. He wanted neither of them to get into trouble, and he thought it best if they stayed together for now.

But even more than that, he wanted to keep Potter with him for a little while right now and study him. Protect him, perhaps, if someone tried to attack him whilst he still suffered from magical exhaustion. He might *think* he could take care of himself, but he was weakened, and Draco would hate to see an enemy win an advantage over him because of that.

He tightened his arms around Potter, his own emotions stirring and churning like a nest of young dragons, and began to walk towards the Manor. As he caught sight of his father looking out from a window of his study, Draco began to smirk.

Besides, he rather liked the thought of Lucius Malfoy, the founder of Counterstrike, sheltering the people who had just caused such splendid trouble for that organization.

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eighteen—Proving the Point*

Lucius met Draco in the entrance hall. Draco scrutinized his father carefully, knowing he must have moved very fast to get down the stairs from his study so quickly, but of course none of the strain showed on Lucius's face. He displayed only the most perfect, most polished marble disdain as he stared down at Potter's limp, still disguised body.

"Draco," Lucius began, "I have already heard rumors of what you have done. I will not let you bring that man in here."

Draco felt his eyes brighten and his breath come short. Was this the point at which he would insist on having his own way and Lucius, exasperated beyond reason, would disown him? Draco could feel his former plans wheeling around in his head like melting snowflakes, reorganizing and freezing into new lines.

"*That man* is my lover," he said. "The man I've spent months with, and will spend the rest of my life with, the way I feel about him right now." He didn't miss the way Lucius's lip curled, or the

small step his father took away from them, as if being gay were contagious. "He has as much reason to be welcome in my home as I do, Father. Unless you would require the *both* of us to leave?" He arched an eyebrow, and waited. His heartbeat increased as Lucius continued to stare at him.

"You are rapidly straining my patience," Lucius said. "More, you disgust me."

No emotion in the words. That meant he was, indeed, telling the truth. Draco restrained a yelp of triumph. If he showed his father he *wanted* this, Lucius would reverse himself abruptly and attempt to discover the real reasons why Draco had wanted to be disowned later.

"And you disgust *me*," Draco retorted, "because you cannot accept the evidence of love where it exists, because you want such a powerful force to flow only inside your narrow boundaries." He put a possessive hand on Potter's chest. It was a delight to him to feel the slow, deep breaths Potter was taking. Whether or not the other man would actually have chosen to sleep next to him was beside the point. He *was* sleeping next to him right now, and the emotions that surged through Draco were protective, glad, deep, exalted.

Lucius brought his hands sharply together, the signal he had used to call his son's attention to him and break up arguments between Draco and Narcissa for as long as Draco could remember. It didn't startle him now; it just built his anticipation higher. Draco watched his father, and tried not to pant.

"I have already heard rumors of what you have done," Lucius repeated, as if the matter of Potter staying in the Manor were settled. "You sponsored a play that dealt—openly, mind you—with the sort of life you have degraded yourself to living these days."

Draco snorted. "Of course I did. I think I can remember spending my own money, Father."

Lucius twitched his head, as if he hadn't really believed the report and its truth stung him. For just a moment, his eyes lowered. If it were still possible for Draco to take pity on Lucius, he would have felt it then.

"Draco," Lucius murmured, and most of the veneer of his voice was gone. He extended one hand as if he would actually clasp Draco's and tug him into an embrace, which had not happened in over ten years, since the first moments after the Battle of Hogwarts. "You *must* tell me. Why doesn't a discreet lifestyle content you anymore? Why did you not consent to marry someone of our choosing? You could have kept your lover on the side. If he truly—" Lucius swallowed as if the words he had to speak nauseated him. "If he truly *cares* for you, then he will understand your responsibilities to your family and to a great culture that is on the brink of vanishing. Such arrangements have happened in the past, and with perfect facility and happiness, with eyes and mouths shut where they needed to be. What possessed you to open yours?"

Strangely enough, Draco could give him a part of the truth there. Lucius probably would still not understand the terms that Draco used, but, in a way, it would be a relief to speak.

"I haven't been what you wanted me to be for years," Draco told his father quietly. "The affairs I had with men started out of curiosity, and boredom, and as a way to defy your strictures. And then they became important to me. I found that I could care for men quite as much as for women. I could not endure the thought of spending most of my time in a loveless marriage and only seeing my lovers on the side. And then I found Brian." Strange, how natural it seemed to want to say *Harry* instead, in that moment, and how close he came to breaking apart his father's world even further. "He is special. He is different. He is the one who could never be put aside for a wife, no matter how much I might *want* to respect you and uphold my duties to the family."

"Duty is the one inflexible master," Lucius said. "Not love. Nothing else is as important as the continuation of our traditions—in this case, the continuation of our family line. You could have come to me when you found yourself—" Again he seemed to strangle. "Falling in love with this young man. I would have found some way to ensure that you did not suffer."

"And what way would that be?" Draco smiled. "Giving him a potion that ensured he fell in love with someone else? 'Persuading' him to take exile from Britain? A long-lasting impotence curse, like the one you tried to cast on me?"

"Any and all of those would have been better than the dishonor you are bringing us to," Lucius said, and for the first time a pale flame of anger was in his eyes.

Draco gazed steadily at his father. This was his version of the extended hand and the forgiveness his mother would have offered far more freely, Draco knew. Reject this effort at reconciliation, and the chances were good that Lucius would never offer him another.

Except that Draco thought he could live with that, now. Even if his plain ultimately failed, if he were to be disowned and then Lucius did *not* beg him back into the family no matter what happened, it didn't matter. As long as he had his freedom to think and maneuver, his physical and political independence—

And Potter by his side.

Draco suffered a brief, intense wave of dizziness at the thought that Potter had become as necessary to him as the rest, and told himself to be very careful how he let his thoughts turn. He had not even seduced Potter yet; nor did Potter realize that Draco knew his true identity, and had got past some of his anger.

Still, it felt like a revelation in many ways.

"You do not believe as I do," said Lucius, and then he turned and left the entrance hall, the line of his shoulders set and firm. Draco waited a moment, cocking his head. If his father set the wards against them and would not permit Potter to stay in the Manor, then he would call Rini and order the house-elf to direct him to Potter's home. It was a risk, with the Aurors probably hunting Potter's magical signature, and it would certainly reveal Draco's knowledge of Potter's real face

and name. But perhaps speeding up the game would not matter. And Draco would not subject himself to the indignity of fighting with his father about this.

The wards did not rise, however. Draco cast a Feather-Light Charm on Potter's body and swept him up the stairs into his own bedroom.

Potter looked strangely natural lying on that bed, Draco thought, as he arranged the other man's head on the pillows. Then he snorted. Of *course* Potter looked strangely natural. He had spent the night there once before, the night he had fucked Draco.

With his eyes closed, however, he looked so much like Draco's schoolboy nemesis that Draco really *must* have been an idiot not to have seen it before. *Perhaps I can claim I was too tired from shagging to notice.*

Draco thought he could get used to seeing Potter there for days on end, in early morning slants of sunlight and at night when the moon had risen. Of course they would live in the Manor until Draco's parents disowned him, and when that happened, Draco would bring his own furniture with him to a nicer dwelling than Potter could ever afford. Draco was *not* about to stay in whatever tatty house Potter had appropriated for himself.

*And perhaps you should stop thinking about this and think about what you'll do when the Aurors arrive, and when the papers report on this, and when your mother questions you.*

Draco laughed quietly and leaned back against the wall of his bedroom. He was not *entirely* sure that Potter was good for him. He made Draco's mind spin and whirl and leap out of the neat pathways of plans he'd had laid for years, into new ones that might or might not lead to the places Draco needed to go.

But as of yet, Draco did not think he wanted to give that feeling up.

Harry opened his eyes with a startled gasp. For a moment, he could not remember how he had fallen asleep, or determine where he was now. He forced himself up on his elbows so fast his vision wavered and he went dizzy with the rush of blood.

Then Draco's hand fell on his shoulder and drew Harry back to rest against him. "It's all right," Draco whispered into his ear. "You're in the Manor, and my father made no fuss about our staying here. Nor have the Aurors shown up yet." His other hand smoothed up and down Harry's back, and Harry found his eyes fluttering shut in spite of himself. No one had ever stroked him just *there* before. He'd had no idea how much he enjoyed it, or that it would make his muscles as limp as marmalade.

Then he threw the thought impatiently into oblivion. "You cast a sleeping charm on me?" he asked, yanking away from Draco.

Draco didn't seem inclined to let him go; though his hands momentarily shifted their positions, he almost immediately replaced them and sighed into the hair that curled around the nape of Harry's neck. "I did. You needed to rest after that spell you cast, and with all your talk of going to prison and facing the Aurors, I wasn't sure you would."

Harry ignored him as best he could, instead listening intently. Yes, he thought he could hear the faint *cracks* of Apparition when he concentrated. The Malfoys had wards on their house so that one could not simply Apparate in and out, but they would not have wanted those wards to conceal the sound of approaching enemies.

"The Aurors are here now," he said softly.

Draco's arms grew stiff for just a moment, his fingers curling as if he would stab them into Harry's neck and spine instead of stroking him. Harry was glad. The slight pain from Draco's expensively manicured nails digging into him cleared his head still more. He began recalling the script that he'd prepared for this moment, and ran a hand through his hair. It might be tousled from sleeping, and he wanted to make a small pretense at cleanliness. Best to look normal, as if he'd had no idea the Aurors would want to pursue him.

"How did you know they were here?" Draco breathed harshly, even as they heard the sound of the door opening into the entrance hall below and the shrill voices of house-elves announcing a visitor. Harry was not entirely sure whether Lucius or Narcissa would greet them first, but that hardly mattered.

"A spell that I cast to wake me up when they arrived," Harry said, and shrugged as he sat up, finally forcing Draco's hands off him. "Even if I was under a sleeping charm at the time."

Draco gripped his shoulders and forcibly turned Harry to face him. "No one can track Aurors that way," he said. "Not unless you knew exactly which ones were coming." He eyed Harry contemplatively, as if the notion of Brian having acquaintances among the Aurors were not so far-fetched.

*And this is another reason you need to leave,* Harry told himself, even as his pulse quickened from that look. *You're giving him more things to think about. He's either trying to track down Brian's real history or he will start soon, and that is a complication you do* not *need.*

"I can," Harry said, and laughed a little as the expression on Draco's face slid towards incredulity. "I'm an actor, Draco. I pay a lot of attention to fabric—to clothing in general, really. It's important when you're going on stage in costumes. And from there, I've extended the habit to other areas of my life." He shrugged a bit. "The Aurors' robes are mostly all made of the same material. The Minister instituted that a few years ago, I'm told, to make it easier for wounded Aurors under extreme circumstances to borrow each other's clothing. Or some such thing. I didn't follow politics that closely, until I met you. The charm alerts me when a group of people wearing robes of that material appears next to me. That's all. Simple, yes?" He winked at Draco and rose to his feet, ready to face the Aurors.

Of course, if he had really allowed the Aurors to trace him without trouble, they would have uncovered Harry Potter's magical signature. But Harry had advantages that other wizards didn't. He hadn't cast magic in public in a long time, making his magical signature harder to recognize. He regularly switched wands, and that led to his signature not being as stable as someone who used the same one all the time; it wasn't well-known, but a wizard's magic was influenced by the wood and core of the wand. Otherwise, any wizard would have been able to use any wand.

And Harry had sent a record of "Brian's" magical signature to the Ministry two days ago, as a good-faith gesture. He was appearing an awful lot in public lately, he had said in his letter, and he wanted them to know who he was, just in case he was ever involved in something dramatic and with political consequences. The signature was a mixture of Harry's with enough different bits and pieces—the influence from the different wand core and wood, the tendency to cast powerful spells, the imprint of a different personality and fascinations—that it should withstand inspection, much like a lie mixed with the truth.

He bounced "Brian's" wand in his hand and waited.

Draco narrowed his eyes as he watched Potter face the doorway of his room. He looked like someone about to enter battle, as if he suspected he could actually fool the Aurors. Surely he had planned on revealing that he was Harry Potter to the few wizards and witches who would corner him, and then swearing them to secrecy? Draco could easily picture Potter being let off for his little pranks by an indulgent set of Aurors, especially with one of his good friends still in the Minister's office. Draco had thought that was the reason Potter felt so confident going out in public, in fact; he had the web of lies about his magic and his living situation, but that would not have been enough for him to accomplish acting lessons and lessons in pure-blood culture, so he probably depended on the Ministry to cover for him.

But now…

He had not panicked at finding himself in the Manor. He didn't seem indignant that Draco had cast the sleeping charm. He just stood there, grinning slightly when the first Auror stepped into the room, a fat, tall man with a face rather like a melted pork pie.

*Perhaps he intends to cast a Memory Charm on me the moment the Aurors are finished talking.* Draco loosened his wand in his sleeve. It was a practical precaution in other ways, too, he mused, as the Auror cast him a glance of disgust.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Potter said, nodding as another Auror stepped into the room. "Can I help you?"

"You're Brian Montgomery?" The second Auror carefully checked a piece of parchment he was carrying. The first one snorted. He had contempt ground into the lines around his eyes like dirt, but he was casting Potter covert glances anyway. Draco tasted vinegar jealousy in his mouth.

"Yes," Potter said, and gave them a little self-deprecating smile that wasn't among Brian's usual gestures. Draco frowned, trying to figure out why that bothered him. Perhaps Potter simply hadn't had cause to use that smile around him. "I suspect you want me to ask me some questions about what happened in the Theater-in-the-Round this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Pork Pie. "Your wand, if you please." He held out his hand, and Potter nodded and handed over his wand with a touch of ceremony. Draco hid a snort. So there were pieces of the Brian personality still there.

*How mixed are they? How interleaved? I wonder if I would see the real Potter even if I pinned him down and told him I know the truth?*

The first Auror cast a number of spells on the wand, whilst the second pressed questions on Potter—boring ones. When had he arrived at the theater? Had he come with the intention of causing a disruption? Who had he come with? Did he know the play was going to take the dramatic turn it had?

Potter answered them in the manner of a perfect liar. He didn't look at the ground and pretend false innocence, the way Draco knew he had in Hogwarts. He didn't fidget and look uncomfortable in the wrong places. He didn't show too precise and diamond-edged a recall, the way he would have done had he practiced his story over and over. He told the truth of events simply, plainly, with a sigh of annoyance now and then when he glanced at the way Pork Pie was handling his wand.

Draco recognized the spells Pork Pie was casting as the kind that would identify a magical signature. He stiffened with anticipation. Surely *someone* would recognize Potter's magic. How could the most famous wizard in Britain go unrecognized?

Then Draco remembered the lies Potter had spread about. And he remembered the sheer power of the magic that Potter had used in the Theater-in-the-Round. Was there any *record* in the Ministry of the boy Potter had been using a spell like that? Or would their records show only minor hexes and jinxes, perhaps an Unforgivable or two? The Aurors would not even bother to check, perhaps, if they thought the "real" Harry Potter a weak wizard.

Finally, Pork Pie made a hacking sound and cast Potter's wand back at him. Potter caught it with a neat underhanded motion that caused Draco's eyes to narrow. *That movement would have betrayed him, I think, even if I didn't know. He obviously has played Quidditch before, and he was obviously a Seeker.*

"Nothing," Pork Pie said, talking to his partner instead of Potter. Potter just raised his eyebrows and nodded, as if to say *I* told *you there was nothing wrong with my story.*

"I thought not," said the second Auror, in a tone of satisfaction that made Draco glance at him. He was stealing covert looks at Potter, too, and they were filled with decidedly more approval

than Pork Pie's had been. When he briefly caught Draco's eye, in fact, he gave him a fleeting smile and a wink.

*Well. Perhaps our revolution is not without allies in the official establishment, after all.* Draco gave a brief, chilly smile in return, and stepped up to put a hand on Potter's side. Potter, oddly, tensed instead of relaxing the way he should have at a show of support. But the Aurors were departing with cordial farewells on the part of the younger—who had introduced himself, but whose name Draco hadn't bothered to catch—and evil-sounding grunts from Pork Pie.

Potter yawned widely when they were gone, and said, "Well, *that's* over for the moment. And you were right, it was easier answering their questions here than in a holding cell." He winked at Draco in turn. "Now, if you'll just tell me when we should meet next, I'll go home."

Draco's frustration abruptly caught fire. Potter had weathered the storm without a bow of his head. He had simply accepted the sleeping charm and Draco's bringing him here as if it didn't matter. He had done everything on his own, beautifully and perfectly and without slowing down once.

As if he didn't *need* Draco.

Despite his promises to himself that they wouldn't have sex again for the present, Draco burned with the desire to affect Potter in the one way he knew he could. He whispered, "We're not quite done yet."

"Oh?" Potter eyed him in a bewildered manner, as if he couldn't imagine what Draco wanted, which made Draco growl even as he lowered his mouth to the other man's and kissed him, long and hard.

His body immediately burned with need, and he heard Potter's soft, startled gasp and felt the erection brushing against his with as much satisfaction as he'd felt the first time he opened Malfoy's Machineries.

And then Potter was pushing firmly against his chest, stepping out of his arms, his eyes narrowed and blazing, and saying the words that Draco could not accept, could not believe, not in his current mood and not in any other, as much for the cool tone in which they were delivered as for their meaning. "I'm not interested right now, thanks."

Harry was furious with himself. He was sweating as if he'd been tossed head-first into a bonfire, his hands shaking. He'd felt the urge to stand where he was and let Draco have his way, or wrap his arms around the other man and take Draco to bed.

Betraying his disguise was one thing; it could be recovered from. Getting emotionally involved when their magic reached out and bound them together—Harry would have challenged Lucius Malfoy himself to resist that. But putting himself into a situation he *knew* would make him

emotionally vulnerable, with an excellent chance that Draco could find out who he really was, when he knew he'd have to leave in less than a week and when he'd promised himself that he wouldn't have sex with Draco any more…

*No.* Harry felt a sharp-edged wave of self-loathing rising over him, and shook his head against it. He couldn't flop down and sulk the way he usually did when he made a mistake like this, and he couldn't employ his other indulgence when he'd been weak and stare into the reverse Pensieve. He kept his eyes sharp and his resolve firm by taking a few steps away from Draco.

Draco just stared at him as if he had no answer to Harry's refusal. He was panting, too, his gaze keen and his hands trembling in the moment before he clenched them into fists and put them behind his back. His voice stung like sleet. "I want you. I could quite *clearly* feel that you want me, too. Don't try to tell me you're not *interested.*"

Harry's breath caught. Unwittingly, it seemed, he'd stumbled on to a way to deeply insult Draco. Maybe this would make him care about "Brian" less and back away.

"It's true it's been a long day, and I was bored," Harry said casually. "And perhaps a little aroused, with the way our visitors kept eying me." Draco's expression was quickly streaming past incredulous and heading straight for purest fury, so Harry twisted the knife a little more. "You don't know a lot about my past. Didn't I tell you that I get bored relatively easy? That it takes more than the offer of a few exotic positions to keep my interest? And since that's all you have to offer me, I might as well take my leave."

Draco's lips parted in a snarl. Harry smirked at him one more time and turned his back. His self-loathing was searing him, but this should *finally* put an end to the most unwise action he'd ever taken—

Draco's arms slammed into the wall on either side of him, pinning him there. Harry whirled around, snarling himself now, trapped, enraged—

And Draco kissed him, biting him hard, forcing his tongue into Harry's mouth, his own rage boiling through the kiss—

Harry realized what was going to happen as the air turned red and silver around them, and tried madly to Apparate. But the Manor's Apparition wards were too strong for him to break without more concentration, and he had dangerously exhausted his magic earlier.

Or perhaps he had already waited too long.

Once again, their magic connected across the gaps between them. Once again, their emotions flowed into each other, rushing, drowning Harry in Draco's desire like a waterfall.

And no option was possible for either of them at that moment but passionate surrender.

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Nineteen—Passionate Surrender*

Harry gasped into the kiss as he felt Draco wrestling him towards the bed. Draco's emotions leaped and danced around him, one moment brilliant with anticipation, the next moment cloudy with lust. It was like being in the middle of a lightning storm where the darkness was just as likely to hit him as the radiance was.

*Not that you're much better,* said the part of Harry that never lost control, far away behind the curtains of fire and the sound of tearing cloth as Draco pulled his shirt off. Of course, since the shirt had been under Harry's robes, this did not progress very far towards getting him naked. *Look at you.*

That part of Harry had never had much influence on his actions, though, and so Harry drove his mouth into Draco's, delighting in the click of their teeth; drove his hands into Draco's back, propelling him closer and further into the kiss; drove his whole body into delight and eagerness and hard determination to *win* this time. There had to be a way to have sex with Draco and yet make him want never to see Brian again. There had to be a way, and Harry would find it.

Draco pulled away from him and flicked his wand. Harry's robes crumpled smoothly to the floor. Harry thought the spell had slit them up the sides. He didn't mind. He had more where those came from, and he had Draco in his arms again at the moment, naked save for his undergarments. Harry pumped his hips, scraping his erection against the cloth covering Draco's cock, and groaned.

The sound might have told Draco how much he liked the sensation, but it was just as likely to be the net of coiling emotions around them, shifting back and forth, washing them both with waterfalls of strength and longing, light and color. Draco's cheeks were flushed, his eyes actually *sparkling*, like the grass after a storm. He reached down and squeezed Harry's cock. "You like that?" he asked.

Harry growled—of all the *stupid* questions to ask—and lunged forwards, at the same moment angling himself sideways so that he caught Draco behind the knee with one foot. Continuing the whirl, he turned so that he kept his balance whilst knocking Draco onto the bed. Then he fell on top of him, shivering in wonder as he felt the scrape of Draco's stubble against his face and heard his hiss, half-pained and half-lustful, from the impact of Harry's weight.

It was the best position Harry could think of. From here, he could control everything that happened and win the competition between him and Draco. He knew based on previous experience that he could survive this overwhelming onslaught if he gave Draco a blowjob. He drew Draco's pants down—

And then he realized that his emotions were telling Draco everything he felt, and, as strong hands seized his shoulders and waist and flipped him, that Draco had no intention of letting him win.

Potter's eyes were brilliant with passion. Draco suffered a momentary spasm of regret that he didn't have time or a hand to spare to cast the spell that would change them to green. Potter wasn't wearing a glamour or he would have sensed it and dispelled it by now; that left Transfiguration to keep his eyes the blue of Brian's. But Draco would still have enjoyed overlaying the blue with a temporary green color, just to get a better idea of what his partner looked like as himself.

Potter would feel his regret, but not know the source of it, just as Draco felt his steely determination to win this contest but didn't know why he thought he *had* to win. Draco felt safe in feeling whatever he wanted as he stared at Potter, whom he knelt over now and pinned to the bed.

"I said we'd do things we hadn't before," he whispered. *This* time, he was going to have Potter. He wanted to see what that would be like whilst these emotions sliced and dived around them. He shuddered as magic flooded over his cock, wondering for a moment what it would be like for it to bind both of them when he was buried inside Potter.

"But we know already just how good I can make it for you when I use my mouth," said Potter, and arched his neck, baring his throat temptingly. Draco's breath caught. *How much of this seduction did he learn in the past ten years and how much is natural? How much of him is real, but hidden behind the barriers of my own prejudice? I never really knew him.* "Why not have that happen again?"

Draco let a small smile wash over his face. "Scared to be on the bottom, Brian?" God, he'd nearly said *Potter.* And he was not ready to let the knowledge slip free from his mouth and mind.

Potter hissed at him, his cheeks flushing richly, his forehead flexing so much with his frown that for a moment Draco thought his scar would bend away from its Transfigured disguise back into its real self. "It has nothing to do with fear," he said, pitching his voice at a level that made Draco's hips pump in spite of himself. Potter's eyes rolled back as Draco's erection brushed against his stomach. When he went on, his voice was at least breathy, to Draco's satisfaction. "It has everything to do with wanting to make you feel good."

"And what about you?" Draco reached out and stroked the side of Potter's neck with the back of his knuckles, feeling the connection between them come alive again as Potter shook with pleasure, and Draco's pleasure fed on his and flooded back, until Potter's belly was soaked with

precome. "Don't you want to know what it's like to forget words with my cock inside you? Don't you want to know the way I make love to someone I'm actually interested in? Can you feel it?" He lowered his voice and shifted so that his cock once again brushed on Potter's stomach. Potter arched towards him in a way that made Draco's throat ache. "Can you already feel me inside you?"

Harry was dangerously near to doing something he hadn't done for twelve years: saying "Fuck it," and acting without thought for the consequences.

*But that's not quite true, is it?* asked that little in-control part of him that watched and did not approve of all these goings-on. *You started to lose control the moment you let your magic show because your anger at Lucius just couldn't be contained.*

Harry heard a shrill whining sound. He looked at Draco, and then realized he was making the sound himself. He didn't know when it had started, and when he tried to stop, he couldn't. He shivered, excited by the thought of giving in to impulse like this, though the little voice shrieked at him and tried to get his attention.

"Let me," Draco whispered, and trailed his fingers down the side of Harry's neck again, this time locating the spot on his ribs that he had touched when they danced together. Harry's whining sound mixed oddly with the noises of his panting and squirming against the sheets. Draco said nothing more, just let the sounds of Harry's own pleasure speak for him.

And then the pleasure was not quite enough anymore. Harry could feel Draco's own anticipation to be inside him seeping through the barriers of Harry's will, softening the earth under them, making them topple. His mouth fell open and his tongue curled out. He flushed at the thought of the picture he must make.

Draco held his eyes, and Harry realized he wasn't at all amused; instead, his hands were trembling with the effort of holding himself back.

And Harry let go, as another part of him, this one primal and further from the surface than the small voice, had known he would from the moment Draco pinned him to the bed. He wanted this, he needed it, and he didn't want to wait. He lifted his head and welcomed Draco in with mouth, eyes, tongue, lips, hands. He offered himself instead of his concern for his partner's pleasure, and by the way Draco's eyes took fire, that was the kind of invitation he had *really* been waiting for.

Draco thought he knew what werewolves felt like when there was a full moon out. He wanted nothing more than to howl, telling the world that Harry Potter was *his*, that a man who had proven himself brave and clever and manipulative and strong in ways Draco could never have imagined was laying down his defenses and letting Draco do whatever he wanted.

Mixed with his triumph was a certain desperation. He *had* to have this, more than once. That meant treating Harry in a way that would cause him to return to Draco's bed. Draco could not remember the last time he'd been more concerned with the amount of future interest his partner would have in him than the *immediate* future.

He bent down and carefully began to lick Harry's right nipple. Harry shivered again and licked the side of Draco's face in response. The trickle of saliva joined the sharp tingles of anxiety running over Draco's skin as he thought of the ways this could go wrong, and he nearly lost himself in sheer *feeling.*

But though he planned to accept and return the invitation Harry had given him, he wasn't going to let his body simply succumb to sensation. He had done that last time. It would become boring if it happened all the time.

So he kept part of his consciousness lodged on the way he was making Harry feel, noting the way that the other man's fingers tightened in his hair, the way he locked his legs and bucked up when Draco located a certain spot on his hip, the way the pleasure in Harry's mind increased almost to the point it knocked Draco unconscious when he reached for his wand and conjured lube. Harry, it seemed, had quite a good imagination.

*Of course he does.*

Draco, from the place where he was kneeling between Harry's legs, looked up at his lover's face, and suffered yet another desire, this time much stronger, to reach for his wand and cast the spell that would restore Harry's real appearance. It was wrong that Harry lay in his bed, so open, so trusting, and yet wore a stranger's face.

"You're—" Draco said, and then stopped, with his mouth open, shaking his head helplessly as he slicked two of his fingers and reached for Harry's entrance. His magic was doing a better job of making his meaning clear than words could. Shivers and shadows of purple and gold danced along Harry's skin and through their minds, absorbing the earlier anger (though there would be a reckoning for the insults Harry had flung at him later) and smoothing out a rippling wave of wonder.

Harry swallowed, and for a moment, his eyes darted away from Draco's.

*Rethinking his deception?* Draco slid one finger into Harry's body, reveling in the way that the other man tensed up just a bit before he relaxed. This intrusion wasn't painless, but it wasn't enough so to make him rescind his invitation. *Good. I hope so. I want him. I can't help but want him. I want him forever. This isn't enough. And bed isn't enough. I want to know what he's really thinking when we're not having sex. I need—*

And then he froze and uttered a helpless little whimper of his own.

He had forgotten that the magic would find a new conduit when he reached into a new part of

Harry's body.

Harry rolled his head back, his vision exploding with images of red and black and white, his ears ringing. He had thought the magic powerful when he and Draco kissed and it could roll from tongue to tongue. That was nothing compared to what happened when Draco reached into the most intimate part of him.

He was suddenly feeling Draco's emotions from the *inside*, as if they had briefly traded minds. He started and drew back, feeling for one moment as if he should be building barriers, but then he found them rising, sheltering the most fragile parts of his mind from any contact. Many of them remained open, however, and Harry could feel his past emotions—fear and cunning and anger and sorrow and love—reaching out towards Draco, gleaming like freshly offered sweets.

And Draco's emotions—impatience and disgust and the harsh contempt with which he'd treated himself until he managed to *learn* patience and a heart-deep strength and rage—reached back, traveling over Harry so that nothing Draco had felt, it seemed, was strange to him. He might not have been able to imagine himself in the situations Draco had faced and survived; now he could.

And the pleasure.

*One must not forget that*, Draco—Harry—Draco thought hazily. Perhaps it came from both their minds, because it was the sort of thought they could have shared easily. The physical pleasure coiled around them, binding them together, traveling in a spiral, driving Draco's anticipation higher and then returning for Harry's, increasing Draco's hunger and then reaching for Harry's, and Harry's body already stung and trembled with a sensation near to pain.

Harry shoved himself back onto Draco's fingers, no longer fearing that he would be degraded in Draco's eyes for doing so. He could feel Draco so clearly, after all. *He* felt only a kind of awe, and a trembling rapture that he feared meant he would come the moment he entered Harry's body.

"Come on," Harry whispered. "I don't need much. The feeling will take care of any discomfort." The words felt heavy and clumsy compared to the silken, invisible, wind-swift rush of emotions, but he couldn't count on Draco learning the truth from his mind. Actual *thoughts*, rather than feelings, still seemed rare between them.

*You should be grateful—*

And then that voice ceased to exist completely when Draco spoke. Harry could feel his own muscles trembling, as if they were tuned to the cadences of Draco's words. "I don't want to hurt you," he murmured. "I never want to hurt you."

"It's hurting *now*, Draco," Harry said. And that was true. Wonderful as all this sharing was, humans were not meant to live with such keenness forever. Harry was already longing for what

came next, the movements that would both ease the pain and cement their sharing. "Please, please, normally I wouldn't ask for this, but I have to, please, come on—"

Draco's hands smoothed gently down his sides, causing Harry to give gasps like a wounded animal when he touched places that normally felt ticklish. "Shush, it's all right, I know," Draco whispered. "Legs up now."

Harry thought he put his legs up so fast that his foot nearly struck Draco in the jaw, but if so, Draco managed to avoid it in time, and didn't say anything about it. Nor did his emotions convey anger or resentment as he pressed forwards. There was only a shining determination to get the job done right—

And then Draco was easing inside him, and the magic found yet *another* conduit.

Draco thought his heart might explode before they finished this. It was certainly pounding fast enough to burst, and adrenaline flowed like a riptide under the constant exchange of emotions between him and Harry.

And now the magic was *braiding* their minds together. One moment Draco felt the sudden slide, the fullness, the sharp pain of being breached; the next moment he was consumed, and knew Harry was as well, in the heat and the tightness around him. He leaned his forehead on Harry's shoulder and panted, overwhelmed. His arms shook. He wondered if he would be able to hold Harry's legs up.

*Flash, flash.* There was Harry's certainty that he would, because this position was their path to the pinnacle of sensation and out through it; there were his own shoulders confirming that Harry's legs still rested across them. Alternating sensations, and once again, both had felt them both.

Draco shivered as he began to move, hearing a groan of pleasure that seemed to have ripped its way out of Harry's guts. Was it going to be this way every time they made love? He would fear losing himself, if it were, leaving bits of his own personality stuck and starred here and there in Harry's like pieces of a shattered blade.

As if in answer, the movement of the magic changed, and Draco realized it was strengthening them as individuals even as it reached out and tied them into a single strand. His own memories were available if he sought them, faster and clearer and sharper than they normally were—on the edge of pain, as Harry had said.

Or thought. Or felt. Or as Draco had said, or thought, or felt. The memories of the experience *within* the lovemaking were blurred, which was only appropriate, because this passion really belonged to them both.

It was as two *people* that the magic brought them together, neither one entirely subordinated to

the other, their strengths and their weaknesses gathered and gleaming like gems in a net. Of course there was still the sex as well; Draco gasped as he thrust deeply, and felt Harry push back to meet him, impatient and daring as if they were both on brooms above the Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch. But the sensations of pleasure existed alongside the mingling of their minds. Draco reached forwards and back, and both of them existed, shining for him, sharing the world he created.

That he and Harry created together.

Draco was horribly afraid that his eyes were blurring with tears; what he could see changed from moment to moment, however, sometimes clear and sometimes bleary, and so he was not sure. And then Harry's acceptance reached for him again and kindled him into acknowledgment that it was all right if he *was* crying. Harry wasn't certain that the thick drops of hot liquid sliding down his face were all sweat, either.

And Draco, driving himself higher and higher with pleasure and elation and delight and exaltation, found the secret he was clutching suddenly intolerable. The magic had made them surrender nothing they did not *want* to surrender. Thus Harry still held the secret of his identity, and he still didn't know that Draco already knew. This lovemaking could not reveal what they did not freely wish to reveal.

And now—

Call it a side-effect of the magic. Draco could, later, if he wanted to scold himself. Call it an effect of blurred thinking. In some ways, Draco's mind was clearer than it had ever been in his life, but surely no one could be completely sane in the midst of an experience like this.

But *Draco* chose to call it his own decision. He let the barrier down in his mind, and blasted Harry with recognition, with longing, with memories of Harry Potter's green eyes combined with the poise and strength he had seen in the last few weeks. He let Harry know the one secret he'd been holding back from him.

And in that giving of himself, he gave something else, too. His legs tensed, and then he was frozen, shaking, as he shot his orgasm into Harry's body. The painful pleasure fused with the relief that he had finally told Harry the truth and their relationship would have to change now hurtled him into something better than happiness, better than joy, better than pleasure.

Draco existed for one moment only in it, and then fell away, fluttering, like a windblown autumn leaf. He sagged over Harry, eyes shut, not opening them yet to meet the other man's gaze only because he was so tired. It had nothing to do with regret over his choice.

Regret didn't exist right now.

Harry felt a bubble of panic fill his chest when he realized Draco *knew*. There could be no doubt

about that. It was knowledge and a thought Draco had sent to him, specific wording—*Brian Montgomery is Harry Potter*—and then images of him from the ancient past combined with the actions of the man Draco should have known only as Brian.

But with that came longing, and the determination to let Harry know that Draco knew as a matter of pride and honor and curiosity. There could be no mistaking this for a gesture of conquest. It could not transform their act of lovemaking into a ceremony of hidden laughter, where Draco had planned all along to put Harry in this vulnerable position and then humiliate him.

Draco desired Harry for *himself*.

And the moment he really understood that, Harry began, helplessly, to come.

The orgasm tore through his body again and again, pulses of release that always began just when he thought they'd finally ended. He was quivering, strung tight, half-dreading how good he felt even as he craved it. *God*. How could someone bear this and survive? Maybe there was a reason that this magical connection between two people was rare outside the simple rarity of two powerful wizards or witches perfectly desiring each other in the first place.

But still, he could not have wished the moment undone. He came back to himself sweat-soaked and pinned beneath Draco's weight and deliciously exhausted and with his fear and anger and self-loathing just beginning the climb back into his consciousness.

He braced his elbows beneath him on the bed, not knowing how he would move, just knowing that he had to.

Draco lifted his head and pinned Harry with a calm gaze. Harry had never seen anything like it. Trapped emotions didn't move behind that gray color like fish under glass, the way it usually happened with Draco. They were part of the serene surface. Draco had thought through what this revelation would change, and it didn't matter to him. Or, at least, the consequences were foreseen and accepted. He still wanted Harry.

Harry flinched. He couldn't help it. He recoiled from Draco even as the memories of the magical connection and the emotions they had shared drew him forward, saying all the different kinds of *yes* there were.

He wasn't—he wasn't—no one wanted him for that. Harry Potter was not whole enough to want, in either sense of the term. When he fucked men in his own guise instead of inside one of his personas, they were either Muggles or wizards who never quite saw his face and certainly never saw his scar.

Draco might want this, but his determination that they should relate to each other openly met and clashed, as it had to, with Harry's equally strong determination that they should *not* do this.

Harry kept his breathing light, even, not yet looking away from Draco. Doing so might alert him

to what Harry intended to do: Summon his wand and *Obliviate* Draco. It was the step he had been reluctant to take with Narcissa, because someone else might have noticed something off in her behavior, but he knew everything there was to know about Draco's knowledge of him. It had all transferred to his head in that one blinding moment of revelation.

And then—

The same part of him that had insisted he could not withdraw emotionally from Draco after their encounter at Clothilde Castle, a tough remaining kernel of Harry Potter, forbade him to use a Memory Charm.

Harry's breath stopped. He couldn't betray what they had just shared. He couldn't pretend that it didn't exist. And he couldn't take the memory away from Draco, either. It would have been a sin. And whilst he had been known to engage in crimes, he had never sinned against the most fundamental principles that guided him.

Draco began slowly to smile, as if the pale, frightened look even *Harry* could feel on his face were the signal he had been waiting for. Then he reached out and put a hand on Harry's sternum, fingers spread towards his heart.

"Good," he said evenly. "We have much to talk about, and I prefer we do it with our own faces. Will you not change yours, *Harry*?"

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty—Honesty, Damned Honesty*

Draco watched the shadows flicker across Harry's face as though they were the shadows of swimmers underwater. Harry swallowed twice, then reached out and picked up his wand slowly from the side of the bed. He never took his eyes from Draco.

Draco only stared back. He was certain he had judged the previous terror in Harry's expression correctly. There had been a moment when the shock was so great that the other man could think of nothing but fleeing or striking back. But if he had been going to do that, he would have done it by now. Draco's own intact memory and physical health were proof of that.

Brian's wand swished once, twice, and Brian's face vanished. Draco didn't allow the fact that he was impressed by the nonverbal reversal of Transfiguration to show. Of course Harry was

powerful; he had known that for a week now. He was more interested in seeing those flushed features change, and in monitoring his own reaction.

Brilliant blue eyes changed to brilliant green ones. Draco had been trying to imagine them, or to invent them out of his own memory, but it wasn't the same. He hadn't been able to capture the way they would shine, or how the terror remained not far from the surface. Odd terror, he thought idly. Was Harry really *that* afraid of Draco's vengeance? Even though he was the more magically powerful, and he had to know that Draco was not as angry at him as he could have been, given their emotional connection?

And the scar—the scar was back where it belonged. Draco shuddered a little with the sensation of *rightness* that traveled through him. It now seemed as though he had always known there was something off in Brian's face, and had willed him to become Harry Potter even before he became suspicious.

*Of course, perhaps that comes from your trying to rationalize your behavior after the fact.*

Draco told himself to be quiet, and instead enjoyed the fact that he had Harry Potter in his bed, naked, armed but not striking, with Draco still inside his body. Draco shifted his hips a little to emphasize that, and Harry gasped and shivered. A small reaction, but *God*, it made Draco twitch with lust and deeper feelings that he wouldn't dare try to name yet.

"Good," he said quietly. "Now, I think you have some things to explain to me. And perhaps you should try being honestthis time, hmm? You know I want the real you, so there's really no reason to lie." A Slytherin would have retorted that there was always a reason to lie, but from what Draco had seen so far of Harry's acting skill and temper and readiness to take up the cause of social justice, he would not react like a Slytherin, however cunning he might be.

Harry controlled the impulse to laugh hysterically. *Oh, yes, no reason to lie. Except that you've come closer than anyone ever has to ruining my life.*

He was ruing bitterly that he had allowed his emotional involvement with Draco to become so deep and so complex. Yes, he had enjoyed what had just happened and didn't think he could betray it. But it was flying straight for disaster. There was no way that Harry could simply hand his secrets over to the covetous hands of Draco Malfoy, and no way that Malfoy would ever relent until he had them. Everything Harry *was*, or had made himself, rebelled against this attempt at intimacy.

And as for Draco saying he wanted the real Harry Potter…

*You have no idea what you're talking about, Malfoy.*

Lying it would have to be. But he would have to be oh so careful, because of his own damn bleeding *openness* to this. So Harry relaxed, a little, and dropped his wand to his side, and stared

at his chest for a moment.

"You'll laugh," he said, aiming for the tone of someone sullen about being found out. If there was a chance Draco had recognized his more complex emotions, terror and panic and despair, Harry needed to lay down a false trail at once.

"Really." Draco shifted his hips again, and Harry arched his back in spite of himself. He hadn't had someone inside him for this long, ever. As a matter of fact, letting anyone inside him was rare; he couldn't afford to lose control like that in a situation with a client, so he fucked those men if he fucked them at all. And the ones who fucked some random Muggle bloke with green eyes and tousled black hair never know *who* they'd shagged. "I can't imagine laughing at anything you do—not in the way you mean, not sneering and smirking the way I did in school. I can imagine laughing affectionately." Malfoy—Harry had to think of him that way, had to, it was the only thing that would work—lowered his voice. "I've seen part of what you can do. I know that you've lied about your magical strength and your emotional strength to the wizarding world for the last ten years, at least. Perhaps longer. And I honestly don't think I would have caught you out if you hadn't shown that strength forth in a moment of temper. Tell me, Harry, dear one, what I would laugh at."

"Dear one" was a misstep—too light a name for what lay between them, or else mocking. Harry flung his head up in challenge, glad to take strength in the jarring note. Malfoy narrowed his eyes, nonplussed, but didn't seem to recognize his own mistake.

"A pathetic crush," Harry said defiantly. "I've wanted you for a long time, all right? Even though I've fucked other men and enjoyed it, somehow none of them quite made up for the dream of you, of *having* you. And then it turned out that you came to Metamorphosis and it—there was a chance I could have you for real." He closed his eyes. It was no trouble to conjure a flush onto his cheeks. "This whole thing was the result of some silly schoolboy crush I never managed to get over. No wonder it went south. I never had a chance of pulling off this deception when the motive was—"

Draco spread his fingers wide over Harry's sternum, digging his nails in just slightly. Harry blinked, and opened his eyes. Draco had shifted his hips again, and then leaned forwards, until his eyes were only a few inches away from Harry's.

"Stop fucking lying to me," he whispered.

Draco's mood wavered back and forth for a moment, and then dropped straight into fury. He could not accept that Harry was sprawled here in front of him, their bodies still joined, the magic that had connected their minds and emotions still ebbing around them, the air thick and musky with the smell of sex, and lying as if he expected Draco to believe every word he said.

Harry reared back a bit, and his eyes narrowed. Emotions Draco did not know and could not read sped under the surface of his gaze. For a moment, Draco wished for the magical connection

back, though it was too intense for everyday use. He would have given much to know exactly what made Harry so eager to pull away from him. Could he possibly have another lover? A partner, a commitment?

Draco shivered, his skin stung all over with his jealousy.

"I'm not lying." Harry spoke the words slowly, in the manner that one would handle a recalcitrant child, adding to Draco's fury. "I'm not proud of what I did, and you have every reason to hate me for it." On the words "hate me," he swallowed a little, as if he wanted that result and yet feared it. "You have your triumph over me now, you know, for every petty insult I hurled at you in Hogwarts." Harry looked down at Draco's hand on his chest for a moment, and his smile was bitter. "How does it feel to know that I was lusting after you for the past decade, that I couldn't wait to get into your bed? That I'd do *anything* to fuck you, even play a part I obviously wasn't very good at playing?"

A week ago, Draco would have believed him. He had been unable to imagine what motive Harry would have for playing this deception out. He had never imagined Harry could care for him so much, so perhaps this was the answer.

But no, it could not be. Draco refused to accept the notion that a skilled, accomplished liar, someone who answered him in bed and in conversation and in dancing the way Harry did, was at heart the pathetic schoolboy he was trying to portray himself as.

"You owe me more than that," he said.

"I can't give you more than the truth, can I?" Harry burst out moodily, and lifted a hand to run it through his hair, tugging fretfully. More and more of his sullenness seemed to be emerging now, Draco thought, as if he felt free to show it now that he'd told Draco the secret behind his behavior.

*Or as if he were trying to make a pose more convincing,* Draco thought, and his fury made him shake. He dug his hand deep into Potter's chest, scraping skin up under his fingernails. Potter watched him with narrowed eyes, then yelped to keep in character with his pretense, a moment too late.

"You owe *yourself* more than that," Draco told him quietly. He let no emotions into his voice now. He would use only concentration, that and the stare of his wide eyes that held Potter's and would not let him look away. "You know as well as I do that I couldn't have that kind of joining with someone who really would sacrifice everything for the chance at a fuck. Your motives are richer and more complex." He bent forwards until he was near to slipping out of Potter's body, his breath scraping across the other man's ears. "And I want to know what they were."

*Not a chance, Malfoy.*

Harry could feel his breath coming more easily now. This confrontation was more like what he had been expecting to happen if Draco ever discovered his secret. Anger, prying, desperation to see to the bottom of Harry's deception.

It was what Hermione would have done had she uncovered his secret, too. And Harry had a number of well-honed defensive strategies for that moment; he'd played them out in his mind time after time. Construct a shallow lie and insist that it was the truth no matter how many times the other person asked him—that was the strategy he had chosen to follow. Hermione, or Malfoy, would eventually think Harry didn't care enough about them to reveal the truth, and retire in frustration, cursing him. That would be the beginning of a loss of connections that Harry minded, minded terribly, but he had to preserve his solitude and his freedom to be who he needed to be at all costs.

So he held Malfoy's eyes and mocked him in silence. Yes, it was a lie. Let him know that. He would never have the truth.

Malfoy kept up the staring contest, as though he imagined that would make Harry break. Harry had experience with much more accomplished and terrifying people, though, including Voldemort. So what if his soul flinched a little every time those gray eyes darkened? This bond Malfoy wanted them to forge could never survive. Did Malfoy really imagine that he and Harry could be lovers, openly, in the public, or crusaders for the rights of pure-blood sons and daughters to love whom they pleased? No. He was not that naïve. He would gradually recognize the truth, and someday, when he was married and in possession of the Malfoy fortune and living the life he was meant to, he might even look back on this moment and thank Harry.

Harry waited until the silence had stretched some time, then said, lightly and sharply as sleet, "So. We've rather gone astray from the original goal of making your father disown you. Don't you think we should get back to that?" He began to move up the bed, not incidentally making Malfoy slip out of him.

His heart hurt. God, all of this hurt. But he would choose pain over death. He had chosen so time and again in his life. Personal pain over the death of others was an even more familiar choice, and in this case, the hundreds of lives he'd created during Metamorphosis were all at stake.

"And if," Draco said, his voice so deep that Harry had to pause and listen, he didn't have any choice, "I were to tell you that I want you, and what we could have together, more than I want the future I can have by opposing Lucius?"

Draco could feel his mouth going dry with his own impulsiveness. All the instincts he had cultivated over the years were urging him to draw back, to accept that he had made a mistake and Harry did not want him in the way Draco had thought he did. And his pride was urging him to glance away as well, to drop his eyes and let it end. He had already made one enormously brave decision by giving up his knowledge of Harry's secret and trying to make them more equal. Why should he have to continue making the sacrifices? Fuck Harry if he couldn't respond.

But he had remembered what he could lose, and what he could have, perhaps, if he took the risk. And the shadows in Harry's eyes had remained. This wasn't a withdrawal he was *happy* with. He had probably chosen it only because he was certain that doing anything else would expose him to more pain.

And why was that? Draco still could not fathom the reasons that Harry had wanted to hide his power and become Brian, particularly when he didn't seem to have used the Brian persona to establish a truly independent life, but that mattered less right now than having Harry at his side.

He rolled the dice one last time, swallowed his pride, and admitted another truth that the magic might have shown to Harry, but that Harry obviously hadn't recognized if it had.

And he knew he had chosen aright when Harry shut his eyes and began to shake.

Draco smoothed his hand back and forth over Harry's chest, ignoring everything for the moment—the trickle of semen escaping from Harry's arse, his own cock lying limp and wet between his legs, an itch on his upper shoulder blade—but the feeling of smooth skin beneath his fingers and the way Harry's breathing quickened, speeding up into the range which Draco knew meant real distress.

He had been right. Harry understood exactly what it meant for Draco to value the future with him more than a future with the Malfoy fortune.

Harry swallowed again, and made a low whining noise in his throat, as if to complain about the general unfairness of life. Draco just kept moving his hand back and forth. To try and soothe Harry now would be the wrong move, and Draco had made enough of those today. He would have to wait for Harry's pride, his strength, his sense of fair play, everything that was in him, to act as reins and bring him to Draco's side. A Gryffindor couldn't let the plea Draco had just given go unanswered.

At last, Harry slowly opened his eyes. Tears gleamed at the edges of them, or else a shine of tears suppressed, and he met Draco's gaze like a hunted animal.

"You don't know what it would mean for me to agree," Harry whispered. "I've spent—I haven't gone out in public in ten years or shown anyone the strength of my magic for a *reason*, you know."

"Tell me." Draco formed the words with the shape of his lips alone, putting no breath behind them.

Harry gazed hopelessly at him, and yet with pride and passion just beneath the surface. Draco had to work hard to keep from cracking a smile. Yes, Harry could recognize Draco's value, and he wanted him, too. Part of him must be reveling in this even as he fought it with most of himself.

"I can't have a normal life," Harry said. "The publicity, the pressure of people wanting me to play their hero even with Voldemort dead—"

"And you decided that people should think you were a pathetic recluse instead?" Draco interrupted, because he could *not* keep silent. It did fit with what he'd seen of Harry's behavior, how the idiot had tried to pretend only a ten-year-long crush had landed him in Draco's bed, but the disguise was a revolting one. There was no more reason to adopt it than to disguise oneself as a beggar instead of a prince, if one must go out in public masked. Harry certainly hadn't chosen an ugly mask when he'd created Brian, had he?

Harry gave him an incredulous stare. "Draco," he said, "I don't *want* to be admired or valued. The more I am, the greater the chance that someone would look closely at me. The greater the chance of *that*, the more likely that they would discover I was Harry Potter. Even if they didn't, they would try to recruit me into some game, political or magical or personal." Harry shrugged, looking away. "It's all games, most of the society now," he muttered. "The pure-bloods play to keep their culture alive and to arrange marriages that will give them more power. The Ministry plays to reconcile the differing elements of the wizarding world to each other without letting on that's what they're doing. And there are so many games between the different Departments of the Ministry itself that just listening to accounts of them make me dizzy."

Draco was glad Harry had turned his face away when he had. It gave him a moment more to arrange his own face into an appropriate expression, instead of the gape that he wanted to give.

Potter didn't want to be admired or valued.

Now, granted, Draco could appreciate that Harry was not the attention-seeker he'd always thought him to be in Hogwarts, but there was a difference between glorying in attention and wanting, needing, human connection. The fact that Harry didn't want other people to smile at him, touch him with gentle hands, prize him…

Something was dreadfully wrong with Harry Potter.

But Draco doubted he would get more information if he pressed now. It was, perhaps, a secret Harry would trust him with in time, as their mutual courtship continued, and he realized how deeply entwined they were with each other's lives.

And the thought of a mystery he hadn't discovered yet whetted Draco's appetite. The intense magical connections he'd read about between lovers always seemed to lead to boredom. When they knew everything about each other, what reason did they have to stay together? But this was delightfully different, a reticence Draco couldn't wait to get inside, but was sure would not be dangerous to him; Harry wouldn't let it be dangerous to him.

He pitched his voice at the same low, hypnotic level that had attracted and held Harry's attention once before. "Everything may be games, but this is a different game, Harry. A dance. A contest."

He paused delicately. "A love affair. Will you share it with me? I can think of no one else I would rather have at my side."

Harry couldn't breathe, for long moments. Even when he could, he felt as though he had just fallen from a cliff.

Suddenly, many things he had wanted without knowing he wanted them seemed within reach. He could have them if he simply stretched out a hand. Equality, a partner, freedom, a shared defense against all the people who would scorn him for revealing he was gay in public, perhaps love—

And then he remembered what he was, who he was.

Someone could have all that, yes. But that person was not the stretched, thin version of himself who huddled beneath the surface, nor the personalities he had created. They were not meant to stand the glare of the full sunlight. And Draco was falling in love, or trying to be in love, with someone who only existed in the bed with him.

Harry experienced a desperate, rich, full sadness, stronger than any emotion he'd felt in years whilst in his own skin, except for the terror when Narcissa had discovered his identity. There was no way out of this. No way to have it. No way to let Draco down gently—

So it would have to be harshly.

Harry took a deep breath, the new plan squirming into his head and taking up residence there. He would assume Draco was telling the truth for now; in fact, he'd probably used the truth as special sugared bait for the Gryffindor he assumed Harry still was. He wanted Harry, did he? Then he would seemingly be able to have him, and then Harry would show him why it couldn't work. Violently. Inside a week, so Narcissa wouldn't reveal her knowledge of Harry's identity to other people besides Draco.

It would hurt, but Harry didn't know a way to break a connection this visceral without pain. The most important part of it was ensuring that Draco could go on afterwards, that this didn't wound him mortally.

*I don't think it will,* Harry thought, staring into Draco's shining eyes. *He's a survivor. He might end up less trusting, less willing to reach out and touch someone else again, but I think that's where he was heading anyway. He never expected to find this happiness, did he? So he'll have a few shining moments of it, and that will have to be enough. It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, as the Muggle poet says.*

The voice of his conscience said, cold and quiet and clear: *You cannot do this to him. You cannot harm him in such a fashion.*

Harry, who had not lived by his conscience but by his need for the past ten years, smiled at

Draco and placed one hand in his. "Yes," he said. "A different game begins this moment, I think."

*I still don't have him entirely.*

Draco wanted to be frustrated for a moment, but the smugness he felt at partially capturing Harry was too delicious. Probably, Harry's inexplicable reluctance was connected to whatever secret he still concealed. But Draco could charm him out of the one and discover the other, and he was sure that it would only make him fall further in love with Harry.

*Could I fall in love with him?*

*If I couldn't, then I would know by now.*

Draco leaned forwards and kissed Harry lightly. Harry returned the kiss with his eyes half-shut, his lips parting and his tongue darting uneasily around Draco's, as though he thought he should somehow kiss differently with his real face revealed.

"Now," Draco whispered, leaning back, "I think we should discuss the next phase of the rebellion. I assume that you arranged a meeting with the rest of the dissidents for a certain time and place. What was it?"

Harry smiled, a half-startled expression, as if he hadn't thought Draco good enough to be able to reason that out. "Yes," he began. "Four-o'clock tomorrow, in an old house at…"

*There's a lot you don't know about me,* Draco thought as he listened, his desire growing. *But now that I don't have to pretend I don't know who you are, I can show myself more honestly and openly. You're going to fall in love, too, Harry. I think you may already be halfway there, from what I saw in the magic, but halfway isn't good enough.*

*I don't mind falling, as long as you fall alongside me.*

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Chapter: 21

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-One—The State of the Art*

They settled the details gradually. Both Harry and Draco would attend the meeting of the rebels

tomorrow, and make sure that word of Draco's presence among dissidents reached Lucius, though only after the meeting itself was over, so as not to threaten the safety of those involved. Among other things, Draco would meet with Nusante and arrange to fund more plays, or different projects that might promote the message that homosexuality was normal, even beautiful. And Draco would alert his contacts and sympathetic friends in his own circle to be alert for possible Counterstrike activities.

And Harry would remain disguised.

Draco stared at him when he said that he had to stay Brian Montgomery, then smiled and adopted a falsely reasonable tone. "But you must know that you could propel the rebellion much faster if you went as Harry Potter," he said, his hand smoothing up and down Harry's chest. He seemed addicted to touching the skin there, and though Harry thought it was strange, he was also glad. The continuation of one tender gesture would make it easier for him to become accustomed to it quickly, and thus immune to it altogether. "Some people would support it just because of who you are. We'd get positive coverage along with negative. There would be talk about the appeal of the rebellion spanning generations, because they *do* think of us as part of a different generation than people like Nusante, who were children during the war—"

Harry simply shook his head. "I told you I have a reason for the lies I've built up to surround my true identity," he said.

"Yes?" Draco's face flushed and shone. He even leaned forwards, as if he thought he might be let in on the secret right this moment. Harry did his best not to look at the other man with pity. *He saw through all my lies just a few moments ago. How can he mistake me so badly now?*

Of course, Draco had no idea about Metamorphosis at all, which gave Harry an enormous advantage over him. And Harry intended to see to it that he never learned.

"Well," said Harry, "why did you think I would appear in public by your side as long as that secret still obtains?"

Draco sucked in a harsh breath and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You're gay. You've never admitted your orientation aloud to the public, so you must be afraid of the backlash it would cause."

Harry raised his eyebrows, because the recital of bare facts was not like Draco.

"Why won't you support this rebellion as yourself?" Draco again stared into his eyes. Harry wondered what in the world he expected to find there. "From a distance, if not under your own face and name at first. It would make things easier for you in the end as well as for me and Nusante's circle."

Harry shrugged. "I know that," he said. "But I have no particular desire to *ever* come out. I hope this succeeds, because you've exposed yourself to accusations and hatred already, and someone

like Nusante could never be happy as long as he hides. I can."

Draco's gaze grew piercing again. Harry returned it tranquilly. He was already building another personality he could show to Draco, drawing back from the dangerous intimacy the emotional connection had caused them. Because their minds and emotions were no longer joined, Harry didn't have to be *sure* that Draco would catch him in a lie. He could create a seemingly compliant, sullen, complex Harry Potter persona who already had all his traits Draco knew about, as well as the iron strength that would enable him to carry out the break from Draco. The real, weak Harry Potter was safely buried once again.

And whenever Harry suffered a qualm or a wish that things could be different, that he could actually step up to Draco's side and accept whatever came, he reminded himself of how anxious and hurt he'd been during the few moments when Draco had access to the crumbling fragments of himself. No. He was not that person right now. He was the Harry who could coldly evaluate the situation and do what was *necessary*.

It was a sacrifice, oh yes, but there was nothing heroic about it this time. That ought to give Harry the necessary distance from the few remaining parts of himself.

"The Potter I knew back in school would have had more courage than this," said Draco at last, his voice soft, his face constrained and brooding.

"The Potter you knew back in school isn't the one here in this bed with you," said Harry, his voice cool. "Now, I would suggest simply accepting what I'm willing to give you. Attempt to trumpet my name from the rooftops and I'll *Obliviate* you."

Draco reared back, his face flushing again, and this time not with excitement. "You fucker," he hissed.

*Yes, that's this Harry.*

"You know I won't do that," Draco went on.

Harry held his gaze for a moment longer, then dipped his head. Draco would remember the moment before the submission later, when Harry had betrayed him, but for right now the apology was important. "I'm sorry," he muttered, and managed to make it sound sullen but sincere. "Still resentful that you found me out so easily, I suppose."

For a few tense moments, Draco lay regarding him like a coiled snake. Then he nodded, though his mouth didn't smooth out into a smile. "It was inevitable. You're not a natural actor, you know."

Harry simply shrugged, whilst inside his buried self shrieked with mad laughter. *As long as he's looking in* that *direction, he's never going to find anything out. It's the persona of Brian I played badly, not every part in general.*

"And I won't betray you," Draco said, kissing him on the cheek this time. "We'll wait until the moment when we can announce that Draco Malfoy was dating Harry Potter under their noses all along. And then—what a reaction, Harry!" His voice turned soft with enthusiasm. "Can't you just see it?"

*Oh, yes.* Draco might make that announcement later if he would, though Harry doubted he'd publicly choose to display how easily he'd been fooled. Harry would by then have the protection of his wards and his lies bound around him, and he'd have managed to subdue what he felt for Draco. The pounding of his heart and the sweat creeping along the nape of his neck, beneath his hair, told him of the panic and the pain he was keeping at bay, the yearning to collapse into Draco's arms which he had to counter with hard practicality.

"I can," he said, and then put his arms around Draco and gave him a long kiss good-bye, a little too wet, a little too strong, to begin sowing the suspicions that would tear them apart.

Draco lay still when Harry had left, his eyes closed. He knew something had happened between the first passionate moments when he'd been so certain he'd make Harry his and the time Harry left, once again expertly donning Brian's face before he passed the door. But he had no idea what it might have been.

Some treading close to Harry's buried secret? But Draco could not imagine that Harry would have created an elaborate edifice of lies simply to conceal a lack of courage. Someone that afraid wouldn't have been able to leave his house. And Draco had seen that Harry still possessed nerve, and daring, and the ability to act quickly under curses.

Somehow Harry had lost confidence in himself whilst retaining enough confidence to become an actor and join in a wizarding community where he stood a good chance of being recognized for his magic and even date an old enemy. Draco had no idea how both things could be true at once, but he was sure they were, and sure they were connected, and sure that he could discover said connection in the end.

His mind lingered on certain memories of the time they'd just spent together, and Draco let them come. Sometimes he thought best like this, when he could put together random insights and snippets of conversation and let them form their own associations. At the moment, his mind best liked the sight of Harry's wrist as he flicked his wand to Transfigure the color of his eyes, the angles of his face, and that stupid scar. Over and over again Draco watched the motion dance across the back of his eyelids, before he began to wonder what was special about it. His memory itself was balked, certain the motion was important, but unable to go further.

Yes, it resembled the Seeker's catch Draco had seen Harry use before the Aurors left. But it was more than that. It was…

But no matter how Draco reached out for the association, it wouldn't come, so he began listing

adjectives to describe the motion instead. Confident, in that paradoxical way. Reminiscent of wanking, though Draco had never seen Harry do that. Strong. Practiced—

Draco's eyes flew open. Yes, that it was it, practiced. Harry had quite often applied the Transfiguration spells to his eyes and face, then. How long had he been Brian? How many times had he changed his face and then slipped out of his house to walk among and socialize with the oblivious wizarding community?

Strange that his persona had crumbled the first time he'd tried it in intimate contact.

Draco smirked a little. *Maybe it's not that Harry's a terrible actor. Maybe he just can't resist me.*

Satisfied that he had solved the little puzzle of that wrist motion, Draco sat up and opened his eyes briskly. He had a damage campaign to run, on two sides—persuading his father that his support for the rebellion of young artists was sincere and deep, and persuading his friends that this movement could benefit them too.

*Mrs. Malfoy:*

*Your son now knows my real identity, but we have a problem on our hands. He wants to keep dating me. Your revealing that you know could only make him a little angrier than he already was at me for fooling him.*

*Of course, I am still sensible of the fact that you don't want him dating me at all. I've come up with a plan that should snap me free of him inside the deadline you've proposed. Draco is seventy-five percent pure pride, and he's persuaded that we share a deep and intimate connection. I'm going to pretend to cheat on him, and then let him catch me at it. That will cause an enormous wound to his pride and shatter his vision of me. It should be enough. I doubt he'll ever mention my name in your hearing again, or at least it will be only to affix a curse to the end of it.*

*You've probably realized by now that the pathetic act I played in front of you was a lie. Therefore, you may ask, and with good reason, why you should trust me now. If you test the parchment of this letter, you'll find that it's Flourish and Blott's Lie-Proof variety, often used for the more competitive exams in the Ministry. Everything I write now is true, and you would have seen the scrawled and stricken-out words if it wasn't. Take all the time you need to research the properties of this parchment; I only ask that you reply to me on the same kind.*

*Harry Potter.*

Harry signed with a flourish. His name, at the moment, didn't belong to him; it belonged to the persona who had composed this letter, the tough, cold, committed man who'd lain in bed with Draco those last few moments. Harry could come close to admiring that name when he knew it wasn't a weakling who bore it.

When he'd sent the letter off by owl, he stood in front of the mirror and critically examined his eyes, using various color charms to switch them to brown, then to gray, and then to hazel. Hazel it would be for his disguise tomorrow, he decided; it was a light, pleasing color, as unlike the intense shades of his or Brian's eyes as possible, and Draco must not stand a chance of guessing that Harry was in the same room with him.

Even though "Brian" would apparently be standing him up, and would arrive late, flushed, and sweaty, with vague excuses for his behavior. Draco would wonder where he had been. Harry would refuse to answer, and become peeved if Draco persisted in his questioning. That would be the first trail laid down that Draco could follow to discover Harry's supposed infidelity to him.

But because Harry did want to help the rebellion a little if he could and keep an eye on the meeting in case they were raided by Counterstrike or the Aurors, he would be on the stage itself.

Or Elizabeth Gouldier, bisexual half-blood woman living in the Muggle world and passionate supporter of all kinds of sexual freedom, would be.

Harry hummed under his breath as he selected and then discarded several different sets of robes. The persona of Elizabeth was emerging in his mind, and her tastes in clothing developed even as she did. Harry finally settled on a set of plain, sandy robes that would suit Elizabeth's preference for straightforward dealing. He put them on and faced the mirror again.

Four softly chanted spells later, and Harry's body wavered as his center of gravity shifted. The skin of his chest puckered and stretched, fat flowing into newly created hollows just above his ribs, and he had breasts. His hair turned softer and finer, wispy black strands with the consistency and texture of Draco's, and dropped into a style that covered his scar. Elizabeth's features were broader than Harry's, less attractive, except for her mouth, which Harry had sculpted into a thick pair of lips so red it looked as if she were wearing Muggle cosmetics.

Harry smiled at his new reflection and swung into the series of spells that would lighten and lift his voice, widen his hips, strengthen his thighs. His groin he left untouched, but a complicated charm ensured that it would look perfectly smooth and flat to anyone who insisted on looking, and that most people wouldn't be all that interested in paying attention, anyway. Harry was confident with the spells that grew his breasts when he passed as a woman—men had nipples and the remnants of mammary glands, too—but the complicated Transfiguration that would change his inner organs and genitals was one he'd never mastered, given everything else he had to study. He could remain woman above and man below, and as long as he took care with his clothing and the way he moved, he had no trouble.

Besides, what did people see when they looked at a woman or a man? Most times, not the *person.* They saw the way the man or woman moved, talked, gestured, sat; the lifting and lowering of eyes; the ingrained caution that women showed when alone in the presence of a strong man or walking after dark. Give them what they expected, imitate well, and people were usually more satisfied with the surface than the real thing.

Harry ought to know.

He felt a dizzy rush of exhilaration that was partially an emotion Elizabeth would feel, but also partially his own. How could he *ever* give this up? This was art; it was haven and refuge; it was pleasure and home.

And Draco, like anyone else, would want to set boundaries on it. He would be horrified, or disgusted, or worried, like Hermione, that Harry was losing himself; or, if he wasn't, he would still insist that Harry adopt a certain personality at certain times, rather than whatever personality suited the occasion. Would he really want to take hundreds of people to bed, or a man capable of containing hundreds of people? Harry didn't think so. Draco probably wouldn't have been happy if he'd known there were three versions of Harry Potter in bed with him that afternoon, the weak one and the open one that enjoyed their emotional connection and the cold one that had begun the first steps in rejecting him.

It wasn't something Harry could see himself giving up. He would lose not just a source of income if he closed Metamorphosis, but the keenest joy in his life.

And then he laughed, and stopped being any version of Harry Potter, and turned into Elizabeth.

Draco sat down cautiously on one chair in the circle of thirty or thirty-five within the old manor house. A quick Vanishing spell got rid of most of the dust, at last; a muttered *Reparo* took care of the chair's tendency to creak alarmingly beneath him.

He hadn't managed to persuade Pansy to come with him, but she had agreed, reluctantly, to attend the next pro-gay play or project that Draco managed to argue Nusante into. She didn't have much reason to support this cause as a cause, Draco considered. On the other hand, Draco was her friend, and she had to consider that relaxing standards in pure-blood society would benefit her, too, in the future, enabling her to meet more openly with her Muggle lover.

*If she can see that, and she's not even gay, why can't Harry? Sure, he wants to hide now, but he'll want what we could have together as partners more.*

Speaking of which, where *was* Harry? Draco glanced around the room twice, and still couldn't see him, only chattering young witches and wizards who wore robes in deliberately outrageous colors and gave the cobbled-together platform in the front of the room that would serve as a stage covert glances. Harry had better not have stood him up. Draco would come to events like these if they would benefit him in the long run, but not alone, particularly not when the *Prophet* had made such a big story of his love affair with Brian.

A witch stepped onto the stage, smiling out at the crowd. Draco gave her an uninterested glance. She wasn't someone he found attractive; the unfortunate cow had been born with lips too large and breasts smaller than Draco liked to feel pressing against his chest when he fucked a woman.

And she wore robes not at all flattering to her figure. Draco had little patience with lesbians who didn't know how to dress. How did they expect to catch the eye of a pure-blood woman accustomed to beauty if they did that?

"Good afternoon," the woman began in a ringing voice, which, for all its lightness—she had a rather good soprano—managed to fill up the room. "My name is Elizabeth Gouldier, and I'm a backer of this new movement." Her hazel eyes flashed as she looked around the room, her head swinging wildly, and Draco had no doubt her enthusiasm was unfeigned. "I've been waiting for something like this for a long, long time. If you'll sit down, then I'll tell you how we can manage to keep from getting overwhelmed in the first few weeks."

People scrambled generally to settle into their chairs. Draco looked around again, and this time couldn't help the frown that twisted his lips, though he blanked his face immediately afterwards. No, Harry wasn't there. Well, perhaps he had encountered some importuning from his friends to spend the afternoon with them. He would hardly have been able to explain that he was expected as Draco Malfoy's date at a secret rally for the rebellion.

Draco smiled at the image that presented itself to him, but his amusement damped into irritation quickly when he realized exactly how easily Harry could have avoided a situation like that—*if* he had been willing to come out as himself and take a public stand at Draco's side.

Gouldier said, "Thank you. Now, I've lived most of the last ten years in the Muggle world, and paid some attention to how gay and lesbian Muggles conducted their affairs." She paused to share in the laugh that went around the room. "An unfortunate choice of words, perhaps," she continued. "But there's a variety of tactics they used, and which we also can."

Draco looked over his shoulder. No door opening there; no Harry staggering in to apologize for his lateness. Draco curled his fingers into his palms, and wondered if Harry had perhaps been caught by someone who recognized his disguise and wanted to show him exactly what they thought of men who kissed other men in the middle of Diagon Alley.

The horrified, outraged coverage of Nusante's play in the *Daily Prophet*, which had pleased Draco because it had made his father stare at him with burning eyes all morning, suddenly seemed dangerous.

Gouldier was talking about marches and protests, literature and pamphlets and ways to teach people that being gay wasn't vastly different from the more "conventional" sexual practices that many wizards indulged in. Draco didn't pay much attention. He would only contribute money for now, anyway, since he could get all the notoriety he needed for doing so and not as much danger. Worry and anger, alternating and mixing together, consumed him, as he wondered what might have befallen Harry.

He had forgotten the bad part of dating someone he genuinely liked and was attracted to: it left him vulnerable to sudden and unexpected blows from any direction.

Gouldier talked for nearly half-an-hour, finishing to applause that rang like her voice. She bowed and slipped from the stage, and Nusante stood to talk about the ways in which artists could contribute to the movement. Draco clenched the sides of the chair to keep himself sitting still. It wouldn't look good if he stood now and walked away from the man he was sponsoring, but God damn it, he wanted to know where Harry was.

The door of the room opened at last, perhaps a quarter of the way into Nusante's speech, and Harry hurried in in his Brian disguise, flashing embarrassed smiles at everyone who turned to stare. He pulled the door quietly shut and flopped down in the seat next to Draco, panting. His hair was mussed, and there was a flush on his cheeks, as if he had been flying. Draco stirred restlessly. He hadn't thought Harry would risk it, not when Brian wasn't known as a flyer and Harry Potter was supposedly staying inside his house. Did he fly often? Draco didn't know, and he wanted to.

More than that, though, he wanted Harry to take that stupid disguise off. He hadn't anticipated how much seeing his lover with blue eyes would bother him, after Harry had worn green ones when they'd talked with partial honesty yesterday.

"Where have you been?" he hissed into Harry's ear.

Harry blinked and gave Draco a startled look, as though he couldn't comprehend his lateness would have been a problem. Then he flushed, looked at his hands, and muttered, "Out." He rearranged the collar of his robes and cleared his throat, pretending to listen intently to what Nusante said.

Draco's gaze followed the motions of his fingers. There was a dark mark on the side of Harry's neck, the shadow of a bruise perhaps.

Or lips.

Draco drew in a harsh breath. The image that struck him was vivid and hurtful: Harry in the arms of another man, tilting his head back, baring his throat. Perhaps he'd even let *that* lover see his real face.

Draco had nothing to give his suspicions ground, and there might well be a better explanation. But now he was struggling with another slew of emotions he hadn't expected to feel around Harry Potter, and he didn't like the sensation that he might soon lose his footing altogether.

Harry watched Draco's reaction from beneath lowered lashes. Draco was hiding it well; Harry doubted anyone who glanced at them would notice anything amiss. But he had one corner of his lip caught firmly between his teeth, and a shutter had fallen somewhere behind the surface of those expressive gray eyes, trapping some of his emotions beneath.

Harry concealed a smile. He was the cool bastard Harry Potter right now, and this was exactly

what the bastard wanted to happen.

Even better, he had been close to Draco as Elizabeth for thirty minutes and Draco hadn't looked twice. No, he really *didn't* think Harry had any acting ability, and Elizabeth's magical signature was so different from Harry's that he had no reason to suspect her. Harry would be able to keep up the Metamorphosis business after this and didn't need to worry, even if he encountered Draco as part of the social circles his personas moved in.

He was debating a few needling words in Draco's general direction when he felt a sensation like a cool finger jabbing him in the chest. He immediately stiffened. The sensation was the one that had awakened him from Draco's sleeping charm yesterday—the spell that let him know Aurors were near by sensing the fabric of their robes.

"Harry?" Draco, damn him, had noticed the small movement, and his hand came over to cover Harry's shoulder, warm and distracting.

And then radiance like sheet lightning cut through the doors of the house, and consumed Harry—and, from the shrieks, others—in terrible pain.

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Chapter: 22

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Two—In Midst of Battle*

Draco cried out as something cut him from the back, slicing a long, jagged line between his shoulder blades. He dropped to the floor, and, though it hurt, rolled over and under his chair so that any other spells which flew through the door would have less of a chance of hitting him. He had never been a master strategist, but he *did* remember where the doors of the room were, and thought it likely that any attack was coming from there.

He wished he could reach for his wand and heal himself, but people were screaming around him, and one of the voices was Harry's. Draco had no way of knowing if Harry had suffered the same thing he had or something more serious. Did the attackers have an extensive knowledge of curses, or had they depended on one alone to destroy the room and their opponents?

*No use speculating yet,* Draco told himself, and forced his eyes open. There had been an enormous dazzle of white light that had blinded him, but it was gone now, and he must see what had happened.

The room was full of shouting, screaming, panicked people, not including a few who lay still and face-down. Each of them seemed to have a bloody gash in the middle of their back. Some were also clutching singed robes. Draco nodded. A combination of a Cutting Curse and a Lightning Curse, then, the latter probably useful only for the blinding effects and to scare Nusante's group a little.

He turned to look at Harry, and found him already on one knee, his wand in his hand, his eyes cool and traveling the length of the room and then back again. Draco shook his head. At the moment, he wouldn't ask where in the world Harry had learned to move like an Auror, but he would demand an explanation later.

*For that and so much else.*

"Who?" he asked, pitching his voice low. If anyone in the room was likely to know, it was Harry, but the others might find it odd that Draco was speaking to his boyfriend as if he were an expert on the situation.

"Aurors," said Harry. "My charm told me that someone wearing Auror robes is out there, and probably several people."

Draco stared. He knew some Aurors were just as hateful towards homosexuality as anyone else in the wizarding world, but that they would take an enormous, coordinated action like this against normal people, when they had to know what would happen if they were found out—

*So perhaps they don't plan to be found out.*

Before Draco could deal in his mind with the full consequences of that notion, another curse hurtled through the doors. This was a red liquid that flew over the heads of the ducking and screaming crowd and lodged like a blob of mucus on the opposite wall. Then it began to steam, and the air filled with fumes. Draco held his breath instinctively and turned in the direction of pounding feet.

Harry seized his arm. "Follow my lead!" he yelled into Draco's ear. "I know that curse, and I know how to get rid of it, but it's a complicated incantation. I'll need you to defend my back whilst I speak the spell."

Draco nodded, then snorted when Harry added, "And don't breathe that stuff in if you can avoid it!"

"That, I think I could figure out without any help from you," Draco snapped, but Harry had already turned to face the far wall, windmilling his wand through a wide pattern as he began to chant. Draco leaned against Harry, back-to-back, and waited until the first seven attackers were fully in the room before he struck.

Mindful of the fact that the curses used so far hadn't actually been Dark Arts, Draco chose a

devastating but still legal spell that exploded the floor in front of the Aurors, causing them to go flying backwards or, more than once, take splinters of flying stone and wood in their faces. One of them cried out, and Draco felt a stab of vicious satisfaction.

But his advantage didn't last for long. The attackers got used to the idea that someone was striking back easily enough, and then a storm of curses were flying at Draco, who had to spend more of his time constructing Shield Charms than taking the offensive.

And no one else in Nusante's group seemed to be fighting back at all. The Aurors, mostly men and women in nondescript dark clothing, were steadily closing in on Draco, and he knew his shields would weaken without some reinforcement.

Snarling, Draco prepared himself to stand it as long as he could.

Harry quelled the temptation to turn around and see what Draco was doing only with difficulty. He could hear grunts and curses and harsh breaths working out of the body pressed against his. That didn't matter, he told himself again and again. Focus on the curse on the wall. Clear the air. Those were the tasks he'd assigned to himself, and those were the tasks he had to accomplish.

It didn't help that the countercurse for this particular spell involved work on two separate levels: one to dissipate it and one to contain the fumes and keep them from wiping the memories of the people in the room clear, as they were designed to do. Harry had to chant steadily, conquering the temptation to take deep breaths in recompense, whilst performing the complicated wand motions that caged the fumes just beyond his face.

He narrowed his focus down, calling on the parts of the cool Harry Potter persona that had the strength to refuse Draco and even run a deception on him, ignoring the way people in the corner of his eye writhed and struggled and cried. The fumes bent away from him, wavered, and then flowed in a long plumed line towards the Aurors. Harry called them back with a sharp wand movement; he didn't want to be accused of poisoning his enemies later, however tempting the notion might be.

One more push and pulse of magic, his will flowing through the incantation along with his words, and the blob of the curse vanished from the far wall. The fumes dissipated with it, sucked into a hole that opened in the air. Harry hissed in triumph and reached around, steering Draco with him so that they stayed back-to-back.

He had the time to see that Draco's face was gray with pain, he was limping, and there was a long streak of blood down his side, joining the blood from the wound the Cutting Curse had made on his back.

And then Harry's anger and the need for defense combined, and dropped him into the middle of a personality he had only ever experienced in battle.

He hurled the first curses that came to mind, choosing ones that hovered just on this side of illegal but not Dark, forcing the Aurors back—and he recognized some of their faces; had the Ministry gone *completely* mad?—and then going to work to knock them down and keep them down. Incantations left his tongue and his lips stinging with how fast they flew. Constructing Shield Charms with a good portion of his power left him free to fight on the offensive most of the time, because he was strong enough for it to take twenty or more spells before his shields would begin to crack and bent. He was moving miles mentally whilst physically keeping almost still, his back against Draco's, though he dodged and weaved as necessary.

He became pure war, and all thoughts of other strategies, other personas, other ways of being, were stripped away and left far behind him.

Draco was sure, now, that Harry had to have received Auror training.

There was no other source for that combination of grace and skill with which Harry moved behind him, tossing off spells that flung the attackers from their feet, spells that bound them to the floor, spells that dazzled and confused and made illusions burn in front of their eyes so that they struck at the invisible and the imaginary. Yes, with his power he could have learned spells like that on his own, outside the confines of the Auror program, but where had he learned to *combine* them? How had he known which ones worked well together? How did he know which spells the Ministry classified as Dark Arts and which they didn't?

On the other hand, watching could only go so far. Draco had taken the chance to heal the wounds on his back and side, and do what he could to ease the pain in his battered leg; healing muscle aches and soreness was not a specialty of his. He wanted to show that he had some part in this battle, too. It would give him good publicity, in a way, demonstrating that he was serious about the people and the ideals he had committed to. And it would be a nasty surprise for Lucius, who Draco thought must have had something to do with this raid.

He waited for a pause, as the remaining attackers backed away from Harry and conversed together about the way they could get around him, and then tugged on Harry's arm. Harry whirled around, glaring.

"*What*?" he snapped.

Draco choked on swallowed air. Harry looked magnificent, his hair tousled and blown-back as by a strong wind, his eyes brilliant even behind their disguise. Draco felt himself grow half-hard. It was a struggle to ignore that response.

"Let me," he whispered. "I think I know something that will knock them out."

"I'm doing all right." Harry dragged a hand through his hair and countered a spell that an overconfident witch flung at his back without even turning around. She quickly retreated to the huddle of her allies.

"I know you are," Draco said, "but we still don't know who these people are or where they came from, and there might be reinforcements arriving at any time. Besides, they have some measure of you now. When they strike again, it's going to be specifically to counter the tactics you've been using against them, and they might succeed if they coordinate their magic."

Harry drew his breath in as if to respond, then paused and cocked his head. Emotions raced across his face, so many of them that Draco had to fight the urge to take an involuntary step back. There were many people struggling in front of him, it seemed, not just one. And then Harry bowed his head, and the door slammed on the glimpses of hidden depth that Draco had seen.

"Very well," Harry said, and moved out of the way. Draco stepped up beside him and raised his wand.

The Aurors, or whoever they really were, immediately started raising Shield Charms. Draco sneered at them. Such plebeian tactics stood no chance of working against what he planned to use now.

Slipping one hand into a pocket of his robe, he closed it around a smooth glass vial. He carried this potion for emergencies only; he didn't exactly want the Ministry to get wind of his brewing skills or the ingredients that had gone into the potion. But no one on the opposite side would stop or slow down, and no one had shown hesitation at the sight of his hair and face, so the Malfoy name wouldn't carry the day this time. This *qualified* as a damn emergency.

Besides, if he did this right, none of the enemy would be in a position to report much about the potion.

Draco pulled the cork from the vial and flung it in a high, twisting course, over the Shield Charms and down inside them. The vial spun end over end, and the liquid inside sprayed like heavy rain across the faces and robes of the Aurors. Someone laughed, as if relieved there was no more to the attack, though many wands remained cautiously trained on Draco.

Draco closed his eyes and braced himself for the onslaught.

It started with a shimmer in front of his eyes, as if from one of Harry's illusion spells. Then his field of vision flooded with information: faces, voices, memories, pains, pleasures, maps. The potion had spilled into the eyes of at least some of the attackers and was bringing the contents of their plundered minds into Draco's head.

The potion was one that Severus Snape had invented, but never had the chance to use. It would have been too risky to steal Death Eaters' secrets, and he had no one worth using it on where Dumbledore and his followers were concerned. But he had field-tested it on Muggles, and passed the recipe on to Draco during those nightmarish few days when they had run from Hogwarts together. Draco was confident it would work.

The images sorted themselves out, the repetitions fading, the overlaps condensing into clear pictures. At once Draco knew that these were indeed Aurors from the Ministry, chosen carefully for their special dislike of homosexuality. They were going after a "terrorist" group that they'd been informed had started the riot in the Theater-in-the-Round yesterday. They were to round up all the people they found in this house and bring them to the Ministry for questioning, keeping the capture quiet enough that it would never reach the newspapers.

None of the people whose minds he read, to Draco's frustration, knew anything about the *source* of the information on the meeting.

He opened his eyes and watched the secondary effect of the potion with some satisfaction. Their minds suddenly and violently emptied by the action of the potion—the memories would be replaced and regrown in time, but not for a few hours—the Aurors simply collapsed. Those who had managed to block the potion from pulling anything from their minds were exhausted by the struggle, and joined their comrades in unconsciousness. The floor was suddenly littered with three dozen fallen Aurors, and the air laced with traces of dissipating Shield Charms.

Draco smiled and turned to face Harry.

The expression of devastated admiration on Harry's features, false though they were, was everything he could have hoped for, and it grew deeper as Draco explained, calmly, just who these wizards and witches were, and what they had come here to do.

Harry was good with magic. He had always enjoyed spectacular effects. Some of his favorite memories centered on the demonstration of Patronus Charms, deadly curses that would kill the caster if they were used wrong, and the skillful layered glamours he had seen applied by some of the teachers he'd studied with.

But he had never seen anything as inexpressibly *wonderful* as the way in which Draco Malfoy folded his arms and bowed his head—

And his enemies collapsed in front of him, whilst Draco stood as patient and immovable as some Muggle Zen student.

Draco was a skillful businessman and a skilled player of the games that occupied the upper pure-blood classes. But Harry had not realized before that he might also know the right thing to do in a tight corner; *that* seemed to be the way in which this Draco had changed the most from the one Harry had known at school. He was clever, and thought on the fly as well as in long-range plans. Harry admired improvisation, and it was the one quality he had assured himself Draco did not have.

Now, here, Harry could see that he did.

He fought to keep his mind on the words, to realize that these were Aurors who had come with

official sanction from the Ministry and the danger that might pose. Of course, he had to ask Draco what the potion had done. Draco explained.

And when Harry realized Draco had stood motionless through an assault of reverse Legilimency, his admiration only increased. That had been something he'd never been able to do in his own lessons with Snape.

"Harry?"

Draco was eyeing him strangely, he realized, one hand reaching out as if he thought he would have to grip Harry's shoulder and brace him against losing his balance. His face also seemed closer than before, though Harry was sure he had not stepped nearer since he began telling the story.

*I must have moved closer to him.*

And the truth of what this admiration could mean burst in front of his eyes like a firework.

He stepped hastily back, avoiding Draco's hand, and shut his eyes as if in intense concentration. In truth, he simply wanted a few minutes to organize his thoughts in the packed layers they should have already assumed.

This admiration for Draco did not belong to the persona he had chosen for today, the one who could survive a battle and create the illusion of another lover. It belonged to the Harry who had briefly joined Draco in bed yesterday, the one who was open and which Draco would probably call the "real" Harry.

It was the first time Harry could remember that he'd lost conscious control of a persona when he hadn't been under great stress.

*No,* he thought then, recalling the moment when his Brian disguise had shattered, at least in the eyes of Narcissa and Draco. *There was no imperative for you to do that, no exhaustion or extreme grief. There was nothing to make you do that but indignation on Draco's behalf. Draco has been the common factor in every risk you've taken in the past week, every slip, every near-disaster, every cracking in the mask or breaking of the disguise. He can make you do this when no other person has ever been able to.*

Panic caught Harry's lungs in an iron hand. He shivered, and then shivered again. What he *really* wanted was to bolt out of the house and leave everything—the rebellion, Nusante, the conflict with the Aurors, Draco's efforts to get disowned, the sexual entanglement that had sprung up between the two of them—behind. He would return to Metamorphosis and take up a new case. It was the only solution challenging and intriguing enough to make him think about *it* instead of thinking about Draco. The way he cared about Draco was twisting and glittering in him like a disease or a time-delayed Imperius, controlling his actions and influencing his thoughts even when he believed he was free of it.

"Harry." Draco's voice had a snap to it, as if he had called Harry's name more than once and heard no response. Harry opened his eyes and hoped fervently that that wasn't true. It would indicate a lack of responsiveness to the real world, a vanishing into the internal turmoil he ought to have been able to still, even worse than what he'd already suffered so far. "What are we going to do about the Aurors?"

"Oh, that's easy enough," Harry said. "You said your potion wouldn't leave them with any memory of the attack."

Draco snarled a little. "No, it won't, but you mistake my point. *Someone* in the Ministry will still know about the raid and remember that they've been sent on it. We can't hide that this happened."

"Yes, we can," Harry said, surprised that Draco had taken up revolutionary politics without studying the tactics of revolutions. Elizabeth Gouldier had certainly talked about them in detail. Hadn't Draco been listening? "We'll go underground, that's all. Not be as public as before. We're going to win support still, but we'll be doing it through rumor and art and parties targeted at that younger set we'll be pulling most from anyway. People of your generation."

Draco's brow wrinkled. "And your generation, too, Harry," he said quietly. "You're two months younger than I am, after all."

Harry took a deep breath to damp a spark of irrational anger. Draco kept trying to insist that Harry was in this with him, that they were, somehow, together. If that meant emphasizing the most trivial bonds they shared, Draco obviously wasn't above doing it.

"I'm not a pure-blood," he said, smiling at Draco. "You saw how badly my attempts to play one collapsed." *Make your weakness your strength. Convince Draco that you're not a natural actor, and that you're not acting now.* "Anyway, we'll make sure that the next meeting is much better protected. I have some ways that we can locate the traitor who might have told the Ministry about this." He nodded to Draco. "Until I owl you. I need to go help Nusante organize the removal from this house and make sure no one breathed the fumes."

He turned away, and Draco's hand closed on his elbow like a steel wire. Harry wasn't sure what he despised more: the panic tightening his chest up again when he knew perfectly well he was magically and physically strong enough to break free from Draco's hold, or the longing to stand there in the hold, not resist, move closer.

*I'm breaking. Pieces and pieces of my selves mixing. Why can't they all be obedient enough to stay in their proper places?*

"We still need to talk about two things," Draco said tightly. "First of all, if no one can remember this attack, how is being at this meeting going to help me get disowned?"

Harry raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Do you think your father is going to be satisfied with the

result of this raid, especially when he and Counterstrike probably instigated it? You can hint easily enough that you were here, and even that you had something to do with stopping it. Does he know about that potion you used?" Draco shook his head. "Well, drop what hints you can without revealing its existence. When a strange, powerful event centered on a Malfoy happens, I'm sure he'll be happy to swallow the notion that you were responsible. Or I can show up in my Brian disguise if you want and talk cryptically about the raid."

Draco simply nodded, which could have been an answer to several parts of Harry's statement or just one of them, and then said, "The second thing is why you were late." He turned Harry to one side and touched the bruise on the side of his neck. "Does it have something to do with this?"

Harry froze when he felt Draco's fingers brush his neck. The immediate response was one of vulnerability, but he didn't want to pull away to physically protect himself. Instead, he just barely kept from leaning towards Draco and begging for a deeper touch, for—

*What the fuck is* wrong *with you?* shrieked the voice of his cold Harry Potter persona. *You've known Draco as he is for a few days. That's not enough time to form an emotional connection of this depth and magnitude, and I don't care how great the sex is. You're reacting irrationally, and you'll give up your whole life for him if you don't watch out—at which point he'll despise you.*

That thought gave Harry the strength to yank away, easily breaking Draco's hold on his wrist. He snarled at him, said, "How much do you really know about me? *Think really hard,* Draco," and then strode towards Nusante.

He could feel Draco's eyes on his back, but he was sure they held no understanding. He was already engaged in rebuilding his personas, putting everything back together the way it had been. Facts and memories flew around his head like a whirlwind. When he emerged from them, it was as a whole person once more.

*Wonderful how easy this is to do, when I'm away from Draco.*

As he smiled at Nusante and took up the helpful part of Brian Montgomery, Harry silently admitted that it would be best for his own sake, as well as for Draco's and Narcissa's, if the connection between them was severed.

Draco stared after Harry. The way he had behaved in the last few moments had been extremely—strange. It was true that he might be motivated by the desire to leave the manor house before Ministry reinforcements arrived, but he had been abrupt and too forceful, when he could have made his point with coldness and tact and had Draco believe him completely. And Harry was too knowing of both pure-blood behavior in general and Draco's behavior in particular to make a mistake like that.

*A conscious mistake, at least.*

Just as he was too good with Transfiguration to leave a bruise like that on his neck.

Draco's eyes narrowed. *Deliberate. It was deliberate. It has to be.*

*I don't know what the fuck he thinks he's doing, but no matter how far or fast he runs, I'm not going to forget him or let him go.*

Draco was smiling a little as he Summoned the vial the potion had filled, just to make sure he wouldn't leave any traces behind for the Ministry Potions experts. *He's slipping. He doesn't really want to leave me, I think, even as he seems to be aiming at that end.*

*At this rate, I won't have to beg or drag his secret from him. He'll end up confessing it to me of his own free will.*

*Not that a little—encouragement—will hurt.*

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Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Three—Unexpected*

Draco slowed when he entered the house. He knew something was different, though for long moments he could not pinpoint that sense of difference to one specific object or sound. He stood still, his gaze sweeping the length of the entrance hall.

Then he located the source of the strangeness. No house-elf had come to greet him, which *always* happened when he came back from more than an hour's journey, even when he dismissed it again in the next few moments.

It was not quite as clear a sign as raising the wards against him would have been, but it was still a signal of his father's displeasure.

Draco smiled a little. He wished he had worn gloves today, so he could have removed them slowly and ostentatiously, with an excuse for lingering in the entrance hall until Lucius came to find him. As it was, he would have to hasten the confrontation with his father himself.

Draco strolled out of the entrance hall and up to the study Lucius usually occupied by this hour of the day, opening and discarding several conversational gambits in his head. No, he didn't want to give his father a chance to slide around this. Open defiance appeared to be the only course of

action that actually commanded Lucius's attention and didn't allow him to hide behind some polite excuse. Certainly he had only treated Draco's objections to his future seriously when Draco started dating Harry.

*Brian*, he reminded himself, as he opened the door of his father's study without knocking. *Make sure that you call him Brian in this conversation, or you will give your father information that you prefer he* not *have.*

Lucius looked up with no expression on his face. He sat in a large, comfortable chair, piled with Cushioning Charms. It had been the favorite chair of one of Draco's great-great-uncles, who had taken a claw in his backside from a hippogriff when young. Lucius had no excuse for indulging in such excessive luxury, however, Draco thought. A large book bound in dragonhide rested on his father's knees.

"Yes, Draco." Lucius did not make it a question. "I am here. And you could have waited for dinner if you wanted to speak to me. It is no good holding an argument on an empty stomach." His tone was lightly chiding, with a chilly hint of superiority that would have had Draco shivering twenty years ago and seething with helpless rage a decade back. Now he saw it too clearly as part of the mask his father was trying—and failing—to wear, and had to smile.

"May I sit down, Father?" he asked. He kept the question perfectly polite, but coupled with his rudeness so far, there was no way Lucius could take it as anything but mocking.

Lucius's eyes narrowed, and his expression appeared to set itself in ice. "But of course, Draco. Would I refuse the hospitality of any part of my house to my son?"

"You've refused the house-elves," said Draco, and sat down in the second most comfortable chair, taking a moment to look around the room. The shelves were of light, pale wood, which nicely complemented the sunshine streaming in through the high windows. Some Malfoy who loved light had designed this room, Draco thought, long before the family thought their association with Dark magic also required association with literal darkness.

"You should not take my little fits of temper so hard, Draco," Lucius murmured at once, as if he had thought Draco's complaint was actually serious. "I may sometimes send you a message through indirect means, but when I am displeased with you, I will make that displeasure known."

"How directly?" Draco cocked his head. "Would an attack by Ministry Aurors be enough of a message?"

Lucius's fingers tightened on the book, but he said nothing, and no line of his face stirred. "You are beyond being beaten like a child, Draco. And why would I invite Aurors into the Manor? They *do* cause trouble, and stir up the clouds of cobwebs that I would prefer stay discreetly out of sight."

"Oh, I don't say they would have to intrude into the Manor," said Draco. "Just into a house where

I happen to be at the time, for a purpose that is understandable if not exactly innocent." He leaned forwards, smiling. "We're discussing this as a hypothetical situation, of course. Perhaps not as something that *happened*, but rather something that *might* happen if, say, your patience ran short."

Lucius hesitated, holding Draco's eyes. Now, Draco thought, he would wonder whether his son had actually gone to the meeting this afternoon or not. Draco didn't intend to hold him in suspense long, but he would tease the information out of him this way if he could, slyly, indirectly. So much more elegant, in the long run.

*I have myself as an audience to perform to, even if there is no one else.*

"I still would not call on Ministry Aurors," Lucius said at last, his voice distant as starlight. "What need have I? I have words, Galleons, connections, knowledge of magic. All of those would be much better ways to chastise my enemies."

"Ah," Draco said, "but we aren't talking about enemies." *It will have to be the direct method, then.* His father was trying to shift the grounds of the conversation far too early in the game. "We're talking about someone you're close to, but who has willfully and repeatedly defied your attempts to bring him under control. Someone you can't stand to see rebel, because that would mean you had been wrong about him being a small soul, obedient, content to follow you and to trust in your prescriptions for his future. Could you see yourself using the Aurors against someone like that?"

Lucius rose to his feet. He laid the book precisely down on the glass table in front of him, which somewhat disappointed Draco. He had been looking forwards to seeing that book fall with a crash.

"You have made many references to our family conflict in arenas where I would prefer that you not make them," Lucius said. "You have made our name one that people snigger at when heard. You claim to care for your mother and I and our reputations, yet still you take these actions. You will answer me, *now*. In what way have I mistaken you? In what way have I given you less than a life to be proud of, a life to honor and imitate?"

*I wonder if he's talking about the example life he's lived for me, or the life he's actually tried to give me,* Draco thought idly. *Well, he's about to learn that there's a difference between them.*

"For one thing, Father," he said, leaning back in his chair and smiling up at Lucius, "I don't know if you've noticed this, but I'm fucking a man."

Lucius's lip twitched at the vulgarity. Draco didn't care. He was pressing his father closer and closer to ultimately losing his temper and ordering him out of the Manor. If that happened, then disowning would soon follow, because Lucius was one to carry a dramatic gesture fully through instead of retracting and apologizing; he feared that would make him look weak. Draco waited, holding his father's eyes.

"Who one sleeps with and who one marries are often not the same," Lucius said at last, with his voice softer and more conciliating than Draco would have liked. *Why isn't he screaming with rage?* "So long as you are discreet, Draco, there is no reason—"

"I have no wish to be discreet," Draco said. *Save with my real purposes, of course.* "I have grown tired of lying and deception, and with the lack of real attention you have given me." *Careful,* he chided himself a moment later, *or you'll sound like a spoiled child. You do not want Lucius thinking of you that way no matter how true it might have been when you were younger.* "I have tried to hint before that I did not wish to marry, that continuing the Malfoy line is not of the utmost importance to me," he said, "and you have simply assumed it is and carried on. There are many names for that ignorance of reality, Father. None of them are complimentary."

"You are pure-blooded," said Lucius. "You are the only Malfoy heir."

"The only one in the direct line." Draco smiled at him again. "There are Cousin Maxwell and his children, after all."

"You will not disgrace our family by accepting one of them as your heir." Lucius spoke as if it were a fact, or a prophecy, not a simple pronouncement, Draco thought. That was the most infuriating aspect of his father's behavior. He was too used to commanding something and having it be done. Well, Draco was not a house-elf. "You will marry where and how we tell you to. There are many young women who will accept you and turn their eyes away if you wish to continue this ridiculous love affair."

"I like fucking Brian," Draco said. "I may very well be in love with him." *I will know that answer for certain in a week's time, I should think.* "I won't give that up for some insipid little bride and some colorless marriage such as you've allowed yourself to be content with."

Lucius gave a dry laugh, though the narrowing of his eyes showed he was furious. Probably more over the insult to Narcissa than the insult to himself, Draco had to admit. In his own way, his father cared for his mother.

"There are many things in the world to content oneself with beyond lovers," said Lucius. "And many things beyond marriage, come to that. Marriage is merely a necessary component of those other pleasures. As you grow older, Draco, you will come to see beyond the lusts of the flesh. You will learn the joy that comes from seeing plans unfold—"

*Oh, that I know.*

"—and the joy that comes from seeing the quiet dance of society go on around you, ordered and neat, precise as the small clockwork of a watch, and beautiful as the uncontrolled chaos that you have connected yourself with never can be."

"Why, your poeticizing might convince me, were I still in the stage where pretty words

concealed a brutal truth," Draco said. He rose to his feet. He was tired of sitting still and allowing Lucius to loom over him, and it was probably giving his father too much confidence that he could win this argument. "I do not want what you are offering me, Father. Save the truth that you have finally spoken about my connections with the rebellion, of course. Thank you for that. So now I know that you would use Aurors to chastise a family member, if you thought that family member to be out of line."

Lucius became still, every line of his body coiling like a snake about to strike. "If you had maintained your proper social standing," he murmured, "you would not have stood a chance of being caught up in that…unpleasantness."

"I dare say it was more unpleasant for the Aurors than for me."

Lucius's right hand twitched, opening as if he wished for his snake-headed cane. Draco laughed inwardly, not allowing a ripple of the amusement to show on his face. Lucius had picked up on the causal connection that the words suggested between Draco and the failure of the Aurors' raid, and was interested.

"I do hope that you didn't sneer at them," was what Lucius said, mildly. "Despite your opinion of words, they can be deadly when wielded by a master."

"It will be interesting to hear what they say when the Minister asks them questions, don't you agree?" Draco cocked his head. "I wonder whether they will remark on my face, my words, my clothes, or on my presence at all."

Lucius came forwards a step. There was still a table between them and Draco had his hand closer to his wand, so he didn't back up. He was only mildly surprised to find that his heart was beating fast enough to stir a haze of blood through his head. This was the moment he had been hoping would happen from the time he wrote Metamorphosis. Perhaps the goal had become somewhat subsumed under his physical passion for Brian and then finding out Brian was Harry, but it was still real for him.

*Father. I will make you crawl.*

"You have never been political enough for my tastes," Lucius said distantly. "Still, I would mourn to see my only heir destroyed in swirling waters that are too deep for him."

Draco kept from smirking with an effort. *You don't know the half of it. I doubt that you would have survived the intellectual parade of changes necessary to keep up with my life in the last few days.* "These are waters where I have chosen to swim," he said. "I carefully measured their depth before I entered them."

"Shall I be frank, Draco?" Lucius twisted his head to the side, so that he was watching Draco with one eye, like a raven. If he meant the pose to be frightening, it failed.

"I don't know," Draco said. "Can you be?"

Lucius drew in a slow breath, which was the first sign of his mask truly cracking that Draco had seen so far, the first gesture he'd made that he didn't make on a regular basis. "There will shortly be things happening in the wider world that it would be safer if you were ignorant of," he said. "If not in reality, then on the surface. And once you see those actions that certain—friends—of mine will take, you will be glad that I informed you of them in time."

Draco felt a very slight smile lift his lips. He hadn't known he would do that before he did it, but now the words were falling as naturally from his mouth as the smile had. "Even if I wanted to change my mind now, Father, I very much doubt that I could."

"You do not have one of those sadly inflexible minds, set in granite or marble." Lucius folded his hands over each other. He was wearing gloves, and Draco expected him to start pulling them off in a minute, if only to calm down the shaking or fist-clenching his fingers might otherwise get up to. "You can change your mind when you realize what a string of bad choices you have made."

"If I see them as bad choices, yes." Draco widened his smile. "But I have a lover who is most Gryffindor-like in his courage and his outrage over perceived social injustice. You saw his face when he threatened you in the dining room?"

Lucius's nostrils flared in a way that said he did not understand why Draco was bringing that disgraceful episode up, now or ever.

"And that was only anger over me," Draco whispered. "Imagine what he will be like when he turns his sights on an entire society that has made it impossible for us to live as we desire. Make no mistake, Father. He knows what will happen to me if we continue to be public about our love. And what will happen to him, but it is *me* he cares about." *Not such a lie.* "He blames, not individuals, but social systems, as Gryffindors often do. And he has no anxiety about setting out to reform them. He will not back away from this fight, and I will not back away from him." He paused just the right amount of time, he knew, to set Lucius seething, and then gave an elegant little shrug. "Even if the waters are a torrent, we intend to swim them. Together."

He added a very slight whine to his tone, making it the voice of a bedazzled teenager in love.

And Lucius broke.

His lips wrinkled back from his teeth, and he leaned across the table that separated them with a brutal snarl. Draco laid his hand on his wand, just in case he had misjudged his father—which had happened several times since this all began—and Lucius went for curses, but words dragged themselves out of Lucius's mouth instead.

"You are to be gone from my house within the hour," he said. "I will have no heir who does not understand that his obligations to his family and the continuance of his line take precedence over a small fling."

"It is not a fling—" Draco began, adopting the proper indignant expression.

"You have one hour to leave," Lucius repeated. Already he was calming, stepping away from Draco and tracing one finger over the center of his gloved palm. If there was any doubt in him that he had just done the right thing, Draco knew, he still would not yield to the doubt. He never questioned his own decisions or his own perceptions. He went forwards and tried to live in his own version of reality. "Then the wards will forcibly Apparate you beyond the Manor's walls, and any belongings that you have here must be lost to you."

Draco bowed a little, but he wanted to make sure this was the moment of ultimate separation from his family. "And when may I hope for an invitation back?" he asked.

"Given what I know?" Lucius's hands clenched involuntarily. "Never."

*It is done, then.*

Draco bowed again and walked from the room. If Lucius thought he did not look upset enough by the disowning, then he would decide it was just a front, and that Draco was really devastated and sobbing inside. He would not readily glimpse or guess his son's complicated joy even if it was presented to him in interpretative dance.

*Free, now, to make my own way in the world, to make my own name—in the end to win the name back when Lucius comes groveling at my feet.*

It was not the way he had originally planned to lose his father's respect, Draco had to admit. He couldn't have foreseen himself becoming involved in a rebellion of this scope at the time, not when he had thought his major concern would be with his own problems and suffering. And he really had planned to eventually reveal to his parents that he could sleep with women too, and thus that he could get married and continue the family line. He did not dare to reveal that yet, or they would have disregarded his objections and pressed marriage on him. They had to think he was completely gay.

But now—

*Who can tell how this will end?*

The thought invigorated Draco, so that he whistled as he went to his rooms and started packing up his belongings. For now, he would stay in the flat where he had first met Harry disguised as Brian. It wouldn't do as a permanent residence, but it would hold him whilst he looked about for a better flat or a house close to the center of wizarding London.

A few house-elves came mournfully into the room to snuffle or wring their hands or wish him farewell. None of them offered to help with the packing. Lucius must have forbidden them to do so. Draco shook his head a little as he cast a spell that folded a series of thick, shining gray shirts

and distributed them neatly into his traveling trunk. *No matter which person I am, the starry-eyed social reformer or the real, true plotter, is Lucius such a fool as to think that not having help would dissuade me?*

A noise in the doorway made him think it was another house-elf come to visit him. He blinked when he turned about and found his mother standing there, her hands tightly knotted together, staring at him.

"So the day has come," she said, in a low voice that Draco didn't think sounded at all like her.

Draco stepped across the room to kiss her cheek. "It has," he agreed easily. "And whilst I can understand Father's reasons for disowning me, I hope that he doesn't take his bad temper out on you."

Narcissa swallowed and went on looking at him for long moments, so long that it made Draco uneasy. Her next words proved he had been *right* to be uneasy. "This was what you wanted, Draco, wasn't it? You've decided on independence from your father, and you chose to seize it by giving up our name."

Draco knew he made a bad show of covering his shock. His mother spoke through any protests he might have given, gazing meditatively at the floor. "So long as the Malfoy name cloaks you, you would be seen first as Lucius's son, and only second as yourself, if at all. So you chose to make your way in the world, away from us." She lifted her head and stared at Draco. "Did you know that you would force me to choose between my husband and my son?"

Draco's back straightened. That, at least, was an accusation he had been prepared to face. "No one is *forcing* you to choose anything," he said. "Agree with Lucius in public if you must, but think whatever you want in private. My plans from now on don't depend on your support or your anguish."

"Nevertheless, my anguish will be the result."

"And you cannot blame me for that," said Draco, "not when Father and I have grown so far apart. Do you believe that I would have done this unless I was *forced* to it? I have tried other ways to persuade Father. He will not listen to reason, so the most blatant unreason is needed to shake his preoccupations with pure-blood politics."

Narcissa looked at him with her lips so tightly shut that Draco wondered if he had managed to alienate her after all. Then she nodded and drew out a letter from a pocket in her robes. "I have made my decision," she said. "I think you should have this. I discovered Brian Montgomery was Harry Potter some days ago through my familiarity with his magic, and gave him two weeks to leave you, since shortening the time to a week. This is what he has written to me in reply."

Draco read the letter. His heart was pounding as much with shock over his mother's news as it was with anger at Harry by the time he finished. He folded the letter very carefully and looked at

her. "Why do you think he sent this to you?" he demanded. His lips felt numb. "He must have known there was a chance you would show it to me."

Narcissa shook her head. "I think he believed I cared more for you than for your happiness." Her eyes briefly flashed. "And he may have feared that I would tell the secret to others—as I could have—if he was not in communication with me." She sighed, then, and the fire seemed to leave her, though Draco could still see the steel. "But it appears that he is essential to your future happiness. And *that* is what I want. At one time, it was only your safety. But through the years, I have watched you, and come to believe that you need your freedom and your own power to find any future at all. The man who writes a letter like that, who was able to lie to me so convincingly that I half-believed him, and who inspires such passion in you seems to be a necessary ingredient of that future."

"Mother," Draco whispered. He was dizzy.

"I will stay here with Lucius," said Narcissa, looking very strong and very tired. "If I can, I will halt his more doomed plans—and I suspect that the majority of them will be doomed, if he plans to attack you and Harry Potter combined. Go find your future, my son, and may you be happy and strong."

Draco embraced her, more fiercely than he had in years. He could feel her arms close around him, too, trembling, and he wondered how much second-guessing of herself she must have done before she finally arrived at her decision.

"May there be peace in this house someday," she whispered into his ear. "Between family members, and from such hard choices."

"I shall endeavor to see that there may be," Draco said, and kissed her hand, and Summoned the rest of his belongings, and went, his soul burning like phoenix fire with his joy and his anger.

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Chapter: 24

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Four—Against All Hope*

Harry frowned when he took the message from the owl that had just fluttered to the window and realized it had come from Draco. He really didn't know why *Draco* would need to write to him when they had just seen each other a few hours before. Harry had spent those hours calming Nusante, reassuring him that the Aurors wouldn't remember anything of the attack, and then

sitting stiff-faced through a conversation with Ron and Hermione in which Ron had chattered on about the raid—of which he'd heard rumors—and how much he wished he could have gone on it. No matter how many times Harry told himself that Ron was looking forwards to arresting the criminals who had caused a riot (as far as he knew) and not to the destruction of gay witches and wizards, there was still a small wound inside him from Ron's words that refused to heal.

And then he had come back to Grimmauld Place hoping that he would find a response to his letter from Narcissa. How long would it *take* for her to acknowledge that, yes, Harry was still keeping his part of the bargain by attempting to leave Draco, even if he had to resort to false cheating in order to do so? Perhaps she was having trouble locating a piece of parchment that would show she was telling the truth.

Instead, there was this message from Draco. Harry ripped it grimly open, expecting an invitation to a date or a suggestion that Harry come over so they could have sex. That would be *like* Draco, who despite his cleverness and unexpected depths was still one of the most thoughtless, impulsive, shallow—

*Harry:*

*My father disowned me.*

Harry froze, staring at the letter. His hands were shaking, and he only noticed when the paper startled to rattle. He took a deep breath and licked his lips and read on.

*My father disowned me. He made threats, of course. I have the notion that he's started plans, perhaps even participated in them, that he hopes will destroy the rebellion we're raising. We should discuss the best way to get in touch with Nusante and warn him about this. The next meeting place can't be too obvious, and though Nusante has passionate belief in his cause, I don't trust him to choose a place that's not obvious. Come visit me tonight. I'm in the flat that you first came to in your Brian disguise. Our conversation might not be long, but it should prove interesting.*

*Draco.*

Harry shook his head, growling softly. Draco could have made a few suggestions in the letter, and waited for Harry's return owl. That would have allowed them to have half a productive conversation, anyway. He only wanted to see Harry again so he could ask troublesome questions and leer.

And then Harry closed his eyes and fought the temptation to smack himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand.

*The most momentous piece of news is still the one he put first.*

Draco had hired Brian to help him get disowned. It sounded like the plan had succeeded

brilliantly, even with Brian's less-than-direct help for the last part of it. That meant Harry had fulfilled the contract, and *that* meant this was the end of the job, and he owed Draco nothing more.

Harry purred deep in his throat. Then he stopped, frowning. That sound belonged to one of his personas who liked hunting and always purred when she crouched over a dead animal, expressing a mingling of human and feline satisfaction.

*Well, you still haven't quite regained control of yourself after your confrontation with Draco. A little confusion is to be expected.*

Harry leaned back on the wall of his bedroom, not far from the closet which contained his selection of robes, and took several deep, calming breaths. All was well now. He would be free to take up other jobs for Metamorphosis, to forget about the danger dogging his heels from the moment Narcissa had figured out who he was. Mrs. Malfoy ought to be happy, he thought absently, even if she wouldn't write him back and tell him she was. He would stay away from her precious son. And Draco would have to forget about him and go on. After all, what could he do? Send Harry Howlers?

*I'll go in to Metamorphosis tomorrow,* he decided, straightening. *Who knows? Among the letters may be a case that will require the creation of an entirely new persona, perhaps the best one I've ever invented.*

And if he felt a small wound as he had when he listened to Ron's ranting earlier that evening—well, none of the other promises he'd made Draco had been binding. No money had changed hands, and no one would be hurt.

*Nusante and his followers?*

They'd have Draco. And maybe Draco was impulsive and arrogant and shallow, but if he knew how to do anything, Harry thought, it was how to engage in activity that would make Lucius Malfoy want to kill.

He went to tell Kreacher that he'd have Italian food tonight—the house-elf had hidden inside the kitchens of several Muggle restaurants to learn how to cook the more unusual food choices—whistling under his breath all the way.

At first Draco watched the sky for an owl every few minutes, in between reading Harry's letter to his mother over and over again and trying to figure out how to feel. A coldness lurked behind these words that felt forced and feigned to him, rather like the story of a ten-year crush that Harry had tried to sell to him and, apparently, to Narcissa. Was that all Harry knew how to do when confronted with the truth, lie? And why did he try when he was so bad at it?

At one point, Draco woke from a fantasy of what Harry would say when he finally responded to

the owl, and realized that he'd been sitting in his very comfortable chair in the dark for some time. He cast a *Tempus* charm, the bright glow of the numbers cutting through the gloom.

*Nine-o'clock. And Harry hasn't written me back.*

Draco sat still, his mind roaming over all the available evidence in much the same way it had when trying to figure out the specifics involved in Harry's wrist movement to Transfigure himself. Harry might have been hurt in the fight with the Aurors, but Draco thought he would have noticed a wound, or the results of a curse, during those long moments they'd stood talking after his use of the mind-reading potion. He might have been with his friends for the evening, but that wouldn't have prevented him from stealing a moment to respond, even if only to tell Draco he was busy. He might have not opened the letter, but Draco hadn't written anything on the envelope or used the Malfoy seal (he thought he should start observing the scruples that applied to a disinherited son); he would have had to open the letter to find out who it was from.

Which must mean he wasn't going to write back.

And why?

Draco's shoulders tightened as he remembered his own letter, written in the first flush of excitement after he left the Manor. He had told Harry that his father had disowned him. That was the very first sentence. The invitation followed it, and Harry would have to be stupid not to glance down the rest of the parchment.

But Harry could be stupid when he wanted to be, couldn't he? He was very good at simply not allowing certain facts to enter his head.

What if he thought that, since Draco had hired him for a specific purpose and that purpose had been fulfilled, he could pull back now? What if he sought to end their association in the simplest manner possible, by vanishing from Draco's life and hoping he wouldn't follow?

Draco rose slowly, deliberately, to his feet. His hands were clenched into fists, and his breath sounded in half-hungry rasps over his lips. He observed himself from a distance, aware that his anger must be quite astonishing, though as yet his mind was insulated from the full force of it.

Then the dam broke, and he and his anger were the same thing, swimming in liquid as sour as bile and hot as acid, and his breath had become one long, continuous hiss, as if he and not Harry were the one who spoke Parseltongue.

He turned and flicked his wand, issuing the soundless call that would summon a house-elf from the Manor. Normally, of course, a disinherited child should never have been able to do such a thing, but this was a Black spell, not a Malfoy one, taught to Draco by Narcissa one summer day long ago when he'd been fretfully searching for things to do. He was nearly certain that Lucius would not have set up wards to prevent his house-elves from hearing it. Now, of course, it was the elf's choice whether to respond.

Rini seemed to know what was good for him. He appeared a moment later, bowing frantically even as he banged his head against the floor, punishing himself for disobeying the orders of the Lord of the Manor.

Draco's words made him look up, eyes wide, and stop moving immediately.

"Take me," Draco whispered, "to the house that you entered once before. The house where you found Harry Potter."

Rini's mouth dropped open, and he whimpered for a moment. Then he said, "I is trying, but I can't bring Master Draco through the wards, Master Draco! Just room enough for one house-elf at a time! Sorry! So sorry!" He grabbed his ears and whacked his face into the floor again.

Draco curled his lip in distaste. The small gesture was enough to make Rini be still.

"Simply lead me to the house," Draco said. "Once there, I will do the rest."

He thought of Harry complacently sitting in his house, probably whistling as he planned how to spend his seven hundred Galleons, and his rage increased.

*Did anything we did matter to you besides the money, you bastard? What kind of person are you, that you can ignore the offer of a passion you'll never feel with anyone else?*

Well, either Harry really wasn't the kind of person Draco had thought he was, and Draco was about to correct his own misapprehension—

Or he would burn Harry's shell to ashes with the force of his righteous anger.

*Either way, I win.*

Harry had just finished eating his dinner—he'd eaten at a leisurely pace, one of the weaknesses of his base self that he rarely took the time to indulge—and settled back into a chair in the library with one of those "modern Muggleborn novels" that Hermione had been encouraging him to read. They supposedly depicted in detail the dramas of young Muggleborn men and women trying to fit into a society as traditional and restrictive as the wizarding world. Harry, who considered that he lived daily with evidence of exactly how restrictive the wizarding world could be towards those it idolized or hated, saw no need to read fiction about it, but tonight he was in just the sort of amused, tolerant mood that a book like this needed. He'd won a victory he didn't want to think much about, and—

And someone was out in the street, applying steady pressure against his wards. It wasn't flashy magic, but more like a loud, sustained knocking.

Harry rose swiftly to his feet, his wand in his hand, smooth possibilities traveling through his head as he brought his cold persona forwards. If it were fans, he could scare them off. If someone from the Ministry wanted to talk to him and had given up in disgust at the blocked Floo connection, Harry could give the answers in a cold enough tone to ensure they'd never do *this* again.

He reached out with his awareness of magical signatures, sliding around his own wards, trying to tell if it was a stranger or a friend standing there. Probably stranger; Ron and Hermione were keyed into his wards, after all, and so were most of the other Weasleys—

He reeled back when he felt the blazing magical signature, and caught himself with a hand on a bookshelf. What the fuck was Draco doing here? How the fuck had he known where Harry lived?

Harry felt the storm building in his head again, the flickers and flakes of his personalities breaking apart from one another and flying in circles. He immediately barked an order at the fragments, pulling himself—himselves—back together with a physical jerk. This kind of reaction whenever he thought of Draco was unacceptable. They had to live in the same world together, since Harry wouldn't give up visiting the pure-blood social circles Draco moved in. And he had managed to fool Draco once already, hadn't he? Draco hadn't looked twice at Elizabeth Gouldier, and in fact hadn't seemed very interested in anything she had to say.

Draco could not *make* him break down and do stupid things. That was all a problem Harry had created for himself, because he had leaped from knowing that Draco knew one of his secrets to anticipating the day when Draco would discover them all. He was attributing a cleverness to Draco that the other man simply didn't have any reason to possess.

*There's no doubting his persistence, though,* Harry thought in irritation as the wards kept resounding like a badly played piano.

With his cold self foremost in the front of his mind, and not-so-incidentally casting a spell that highlighted the mouth-shaped bruise on his neck, Harry went downstairs.

Harry opened the door after Draco had knocked more than a hundred times. His eyes were wary, his face set and cold, and altogether he looked like nothing so much as a stag preparing to charge. Draco could see the same sort of noble courage in his half-flared nostrils and tightly-clamped lips.

*If he had real courage, he wouldn't find telling the truth so hard.*

Draco pressed in as soon as the wards were lowered. No chance that Harry could tell him to wait on the doorstep and Draco would fall for it. He turned the moment he got inside the door, so that he could have his back to a wall. No telling how violent this would get before they were finished, either.

Harry raised an eyebrow and shut the door slowly. "Come right in," he said, every word tart and acidic.

With his own acidic anger still boiling and churning in his head, Draco hardly cared. He had planned to handle Harry very carefully, dancing around the topic at first, hoping to lure him into confessing of his own free will. But that was before Harry had decided to ignore his owl and pretend they meant nothing to each other.

*How stupid is he?* It hadn't escaped Draco's notice that Harry's breathing had quickened the moment he stepped into the gloomy entrance hall, and that he stood a little straighter, now, as if Draco's approval were something to be courted. *We reach out to each other whether we want to or not. We would react to one another in a crowd of a thousand.*

"You might as well give up your sham of cheating on me," Draco said, and drew out the letter his mother had given him, flinging it at Harry. Harry caught it with that same quick motion, the Seeker's catch, the twisting wrist. Draco shivered, and wondered if he should be annoyed or grateful that he was shivering with desire. *I cannot be free of this shared obsession either, it seems.* "I know that you're not."

Harry lowered his eyes to the letter, and then turned absurdly pale. Draco found himself actually tensing to take a step forwards, thinking Harry might faint and he would have to catch him. But when Harry's head came up, his eyes were brilliant and furious, and he was crumpling the parchment in his hand as if he could hide the evidence of his deception that way.

"She had no right to share this with you," Harry said, and his hand slipped back towards his robe as if he were feeling for his wand.

"She's my *mother*," Draco said, a new scathing gout of rage breaking out beneath his heart. "What is she to you but someone else who's trying to get you to tell the truth?" He did take that step forwards now, ignoring the way that Harry's wand—a polished wooden wand quite different from the one he used as Brian—pointed straight at his chest. "Do you *ever* tell the truth, Harry? Or do you just hide behind all the deceptions you can and gnaw rat-like at every trust that someone tries to put in you? Do your friends know who you are, *what* you are? A liar, and worse, someone who lies to himself about what he wants and what matters to him? I would never have thought that *you*, the hero of the hour, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, could be such a coward and a hypocrite. But I see I was wrong. The truth is frightening, isn't it? And you can't handle it. You build masks. You—"

Harry didn't realize consciously what he was doing until it was done. He just wanted Draco to *stop saying those words.* Someone else *couldn't* suspect that he'd made masks up and hidden behind them. Not multiple ones. One was fine. One was Brian.

And the names Draco was calling him—speaking as if those names actually belonged to him, as

if all of Harry Potter was confined and held in the Chosen One, or the Boy-Who-Lived, or whatever other labels the wizarding world decided to adopt for him. That Harry Potter wasn't real, never had been, but Draco was trying to make him be, and it was intolerable.

His wand flicked, and Draco flew backwards across the entrance hall, slamming into the far wall. His head sagged forwards on his chest as something seemed to explode in his body, and Harry, staring out of the haze of rage and magic that had for a moment consumed him, suddenly realized what he had done.

His wand clattered to the floor as he put his hands over his eyes.

*No. Oh, no.*

He wanted to claw at his own body, tear the magic out of himself. He shouldn't have it if he misused it like this. It was the real Harry, the weak Harry, who had done this, and the real Harry was as stupid and undeserving of any gift or blessing as Harry had always thought he would be. Of course he was. He was nothing more than a shell of others' expectations wrapped around the ashes of his self-confidence, wasn't he? Nothing made sense for him anymore. Harry couldn't stand being him anymore.

His head lifted as the thought cut through him. *He couldn't stand being him anymore.* Yes, that was right. And though he might have had no option but throwing up desperate walls a moment ago, trying to make himself believe that he was not that person anymore when he would know all along that he was at core and bottom and center, he was thinking clearly now, and he remembered that he had another option.

Upstairs, the reverse Pensieve wanted. Harry had to brew the potion that went with it, but that would not take long. He had familiarized himself with every step of the potion; it had been his bedtime reading when he found himself locked in the persona of the weak Harry Potter and he couldn't sleep. Yes, that would do. He would make it now, and he would wake up as—

As whom?

There was an endless list of possibilities stretching before him, endless personas he could become, endless people he could be. He only needed to choose the one that had the fullest personality, the most curious life. And he would bury himself inside that person and *become* them, with their memories, and forget all about the horrible thing he had just done.

He started to turn away.

And then Draco groaned.

Harry turned back slowly, staring. He had been so convinced Draco was dead that it felt, now, as if the world had tilted off its axis, or death had reversed itself, even though Dumbledore had told him it was impossible to resurrect the dead. He swallowed. He had come to peace with himself

as a murderer, because he was going to annihilate the person who had done that. Could he come to peace with himself as someone who had hurt Draco?

Draco stirred weakly. Harry crept back towards him, slow step by step, and then caught him as he crumpled to the floor, the force of Harry's magic no longer holding him against the wall.

Harry felt horrible, clumsy, weak with guilt and the fear that he might touch a broken bone and exacerbate Draco's pain. He was breathing hoarsely as he Summoned his wand with a flick of his hand and then ran it gently over Draco's body, using a simple spell to determine the source of any pain. Draco arched and groaned as the wand traveled over his bottommost rib on the left side. Harry breathed softly now, because he had learned a spell in his bodyguard training that might help with this.

He reached down, his wand resting against the rib, and closed his eyes. He had not performed this spell on someone else before, but he was used to doing it through cloth and flesh. In the midst of battle, there was no time to strip down and have all the luxuries he might be permitted in hospital.

Carefully, he Transfigured Draco's rib from a broken bone to a healthy one, feeling out the lines of breakage and the chips of bone, removing them or realigning them according to what the magic dictated. The spell proceeded slowly, and more than once Draco groaned and shifted uneasily, his hand rising as if he would clasp Harry's arm and make him stop. Harry shifted so that he could give Draco a hold on his shoulder; with one arm slung beneath Draco's body, supporting him, and the other controlling the wand, he had no hands free.

It took perhaps ten minutes, which felt like two hours to Harry when he sat back, his muscles trembling. This time, though, the spell he cast to detect pain revealed only a slight soreness on Draco's left side, quickly fading. Harry cast one more spell just to make sure; this one illuminated the flesh from the inside, briefly, and let him examine Draco's bottom left rib. He sighed a breath of relief when he compared it to the one just above and realized it was as whole as the others.

The desperate task done, his guilt came crashing to the forefront. Harry put an arm over his eyes and sobbed.

His weakness *had* caused this, but it was not simply the weakness of vulnerability to Draco's words. He had the ability to maintain control of his magic; he had hung on through worse insults, harder flayings with words, such as the night he had come out to Ron. He had not injured Ron the way he had Draco.

And then to simply *assume* Draco was dead without checking! He had suffered minutes of pain Harry could have spared him.

There were certain things Harry did *not* do. He could justify the games he played with Metamorphosis to himself because he was practicing an art, having fun, making money, and

*hurting no one else.* Not his clients, anyway, the people who mattered. He had hurt people who tried to attack his clients when he was playing bodyguard, and sometimes others, like Lucius, who had their worlds spun upside-down by the "revelation" the client had hired him to provide—that they were straight, or capable of attracting a lover other than the one their parents proposed for them. But those were risks Harry evaluated before he ever took a case. He could be at peace with them because he had decided they were acceptable. He did not take cases where the main motive seemed to be petty revenge.

Now, with his vision ripped open, he wondered when he had started accepting that it was all right to cause pain to Draco. The moment Narcissa had discovered his identity? The moment they had slept together? The moment they had *met*?

He had blamed Draco for causing him to lose his emotional control, but if Harry had really mastered himself as he had always liked to think he had, he would have found it easy enough to refuse to sleep with Draco, to withdraw from the relationship when Narcissa threatened him, or to sit Draco down and *explain.* If Draco had been a raging arsehole about the explanation, Harry could have Obliviated him.

Those were the things he could have done, should have done, if he were really at the top of his game. Now, it was beginning to seem like mere luck that he had not become emotionally involved with a client in this fashion before.

*Or maybe—*

Harry swallowed. He didn't know what part of himself, what persona, was speaking these words to him with cold, merciless clarity. Perhaps a new one. It didn't sound at all familiar.

*Maybe it was different because you really do share something with Draco that you didn't share with any of your other clients. Avoid calling it liking or infatuation or love if the words make you uncomfortable, but the emotion is there, and running from it involves you inflicting emotional and finally physical harm on others. That is* not acceptable. *How could you ever think it was?*

Harry stared down at Draco and ran a hand through his hair. Yes, he was guilty—

*Forget about guilt. It does nothing productive. Atonement, reparations, restitution. Those are the words you should be thinking on.*

Harry sighed, and relaxed. He felt as if he'd been placed under the Imperius Curse and had it suddenly lifted. Glancing back over his actions in the past week, he was horrified at his stupidity.

He had prided himself, before, on how good he was at creating personas that could face up to every situation. He could create one for this situation.

The new voice in his head, his own voice, speaking to him, would be the core of that persona. It could have the strength of the cold Harry, the principles that the weak Harry Potter wouldn't

surrender, and the openness of the person Draco needed.

The persona would *have* to have all those qualities, or Harry didn't think he could make things up to Draco.

He gently slung his arms beneath Draco's waist and back, lightened him with a flick of the wand, and then carried him upstairs to one of the bedrooms that Kreacher kept scrupulously clean, even though it was never used.

Draco opened his eyes slowly. Memory took a moment to return, and when it did, it made his throat ache.

He turned his head to the side, and a hand held a glass of clear, cold water to his lips. Draco gulped eagerly, then opened his eyes to see his savior, expecting to find himself in St. Mungo's or back in the Manor. Harry would have owled Narcissa about him, surely, and she might have sneaked him in.

Instead, Harry sat on a chair beside the bed, gazing steadily at him, hope and caution and an incredible weight of sorrow in his gaze.

"You have every right to ask me to leave you alone forever," Harry said quietly. "And that's what I'll do, if you want it. But I want to ask you *what* you want. What I did was inexcusable, and because of that, it has to go beyond an apology. What do you want?"

Draco stared at him in silence. Harry looked back. Draco didn't think he had ever seen anyone look so tired before, and so determined to fight back against the weariness and do what was right anyway.

This was the man he had seen, briefly, when they lay in bed together.

For a moment, Draco toyed with the idea of asking Harry to leave him. He had been hurt—he could still feel the remnants of pain in his left side when he breathed deeply—and he had never been into love games that almost killed him.

*On the other hand, you should have known better than to confront a dangerous, emotionally unstable, magically powerful wizard the way you did. Back a lion into a corner and what do you* think *will happen?*

Draco grimaced. What he felt was not self-blame, exactly, as much as it was disgust with himself for being so stupid. That was unacceptable. He'd come off the high of defeating Lucius and finding out his mother was still on his side, but he ought to have been Slytherin enough to rein in his emotions and subtly get the answer out of Harry.

Harry, it seemed, had already arrived at that calm, clear-headed position, and would do what

Draco wanted even if it hurt him. Draco was not going to be stupid enough to throw this chance away because of his own mistake, or in pique.

He reached out and took Harry's right wrist, squeezing just enough to be painful. Harry raised an eyebrow and said nothing, waiting.

"I want you to do the most difficult thing of all," he said quietly. "I want you to tell me the truth."

Harry gave him a half-smile, the right corner of his mouth twitching up. "Yes," he said. "That is very difficult. But you'll have it."

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Chapter: 25

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Five—The Truth*

For long moments, Harry sat still, his head lowered, his courage gathering. He was surprised that Draco did not ask his questions right away, but perhaps he had sensitivity enough to see how hard this was for Harry and to give him some time to deal with his own resolution first.

*Perhaps? He does, and you know it,* said that cold, clear voice. *Lie to him about the connection between the two of you, but it won't sound very convincing. And I won't let you lie to yourself any more.*

Harry did have to wonder about that voice. It sounded firmer and more contemptuous of him than his other personas did. Of course, the other personas didn't speak *to* Harry; he voiced them, turned them outwards and set them like mirrors facing the world.

"How did you come to work for Metamorphosis?" Draco asked, evidently deciding that Harry had had enough time to brace himself. "And why pretend to be Brian?"

Harry sighed shakily. This was one of the things he had known Draco would ask, and thus one of the truths he knew he would have to tell. But the secret had been his alone for so long, hoarded like a precious gem, that he had a very hard time relaxing his grip on it.

Draco stared intently at him, but said nothing more, and the silence that passed before Harry answered was punishing and comforting both at once.

"I—I don't work for Metamorphosis," Harry whispered at last. "I own and run it."

Draco frowned. "And you delegate responsibilities to the Manager?" He cocked his head. "I suppose I can see why you would do that. You don't want anyone to know you're gay, so you don't want your name associated with an organization that does good work for gay people." His voice grew briefly scathing; Harry winced, but didn't try to defend himself. "That still doesn't tell me why you decided to play one of his workers, though."

*Damn. I will have to come out and say it.* "I don't—Draco." Harry looked away from him, staring down at the sheets. He only realized his hand was shaking when Draco clasped it and rubbed his fingers back and forth over Harry's knuckles.

That straightened Harry's spine. Draco was the one who had gone through a broken bone and great pain in the last few hours; Harry had no right to shake or break down or act even weaker than he really was.

"What is this terrible secret?" Draco whispered gently.

Harry took a deep breath and answered honestly. It took more courage than he had used to face Voldemort in the duel in the graveyard. "Not terrible, except maybe in its size. I *am* Metamorphosis, Draco. I play every single person who belongs to it. The Manager was me. If you had chosen one of the other people I showed you—Purity, say—I would have been him. Or her." He looked at Draco, only then realizing he'd been glancing away during his confession, and waited.

It felt as if a firework had gone off in Draco's brain.

*No. That isn't possible—no.*

Draco opened his mouth to accuse Harry of lying again, and then paused. The expression on Harry's face was quiet, worn, and open, like the expression of someone who had spent days hiking through a thunderstorm. He made no attempt to withdraw from Draco, and he had his head tipped forwards slightly, as if he expected anger to break over him, even welcomed it.

*This is the truth.* Draco felt that as unshakably as he had felt that Harry's story about a ten-year passion for him was a lie.

*Ten years.* Metamorphosis had been active for ten years. And ten years was the amount of time that Harry had spent in seclusion, about the time that the "pathetic Potter" rumors had started.

It *was* possible. Barely. If Draco were willing to credit Harry with supernatural determination, strength of will, magical power—well, he knew about that one—and learning capability.

"Metamorphosis has handled so many cases," he whispered at last. "There have been so many different wizards and witches—"

"Every single one of them me." Harry smiled; it might have been a wry smile if his eyes hadn't been so full of panic. Barely restrained panic, Draco thought, and realized how much it had cost Harry to tell him this. "That's why one of our mottos is 'Need a perfect stranger?' I can guarantee that the person you hire will be a stranger, because they didn't exist before I made them up."

*The motion of his wand when he cast the Transfigurations on himself. So practiced, as if he had handled this magic for years.*

"I can't imagine the amount of training this must have taken," Draco said. His voice was still low and breathy. There was no particular reason for it to be like that; this was Harry's house, and surely he would have wards that shut out spies. But his mind was glassed over, his emotions drowned for the moment. He knew he was essentially in shock. Even the beat of his own heart, overwhelming in his ears, felt distant.

"It took a lot, yes." Harry shifted a little, as if compelled to put some distance between himself and Draco, though he didn't let go of Draco's hand. His muscles were all locked; Draco could see them bunching in his shoulders. "But I wanted to do this. From the moment I came up with the idea for Metamorphosis and realized how much fun it could be and how much I could help people, I've never wanted to do anything else. So it was acting lessons and dialect lessons and Transfiguration lessons and glamour lessons and learning how to choose wigs and robes and other clothes. Learning to alter the way I walk, my small gestures, my emotions."

Draco took a deep breath.

And the reality of the idea exploded on him.

*Oh my God. Oh my* God.

The Savior of the Wizarding World, the Gryffindor who had fought to destroy the shadows consuming their society so that people might walk honestly in the light once more and look each other in the face, had also created the most deceptive web Draco had ever seen or heard of. His father liked to brag about the way he had fooled the Ministry for fourteen years into thinking that he'd just been under the Imperius Curse when he'd served the Dark Lord. Compared to this, that was only a half-meant deception, a secret Lucius had betrayed the moment he found an appreciative audience who would not betray him in turn.

The only perfect conspiracy was one that was never discovered. And Draco knew of no one who had even *suspected* that Metamorphosis was not real, that the Manager was his workers, or that any of them was Harry Potter.

It was clever, and more than clever. It took cleverness, cunning, ambition, power, all the Slytherin traits that Draco had been raised with, and spun them into a web that it tugged over *everyone's* eyes. The people Draco knew who had used Metamorphosis included a great many Slytherins, and others who prided themselves on knowing the sheathed-dagger traits of the

pure-blood world and surviving them every single time. They had been just as fooled as everyone else had been.

One small part of Draco was violently jealous. That Harry had the skills to pull something like this off, and he didn't—

But the rest of Draco was flooded with desire.

He came back to himself. Harry was watching him carefully, head tilted back and nostrils flared and eyes wide. He seemed ready to bolt if Draco had an unfavorable reaction.

Draco smiled. He cupped Harry's chin and brought his face closer, kissing him lightly on the lips, then on the cheek, then behind his ear. Harry gasped a little, his head drooping and his eyelids fluttering.

*Mine. Not just him, but everyone he's ever played. He held his cool and finished the jobs with everyone else, but* I *was the one he gave in to.* I *was the one he told. Even his friends can't know, or one of those gossipy Weasleys would have betrayed it by now.*

"Do you know how much I want you?" he whispered into Harry's nearest ear, making Harry squirm, maybe at the words, maybe at the tickling sensation. "I wish my body was healthier. Lovemaking is the best means of sharing I know, and I want to share *everything* about you, with you, in you." He felt himself harden and growled a little at the pain that twinged through his left side when he tried to move. "Maybe you can—"

Harry pulled back, alarmed. This was definitely *not* a normal reaction, and maybe Draco had hit his head on the wall harder than Harry thought. Besides, they couldn't

just have sex every time one of them felt the urge. That was stupid.

"Draco," Harry said sharply. "Why aren't you feeling angry at the moment? Betrayed? You have a right."

Draco smiled dazedly up at him, his eyes shining so fiercely Harry thought he looked drunk. His hand kept moving, sweeping through Harry's hair and up and down his neck. Then he brought his other hand, the one that had been clasping Harry's, into play, as if he couldn't get enough of touching him.

"I'm not angry," Draco whispered, "because what you've done is beautiful."

Harry just stared at him.

"So deceptive," Draco went on, his voice working into an actual *croon*. "You didn't leave any clues behind, or a trail. I never would have guessed what was wrong if you hadn't confessed it."

He didn't look angry at admitting his own incapacity, either, which made Harry flinch. "This—the possibilities are endless, Harry. And you used them to help other people in your own way, didn't you? And to *play* in your own way. This is an endless game." His eyes sharpened for a moment. "Mind, I want to know why you chose this, instead of the life that everyone expected you to have after the war."

Harry's breath withered in his throat. Oh, Draco *would* choose the hardest question, the one that he doubted he could answer for anyone, because his justifications would seem impossible or thin outside the shelter of his mind.

"Harry? I'm waiting." Draco's face had hardened slightly, though the shine still lingered in his eyes, and his hands still caressed Harry's face.

"It wasn't—it wasn't the life I wanted or could have," Harry whispered at last. "I found out I was gay, which cut out marriage and a family."

"It doesn't have to," Draco said, so low that Harry could hardly hear him. "There are children you could adopt."

Harry stared at him again. "What are you—"

"Well, never mind." Draco waved an airy hand, all his attention squarely on Harry. It was unnerving. Harry had always had the impression Draco was thinking about at least two things other than him. Now he faced that sole scrutiny, and it hurt. "What were the other reasons, Harry? I want to know them. I want to be the only one who knows this much of you."

His words burned along the edges with strange passion. Harry shook his head, not in denial but uncomprehendingly. Draco wasn't reacting *right.* His own knowledge of Draco gained from observation and from Pansy and Narcissa said that he should care more about the insult to his pride than about learning Harry's secrets. Why didn't he?

*Maybe because he's in love with you,* said the merciless voice.

*There isn't a me he can be in love with!* Harry screamed back at it, and only became aware that he'd pulled away from Draco when the other man's hands tightened on his shoulder and the back of his neck, forbidding him from going further. He murmured a few soothing nonsense words, then said, "Harry? Tell me."

*Yes, there is,* said the merciless voice. *Me, for a start. And if you try to deny that you're on the way to falling in love with him, I shall set your conscience on you. You could have got him medical help and left him alone. That would have severed the bond between you if anything could. Instead, you kept him, healed him, and told him secrets you once swore never to let out. If that is not a sign on the road to love, what is it?*

Harry lifted his head with a gasp, like someone surfacing from quicksand. If he loved Draco, he

thought wildly, then surely he could trust him. He could trust Draco to listen to a request from him and honor it.

"I'll tell you what made me start Metamorphosis," he whispered. "I will. But later, Draco, please. I'd—I'd break down sobbing if I tried, and that would make me very unattractive, wouldn't it?" He smiled, trying to banter. Surely, if Draco could ask for sex at a time like this, he could use humor.

Draco studied Harry for a moment, his eyes narrow. Harry looked less like a frightened rabbit than Draco had thought he would, and more like a man under torture. His face was pale, his body shaking, his hands clumsy when he reached out to press his fingers under the place where Draco's side hurt.

Draco knew he could press his advantage. He could remind Harry that that pain was his fault, and that Harry owed him the truth. And he thought Harry would break and confess. Perhaps it would even do him good to get it out in the open at last.

But Harry had asked for more time.

And Draco did not really want to see Harry broken. He had dreamed of Harry surrendering the truth to him freely, and that was what had happened so far—at least, Harry must have known there was a possibility that Draco would demand that when Harry offered him whatever he wanted. This truth, too, should come to Draco freely to be really valuable.

*When he tells me, I'll know he's mine.*

Draco relaxed. Yes. That was important. The myriad selves Harry had just revealed had made their relationship twenty times more complicated. Harry might easily be able to fool Draco into *thinking* their bond was permanent and then slip away. Or he could show Draco one of the many other facets of his character and bedazzle him. Draco wanted Harry to step to his side and bow his head of his own free will. It was the only way to be sure of him.

*Of his love. That is what I want.*

And Draco fiercely wanted the man who could do this.

"All right," Draco said at last.

Harry lifted his head, and the expression on his face was stunned, beatific. No one had ever offered him something like this before, Draco thought. He was the first, again. He felt a surge of smug satisfaction, and then more curiosity.

Before he could ask his next question, though, Harry said, "I'd like—I'd like to kiss you right now." He flushed, as if it were asking for a kiss and not all the other things they'd done since they

met which was blush-worthy. "Very much. Please?"

Draco tilted his head back, eager to see what the kiss would be like. "You always may," he said.

Carefully, with his eyes open and his face curiously set, Harry kissed him. It was a light, gentle pressure for long moments. Then Harry tapped on Draco's lips with his tongue, and Draco opened them. Harry explored Draco's mouth in silence, save for the soft slopping motions of their lips together.

And then he *moaned,* a sound that seemed to tear itself out of his guts.

The significance of the moment was not lost on Draco. It was the first real kiss Harry had initiated wearing his own face, and it was affecting him as none of the kisses they had performed before—when he was wearing Brian's face—had done.

Another memory of the last time they had spent in bed together overwhelmed Draco. Strange that he hadn't attached much meaning to it at the time.

*He came when he realized I wanted him.*

Yes, Harry was there for the having, if Draco could only find him. And he could give himself happily, contentedly, to the man who had done this.

Harry pulled back at last, his pupils so dilated that Draco's erection came back again; he hoped that Harry would forget about his injury and suggest a short romp. But Harry cleared his throat and murmured, "What was your next question? I've asked a few and got such pretty answers, it's only fair I should answer a few."

Draco smiled lazily and let his hand skim over the side of Harry's neck again, hoping the motion would soothe him whilst he asked a question that was sure to be painful. "Why haven't you told your friends about Metamorphosis?"

Harry swallowed. Then he swallowed again, braced an elbow on the bed, and leaned down towards Draco so that he could have his hair and face stroked. Draco obliged.

Harry began in a shaky voice.

*Careful. I've got to make it sound good without betraying Ron and Hermione—*

*You have to make it the truth,* said the merciless voice. *Or are you telling me that you feel as close to them as ever at this moment, closer than you do to Draco?*

His life would have been more comfortable if he could have kept on lying to *himself*, anyway, Harry thought, and then wondered: which portion of himself?

But Draco was waiting, so Harry spoke. "Hermione knew I had started practicing with glamours and other shape-changing spells in Hogwarts, so I could keep people from mobbing me," he murmured, leaning his head on Draco's shoulder. That left him alone with the memories, but even that was easier than facing Draco's gaze at the moment. "She didn't like it. She talked to me several times about it, then she argued, and then she broke down in tears, pleading with me to be myself, no matter how hard it was. She was afraid that I would lose myself behind the masks."

"And was she right?" Draco whispered directly into his ear. "Have you lost yourself?"

"No," Harry said strongly. "I haven't."

"Liar," Draco sighed. For just a moment, his hand rested heavily on the back of Harry's neck instead of stroking. "Tell me the truth, Harry."

Harry shivered. This was one of those secrets he had wanted to keep back. But telling Draco whathad happened as a *consequence* of that last year between Hogwarts and the opening of Metamorphosis was not the same thing as telling him what had happened during that year itself. Surely.

*Surely,* the merciless voice agreed.

"I've come close to it, I suppose," Harry whispered. "I don't *want* to be Harry Potter anymore. Everyone thinks they know him, and no one does. He's deficient in all the best traits. I want to be the people he's not, and that's one reason I chose as many different personas as I did. I wanted to be Brian more than I've wanted to be anyone in a long time, and I think that's why I slipped up. He was close to the idealized image of my self, the person I would have liked to be if I could."

When Harry began to speak of himself in the third person, Draco went cold. Only great effort kept his hands moving on Harry's neck and shoulders, stroking the truth out of him.

*Granger may have been right.*

On the other hand, why did she forbid Harry from using the masks and the glamours? Obviously, all that had happened was Harry's agreeing with her on the surface and then using the spells in such a way that she wouldn't find out, and that had increased the danger of his drifting without an anchor. She should have stood by him, been someone he could come talk to about it.

*I will be that person. I want to know him. I want to know what he's playing, see how he does it.*

Draco's throat was thick with longing. He wanted to know the real Harry, of course, the one the man on his shoulder spoke of losing; he must be the origin of all those traits Harry loved to put in his other personas, and he was so sheltered and hidden that it would be an honor to be his first contact with the outside world in a decade. But he wanted to know the other people, too, the

personas Harry became, the flashing, narrow facets of his character that would reflect the light back like a many-sided gem.

*How stupid of Granger to give up a chance at that position.*

"Go on," Draco said, and touched his lips to the skin behind Harry's ear.

Harry began almost babbling. Draco kept the touches of his hands smooth and steady. *How long has he wanted to say this? How long has he had to hold back?*

"I pretended to agree, she was so upset about it, but I couldn't stop. And then Ron found out I was gay, and that came near destroying our friendship, but I locked him in a room with me and a bunch of Firewhiskey and talked to him about it until he came around, but I can't let him find out that I actually have lovers, because he asked me not to shove it in his face, and he still thinks of other gay men and women the same way as he always did, and that *hurts* but he's Ron and I love him. And Hermione is so caught up in her causes, in helping house-elves and Muggleborns, and now she has a new baby on the way, I can't ask her to take on the burden of helping me, too. And she would think I needed help if she knew the truth about Metamorphosis. I *can't*, Draco, I *can't.*"

"Shhh, Harry," Draco said, his arms tightening. Harry lay almost completely on the bed by now, his breath short and frightened. "I'm not asking you to tell them. I only wanted to know why you hadn't." He paused. "Do you regret that you told me?"

Harry raised his head, sniffling, embarrassed. He had swum entirely in a sea of self-pity for long moments, when Draco was the one who had been hurt. And now he was in tears just from the memory, when Draco hadn't cried at all. It was one thing to choose an appearance of weakness in front of others, as Harry had in order to fool Narcissa, and another thing to let anyone see the parts of him that found the world hard to bear. They deserved to be scorned, but the scorn would tear Harry apart.

"No," he whispered. "But I'm afraid that you might."

Draco's arms tightened again, and he half-rolled, so that they were face-to-face. Harry met his gaze, distantly surprised that it wasn't as hard as he had assumed it would be a few minutes ago.

"Listen to me, Harry," Draco whispered. "It seems that you might have lost part of yourself playing games, yes—"

Harry began to struggle. He could bear anything but the actual evidence of Draco's regret. He would have to reach his wand, he would have to use a Memory Charm—

"*Listen* to me."

*You owe him trust, too,* the merciless voice said.

Harry took a deep breath, restraining his panic as he had restrained his tears, and looked back at Draco.

"Good," Draco said quietly. "Now. You might have lost yourself, but I don't want you to have to give up the games. They're beautiful. I want to see all you can do, to meet all the people you are."

Harry reeled as if someone had punched him in the gut. *Oh, God. This—it isn't happening. I don't deserve so much good fortune.*

*Shut up and listen,* said the merciless voice.

"I want you to be able to play them whilst still being yourself." Draco's hand slid into his hair and tightened there. "I want everything for and from you, Harry Potter. Do you understand me? Some things about you I won't like, I'm certain, but I want the chance to dislike them. I want you to trust me. I want you to be strong in all senses of the word. And I'm going to demand that you make *me* strong, and that you tell me what you honestly think of me, and that you give me the chance to earn your trust."

"Oh, yes," Harry whispered, and then he was kissing Draco again, hovering a little to be careful of Draco's wounded side, but frantic to express his emotions and unable to find any other way. Some of his personas were good with words, but he wasn't.

*Oh, yes. I—I hardly dared to even envision this.*

*Envision it,* the merciless voice said. *And work hard to deserve it. Use all the strength that belongs to you, both with you now and distributed among your personas.*

That was the first thing Harry thought the merciless voice had been wrong about, because once he gave a character trait to a persona he could not call it back to himself without destroying the persona. But he would worry about that later.

For now, he simply kissed Draco and was happy.

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Chapter: 26

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Six—Debates*

"More porridge, Master Malfoy?"

Draco had to admit that Harry's house-elf made excellent food, even if Kreacher seemed to feel that porridge and nothing else was suitable for someone recovering from a physical injury. He nodded and held out the bowl, but Kreacher snapped his fingers and an entire new bowl appeared in Draco's hands. Draco smiled and let Kreacher take the empty one instead. He looked over Kreacher's head, but Harry still hadn't returned from the loo. Maybe he'd gone to take a shower instead of relieve himself, as Draco had supposed.

Before the house-elf could leave the room, Draco cleared his throat. Kreacher turned back at once, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He really was eager to serve, Draco thought, and wondered if the difference between him and the Malfoy house-elves came from the people they served or the way they were treated.

"Master Malfoy needs something else?"

"I was just wondering if you could tell me a little about Harry," Draco said. "I haven't been dating him long, you see, and there's still so much I don't know."

Kreacher's ears rose almost straight up. "Master Malfoy is moving into the house?"

Draco blinked, wondering how Kreacher had drawn that conclusion from his words. "Er, not at the moment," he said. The elf nodded, and his ears drooped again. "But I wondered how much truth there is to the rumors that Harry stays in the house all the time and never goes out for any reason. Does he spend much time here?"

"Master Harry is always moving," Kreacher said, his voice taking on the tone of a familiar complaint. He tapped one over-large foot agitatedly on the gleaming wooden floor of the bedroom Draco had taken over. "He will not sit still for long, not even when he is sick. 'Master Harry,' Kreacher says, 'do not overstrain yourself.' 'Master Harry, eat more.' And he just smiles at Kreacher and says he doesn't need to. Sometimes he says he doesn't need to eat more because the person he is doesn't need to eat more."

Draco blinked again. "The person he is—"

"Trying to pry information out of my house-elf, Draco?" Harry stepped through the bedroom door, his hair wet and gleaming, his smile sharp enough to cut. He had on a shirt and a loose pair of trousers, Draco was disappointed to see. After all the time they'd spent around each other, surely it wouldn't have bothered Harry to expose a bit of flesh, and Draco would have enjoyed it. Harry flicked a glance at Kreacher, and the house-elf squeaked and vanished.

"Just ask me if you really want to know."

The words were friendly enough, but Harry's eyes had gone shadowed, and he'd lost a little of the openness he'd shown last night. Draco didn't know why. They'd only been apart for five or six hours, if the *Tempus* Charm he cast was accurate (and it always was), and Harry would have spent most of that time sleeping. Had he put up his barriers again solely because of the time? Had he thought of some consequence to their companionship that Draco had not?

"Sometimes house-elves know things that wizards don't, even the wizards who own them," Draco said, refusing to apologize. "But since you extended the invitation to me, I will. Do you spend a lot of time here?"

"Not really." Harry waved his wand and dried his hair, then nodded at the porridge. "Are you going to eat that?"

"Impatient, or hungry?" Draco murmured, picking up his spoon.

"Impatient." Harry stretched his arms over his head and paced back and forth. Draco watched him from the corner of an eye, and slowed the movements of his spoon when he thought he could get away with it. Harry was staring at the far wall, though Draco had already looked at it and knew there wasn't a window there. "We'll have to make decisions sooner or later, and have a conversation that I'm not looking forwards to."

Draco laid his spoon down with a precise click. He supposed it was progress of a sort that Harry was confessing his dread of the arriving conversation rather than trying to avoid it or disguise his motives, but since Draco had no idea why he would dread anything, the statement was still irritating. "And what do you think we'll talk about?"

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face him. His eyes were still shadowed, but now he was biting his lower lip, which calmed Draco a bit; Harry was even more nervous about this than he was, if that was possible.

"More like, what we'll *argue* about," Harry said. "Shouldn't you finish that first?" He nodded to the porridge.

"I suddenly find myself without an appetite," Draco said. "Disagreement with you does that to me."

Harry cursed inwardly. He knew he should have followed the promptings of his common sense and kept out of the bedroom until Draco had finished his breakfast. He didn't want to rush him, or injure him further. Yes, he had managed to heal Draco's broken rib last night, but he was no expert at such magic and Draco still needed time to recover.

But he'd allowed his own impulses to overtake him, and what good did *that* ever do? There was a reason Harry kept such a tight leash on the part of himself that had got him into trouble during his years at Hogwarts, a reason he regarded that part of himself as the weakest one.

Still, Draco knew enough by now that he might as well go ahead with the subject. Harry leaned back on the wall and did what he could to show patience and invincible calm, instead of the champing pain on his nerves. "You'll want me to go about in public with you now," he said. "To stand at your side as Harry Potter instead of Brian Montgomery. To put the power of my name behind the rebellion." He paused. "And behind your rebellion as well, I suppose, though since Lucius has disowned you already you don't need my name for that."

Draco had narrowed his eyes, but his hands had not moved. Harry wondered idly if he had learned his poised immobility from his mother or his father. It did wonders for him, either way. He certainly didn't look like the kind of man someone would want to argue with.

*Too bad I have no choice. I should have seen this last night. We're just too different, in some ways, for it to be a good thing that he has the secret of Metamorphosis now.*

Harry knew he would still have done the same thing again if offered a Time-Turner, however. He had owed Draco the truth; he had owed Draco whatever he asked for, and Draco had chosen the truth. And there was still a crawling, shrinking relief in him, emanating from that weakest and most deeply-buried part of him, that someone besides him *knew*. Carrying the secret had been a weight of its own.

But in other ways, this was an enormous problem. Draco might *think* Harry's deceptions and disguises were clever and Slytherin and fascinating, but he wouldn't for long. This was only one of the reasons.

Harry knew better than to believe this could work out smoothly. He would have to ride it out as best as he could, though, because he *was* attracted to Draco, he *did* want to be with Draco, and Draco *did* know.

"You're saying," Draco murmured, "that you want to remain disguised."

"Yes," Harry said.

"This has to do with the reasons that you've never revealed yourself as gay? That you've never told anyone else you run Metamorphosis? That you haven't used your name and your power as you could have, to claim some respect for yourself?"

"*What* power?" Harry said, before he could stop his own words. He flinched when Draco glared at him. *Damn it, the weak part of me is speaking again.*

"Do not play stupid," Draco said. "You know very well your magic could have won you all the attention, admiration, respect, or fear you desired. Yet you preferred to act the weakling." His hands briefly clenched in the sheets, as if he were fighting himself. "And those reasons you still don't want to confess to me."

"Yes," Harry said quietly. He held Draco's eyes. "Is this the ending of any connection we might share, then? Do you regret I told you?"

Nausea churned in his stomach and relief swirled dizzily behind his eyes. Draco's rejection now would hurt terribly, but it would also allow Harry to continue as he had been. At the moment, with reality crushing the little paradise he had briefly found in Draco's arms, Harry was not sure which one he wanted more.

Draco frowned, the sharp retort he had drawn breath to make dying in his mouth. He examined Harry with narrowed eyes. He was missing something he should have grasped and understood instinctively, and God knew there were enough mysteries around Harry already.

Harry had his arms crossed behind his head, an easy, relaxed posture Draco was sure was fake, especially with the flickering movements of his eyes and the tremor in his voice. When he happened to shift to the side, his shoulders bunched and stayed that way, tense. His expression struggled for stoic, with flashes of other emotions easily visible behind it.

And now Draco felt stupid. *He said he was a good actor. What if he's acting around me, too? What if he's showing me what he thinks I want or need to see, instead of the true, honest him?*

The truth was probably more complex than that, because Draco had easily been able to tell when Harry was lying before, and now he wasn't sure. However, the question had sounded real enough. He started by answering it, relaxing his own posture and smiling as much as he could under the circumstances.

"Of course I don't regret it. You sound as though you're awfully certain I'll leave you at any moment, Harry, as if I'm looking for some *excuse.* You should know that's not true." Draco lowered his voice, filled it with affection. "Why would I be looking for one, you imbecile? I showed you what your trust means to me. I want to retain it. I hardly could if I rejected the first great revelation you've offered me out of turn."

Harry's head jerked sharply to one side, and his eyes lost their shadows for the first time that morning, widening and letting in the light. He dropped his hands from behind his head, crossing them at the waist, and looked long and steadily at Draco.

He still didn't smile, but Draco thought he was getting through to him now. He waited. Harry cleared his throat and then spoke in an unsteady voice. "I—of course. I should have known that." He paused, his muscles still tense, locked and trembling as if he were about to bolt, and then blurted out, "I'm trying to trust you. It's harder than I thought it would be." And then he looked mortified he'd said that.

But Draco relaxed, because he understood much better now. Harry feared bad reactions from his friends if he told them about Metamorphosis. Why shouldn't he fear the same thing from Draco, once he'd had time to think about it, once a disagreement came about between them, even if

Draco had initially been swept away in the rush of emotions?

*And I am dearer to him than any friend.*

Draco kept his voice soft and cheerful, the same voice he might have used to coax a timid wild animal close. "Of course I would like you to take your place at my side, but I think that's impossible right now, for many reasons." Harry looked at him with such shining gratitude in his eyes Draco had to fight to keep from preening. He did harden his face and tone enough to add, "But we should work towards that. I will, eventually, want to date you in public. And in the future, please ask me what I'm likely to want, rather than assuming I'll argue with you like a goat butting his head against a stone wall, or give up on you the moment I don't get my way."

Harry flushed, and nodded. Then he said, "What *should* our strategy be, then? I enjoyed last night, but kissing and confessing secrets is hardly the way we can spend all our days, not if we want to be productive." A note of wry humor had crept into his voice which Draco took a moment to revel in before he answered.

"It depends on what you mean by 'productive,'" Draco said, and this time Harry smiled. Glad to see it, Draco smiled back, though he made a mental note to himself not to expect *all* their arguments to be this easily settled. "I intend to continue my support of Nusante and his followers. My name is associated with it now, and backing out would look weak. Besides, it will anger Lucius." That won an even broader smile from Harry, though this one flashed and went quickly. "However, I know next to nothing about safe meeting places in London, or about the best ways to send positive messages about homosexuality through plays and other art. My contacts in the Ministry are also limited." He leaned forwards. "I want to lend monetary support. I want you to make the plans."

Harry's face froze. Then he said, "You know, Draco, exaggerated stories about what I did during the war aside, I'm really *not* that great a planner."

Draco blinked for a moment. Then he said, "I wasn't talking about the war. And as for your not being good at planning, that's a load of bollocks. Who carried out Metamorphosis under pure-blood noses for a decade?"

Harry flinched a little, then stood straighter. Draco had to admit he didn't understand this reaction, either.

*But some of them you want him to explain on his own, remember?*

*He—he thinks I can do this. I told him the truth, told him how I've hidden behind other people and fled from my responsibilities, almost broke down in his arms, and lashed out and wounded him physically, and he still has confidence in me.*

Harry could not remember the last time he had felt this heady mixture of support and trust

coming from another person. References to Metamorphosis still hurt more than he'd thought they would, and somehow he'd forgotten that of course Draco would factor his new knowledge of Harry into his future plans. But Draco was willing to believe in him, despite everything, and that made Harry determined not to let him down.

*You cannot,* the merciless voice insisted in Harry's head, the first time he had heard it that morning. He barely concealed his start; he had thought he'd put it away and gone back to being the cold Harry, mixed with glimpses of the weak one Draco seemed to see against Harry's will. The voice was a most strange persona, not fading away when it was told to and talking back to Harry, whilst the others were simply different people. *You cannot fail him, not as long as you have breath in your body.*

*It might happen anyway.*

*But not with your willing cooperation.*

*No*.

And with the merciless voice pushing at him, Harry made a gesture he knew he could never have done otherwise. Holding Draco's eyes, he smiled a little and said, "Well. It'll be some time yet before I'm ready to let my name or my face be associated in public with homosexuality. Still, it'll happen eventually." Making that commitment caused shivers to race up and down his spine, but the softening of Draco's face was worth the fear. "What if I were to spread the rumor that Harry Potter *does* support Nusante and the struggle? What if I were to offer a hiding place in London where no one would think to look for them, because the house is so well-hidden?" He made a wide circling gesture around at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "But someone must know you live here. Someone would figure it out, and probably sooner than we want."

*He said we*, the merciless voice pointed out.

*I know he did,* Harry snapped back, still reeling with the wonder and the shock of it, the implication Draco was with him, even in decisions he clearly didn't agree with. Then he continued, "There are ways to disguise that. We'll give them the Apparition coordinates, the *exact* coordinates, so that they'll Apparate in on the doorstep. I can easily disguise all traces that I live here." Draco's eyes narrowed a bit, but Harry didn't think it looked threatening and so didn't pursue the subject or allow his confidence to deflate. "And I'll adjust the wards to cast a modified illusion spell. Anyone who gets curious will think he's looking at another street entirely. It'll be that much harder to betray from the outside, if we do have anyone who thinks to score points with the Ministry by trying."

"We still don't know where they got the information about the first meeting," Draco murmured.

"Exactly." Harry took another risk. He was dizzy with the sensation of doing so, but he had

*support.* He couldn't have forgotten that even if the merciless voice didn't constantly whisper in his head to remind him. "I do have contacts in the Ministry. I can talk to Ron, and he's happy to give me all sorts of gossip if I ask the right questions. I'll try to learn both who gave the meeting away and how much they know now."

Draco chuckled. "And the art?"

"I do have some ideas on that as well," Harry admitted, biting his lip. He was debating whether he should tell Draco that he had been Elizabeth Gouldier. But this was probably enough risks for one day. Draco would be irritated if he learned that Harry had been acting a persona right under his nose. "However, I think we can leave the bulk of the planning up to Nusante and the people who want to work in the same field. They're the artists, after all."

"True enough, for now." Draco leaned back against the pillows and stretched. He had removed his shirt to sleep, and Harry found his eyes following the muscles in Draco's arms and shoulders with more than friendly interest. Draco noticed him looking and breathed deeply on purpose, which flexed his muscles. Harry flushed.

Draco took the mercy on him the voice in Harry's head would not. "I can ask among my own pure-blood friends to see if anyone might have any idea who passed the information on to the Ministry. And it's time I softened them up. They'll talk to me, I think. By now, they'll have heard of the disowning, and they'll want to know how in the world I could be so reckless." He held out a hand. "Come here. I'd like to kiss you before I leave."

Harry stepped forwards and bent his head. This kiss was less intimate than the one they had shared last night, but also lazier and slower and less urgent. They didn't need to rush, Draco seemed to be saying, because they had plenty of time to know and explore and tease each other. Harry was panting nonetheless when he drew away, and half-hard.

Draco smiled at him, but didn't say anything about it. He rose to his feet, retrieved the shirt hanging on the back of a chair, and slung it over his shoulder. As he followed Harry down the stairs to the entrance hall, Harry glanced back at him and found his eyes fixed on the distance. He was humming under his breath, the way Harry often walked down these stairs when things were going well and whistled.

*He can focus his whole attention on me, and he can also relax enough around me that he doesn't have to pay attention to my every little movement.* Harry flushed again. Honestly, he needed to stop acting like a delighted puppy when he learned something new about Draco.

*If reacting like a delighted puppy keeps you aware of how much you owe him and how much he can give you, then that is the right thing to do,* said the merciless voice.

Deliberately, Harry focused his thoughts on being the cold Harry, the one who saw and thought far ahead, the one who had the strength to do things he didn't necessarily like. That would banish the merciless voice, the decided shift to another persona. And something occurred to him,

because he was thinking like his cold self, which had not been answered so far. Pausing with his hand on the front door, he turned and asked Draco, "How did you learn where I lived? Is it a hole in my wards that someone else could exploit?"

Draco looked up and shook his head. His hair hung shining around his head, even in the relatively dim lights of the hall, and Harry found himself admiring it. Well, the cold Harry *did* have a libido.

*No, he doesn't.*

Harry snarled a little and held himself still. Draco was staring at the place where the portrait of Mrs. Black had once hung and looked as if he wanted to ask a question about it, but he drew himself together enough to answer Harry's instead.

"A house-elf followed the owl I sent you a few days ago," he said, smiling at Harry again. "He waited until your elf was out, then sneaked into the hole he'd left, convincing the house that he was Kreacher on the way." Draco looked insufferably smug, but Harry supposed he had a right to.

"All right." Harry nodded. "So long as it's not a weakness I need to patch up."

Draco stepped up to him and laid his hands on his shoulders. He looked at Harry from so close Harry tilted up his chin, anticipating another kiss, but Draco simply stared intently.

"I think you have fewer weaknesses than you pretend," he murmured, and released Harry from his hold.

Frozen, Harry watched Draco step out the front door and casually tug on his shirt. Then he Apparated. Harry found himself obscurely grateful that Draco had dressed before he went, even though the wards would have prevented anyone on the street from getting a good glimpse of him.

*You might at least admit your own jealousy,* the merciless voice said.

Harry put his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking and turned away abruptly. He would don the mask of the Harry who was Ron and Hermione's friend and guide Ron's conversation subtly towards events in the Ministry. Yes. He would keep his promises to Draco and lend his support to the rebellion.

And he would banish this inconvenient persona he had assumed who did not seem to know how to leave him. He *would.*

Draco arrived at the London flat and frowned lightly as he realized two men were leaning against the wall outside the door. Clients, this early in the morning, and important enough the people at Malfoy's Machineries had sent them ahead? He hoped it was not some trouble with a new

product.

He assumed his business face at once, and nodded courteously. "Gentlemen. Can I help you?"

"In fact, you can," said the nearest one, stepping forwards, and Draco only then recognized the Auror cut of his robes. He tensed. The other man moved to flank his partner. The first one, a tall, blue-eyed, dark-haired wizard who resembled Brian too much for Draco's taste, gave him a hard smile. "By coming with us quietly. Draco Malfoy, you are under arrest for violating the Public Statute of Sexual Decency and Morality, 1900, through flagrant displays of homosexuality."

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Chapter: 27

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Seven—Romancing the Ministry*

Harry smiled at himself in the mirror. It was a timid, shy smile, and his eyes darted away from his reflection the moment he gave it. He nodded. Yes, this was the Harry whom Ron and Hermione would expect to see: interested in their lives, reluctant to talk about himself, guarded in his conversation and his expressions lest something he did led to a mention of the war.

*As long as Draco isn't here, I have no trouble assuming one of my personas.*

*You need this one right now,* the merciless voice promptly answered. *That doesn't mean you'll need it always.*

Harry ground his teeth together hard for a moment, then stopped. Would the Harry Ron and Hermione knew get angry? No, he would not. He was afraid of his own temper. He had said and done things when angry that he would regret forever, particularly when he had been nineteen, the year between his *real* seventh year at Hogwarts and the beginning of Metamorphosis.

He felt his hand begin to shake, and stopped it by sheer force of will. He had once told himself he would not spend time dwelling on that, and he never had. His anxieties, insecurities, and doubts dissipated in the constant running of Metamorphosis, in the assumption of minds and personalities that had no reason to feel them. And he would not let his new relationship with Draco, or the rebellion it seemed Harry was half in charge of running, damage his ability to assume those personalities.

*Draco said he wanted to know all of me. These personas are part of me, too.*

Harry stood up, shook his head twice, and clattered down the stairs. He normally would have asked Kreacher to make him some breakfast before he left, but this would leave his stomach free to growl whilst he spoke with his friends, and then Hermione would have the chance to fuss and accuse him of not taking care of himself. Harry would blush and look at his hands and mumble something that didn't actually answer the accusations.

*They deserve the chance to see what they want to see.*

Draco kept his head up as the Aurors marched him through the corridors of the Ministry of Magic. He knew they were deliberately choosing the most public route, to humiliate him in the most effective manner possible. They ignored a lift that started up from the Atrium with only two wizards in it, in order to crowd into one laden with Ministry employees, visitors, and children. One of the older witches lifted an eyeglass to her face to look at them and inquired in a low voice what Draco's crime was.

"Public homosexuality, madam," the blue-eyed Auror announced. Draco let his eyes fall half-shut so he could study the reactions to those words without it being obvious that he was doing so.

Half of them flinched. Others looked at the floor. The witch with the eyeglass adjusted it as though she thought public homosexuality ought to leave a disgusting film on Draco's skin. A burly wizard tugged his daughter behind him and frowned at Draco. One young woman bit her lip hard enough to make a drop of blood run from it.

"My, my," said the witch with the eyeglass. She had shining black hair, so obviously dyed Draco subdued the impulse to tell her where she could buy dye that would last longer. She leaned closer. "And more than one violation, from the way that you're holding him." She nodded to the other Auror, a bald, brown-eyed man, who hadn't stopped twisting Draco's arm behind his back since they left the flat.

"Two incidents that we have record of, madam, from the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses," said the blue-eyed man, and swung around to glare at Draco. "He simply couldn't control his libido."

Draco raised an eyebrow. He knew the stereotype of homosexual men that many wizards entertained concerned their insatiable sexuality; they spread disease and were inconstant to their lovers because one partner could never satisfy them, said the common "wisdom." Marrying one was unsafe because he would bring diseases home to his wife. They would rape children and any straight man even the slightest bit unwilling to accept their attentions.

The stereotype was so far from true in Draco's case that he had some hope of being able to cause doubts in the Aurors' minds simply by his behavior. On the other hand, eyes determined to remain shut could not be opened, and he would not waste his time with them. His task was to identify the members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement who might possibly be

sympathetic and work on them.

"And you're not going to speak up in your defense, young man?" the witch continued, peering so closely at him now that Draco was certain she could count the pores in his face.

"I'm in a relationship more permanent and deeper than half the people in this lift could ever entertain, madam," Draco drawled. "What is there about that to defend?"

The witch chuckled. Most of the adults simply looked angry. The grip on Draco's arm tightened until he would have gasped with pain had he not been a Malfoy. But Lucius had done worse to him and expected him to bear it without sound. Draco focused his eyes on the ceiling of the lift and didn't show a thing. He thought he heard the blue-eyed man suppress a frustrated snarl.

"I have an interest in such sexual perversions," the witch said. "My card, if you will." She bowed with a flourish and slipped a gold-embossed brown card up Draco's sleeve. The Aurors looked as if they might have liked to protest, but given that it had happened in front of everyone, they didn't quite dare. Or maybe it was the coat-of-arms briefly visible on the card that had stopped them, Draco thought. The Garrett family was neither poor nor without influence. "I look forwards to following the progress of the case." The lift jerked to a stop, and she moved out with half the people on it, not once looking back at the Aurors.

*One ally,* Draco thought. *And a good one.* He had briefly scanned the genealogical tables that Lucius had drummed into his head, looking for a witch of the appropriate age, and determined that she was Caroline Garrett, an expert in Abstract Magic—and Blaise Zabini's second cousin. Draco might not be able to rely on her for anything, but he had no doubt he would see her again.

"You needn't look so pleased with yourself," the blue-eyed Auror murmured to Draco, his lips close enough to Draco's ear that none of the other passengers could hear him. "You ought to know you won't find allies like that everywhere."

Draco fluttered his eyelashes briefly. "If you wanted to whisper sweet nothings to me, you could have done it openly. *I* wouldn't have minded." He darted his eyes towards the man holding his arm. "He looks like the jealous type, though."

In half an instant, the blue-eyed Auror was on the other side of the lift. He stared at Draco with his mouth open in disgust. His fingers had tightened on his wand until Draco fancied he might snap it. But alas, the wood was hard enough to withstand the increased pressure.

So was his arm, though Draco grunted a little as the other Auror yanked on it. "Do you explain bruises often?" he asked, with what voice he had left.

"Go easy with him, Young," the blue-eyed Auror said, and faced Draco again. "You ought to know it won't be so easy for you when we actually reach the Department."

"Your phrasing is repetitive," said Draco. "It bores me."

Young clenched his arm again. Draco smiled inwardly. Yes, it hurt, but on the other hand, he knew how strict the standards for Aurors had become since Minister Shacklebolt took over and cleaned what corruption he could out of Magical Law Enforcement. Aurors were supposed to handle even suspected murderers gently, proving themselves to be above the sort of rough justice that had tarnished their reputation during the first war with the Dark Lord. Draco only had to make sure the right person saw the bruises, and Young would suffer for this arrest right along with Draco.

At last the lift clattered to a halt, and Young and the other Auror led Draco off. Draco let his gaze rake the mass of desks he was led past, looking for a face he recognized. Though a few men and women stared at them curiously, he saw no one who looked like a good ally—

"*Malfoy?* Oh, this is rich."

Draco had to fight harder than normal to keep his face blank as he realized that the wizard who had risen from the desk ahead of him was Ron Weasley.

"You forgot to eat again, didn't you, Harry?"

Harry kept his eyes on his hands and shrugged a little as he listened to Hermione bustling about the kitchen. She had stood up the moment his stomach rumbled, although she had been deep in the middle of a story about how she'd managed to make it a crime for wizards to burn house-elves. It was the first of a long, long series of abuses that needed legislation passed against them, she'd said seriously, but if she had to devote the rest of her life to it, she would pass those laws.

Harry felt slightly in awe of Hermione when he listened to her say such things. She had a simple, direct will that he had only ever matched when he contemplated defeating Voldemort or playing a Quidditch game against Slytherin. She knew what needed to be done and did it, directly approaching the goal, without turning aside, lying, or manipulating anyone.

*A pity she doesn't turn that same will to the protection of wizards or witches who want to love one of their own sex,* the merciless voice said in his head.

Because he was alone, Harry dared to roll his eyes. The merciless voice understood the Harry who related to Draco well; it did not grasp the Harry who related to his friends. They had their own lives, lives Harry could understand and support. It would be wrong of him to try and make them change.

He could, of course, fish for information. When Hermione came back with a large sandwich packed with nourishing vegetables and probably slices of fruit and meat, too, Harry smiled at her and turned the conversation as if idly. "I've heard rumors about other pieces of legislation being trumped up," he said, and then had to pause and lick his fingers as a piece of lettuce crumpled

out the far side of the sandwich onto his knuckles. "Something about homosexuality and rebellion and art. Are they going to make it illegal to portray gay characters?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Hermione said, smiling reassuringly at him. "At least, not more illegal than it already is." She waved her wand, and the traces of stickiness left on Harry's fingers vanished. He murmured his thanks. "There was a group who tried to stage a play portraying homosexuality a few days ago, though. At the Theater-in-the-Round? Perhaps you've heard of it?" Her words had taken on a slight edge of exasperation now. She considered Harry hopelessly uncultured, especially since he didn't even get the scraps of knowledge Ron did by accompanying Hermione to the plays and concerts she wanted to see.

"I've heard of it," Harry said quietly, and licked his fingers one more time, causing Hermione to roll her eyes in turn. Harry hid a smile behind his hand. "Posh pure-blood place, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's more than that." Hermione rapped her wand against her palm, her eyes shining. "It's where they staged the first production of *The Moon Shining Down*, which was the first alternate history of the Slytherin-Gryffindor feud, and there was a play based on a recovered manuscript of *Macbeth* created by a wizarding scribe. Very different from the play that goes by that name in Muggle circles…"

Harry sat patiently, letting Hermione speed through the history of the plays she'd seen, or heard about, or wanted to see, performed in the Theater-in-the-Round. As it happened, he was familiar with most of the productions, which made the listening more tedious than usual, but it would hardly do to seem too eager. Finally, when Hermione had finished exhausting her speculations about possible places for other Shakespeare manuscripts to be hidden, Harry returned the conversation innocently to the beginning. "But a group tried to stage a play portraying homosexuality?" He leavened his voice carefully with both incredulity and envy. So far as Hermione and Ron knew, he wished that he could express his sexuality publicly, but had accepted that it was impossible.

"Oh, yes." Hermione shook her head. "And there was a riot in consequence. Really, I don't see why they expected anything else to happen. Everyone knows how touchy pure-bloods are about homosexuality, and that's a theater that's expected to represent pure-blood ideals even when their audiences and playwrights don't come from the culture."

"And the Ministry is going after the people who started the riot?" Harry asked, his sandwich apparently hanging forgotten between his fingers.

"Well, they *have* to." Hermione sighed. "It's not that I'm not sympathetic to them," she added, when Harry gazed at her inquiringly. "I think the way most of the wizarding world reacts to gays and lesbians and bisexuals is disgusting. But you can't fight an organization like the Ministry or the force of pure-blood conservatism with violence. You can't change everything that quickly." A sad smile touched her lips for a moment. "That was the lesson I had to learn. I came into the Ministry with bold visions of freeing all the house-elves in England in a year. Then I had to change that to two years, and finally I admitted that the task might not be done in my lifetime.

Muggleborns won't be fully integrated into the wizarding world in my lifetime, either, and it takes a lot of hard, repetitive work to make as much progress on either front as I've made. Now you have a group of young, impulsive people doing their cause more harm than good by imagining they can just take the wizarding world by storm." She snorted softly into her teacup. "As if no one has ever tried *that* before."

*In neither of your causes does that gap between old and young exist,* the merciless voice murmured. *In neither of your causes is the opposition to change mostly irrational. Losing house-elves can cost money, and many pure-bloods have the idea that they'll lose their homes and jobs to Muggleborns. But the origins of the hatred against homosexuals are based on the idea that wizards will dwindle out of existence if they permit same-sex affairs to flourish freely, which is ridiculous. As if there aren't enough orphans and Muggleborn children mistreated by their own parents to maintain the wizarding population!*

"No, I suppose violence won't make the Ministry listen to them," was what Harry himself said, leaning back in the chair and returning to the sandwich. Hermione would scold him in a minute if she realized he hadn't finished it, and they would get even further away from the subject Harry had come to discover information on. He could hardly believe that he'd forgotten Ron would be at work today. "But they don't deserve to be persecuted even more than they already are."

Hermione sighed and twisted a curl of hair around her finger, gazing at the polished wooden table between them as if it held an open book. "If they hadn't started a riot!" she murmured. "Ron came home saying something about it yesterday, how the lot of them were desperate criminals and had used dangerous magic against the Aurors sent to arrest them."

"Did he?" Harry concentrated intently on the sandwich and gave no appearance of being interested.

"Yes." Hermione took a long, drawn-out breath and shook her head. "The spell wiped the memories of the Aurors completely clean, so they couldn't remember who had been in the house they raided, who they might have arrested, or what kind of magic was used against them. Ron was enraged. Memory magic is always dangerous, you know that—" she gave Harry a quick smile that made him think she was remembering Lockhart "—and he had some friends in the raid. They could have sustained brain damage."

Harry sighed. "That's unfortunate. I suppose the Ministry will have to try again, though, if the first raid failed."

"Yes. And Ron wants to be part of the next one. They should be able to put it together in a few days, he said."

Harry looked up and blinked in feigned surprise. "Why would it take so long? If they could raid this group's first meeting, couldn't they raid a second one?"

"Apparently their source of information isn't being very forthcoming. Maybe he thought better of

betraying his comrades, whoever he was." Hermione gave a crooked smile. "And I have to say that I rejoice for their sakes, even if I don't approve of their tactics. Betrayal by a friend is no light matter."

*No,* said the merciless voice. *No, it is not.*

Harry finished eating his sandwich and stood. He'd got all he could reasonably pull from Hermione without making her suspicious. "Thanks for the sandwich," he said. "I should head home now. I'll need time to sleep this off before I eat lunch. And if I *don't* eat lunch, Kreacher will never forgive me."

Hermione rose to her feet, eyes bright with concern and smile strained. "You should see the Theater-in-the-Round for yourself," she said. "Promise you'll come with me and Ron this Saturday. They're holding a production of that *Macbeth* I told you about."

Harry just looked off to the side and shook his head a little. "I doubt the playwright and the actors would like having their work disrupted by a public feeding frenzy," he said.

And though she had hated the means he used to try and rid himself of the attention, Hermione gave way before the validity of that excuse, as she always did. Harry pressed her hand, smiled wanly at her, and went.

The moment the door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place closed behind him, he summoned the cold Harry persona and went to work. So the Ministry's source had suddenly become tight-lipped, had he? That could mean several things, and Harry would need to conduct tests to confirm which of his suspicions was closest to the truth.

Draco had been quiet and cold for the past hour, but it was difficult with Weasley at his elbow, staring straight at him and snickering whenever he thought he could get away with it. Young and the blue-eyed Auror were completing the paperwork necessary to confirm Draco as a "dangerous" criminal. Though other Aurors stared at them, Weasley was the only one who had ventured near. Thus Draco had no one to cordially complain to, and no one to show the bruises to. He still sat with his hands crossed in his lap, looking more beaten than he would have liked.

"I always wanted to know," Weasley said, beginning another of his childish taunts. "Do you *really* not miss women when you're sliding balls-deep into some poor bloke's arse? Or does part of you remain conscious of how unnatural this is and assign female bits to your partner?" He lowered his voice. "Come on, Malfoy, admit it. That's the real reason so many of you wear women's clothes, isn't it? Because sometimes even *you* get fed up and have to pretend you're fucking a woman to get it up at all."

Draco's tongue burned. He wanted so *badly* to ask Weasley how he'd managed to retain attitudes like that, given his enlightened Mudblood wife and his gay best friend. But then there would be questions as to how to he knew Harry's orientation, if there wasn't a punch for the insult to

Granger. Draco was not stupid enough to give the game away like that.

Besides, he thought he knew exactly how Weasley's attitudes had endured. Harry had confessed he loved Weasley. And Harry didn't challenge people he loved half as often as they deserved. Consider how he'd responded to Draco; casting spells on him seemed a last resort, even when a Memory Charm would have solved his problems. He tried to fade away instead, to lie, to subtly manipulate. The magic he *had* used to break Draco's ribs hadn't been planned.

*He has become almost too Slytherin. I wonder if another of my tasks might be coaxing the Gryffindor side of him back to life. Of course, he'll get some practice in that if he intends to support the rebellion—*

A sudden slap made his ears ring and jerked his head sideways.

"Malfoy, I'm *talking* to you!" Weasley snarled directly into his face. "I want to know whether you've ever dressed up in women's clothes and begged someone else to fuck you, so that you can feel like you're part of something normal for once."

Draco didn't speak, though "I assure you I have no complaints when Harry fucks me" would have been the perfect retort. He slipped his tongue around the corners of his mouth, making sure nothing was bleeding and no teeth had come loose. A pity they hadn't, in a way, but Draco preferred to show off evidence that he had suffered Auror brutality *without* damaging his good looks.

"Weasley!"

And here was Shacklebolt himself—not the ally Draco would have chosen, given that he was the one authorizing the raids in the first place, but the only one present who might be able to restrain Weasley. He lowered his eyes so there was no chance anyone would see the smile lurking in them.

"Sir, I didn't mean to do that! I just lost my temper—" Weasley began, scrambling up and away from Draco as if his arse were on fire.

*But I'd wager he won't offer to heal me and give me anything I wanted, like Harry did,* Draco thought. He shuddered at the thought of what a long and weary struggle it would take to come to terms with Harry's friends. Weasley would refuse any concession so simple as an apology, Draco was certain.

"We'll discuss what you did later, Weasley," Shacklebolt said coldly, and then turned and faced Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, please come with me. Young and Smithson should have brought you to my office at once." He speared the blue-eyed Auror—Smithson—with a sharp glance and turned away. Draco stood and followed with alacrity, making sure that his sleeves fell away from his arms and exposed the bruises where Young had gripped him too tightly.

In the privacy of the Minister's office, which appeared to be home to files and nothing else, Shacklebolt saw the bruises. He took a deep breath and massaged his forehead gently for a moment. "I daresay you have much to complain of due to the treatment you received from us," he murmured.

"At least a little, yes," Draco said in his driest tone.

Shacklebolt leaned forwards. "This offense will be made up for, I promise you, Malfoy," he said. "But in the meantime, may I suggest a way you could make this easier on yourself and everyone else involved?"

Draco eyed him thoughtfully, but said nothing. It had worked so far. And sure enough, Shacklebolt clarified a moment later.

"We need information on this man whose play you sponsored, Raymond Nusante. And on the group of artists he's rumored to have met with in a certain manor house a few days ago." Shacklebolt's fingers clenched together on top of his desk. "Specifically, we would be grateful if you could tell us whether there's any truth to the rumor that Harry Potter was among them."

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Chapter: 28

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Eight—Slytherin Applications of Law*

Harry sighed as he watched the last owl winging away from the house. He'd sent several messages to Nusante and others involved with his group, giving contradictory information and hints at the identity of a possible traitor. Depending on which information reached the Ministry, he ought to be able to track the source of the leak easily.

He leaned back against the library table, stretching, his eyes falling half-shut. He hadn't got as much sleep as he normally did last night, thanks to the excitement with Draco. He wondered if he shouldn't curl up now and try to nap.

A thunderous knocking from the front door put paid to that plan. Harry rolled his eyes, forced himself back to his feet, and tracked down the stairs to the door, his emotions dancing just beneath the surface like a boiling cauldron. He didn't yet know which ones were appropriate for him to feel about his visitor, and wouldn't until he saw who that visitor was.

The magical signature revealed itself to him a few steps from the door: Ron's combination of fire

and stinging frost. Harry blinked, aligned his face and his soul into a smile of welcome, and opened the door.

Ron burst past him and whirled around near the base of the stairs, his wand out. He looked so upset that Harry wished for a moment Mrs. Black's portrait still hung in the usual place, so he could have cursed her. Harry felt himself stooping, become even more somnolent and quiet in response. He did glance quickly out the door to make sure no one pursued Ron before he shut it.

"What's the matter?" he asked. Hermione would have told Ron that Harry wanted to see him if he came home from the Ministry early—or, more likely given the timing, took his lunch at home—but a simple request shouldn't have made him dash over here like this. His hair was practically standing on end with how he'd run his fingers through it, Harry thought in uneasy fascination.

"Do you know who they arrested this morning in connection with that terrorist group?" Ron asked, and dashed on before Harry could shake his head. "*Draco Malfoy!*"

Harry felt himself become very still.

"The idiot's been arrested for flagrant public displays of homosexuality, and behaves as if he didn't know that was disgusting, as if he had every right to walk through the world with his head up like a normal person," Ron ranted, dashing around the entrance hall like a hungry lion around a cage. "He's just—it's not *right!* And then I tried to respond, and I'm the one who gets reprimanded? Fuck that!" He lashed out with his wand, and a section of Harry's banister turned into green slime and dripped down the wall. "Shacklebolt said he'd talk to me later in that scary tone he always gets, and—"

"Ron," Harry interrupted, and didn't know the name would come out in the cold Harry's voice until he'd spoken it. Ron froze, staring at him, his wand sliding slowly down the inside of his fingers. Harry needed some reason to account for his sudden change of mood, because it couldn't be Draco's name, but luckily he'd found it in Ron's words.

"People who are gay are disgusting?" he asked quietly.

Ron's face drained of color so fast that Harry thought for a moment he'd faint. Then Ron shook his head firmly and took a step forwards. "That's not what I meant!" he said fiercely. "I didn't mean *you*, mate. It's just—most of the time I forget you're gay, you know?" He reached out and clapped Harry on the shoulder, as if to prove that he didn't have trouble touching a gay person. "You don't flaunt it. You've never required me to act nice to some boyfriend of yours, and you don't talk about kissing and f-fucking other blokes the way some of them do, and you know how to act like a normal person in conversation, which is a talent bloody *Malfoy* certainly doesn't have. And you're my best friend, Harry," he added earnestly, gazing into Harry's eyes. "I think that's all much more important than who you choose to date!"

Harry swallowed boiling outrage. He should not have lost control so quickly and easily, he told

himself. Whose fault was it that Ron believed Harry was no different than "normal" people? Harry had never told Ron that sometimes he went to the Muggle world to fuck men who wouldn't care about the scar on his forehead. He had never let him into the secret of Metamorphosis, either, and so could he blame Ron when he acted in ignorance of that? He couldn't tell them about Draco, either—

*Except you promised,* said the merciless voice. *You said that you would come out of hiding and stand freely, visibly, at his side. Besides, what if the only reason Ron accepts you so easily is that you don't seem gay to him? If you had tried to talk to him about your love life the way he talks about Hermione to you, would you have received his support? A celibate gay man isn't threatening. An active one is.*

Swallowing, Harry looked away. Even if the merciless voice was correct—and surely even *it* had to be wrong some of the time—this wasn't the moment to confront Ron with the conclusions Harry had just come to. Draco was in trouble. Rescuing him was more important than forcing his own view of things on someone else any day of the week.

"Mate? We're all right?"

Harry tilted his head back and managed to smile at Ron. Perhaps the smile was a bit too sickly, but Ron and Hermione had only ever seen one side of him, and didn't know the others existed. They weren't used to reading the subtle nuances that Draco had seemed to notice and appreciate from the first. "We're all right," Harry said, and his voice sounded firm and convincing in his own ears. "I just haven't been feeling well lately."

Ron made soothing noises, and listened eagerly to Harry's tissue of lies concerning insomnia due to nightmares about the war and no appetite even for the delicious food Kreacher cooked. He was as eager to put a moment that could have threatened their friendship behind them as Harry was, Harry thought. Maybe that explained why he left without a fuss, instead of wanting to stay and talk about Draco.

The moment the door closed behind him, Harry opened his eyes as a new person, his thoughts racing along in perfect agreement with the merciless voice.

He was going to rescue Draco. Ron said he had been arrested for "flagrant public displays of homosexuality"; somewhere in the Black library would be a book that detailed that charge and how to counteract it. And Harry already knew which persona he would use to invade the Ministry.

A few of the people he had created lived only on paper, as the authors of numerous letters to the *Prophet* and to various important wizards, persuading them to change their minds about laws or fads that might have threatened Metamorphosis. Harry had maintained friendly correspondences as well, ingratiating his other selves with some important older pure-bloods who rarely left their estates. It was time to bring one of those personas forwards and into the flesh.

Horace Longbottom should do nicely. He always wrote letters in an eminently respectable tone, on the finest parchment, and though his connection with the Longbottom family was tenuous, there was little chance of anyone finding that out; Augusta, Neville's grandmother, had died a few years ago, and Neville himself had shown little interest in researching his bloodline. The combination of Horace's age and his pure-blood status would win him a respect that few of Harry's other identities could match.

*Except Harry Potter himself.*

Harry stiffened and shook his head. *No. No, I can't reveal myself for the sake of rescuing Draco.*

*And is there any other action you could reveal yourself for that would be as important?*

Harry cast the spell that summoned the legal books, and another that would retrieve Horace's file from Metamorphosis, a variant of the magic that had retrieved Brian's file at his first meeting with Draco. As he concentrated on his reading, the first waves of panic retreated, smoothing into grim determination. He could and *would* storm the Ministry and rescue Draco, as much as Horace ever stormed.

Besides, it appeared Draco had been arrested under the Public Statute of Sexual Decency and Morality, 1900. There was a detail about that law the Ministry must have been counting on most people not to know, but which Harry *did*, and which they would find themselves sorry for ignoring.

Harry smiled and enchanted Horace's file to hover in front of him, so he could refresh the details of this persona in his mind whilst searching for suitable robes.

Draco knew he maintained complete control of his face. Shacklebolt would undoubtedly have looked triumphant or nodded wisely if he had not. He did allow himself one slow blink. Then he leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers together as if he were considering his answer—which was, in fact, the case.

"That," he said, "is a rather intriguing question."

Shacklebolt's arm flexed as if he were tightening his left hand into a fist, though he kept it below the level of the desk and Draco could not know for certain. At least it reassured him that Shacklebolt was indeed someone who would show tells when he was excited or thought he was on the trail of a right answer.

"Potter was there, then?" Shacklebolt breathed.

Draco frowned at him and raised one eyebrow. He would have to be careful in how he responded, but he had been in more dangerous and delicate situations before, with his mother especially. "I had been unaware of his presence," he said. "What I would like to know is why he

was *rumored* to be there. Surely you would know the truth of the matter at once? It was said after the war that the Chosen One might claim the Minister's friendship. Why not Floo him and ask him directly?"

Shacklebolt's muscles tightened. "This is an official Ministry investigation," he said. "I am the one who should ask questions and not you."

"And you have the answer to your question." Draco raised his shoulders once and let them fall limply. "He was not there, *to my knowledge.* I am merely wondering why you brought me here in order to demand answers, when you could have spoken with him and obtained them with less time and trouble. Potter is not a good liar." *And if he questions that statement, I will know he possesses some dangerous information.*

"Potter deserves his privacy," Shacklebolt said. "We merely thought—" His gaze sharpened. "You are hiding something, Malfoy."

"Am I?" Draco widened his eyes. He had let a muscle jump in his cheek when Shacklebolt made his statement about Harry. That had been deliberate, of course, but he doubted the Minister could follow him this far into the game of baiting and hidden motives. "Well, perhaps I am wondering why I was brought here to answer questions about the rebellion when I was arrested for a different reason, under a different law. Hiding such curiosity can be difficult."

Shacklebolt muttered words under his breath that Draco politely paid no attention to, then folded his hands in front of him on the desk. "Listen, Malfoy," he said. "An honest answer for an honest answer. We suspect Potter because we know it was incredibly powerful magic that counteracted our raid on the meeting in the manor house. And not all of us have been taken in by the pretense that Harry is weak. I've felt his innate magical strength a few times. I'll indulge the falsehood in public if he wants me to, as a favor to a friend, but if he's turned to criminal activity…" He let the words trail off and leaned forwards, eyes intent. "We need to know what you know."

Draco lowered his eyes and nodded gravely, biting the inside of his cheek, but far enough back in his mouth that the gesture wouldn't show from Shacklebolt's angle. The Ministry had arrived somewhere near the truth by approaching from a completely skewed angle, as usual.

Draco had learned two pieces of valuable information, however. Harry would have to realize that his pretense of weakness wasn't as iron-clad as he would have liked.

*Perhaps that will encourage him to drop the pretense altogether and emerge into the sunlight the sooner.*

"My involvement with the rebellion is more limited than you have supposed," said Draco, and gave a slight grimace, raising his eyes back to Shacklebolt's. "I do wish that our society was more hospitable to my sexual orientation, yes, but pursuing my affairs in public is not my ultimate goal."

Shacklebolt snorted. "*That* part, I never believed."

Draco nodded. *Let me never say that my father did me no favors.* The selfish, cold reputation of the Malfoy family was so prevalent that no one would believe Draco had acted for the sake of others when he sponsored the rebellion. Shacklebolt's own preconceptions would do more of the work of convincing him than any lies Draco could weave.

"Therefore, I am not deep in Nusante's councils." Draco touched his fingers thoughtfully to his lips. "But I do think it's odd that he's suddenly gained the courage to move—to rewrite his play, for instance, even knowing what had to follow. Why move now, when his rebellion could have started at any time, years ago or years in the future? They've received confidence from somewhere. That confidence could perhaps come from Potter's presence, but more likely from somewhere else entirely. I think I would have recognized him."

Shacklebolt's eyes fired. Draco could practically see the lie taking root in his mind. "And perhaps from your own very public actions as well."

Draco laughed. "I acted only for my own good, I told you. I made no speeches. I did nothing but dance with my boyfriend—" he found it amusing that the Minister flinched at the word "—and announce we were dating, as well as kiss him in public a few times. If someone else wanted to take that as a signal to rebellion, they did so without my encouragement. The only direct encouragement I have given Nusante and his people is money."

Shacklebolt relaxed. "And you know nothing about the magic that stopped our Aurors from fulfilling their obligation with the raid?"

"I would have said it wasn't Potter, but now?" Draco shrugged. "I don't know."

The Minister nodded. "Then perhaps I can see my way to reducing the fine you'll pay for the public displays of homosexuality—"

Someone knocked on the office door. Shacklebolt shifted his chair backwards, somehow missing the files piled on the floor and shelves behind it, though Draco had no idea how. "What is it?" he called, his voice flat. "I left word that I was not to be disturbed!"

The door opened. An older wizard, with a gleaming mane of white hair and a beard that rivaled Dumbledore's, put his head around it and gave Shacklebolt a sword-sharp smile. "My name is Horace Longbottom," he said. "You told me once that I had leave to disturb you whenever I liked, *Minister.*"

Draco darted his eyes from the ancient wizard to Shacklebolt, fascinated when Shacklebolt bowed his head. "Of course, Master Longbottom," he murmured. His words held a tone of wary respect Draco wouldn't have thought many people outside the pure-blood social circles capable of. "You've sent me many—ah—fascinating letters. It might be of more interest to you, however, if you visited me at a later time. I'd certainly have more ability to talk to you as your

conversation deserves then."

Longbottom stepped into the office. Draco leaned back in his chair and studied his face for resemblances to the hopeless Neville's. He could make out a few lines that might be the same, but Horace's brows and cheeks were heavier, his forehead lined with wrinkles, and his eyes a brilliant, arresting blue Draco would certainly have paid attention to if a classmate possessed them. He held a cane in his left hand, the head a golden gryphon, with which he made pointed gestures as he talked. Oddly, his right hand coiled close to his body, as if he had long ago burned or injured it.

"I've heard exactly what this boy has done," Longbottom said, and nodded dismissively to Draco, though his cane made a wide gesture at the same time. "And I'll tell you, Shacklebolt, the law you've arrested him under won't fool a good legal scholar for a second."

*Oh*? Draco thought, his interest in the old wizard increasing. More to the point, the Minister had narrowed his eyes and leaned forwards.

"Now, Horace—"

The cane swung around and pointed straight at the Minister.

"Master Longbottom," Shacklebolt amended, sounding faintly irritated at having to do so. "You know that most of these laws haven't been used in decades, and I'm sorry to have to use this one now. But my charge is the safety of the wizarding world, and unfortunately, the group Mr. Malfoy has associated himself with poses a threat to that safety."

"Then arrest him under some law that will keep him in your custody for more than a few hours," Longbottom retorted smartly, his wrinkles drawing up until his eyes seemed as bright and piercing as a hawk's. "The Public Statute of Sexual Decency and Morality, 1900, demands the arrest of *both* partners participating in the flagrant public display of homosexuality. Otherwise, it was feared that the law would be misused, with specious claims of such behavior being lodged against their enemies by jilted lovers or those who wished to cover their own adultery." He looked at Draco directly then, and Draco hoped he concealed his flinch; those eyes were disconcerting. "And you seem to have only one young man here."

Draco permitted himself a small smile. He had read something like that in his study of his father's legal books, yes, but he had not remembered it before now. He folded his hands in his lap and waited to see what Shacklebolt would say in response.

The Minister narrowed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "You are not acting in any official capacity for the prisoner," he said.

"I'm acting in the capacity of 'official watchdog of the Ministry's reputation,'" Longbottom retorted, and his cane bounced off the Minister's desk. "Consider what will happen when word gets out that you not only arrested someone who's gay, but you did it on insufficient evidence and

without fulfilling every requirement of the law. The public's a powder keg at the moment, Minister." Draco didn't understand the reference, which was probably Muggle, but Shacklebolt did, if the way he swallowed was any indication. "Can the Ministry afford a false step? Can you?"

"I don't understand why you're interested in this issue," Shacklebolt said, picking at his robes with fussy care. "You've always given the impression that you're on some lofty mountain, watching the antics of the rest of us, and amusing yourself that way."

"I can always make an exception for extreme stupidity," Longbottom said, and he turned so that the cane aimed at Draco. "Or extreme bravery."

Draco concealed a snort behind a polite nod. Of course someone from a Gryffindor family would look at his recent actions in such a way, rather than the actions of someone looking to get disowned. Privately interested in the issue of sexuality or not, Longbottom was still of the generation before his parents', which was even more conservative when it came to matters of sexuality and the duty of every child to have further children and stay in the good graces of the family. He could never understand that someone might prize his freedom above the continuation of whatever pure-blood line he belonged to.

"Given the obscurity of the law," Shacklebolt was saying now, quietly, "it is unlikely that anyone will realize I have violated it with Mr. Malfoy's arrest."

"Yes," said Longbottom. "A pity, that. Or it would be, if I didn't have owls ready to fly, first to my relatives and then to that other young fellow, that Raymond Nusante, explaining the circumstances." He smiled, a smile that Draco would not like to have directed at him, and stroked the upper part of his beard, halting his hand oddly halfway down his chest.

Shacklebolt watched him with narrowed eyes for some time, then bowed his head and said, "You win, Master Longbottom. I can assure you that not every contest between the Ministry and the forces of change will be so easily won."

"Of course not," Longbottom said, coming over to stand behind Draco, as if his presence were necessary to unlock invisible chains. "But consider the way you've opposed them, instinctively, in your mind. The forces of change always win in the end, Minister. The ancient oak tree falls. The ocean eats the coast away. The young dragon kills the old one. Is that what you want to see happen to the Ministry?"

"Those metaphors are somewhat easier to understand than the ones in your letters," Shacklebolt said dryly, and Draco heard a tone of uneasy amusement in his voice. On some level, Draco thought as he rose to his feet, he was enjoying the contest, which was probably the reason he was prepared to let Draco go so easily.

"I thought I should choose simpler ones, as I did not know whether I would be confronting a simpleton," Longbottom said, and gestured with his cane to indicate Draco should precede him

out the door.

Draco did so, listening intently in case Longbottom should say something incriminating to the Minister before they left. There had to be a price to this; saviors didn't swoop out of the sky and rescue him because of his inherent goodness. But Longbottom only bade the Minister farewell, and then shut the door of the office quietly.

Draco turned to face him. "Why?" he demanded.

"Can you ask that question?" a far too familiar voice said from beneath the beard, and the cane briefly tapped against the blue eyes. They flashed green.

Draco stiffened, his breath stolen for the moment. It was one thing to have Harry tell him that he was good at disguises and the strangers that Metamorphosis provided to others, and another to witness it.

"Incredible," he said, at last, because it was too late to mask his reaction in any case. "I never would have associated Longbottom with you."

"It's a persona I've been waiting some time to assume," Harry/Longbottom replied, and then the green eyes became blue again and his voice deepened. "And you will have to tell me what made you rate a private talk with the Minister." He began to stride down the corridor as if he owned the Ministry, nodding to the Aurors and hurrying flunkies they passed. Draco was certain he had taken at least part of his commanding manner from Dumbledore.

"When we can be more secure," Draco murmured. "Some of it concerns you."

Harry's step didn't falter. "I should have anticipated it might," he said calmly.

Draco kept his eyes on Harry for the rest of the journey, trying to break down the Longbottom persona into its component parts so he might see how Harry had changed himself. It was difficult. Even granting that he acted somewhat like Dumbledore, and that the swinging of the cane—a Transfigured wand, Draco was now certain—was an obvious mannerism, the parts together formed a smooth and seamless whole. Several times, Draco found himself thinking of the old man as "Longbottom" as he watched him sneer at people who gaped, or stop and aid an ancient witch to step into the lift, murmuring courtesies that had gone out of fashion fifty years ago.

And heknew the truth.

*Or part of the truth.*

Draco was more sober and thoughtful than he had been even immediately after the arrest by the time they emerged from the Ministry. So far, he had mostly seen the potential for useful deception in Harry's disguises. Now that he had witnessed one of them in action, he had come to

appreciate how completely Harry subsumed himself in them, surrendered control to the persona he called forwards.

*He can make others believe in them because he believes in them when he's wearing them.*

*How can I trust him? How can I know when he's telling me the truth and when he's not? I've known so far—or believed I've known. But he had motive not to fool me at the time.*

*And what happens if he lies to me because he believes that's what I need to hear—or because he really does believe what he's saying, even though it's not the truth?*

Longbottom/Harry pointed towards a particular fireplace as they entered the Atrium. Draco had just turned towards it when a hand caught his shoulder. He turned, already drawing his wand, ready to battle Weasley.

Then a second hand joined the first and a pair of lips clamped themselves to his as if they intended to drain his soul through his mouth.

Draco laughed aloud, because he knew only one person who kissed like this. Staggering away from the other man, he glanced at Harry, pleased to see a brief tightening around his current eyes that could have been jealousy.

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Chapter: 29

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Nine—Loss of Control*

Harry had to fight to keep his face placid as he examined the man clinging to Draco's shoulders and beaming at him—only because there was no one else in the room he could beam at, Harry was certain. Blaise Zabini looked as if he had spent most of the past twelve years playing Quidditch and then relaxing beside crystal-blue lakes, or whatever other activities might have given him both lithe muscles and a smooth, unlined face.

*Probably hasn't known a day's worry since he left Hogwarts,* Harry thought in disgust. *Of course, I did hear that he had left England, so that's probably true, particularly if he's gay.*

With the casual way Draco kept his hands on Zabini's arms above the wrists, Harry also found himself wanting to know exactly what their relationship had been like before Zabini left the country. He nearly opened his mouth to ask.

But the personality of Horace Longbottom surged and shook in him like a piece of beaten tin, and he contented himself with coughing politely and tapping his cane on the floor. "Perhaps not the wisest thing to do in the Ministry, with Aurors looking for an excuse to arrest any man who kisses another," he murmured. He shot a swift glance around the Atrium, but few people were paying attention to them, and of those who did, even fewer were likely to know the clause of the Public Statute of Sexual Decency and Morality that mandated the Aurors capture both participants in the act of flagrant public homosexuality. Still, it was better not to take a chance. He glanced back at Zabini and said, "Are you a stranger to our backwards country, Mr.-?" And he raised his eyebrows with a restraint that he thought even Horace could be proud of.

"Blaise Zabini," said the other man, and smiled at him. Harry could grudgingly concede that he was handsome, with smooth dark skin, dark curls that hung to his shoulders, and brown eyes too innocent to be real. It would have been an ungrudging concession if only Zabini hadn't continued to hang on Draco, turning his head to the side so that they shared the smile like a secret joke. "And no, I actually grew up with Draco, but I long ago left the shores of England for a place that actually *respects* the choices people make about their own bodies." He ran a coaxing hand over Draco's right shoulder. Harry concealed a deeper breath than usual with another cough. "He won't listen to me about emigrating so far, though."

Draco shook his head. "Not that I don't appreciate the visit, Blaise, but what are you doing here? And was it necessary to kiss me quite so violently? That's material for the front page of the *Prophet* here, and the few encounters we had were a long time ago, now." He smiled into Zabini's eyes.

Zabini fluttered a kiss over the side of Draco's neck, his eyes closing languorously for a moment. Harry was vaguely grateful that the gryphon on the top of Horace's cane wasn't real gold, or his tight grip would have stood a chance of denting it.

And then he told himself he was being ridiculous. Draco had every reason to rejoice in the touch of an old lover if he wanted to. He wouldn't have done it in front of Brian, or Harry, but neither one of them were here right now. He was standing with Blaise in front of Horace Longbottom, who had no sexual relationship with Draco, nothing but a distant, compassionate interest in him for being the victim of irrational bigotry.

Harry had been Horace for a long time, regularly assuming his cool, detached persona to argue reasonably with unreasonable people. He shuffled gratefully into the older man's thoughts like a favorite robe, and dredged up a smile from somewhere as Zabini nudged Draco in the ribs with an elbow and snorted. "Pansy told me what was really happening. Did you think I could let you start a revolution without me?"

Horace coughed again. "Perhaps not the wisest idea to speak about this in the Ministry, either?" he said.

Zabini gave him a more calculating glance. Horace smiled and held out his right hand, though it

took effort to uncurl the fingers, given the direct blast of dragonfire he'd taken to it decades ago. "My mistake. I'm Horace Longbottom, and I've just helped to ease Mr. Malfoy out of a most—uncomfortable situation."

"It couldn't be anything else, in this Ministry and with this country," Zabini retorted, but he shook Horace's burned hand with nothing more than a small smirk. "So. You're one of the leaders of Draco's little revolution?"

Horace shuddered, remembering the stint he had served in a 'revolution' in his youth. "I am not," he said. "But I am someone who can be of help to him, perhaps, if he is discreet enough." He caught Draco's eye and jerked his head at the Floo.

Draco smiled at him, but took a long moment to stroke Zabini's hand and shoulder before he separated from him, and murmur a few low words that Horace didn't catch. *The follies of the young,* Horace thought, and did not let them see him rolling his eyes. When he had been thirty, he had also thought the height of defiance was showing how little he respected his elders.

"I'm ready," Draco said, and followed Horace with a faint, mysterious smile lingering on his lips. Horace ignored it as he cast a handful of powder into the flames and chose a public fireplace in Diagon Alley. If the Minister sent anyone to follow them—which was quite possible—Horace had no intention of leading them straight to his mansion.

Draco had been watching intently. And Longbottom/Harry turned to face him quite frequently as they made their way down the middle of Diagon Alley, gesturing to the shops and telling him the histories of odd events that had happened there.

It didn't matter how long Draco stared, however; he never again caught the little twitch of jealousy around Harry's eyes that he so wanted to see.

In fact, it seemed now as if it were Horace Longbottom who walked in front of him, and not Harry at all. He spoke of Diagon Alley with the fondness of someone raised in the wizarding world, and who had spent so much time around the shops that he knew them better than their current owners. Decades, perhaps a century, of experience flowed from his mouth, from his gestures, from the expressions on his face.

It was unnerving. Draco narrowed his eyes in thought, though he remembered to smile at one of Harry's stories about a criminal running from the Aurors who had tripped himself on the stoop of Madam Malkin's shop.

*I was thinking that he was a good actor who believes in his characters, and remains conscious of himself at all times, and what he has to do to fool his audience. But it goes even deeper than that, doesn't it? He submerges himself not just for the sake of creating the character, the persona, the play, but for the sake of* being *that person. He's running from something, not employing a skill for the pleasure he gets from it.*

Draco nodded slowly. There would have to be some limits set to Harry's playing and assumption of other names and faces, that was certain. He had no wish to make Harry give up Metamorphosis altogether; the concept was too beautiful and fascinating, and Harry too obviously reveled in it. But neither did Draco want only to cling to whatever fragment of himself Harry chose to show at any given moment.

*I want to be the one who has the ability to see beyond the mask. There's a problem if I can't do that.*

Finally, Harry guided them to a secluded spot under the overhang of an apothecary, and held out an arm for Draco's, his gesture heavy with ancient, formal courtesy. Draco deliberately stepped too close to him and took his elbow with familiar hands, moving his fingers in the caressing motions he had used on Blaise.

Harry cocked his head to the side, and manifested a faint frown of disapproval clearly patterned after Dumbledore's. "Really, Mr. Malfoy, whilst I understand your devotion to your cause, you do *not* need to express physical affection with every man you meet."

*Spoken as if he isn't gay too,* Draco thought incredulously, and then remembered, *I don't think he* is, *when he's like this.*

And that led to an uncomfortable consideration he couldn't believe hadn't occurred to him before: how often did Harry assume a persona that had sex with someone else? Could he flow between sexualities as he flowed between faces? Would he consider faithfulness to Draco imperative only when he was in his own skin, and otherwise disregard the idea, because it was someone else, a person who might not have a partner, entering the bed?

Draco tightened his hold, and hissed, "This is more than devotion to the cause. Now, I would appreciate it if you would Apparate us *home.*"

The blue eyes narrowed. Draco thought he saw Harry's calculating glance fill them for a moment, and was glad.

The next moment, the blackness of Apparition squeezed them, and then they stood on the doorstep of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Harry tried to gesture Draco ahead of him, the way someone as old and formal as Longbottom would have, but Draco tightened his grip and stepped forwards at the same time, forcing them to enter the house together.

Harry moved away from him as soon as he could, once the door had closed behind them. His face had a slight pink cast, and his eyes were direct and disappointed. "Please, Mr. Malfoy, do not mistake my avoidance of casual contact with you for a prejudice against your sexuality," he said. "In my youth, I endured several uncomfortable years that left me with great distaste for *anyone* touching me, not simply—"

"Bollocks," Draco said, without raising his voice, but with a sharpness of tone that made Harry's mouth sag open. "We're not in public right now. You're not playing Longbottom. You're *Harry.* I want you to pick up your real identity and wear your real face right now. We have to talk."

To be pulled back so suddenly from Horace to Harry was a physical shock. Harry wheezed for a moment, his heart jumping. When his body remembered that he didn't actually have the beginnings of heart trouble, as Horace Longbottom did, he raised his wand and cast the spells that would reverse his Transfiguration. He hesitated when that was done, and then Transfigured his clothes as well. He was never comfortable with his own face in the robes that any of his personas wore, Brian excepted.

"That's better," Draco said, his voice still sharp. He stepped forwards and ended up standing a few feet from Harry, giving him the same intent gaze he had before he left that morning. "I need to know a few things before we discuss what you've told Nusante, and what the Minister asked me."

"I think those things are more important." Harry stiffened his spine so he wouldn't step away. He waited, but the inside of his head was silent. At the time when he most could have used the support of the merciless voice, of course it would vanish, he thought irritably. "After all, innocent people are—"

"I have to be able to trust you," Draco said. His voice still had not increased in volume, but Harry flinched anyway. He wondered idly if Snape had taught Draco to speak like this, so that the very sound of the words hurt. "I have to be able to know you. When I left this house this morning, I trusted I would. Now I am not so certain. Your performance as Longbottom was too perfect."

Harry frowned. That had not been what he thought Draco would complain about. *My skill can serve us in protecting the revolution and getting our point across. What more does Draco want of it, or me?* "I don't know what you mean by that," he said, and folded his arms, leaning against the wall behind him. His magic burned in his chest; he banished it with a hiss. No matter what Draco said, Harry wouldn't complicate this encounter by lashing out with his power the way he had before. "If it had been less perfect, we wouldn't have escaped without Kingsley becoming suspicious."

"I mean that you didn't seem like Harry anymore," Draco said. His voice bubbled for a moment as if he were fighting back anger. Once again, Harry had no idea why, and couldn't until he spoke at least a few more words. "I had trouble thinking of you as Harry."

Harry blinked. "But that's good. That's what I strive for when I assume a persona. Metamorphosis wouldn't have flourished at all if my clients stood a chance of connecting the strangers they hired to Harry Potter."

"I'm not a client," Draco said, the cool tone of his voice cracking a little now. Harry bit his tongue to avoid reminding the other man of the seven hundred Galleons he had paid Harry. "I'm

your partner. I want to know who you are at all times."

Harry snorted softly, but he thought he understood what Draco was aiming for. "Do you want me to arrange a signal?" he asked. Draco stared at him, and he clarified, "A signal—a word, a wink, a gesture I can use when I'm in disguise, so you can be reassured that I'm still under the surface?"

Draco said what sounded like the name of a disgusting sexual act, and then hurried one before Harry could ask about it. "No. I want more than that."

"What, then?" Harry asked warily. He didn't like the trend of this conversation at all. He wondered what the merciless voice would say about it. *Probably tell me to shut up and let Draco talk.*

"How common is it for you to have sex with your clients?"

Harry blinked and stared at him incredulously, then shrugged. "Not common at all. One of my most common pursuits is bodyguard, and much of the rest of the time I'm playing a man or woman to a gay woman or man, to convince my client's parents that she or he's straight. Sex is rather counterproductive in either case."

"But you've done it sometimes," Draco said.

"You're the living proof," Harry retorted, and then wondered why he'd said that, and in such a sharp, bristling tone. This wasn't diplomatic or calm and honest, both courses he was sure the merciless voice would have recommended. He fidgeted from foot to foot, hating the feeling of exposure like cold fingers of oil creeping across his skin. Telling the truth was no longer something that came naturally to him.

"I don't want you to do it anymore," Draco said.

Harry's mouth fell slightly open. "I—*what*?" he said, when he could breathe. "Draco, for the love of God. That's such a silly thing to demand. No one would know me for your partner when I'm properly disguised. It won't get back to you or reflect on your reputation, even after we announce that we're dating in public. You don't—"

"Those people are still having sex with you," Draco said, and every muscle in his body had gone tense. "They would still be sharing your body. And your personas aren't completely separate from you. You animate them. I don't want other people to hear what you sound like when you come. I don't want other people to touch you the way I do. I want *some* exclusive rights, Harry, some things you wouldn't share with a friend or a client." His hands were clenched in front of him now, and still Harry, flooded with astonishment, could not understand why.

"But my personas *are* separate people," Harry said, as gently as he could. "Having sex with them isn't like having sex with me. Why do you think our situation is so unusual? I couldn't help reacting to you the way I would, instead of the way Brian would. So you don't have to worry. I'll

share everything I am with you, but I won't be sharing everything I am with them." Surely that ought to satisfy Draco.

The words hit Draco like blows. His mouth was dry, and he licked his lips several times before he could respond.

"Harry," he murmured, "those personas are you. Memories you dreamed up, masks you animate. Without you, they would be nothing but idle dreams on scraps of parchment and a few photographs in which you dressed up. *You* dressed up, Harry," he said, feeling he had to repeat it, given the odd closed expression that had taken over Harry's face. "And you would still be fucking other people if you didn't stay loyal to me. I want you, exclusively."

"I—" Harry shook his head. "But I'm not Harry Potter when I play them. Why do you think I try to adopt their emotions and their gestures and their histories, Draco? Why were you disturbed by my Horace Longbottom disguise? Because I'm not Harry Potter then, and you were expecting him." He shook his head several times more, as if struggling to find his footing on treacherous ground.

"And why not?" Draco said, hurling the question so quickly that he hoped Harry would answer it without thinking.

"Why would I want to be Harry Potter?"

The answer to that question was unthinking, all right, but because of innocence, not surprise, Draco thought grimly. He wondered for a moment if the task he saw unfolding before him really was too massive, if he shouldn't cut his losses and walk away.

And then he thought of Harry fading back into a separate life from his, or, worse, becoming possessed by someone else who did have the patience and love to deal with him, and was promptly so—so many things he could barely breathe. Furious, and jealous, and lonely.

*No. I want him. It's more than just sex. And he wants me, too. I have to have some faith that he'll reach out to me and make the task less difficult. And will it really be that much of a task? I love his deceptions. I can spend some time working my way through the ones he lays in even my path. It's the ultimate challenge.* And Draco felt himself harden as he had in the moments when he first really understood what Metamorphosis meant.

"You are Harry Potter to me," he said, and took a step nearer. Harry frowned at him, but didn't try to back away, which Draco chose to take as a positive sign. "And your body is still the same body, no matter how you Transfigure it or add features to it—"

"If that's the truth, then why did you want to see me with green eyes when you fucked me?" Harry demanded. "You wanted to change the way I looked—"

"Yes, to see the way you really look—"

"But *this*—" Harry gestured at his face "—it isn't any more real than any other mask I wear, Draco."

"To me, it is," said Draco, and he supposed he would have to tell the truth before he could convince Harry to do so. "This is the center of who you are, the Harry who plans and plots and animates the other disguises. This is the Harry I want to know most of all, even though the other personas are also part of you. And that means I want to see the appearance of this Harry, as well."

Harry stared at him, shaking his head slightly. Draco hoped the motion came from a lack of understanding and not a refusal to share.

"I could be anything you wanted," Harry whispered. "Anything at all. I did try to be that with Brian, but my own complacency in my skill tripped me up. And this—*this* is what you want?"

"I do think it's the best of you," Draco said, keeping his voice low. He moved another step nearer.

"You haven't met all my other personas." Harry stared at him, eyes wide and bright now, as if Draco himself wore a disguise and he was trying to see through it. "There are brilliant people among them, fascinating people, people who could make you laugh for hours or fuck you as skillfully as courtesans. Don't you want to meet them?"His voice held an undertone of eagerness that Draco couldn't decipher. "They can give you what you need—"

"Even if that were true," said Draco, and he put his arms out, landing with his hands on either side of Harry's head, "they can't give me what I want. What I want is you, the person who makes me laugh and exhale in frustration at the same time, the one who fucks me and lets himself be fucked with that exquisite *lack* of control."

He fought the temptation to lean down and kiss Harry, though already the air around them was shivering with red and silver sparks as the magical bond sparked by sex tried to form. He wanted Harry's mouth free so he could answer honestly.

For long moments, Harry showed no inclination to answer. He stared at Draco, his eyes probing. Draco remained still, and tried to show that he'd meant every word he said. He was more than a bundle of needs for Harry to fulfill, the way the clients who came to Metamorphosis were to him, perhaps inevitably. He was someone who could rise above those needs, or fulfill Harry's, or demand what he wanted, even if it was difficult for Harry to give.

Harry closed his eyes at last. Draco didn't insist he open them; it was the only way Harry could retreat when they were this close, and perhaps he needed to retreat right now. But he remained quiet, waiting.

Finally, Harry murmured, rubbing at the back of his neck as if something had stung him, "I—I

could give you so much. But what you want is something I've never given anyone. I—there's not much call for the sort of thing you're asking for. I'm not Harry Potter often, and never for long if I can help it."

Draco took those words and stored them in the back of his head. They were another clue to the dreadful puzzle of what he thought might be Harry's darkest secret, this contempt he seemed to have for himself.

"But I'd like to," Harry continued, his voice slow and stumbling but not reluctant. "I'd like to be what I can around you. I've never felt as good as I did when we had sex, and that was more than the magic joining us. And it's more than that. I found myself thinking about you when you were gone today, even though it was only for a few hours. I knew I had to come for you as soon as I heard you'd been arrested." He opened his eyes at last, and Draco thought he could never know how much courage it took for Harry to look at him directly. "And if it's important to you that I don't have sex with other people even when I'm playing other personas, then—then I don't want to have it."

He sounded surprised at himself. Draco didn't care. His heart was thudding as it had the first time he rode a horse over an obstacle and realized he had come down successfully on the other side.

He leaned forwards and kissed Harry, softly but insistently, and Harry made a soft sound of pleasure and kissed him back.

Harry was shaking. He had spent so many years cultivating understanding of emotions: the ones his clients expressed, the ones his enemies and his friends showed, the ones it was permissible and expected for his personas to display, the ones he could never acknowledge for fear of disappointing others. And now he didn't understand the joy or the wonder or the fear he felt, the desire to please Draco not just because Draco was someone who needed something from him, but because pleasing him made Harry happy.

*Eventually, you will understand them,* the merciless voice said. *If it frightens you to speak the name of love yet, then so be it.*

*I could have used some support from you earlier,* Harry thought grumpily at his newest persona.

If the voice had spoken aloud, it would have been smug. *What need did you have of my support, when you were being me?*

Harry might have experienced worse than the startlement he felt at those words, except that it was rather hard to panic when Draco was kissing him and stroking his face like this. He settled for rolling his eyes inwardly and enjoying himself without letting their magic join them and hurry them into bed. They had things to talk about before they next fucked.

*Perhaps,* said the merciless voice, *you will even speak some of my words to him.*

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Chapter: 30

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty—Revolution in the Wind*

"Shacklebolt knows that you're not as weak as you pretend, Harry." Draco's voice was soft and relentless, even though part of the sound of the words was muffled as he raised his teacup to his lips. "Do you know how he might have found out? And what the consequences will be of his knowing it? And if you're such great friends, why wouldn't he have contacted you about your possible presence at that meeting?"

Harry stared into the fire Kreacher had lit for them in the study, and said nothing for long moments. This wasn't a room he inhabited often; the spirit of the old Black family was stronger here than anywhere else in the house, with the scars of spells on the walls and furniture, and a chill even in the hearth that seemed to come from lingering Dark curses. But Draco had asked to come here.

Draco had told him about his meeting with Kingsley, and what the Minister had revealed during it. Harry found himself relieved that at least Kingsley was only guessing about his presence at the meeting. There had been powerful magic, so Harry Potter must have been there. It was little enough to go on, and nothing that would convince either the Wizengamot or many people in the Ministry.

*If only because so many people would find it unthinkable that their hero was gay,* said the merciless voice. *How long have you relied on that protection, that you're living the life they all thought you would, even if you didn't get married and have children? How much longer will you rely on it? Don't you get tired of lying to everyone by omission, even when you're not playing a persona?*

Harry pressed his lips together. He had come to terms with his pretense of weakness, and its likely consequences, long ago. He would not be ashamed of it. And he was not ashamed of the secret of Metamorphosis either, he told himself, only determined to protect it. It was difficult to explain, after all.

*You promised Draco that you would stand by his side as yourself.* The merciless voice chuckled in his head like a dragon catching a thief in its hoard. *You're heading towards the point at which you'll need to explore those consequences, anyway.*

Harry thrust the thought away. Yes, he was, but at the moment, they had more important things to consider.

"The last time I saw Kingsley was three months ago, at a private dinner for several friends of the Weasley family," he said quietly. "I thought then that he looked at me a little strangely, but I didn't connect it to any suspicions of my magic.

"Kingsley was an Auror. It's possible that he can recognize the relative strength of magic, though not individual magical signatures, when he's in close contact with someone. It's one of those things Aurors are supposed to learn but which not many of them actually do."

"I'm sure Weasley hasn't," said Draco, and Harry flinched under the lash of the contempt in his voice. Then he sighed. *And Ron despises him, and has told me so. I won't make them reconcile by scolding Draco.*

"So I can't answer the question about how he started suspecting me for certain, but I think it's been that way for some time." Harry leaned back on the couch, stretching his arms above his head. He felt oddly weary, as though someone had beaten him with sticks. Perhaps it came from the lack of sleep last night, perhaps from everything that had happened today. "But I think I can answer the question of why he's never confronted me about it. Kingsley was—very gentle with me after the war. He seemed sure that it had cost me in evil memories and nightmares, that part of me died with the dead."

"Was he wrong?"

Harry shot Draco a swift glance, but found his face at its most unreadable: lips and nostrils both shut, eyebrows flat and smooth, eyes shuttered. Harry tried not to feel resentment as he murmured, "Not completely. But I didn't suffer as much as he thought I did. I—encouraged him to think I did because it was nice to be around someone who didn't assume I was a resilient hero every day and every minute."

Draco nodded. Harry wondered uneasily if that was a nod of true understanding, or if Draco had added another incident when Harry lied to his private catalogue of such incidents.

*And why would you care, if you are utterly blameless and everything you do justifiable?* the merciless voice whispered to him, and laughed the dragon-laugh again.

"So ever since then, Kingsley has been very reluctant to approach me about anything at all that's hurtful," Harry said. "He didn't even accuse me when someone murdered two of the last Death Eaters before they went to trial a year after the war, although it was someone with powerful magic. He kept the press away from me as much as he could." Harry half-closed his eyes, and forced himself to think only of the time he was talking about and not about all the other happenings of that horrid year. "He'd prefer to find out about something like my presence at the meeting secondhand, if he was forced to notice it at all."

"He may be forced to."

Harry nodded. "In any case, I don't think he would permit the kinds of Dark curses those Aurors involved in the raid were trying to use." He opened his eyes and returned to another, major point of the conversation with some relief. "So there are at least two parties involved in this. The existence of the raid couldn't be kept from Kingsley, but I'm sure the informant behind it and the real purpose was."

"Even though he doesn't like homosexuality?" Draco balanced the cup of tea in the palm of his hand and gazed steadily at Harry.

"Even then. He hates Death Eaters and anyone associated with them, and yet he was polite to you, wasn't he?" Harry waited for Draco to nod. "He has abstract standards of justice. He has to treat criminals well even if he'd like to see them dead as a private citizen. And he would treat people fomenting revolution well even if he felt nothing but disgust for their cause. That may be one reason he's trying so desperately to find out more about this, in fact, so that worse doesn't happen."

Draco inclined his head. His face was still closed, but his nostrils were quivering now, and his eyes had a light moving back and forth in them, comforting Harry. He was interested in the subject they were discussing and actively trying to create strategies for dealing with it, at least. "And you said that you'd owled Nusante and others in his group about the next meeting?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Only Nusante knows where the meeting will actually be held, and he has the wrong Apparition coordinates; I'm having him show up in an isolated area of Diagon Alley instead, and I'll meet him there to escort him here."

"In what disguise?"

Harry gave him a smile, wondering if he had imagined the touch of jealousy in Draco's voice. "It depends," he said. "I might as well use the Longbottom one, since he's already associated with the cause because he came to your rescue. Or I could use the Brian one. But that might imply that you're involved more closely than you want to be."

"I'm going to be involved no matter what," Draco said. His voice was calm, but his eyes glittered. "And I want to show everyone what I can do, now that Lucius is no longer holding me back."

Harry cocked his head to the side. He wanted to ask a question, but he didn't know if Draco wanted to answer it.

*Ask it,* the merciless voice commanded. *Draco is not so weak as to do something that would compromise him merely to earn your favor.*

"Do say whatever you're meditating on, Harry, and stop circling around the fact like a curious

puppy," Draco said, his voice warm again and his eyes open and filled with light.

Harry flushed, but complied. When both the merciless voice and Draco agreed on something, it seemed like a good idea. "Would you have joined yourself to a revolution like this normally? I mean, if you had got free of Lucius and then Nusante contacted you and asked for your help because you were publicly gay...would you have thought it was worth the risk? I know you can sleep with women, too. Does that make this cause less urgent for you?"

Draco smiled slightly and stared into the fire for long moments. Then he said, "I find it hard to answer this question, because my plan for winning free of Lucius has included a stranger from Metamorphosis for months now. And my life has changed so much in the last few weeks that I find it very hard to imagine it without you."

Harry shuddered all over, but it was the good kind of shudder, the one that might come from someone brushing his cheek with light fingertips.

"But no, I don't think I would have associated myself with this revolution so openly," Draco continued. He sat back and tilted the cup of tea—still balanced in the middle of the palm—until it reached his lips. "Contributed money, yes. Perhaps provided legal help if there was real danger of someone being sent to Azkaban. But not attended the meetings or stood by anyone's side. And it's more than the fact that I can sleep with women, too, if I choose to. I don't see myself as part of the group Nusante wants to represent. Even though I am, if you define it in the broadest terms."

Harry nodded. "So. Do you want me to wear the Brian disguise, or the Longbottom one?"

"On the one hand, anything that infuriates my father further whilst building my public reputation with other factions of society is a good thing," Draco said. "On the other, I want you to attend in a different guise altogether."

Harry slightly narrowed his eyes. "Even though I'll have to talk swiftly to convince Nusante why I know where this house is?"

Draco's eyes slipped shut, and he hummed. "If there's one thing you're much better at than I ever thought you could be, Harry, it's talking swiftly."

That was true, Harry admitted reluctantly to himself. And there was a part of him that really did want to show off his personas to Draco, to see Draco looking at him with fascination and awe. What else did he have that could keep Draco's interest and attention?

*It would take too much time to list them all,* said the merciless voice.

But the merciless voice was only a persona, after all, if a clever and persistent one. Harry knew he had personas who would fit the occasion. His desires and Draco's coincided enough that it was no problem to nod and say, "I'll do it. Meanwhile, I'll have watchers at the locations where

the other owls said the meeting would be. If Aurors show up at one of them, we'll have a good idea of where the leak started."

"And of course you'll have Nusante Floo those people from this house and invite them here if they're home, without enough warning to contact Aurors," Draco said.

Harry smiled and found himself relaxing. It took him a moment to realize why. It was a relief, in many ways, to have someone with him who did not require endless explanations to follow every movement.

"And what will you do in the meantime?" he asked Draco.

"Meet with my friends," Draco said, rising to his feet. Harry loved to watch him in motion. He walked and sat and stood still with practiced grace, but the practice had lasted all his life, and so the grace had become part of him, in the way his dancing was, not an artificiality or a superficiality.

*He tells some of the truth about himself with his body,* the merciless voice said. *As you do not.*

Harry ignored the objection, because he didn't think it was an interesting one. If he did not lie with his body, Metamorphosis would not have lasted as long as it had. "And try to persuade them to your point of view?" he asked.

"Yes." Draco turned to look at him. "Blaise won't be difficult. Pansy, a little more so. And I'll expand the circle of my influence outwards. There are even some of my investors who owe me favors and may be interested."

"How influential can they be?" Harry asked. He hadn't paid much attention to that part of pure-blood life that dealt strictly with business, which was one reason he hadn't heard of Malfoy's Machineries before he met with Draco. He knew enough to keep from embarrassing himself in conversation, and that was all he needed. His battlefields were usually the drawing room and the dance floor.

*And sometimes the bedroom,* said the merciless voice. *Though no more, unless it's with Draco.*

"Not influential in the way you're probably thinking of, wherein they charge in and stop the Aurors from arresting anyone," Draco said, his voice dry as Aunt Petunia's toast. "What they *can* do is slowly spread around the idea that gay people aren't all that different from straight people."

"But that isn't always true," said Harry.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know, but it depends on what people want to believe, doesn't it? And I think a great many of Nusante's group will be more like those pure-bloods than otherwise—and more like their *children* than they realize." His voice softened, and Harry wondered absently if there was some sort of despair in his eyes that merited that tone. "I know you've had bad

experiences with people like my parents, Harry, and all those you met when you were pretending to be their sons' or daughters' true loves. But I honestly think some of them will change their minds or relax their standards if the other option is losing their children. After all, if they have a threat to hold over our heads—the money and property we stand to inherit—we also have a threat to offer them. If we don't have children, their precious lines don't continue. And it's much easier to refuse to have children than to go through the formal process of disowning."

Harry smiled in spite of himself. Draco narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"You did speak about yourself as if you were part of Nusante's group, just now," Harry said.

"So I did." Draco gave a little nod. "I do hope that we won't be keeping count of all the little battles lost and won between us, Harry. That could get tiresome quickly."

"So it could," said Harry, and then stepped towards Draco and said something that was his own, though perhaps if he had waited a moment more, the merciless voice would have suggested it. "But I hope we won't ever lose that edge of tension, either. I *like* fighting with you, Draco, when it's a game we can keep playing, and there's no possibility of an ultimate win or loss."

Draco stared at him for a long moment. He kept staring as Harry lifted his hands, put them around Draco's neck and cheeks, and kissed him. Harry made the kiss lighter and gentler than the exploratory one they had shared last night, because he didn't think he was quite ready to invite the intervention of the magical bond yet. They had to get to know each other outside the bedroom at some point.

Draco drew back at last, and he was smiling, an absent gesture, with only the left side of his mouth lifted. "Thank you," he said. "Now, I really do have to visit Pansy. Blaise is already there, I'm certain, and with the stories he's probably told her, I'm sure she's formed half-a-dozen twisted theories of her own."

"I'd hate to see what she would do with twisted theories," Harry said gravely.

Draco shuddered. "I spent most of my fourth year suffering from one of them," he said, and raised a hand when Harry opened his mouth to ask the question. "Later, Harry. I enjoy talking to you too much."

Harry was smiling like an idiot when Draco Flooed away, but he thought he might be allowed.

"Master Draco Lucius Malfoy," said Pansy's house-elf when she opened the door, and bowed stiffly to Draco. "Ritty is happy to see Master Draco Lucius Malfoy."

Draco kept from rolling his eyes with an effort. This was Pansy's "subtle" way of letting him know she was annoyed with him. "If you'll escort me to your mistress, I'd appreciate it, Ritty," he said, and gave his cloak into the elf's hands. The elf whisked it away neatly, then turned her back

and strode up the stairs that began just inside the door. She managed to convey clear disapproval with the set of her back muscles.

Draco looked around as he climbed. The house Pansy owned had once belonged to a Muggle family, and then to a wizarding family who seemed to have had the idea that they'd hold on to their money long enough to actually live here. They hadn't, and Pansy had bought the house for a paltry sum of Galleons. But it was a beautiful place, the walls an odd smirched color sandwiched between gray and white, the actual hue shifting depending on whether the enchanted windows showed a rainstorm at the moment or not. Pansy was dramatic.

The staircase spiraled in three tight turns like a unicorn's horn before it finally came out on the upper floor that Pansy had colonized; she had always believed in leaving the ground floor to the house-elves and "other people who can't help it." The corridors were all carpeted with enchanted rose-petals that barely covered the marble, but were luckily also enchanted to warm the feet. The walls themselves held many small alcoves, each containing one of Pansy's treasures—a statue made in imitation of Memnon that sang with each dawn, a feather from the wing of a phoenix, an umbrella stand made from a mooncalf's foot—and few doors.

The corridor opened out at the end into a massive room that Draco knew was the reason Pansy had actually chosen the house; she had always envied the enormous room that occupied the back of Malfoy Manor. This one was done in shades of blue, carefully chosen so that they blended subtly into each other, but Draco's eye never got tired of looking at any particular one. The window looming over them, so large that only courtesy and the lack of a balcony kept Draco from calling it a door, was crafted of glass sheer enough to make it seem as if one were looking through pure air. But pure air had never been that clear, or sparkled now and then with a rainbow chaser to the viewer's vision, either.

Two stuffed chairs stood alone in the middle of the room, arranged as two points of a triangle; when Draco approached, Pansy waved her wand and conjured the third one, next to Blaise's chair and opposite hers. Her face was set and white. Draco checked a sigh. He should have visited her before this if he didn't want a confrontation. Pansy would try to drag every nuance of the truth from him.

Blaise rose to his feet and watched Draco come with an appreciative smile he did nothing to disguise. Draco grinned back. Blaise had changed from the rather nondescript clothes he'd worn in the Ministry earlier; he wore blue robes to match the room now, but studded with enough gold bangles and green patches to make him look like a peacock. Blaise, of course, didn't care about that. He just liked the clothes, so he wore them, and most of the time he managed to make them look stylish.

There had been a time when Draco was absolutely convinced their relationship would be one for the record books, a romance to last the ages and defy his parents over. It hadn't worked out that way, but he held that emotion tightly for all of a week, and he still valued Blaise for making him feel like that.

"I see our silent communication is still as good as ever," said Blaise, and pretended to kiss Draco's cheek.

Draco dropped into the chair Pansy had conjured for him, deftly avoiding Blaise's gesture, and raised his eyebrows. "Where else would you go? Your mother might accept you, but then she'd try to steal your hair for Polyjuice and drug you so you'd agree to marry some young witch. And Pansy's parents would stare at you hotly enough to brand your skin, even if they wouldn't actually throw you out." Blaise had done something indiscreet at Pansy's house the summer after the war ended. Draco had never learned any more details than that it involved three white mice and a number of sticky red lozenges.

Blaise shrugged, looking unrepentant. "It's not *my* fault that you're only thinking in terms of accepted pure-blood households," he murmured. "From what Pansy has told me in the past half-hour, I do think you're about to get over that." And he sat back, hands folded over his stomach, and looked pleased with himself.

"About that." Pansy folded her hands in her lap. Her eyes were hot and steady, and she was wearing mauve robes. Draco mentally increased the amount of time he'd have to spend pacifying her. The mauve robes only came out when she was deeply threatened and felt like announcing the imminent end of their friendship—thus, about four times a year. "Have you considered what you're doing, Draco?"

"Of course he has, Pansy," Blaise said, and tossed back the small glass of wine he held. "He's throwing all that manky money and that crumbling old manse over for true love. Can't you see the beauty of that?"

"You don't know this Brian Montgomery." Pansy's voice was very soft. "I've done some research, Draco. He's not real. He exists on a few scattered pieces of paper, and that's all. At best, he's some foreigner come to ravish you for his own amusement. At worst, he's part of a revenge plot."

Draco checked his sigh. "I can promise you he's real, Pansy," he said.

"Yes," Blaise agreed at once. "Draco's felt his cock up his arse. How much more real does someone have to be to satisfy you?" He frowned severely at Pansy.

Pansy waved her wand without looking away from Draco. She would have cast a Silencing Charm on Blaise, Draco knew. It was standard for conversations like this. On the other hand, she didn't usually cast one so early.

*She's worried for me,* he realized in astonishment, finally translating the tight lines around her mouth and eyes correctly. *Not just angry I didn't tell her about Harry earlier.*

"Listen to me," he said. "I can tell you he's real, Pansy. But he's masked."

"So it *is* a revenge plot," Pansy said. Blaise was waving his wand at his own mouth with

resignation; it always took him ten tries or so to get the nonverbal countercharm to work.

"Not unless you want to count it as my revenge plot on Lucius," said Draco. "He's a real person. I know who that real person is. I've made him promise to step forwards eventually and let other people know he's dating me."

Pansy had relaxed a bit. Draco could tell she'd expected neither the answer nor the absolute level of conviction in his voice. "Eventually," she repeated.

Draco nodded. "I know I can trust him," he said. "And not just because I'm well on my way to falling in love. His real identity is someone I knew before I met him masked like this. He has the reputation of keeping his word."

"But Draco," Pansy whispered, "is this really worth getting disowned? Changing everything we've always believed in?"

And Draco heard the pleading behind her question, and knew he would have to pour more of himself into promoting the rebellion than he'd thought.

*Harry's right,* he thought wryly. *I am part of Nusante's group, whether I want to be or not. I just hope he realizes the same thing.*

"You haven't believed in what your parents do for a long time, Pansy," he said quietly. "Neither have I. I'm just the first of us to decide to do something about it. And if we fight hard enough, then I believe we'll create a world where I can walk with Brian freely, and where you have a better chance of bringing your Muggle into polite society."

Pansy closed her eyes, as she always did at any mention of her lover she didn't bring up herself. Blaise had sat up and was staring at Draco. Draco returned his gaze calmly. His heart was beating fast, but he was centered in himself, serene at the bottom.

*We* are *going to do this.*

Finally, Pansy opened her eyes and murmured, "Tell me how."

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Chapter: 31

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-One—The Meeting*

"I'm glad to see you again, Elizabeth." Nusante's smile was anxious. He reached out and took Elizabeth's arm hard enough to make her wince a little with the pinching of the skin. "Where is the meeting? The Apparition coordinates I received told me to come here, but it can't be here. It's too public." His eyes darted about for a moment, as though he expected Aurors to come pouring out of the stone walls around him.

Elizabeth watched him for a moment, biting her lip to hold back the pity. Nusante had seemed so confident when he met them that first day at the Theater-in-the-Round, agreeing to change his play in a way he knew would cause an immediate public response. Now he looked hunted.

"You know, Raymond," she said softly, even as she turned and led him along the alley, "if you don't want to stay involved—if this is too hard—"

He jerked away from her and faced her with his arms folded, his eyes suddenly hard and without any trace of fear. "I never said that," he snapped. "I can do this. I've always wanted to be free to love whom I wanted, and this is my best chance to do that. If I sneak away now, that leaves—how many people in the lurch? Hundreds, probably, and certainly the dozens I know who are depending on me. I may feel that I should have had a different position in the rebellion than that of leader, but I'm not about to abandon it, now that I have it."

Elizabeth smiled at him. She had heard similar speeches from Muggle leaders of gay pride movements who in the end had decided to stay and work for it, daring mental scars and physical violence. "You're brave," she said, and discovered, to her amusement, that a woman's compliment could still make him blush.

"Do you know if Draco Malfoy will be attending this meeting?" he asked, allowing her to draw him down the alley again. "There are some people who are only coming on the off-chance that they'll see him. They—were very impressed by the way he got himself disowned. We all know he has his own business, of course, but still, it can't have been easy for him to risk losing everything he expected to inherit."

"I can say with some confidence that Draco Malfoy will be there," said Elizabeth, and then leaned closer to him and lowered her voice. They were coming up on Diagon Alley now, and it was for the best, just in case someone happened to be looking at or listening to them. "And that rumor I passed along about the house we're meeting in?" She had sent a second owl to Nusante hard on the heels of the first one that gave him the correct Apparition coordinates. "That's true."

Nusante jumped as if stung, then flushed again and glanced about as though someone would pay attention to them just for that. Seeing the bland or harried faces of the wizards and witches who poured past them on errands seemed to reassure him. Turning back to her, he whispered furiously, "But that's nonsense! Harry Potter isn't one of us. There's no one who has more to gain from keeping the world the way it is."

Elizabeth struggled to keep up her smile. It felt as though a menstrual cramp had invaded her

belly at the moment. "I agree that he'd have a lot to gain. But maybe his motivation is the same as yours. Maybe he's tired of not being able to walk about in the open with his lover. Maybe he's afraid and weary at the thought of all the work the rebellion entails, but he'd still rather face that than having to hide every day for the rest of his life."

Nusante shook his head, but in wonder this time. "I—there's never even been a rumor about him."

"He's been mostly fucking Muggles, I think," said Elizabeth, and pushed away an inappropriate pride for Nusante's lack of suspicion. "After all, there's the celebrity factor to make it especially unwise for him to indulge himself in the wizarding world."

"True enough," Nusante said, and then began to grin. "Do you know if he'll put in an appearance at today's gathering?"

And there was a moment when Elizabeth felt a cliff-edge she had not expected to feel beneath her feet. She crossed it without waiting for the cleverest corner of her mind to speak to her.

"That might be a possibility," she said. "At least for a moment, and near the end. He won't want to distract attention from the main purpose of the meeting."

Nusante straightened and glared around the Alley, as much as though to say all these ordinary straight people couldn't trouble him when he had Harry Potter on his side. Elizabeth concealed a giggle—it would make her sound drunken at the moment, which was approximately how she felt—and took his arm for the Apparition.

"Just keep me away from the women," Pansy said, for the third time, as she, Blaise, and Draco appeared on the doorstep of Grimmauld Place.

Draco rolled his eyes and flung the door open. "Don't be more stupid than you can help, Pansy," he said. "Not every lesbian wants a straight woman. Besides, you've gone to the effort of polishing yourself up like a cold diamond. Most of them want a woman with a little more life in her."

Pansy gave him a particularly venomous glare that Draco knew meant he would pay for that remark later. But really, Pansy could not go about saying stupid things like that in the middle of this meeting. She didn't believe them, anyway; they were just an effective mask for her nervousness.

They stepped into a corridor that looked nothing like the entrance hall of Harry's house, decorated as it was with glamours of marble floors and stone walls warmed with hanging tapestries. The glamours were layered, so that even if someone sensed the first ones and removed them, they would only see slightly dingier marble and stone than before, and think Harry was trying to conceal a lack of cleanliness rather than a completely different type of building

material.

Blaise, of course, was in his element in moments, joining the largest group of people and adding an original punch-line to the joke being told. Someone laughed. Someone else passed him a glass of wine. Blaise looked thoughtful, swirled the wine around on his tongue for a moment, and then said something else, which made the entire group erupt in laughter. Draco took a moment to cast the Killing Curse on his envy. That was one talent he'd never have, not for a lack of charm but because his name and face were too familiar in an unnerving way.

*Thanks a lot, Father,* he thought. At the moment, he would have given much to have been born into an ordinary, low-ranking pure-blood family, one that didn't need to join Voldemort or Dumbledore because they were too small for either side to notice.

Then he reminded himself his support wouldn't mean what it did to the rebellion if he were someone else, and turned around, Pansy trailing behind him, to scan the room for Harry.

His eyes locked on the woman standing next to Nusante, and narrowed. She was that woman who had bored him with her speech at the meeting the Aurors raided, wasn't she? Elizabeth someone-or-other. Draco hoped she would let someone else speak today. At the moment, she was rather monopolizing Nusante's time.

Then she turned and caught his eye, and Draco felt the slight crackle of a time-delayed spell, apparently set to take effect the moment they looked at each other. For a moment, Elizabeth's rather nondescript eyes were a brilliant green.

Draco swallowed a curse. *The bastard. This is his way of winning Nusante's confidence and telling me his latest little secret without actually confessing it to my face, isn't it? The way the glamours on the house are a way of hiding its true provenance and a show to me of how much power he has in this area.*

For a moment, worry churned in his gut. If Harry was this skilled at acting, he could absent himself from Draco's life without changing a single habit. Draco could search for him forever and never find him.

But he would not let that happen. He would make himself so brilliant that Harry would be charmed into staying with him, gazing at him admiringly, wanting to know what he was thinking and what he would do next.

He turned, plucked a glass of wine from someone who was wasting it by gesturing everywhere and letting the wine splash to the floor, and intimidated the woman with one glare when she tried to protest. He took a swift sip for courage and then strode towards one end of the room. A whip of his wand, and the floor Transfigured itself, molding up into a stage as high as the bottom step of Harry's real stairs. He leaped onto it, and cast *Sonorus* on his throat. By that time, he had the attention of most of the room.

"I'm sure many of you know me by name, face, reputation, and *Prophet* articles," he said. A few smiles appeared here and there in the audience, and Draco relaxed. He could feel himself taking the reins now, gathering up their emotions and manipulating them into new patterns. "What you read is true. My father has disowned me for daring to go against him and love whom I want to love."

Stamping and shouts and whistles answered him. Draco let the noises build on themselves until they began to die down again. He knew Pansy would be making faces at his back, telling him to get on with it already, and that was another advantage of starting to speak when he did.

"I did try to appease my parents," Draco continued, "because they are my parents and I love them." He wanted to pause for a moment, because he didn't think he'd ever admitted that in public before, but the tide of the speech was carrying him onwards. "I wanted to live in peace with them if I could, to have both my partner's companionship and theirs. I'm sure most of you have experienced the same struggle, the sense that if you only did *something* right, the problem could be solved, and it was your own fault that it wasn't."

Heads nodded all around the room. Draco let his own pride catch and catapult him high. No need to be modest now, not when he had them.

He paused, both to emphasize the words he was about to say next and to make sure that Harry's eyes were resting on him. A glance out of the corner of his eye showed Nusante and everyone around Nusante staring at him as if they could not look away.

"But that isn't the way it happens," Draco went on. "It's not our fault that we can't live in peace. It's the fault of irrational prejudices that retreat when questioned, only to fasten on some new object like spiderwebs. I've asked my father why he has such objections to two men sleeping together. He mutters something about hygiene. I tell him that spells exist which can protect men from disease as surely as they protect men and women. Then he comes up with some objection about children. Adoption exists, I remind him. And so he delves up some nonsense about how 'unnatural' it is." Draco snorted, feeling free to express his disgust about those conversations with Lucius for the first time. "If he would just admit that he's worried about a man desiring *him*, making him the one looked at for once instead of the woman, then I would have a lot more respect for him."

Applause and raised glasses answered him. Draco smiled and deliberately did not glance to the side. *Are you watching, Harry? This is for me, yes, and for them, but mostly for you.*

"And the scope of my disrespect has dramatically increased with my abortive arrest for flagrant public displays of homosexuality," he said. "The Ministry is now included in it." He paused, aware that their gazes had sharpened to the point where the expectation in the room was actively painful. "That's why I am going to announce that all the profits from Malfoy's Machineries which had gone to the charities used and established by the Ministry are being redirected to the disposal of the rebellion instead. People like us, people who will find very little help in the wider world if we do not help ourselves."

He couldn't have timed it better. People were still staring at him with astonished eyes, and the applause was tentative and just beginning, when a tawny owl swooped through one of the open windows and aimed towards him. Draco held up his arm imperiously, and the owl settled into place, holding the letter out to him with what Draco could easily imagine was a bow of its head. The letter bore the seal of Gringotts.

He opened it, scanned the contents quickly to make sure they said what they should, and then smiled at the crowd. "And the transaction is complete, thanks to the quickness of our goblin colleagues," he said.

The cheering was hysterical then. Draco bathed in it for long minutes, and shook the hands of the people crowding forwards for that purpose, before he turned his head to the side and looked at Elizabeth.

Her eyes were wide and green when they met his, and there was a warmth of admiration in them that made Draco want to stride over and kiss her/him in the middle of the meeting. But he modestly stepped aside and let others take the platform, including some people who Harry had told him would give them a good summary of the laws Counterstrike and the Ministry might try to use against them. Draco planned to listen to those intently. He trusted Elizabeth to excuse herself soon and come back to his side as Brian.

He could wait patiently in part because his heart and his soul were humming with eager warmth.

*He admires me. He trusts me. He has reason to see that I'm as committed to this course of rebellion as he is. I want all of that.*

*Not that the public admiration doesn't feel bloody good as well.*

Given that Nusante had a speech of his own to make, and Elizabeth was scheduled to do nothing in that line, it was easy enough for her to slip away. In a corridor that only she would have known was there behind the piled glamours, she clasped her hands to her burning cheeks and closed her eyes.

Draco's gift was utterly unexpected, even though she knew he had spent the last few days making "preparations." She had simply assumed that the preparations concerned his Slytherin friends and nothing else. Zabini and Parkinson had followed him in, so those activities had been successful. As to what else might have happened, she hadn't thought to question it.

She let out a sharp breath, and then the Elizabeth persona flickered and vanished, and Harry opened his eyes—not as himself, but with his own mind burning and racing behind the Transfigured mask.

*Oh, God. His father will be so angry with him. So will the Ministry officials and committees that*

*depended on that income to their charities. Other people will see how committed he is and investigate the rebellion, because they will think any cause Draco Malfoy supports is serious enough to demand some attention. He's done more for us at a stroke than anyone except Nusante has.*

*He's running an enormous risk. And he doesn't care. Or rather, he's weighed it, and decided that it's worth the consequences.*

Harry paced back and forth, glancing now and then at the glamour that hid him. If someone had seen him walk through the wall, there could be trouble. But no one intruded, and that meant Harry couldn't help being drawn back into the whirlwind of his thoughts.

*So many risks to run. He's flung himself headlong into a problem he could have ignored altogether, or only supported from a distance. And I'm certain his friends advised him to do stay distant.*

Harry paused and, drawing his wand, created a small hole through the layers of glamour, which should be invisible to everyone outside it unless they happened to be gazing in exactly the right direction when the hole appeared. Then he bent down and put his eye to the hole, seeking out Zabini.

Zabini was standing near Draco, one arm around his shoulders, his head bent towards him. Draco's mouth was open in laughter, his head tilted back as if he trusted Zabini to support him completely. Harry didn't think he'd seen him so relaxed, except perhaps after they made love. And even then, Draco had either been trying to discover Brian's secret or convince Harry to tell the truth. He hadn't looked so much as if he trusted Harry, as he looked like he trusted and loved Zabini.

Jealousy was an ugly thing. Harry closed his eyes and pressed his hand to his abdomen, envisioning the emotion swelling like a tumor. The darkness behind his eyelids roiled with orange and red, yellow and pea-green—all the colors of vomit.

*They're probably just friends,* the voice of his reason argued. *Why would Draco be pursuing you so strongly if he had a secondary relationship that would content him just as well? And Zabini appeared because he heard Draco was in trouble, not because Draco invited him. Draco wouldn't scheme against you like that.*

But the jealousy replied that Zabini was charming, open about himself, and relentlessly interested in Draco, if the way he smiled at him from one corner of his mouth was any indication. And he was making Draco *laugh.* And there were so many problems that lay between Harry and Draco, so many of them the result of Harry's own stubbornness. What if Draco did decide that, as much as he wanted their relationship to succeed, Harry simply hid too much for him? Draco Malfoy was not someone to pine uselessly forever after someone who would never return his love. He would move on, and expect Harry to do the same thing.

*But—*

*But I don't think I can. Where else am I going to find someone as strong and beautiful and intelligent as Draco? Where else am I going to find someone fascinated with my personas, even if uneasily, rather than frightened of them, or someone whom I can never tell?*

*Maybe Draco is the one person I don't have to wear masks around.*

Harry waited expectantly for the merciless voice to speak up, or the voice of his reason, or the voice of his jealousy. But he was alone inside his head, and if the silence scared him, it also goaded him.

*You can't depend on any persona to snare Draco, because he's already told you what he wants—all of them, and not just a facet. He doesn't like you lying. He doesn't like you sleeping with anyone else. He's inviting you into a bond like the one Ron and Hermione have, one you thought you never could have after you had to tell Ginny you were gay.*

But he wouldn't want to just seize this chance because he might never find something better. That would be insulting to Draco.

Harry put his eye to the hole in the glamours again and watched Draco, who had stepped away from Zabini and faced him with his hands on his hips. He was snapping something at him, to the great amusement of the group that surrounded them. Zabini retorted, and the crowd roared. Harry didn't miss the smile both men exchanged.

And Harry knew he couldn't let this go, and it had nothing to do with his not wanting to spend the rest of his life alone. He had become resigned to that long since.

Draco was the one who woke him from resignation. Draco was the one who promised him that something better was possible, even likely. But he couldn't force Harry to accept him or believe him. Harry would have to do that on his own.

His wand shook when he aimed it at himself, and Harry had to pause and close his eyes. His breath was loud in his ears, not helped by the enclosed space in which he stood. He suffered a brief, wild urge to claw at his face, to drop the wand and run, to go upstairs and fetch the reverse Pensieve.

But he had made his decision.

"*Finite Incantatem,"* he said, and the world danced and shrank and realigned as his center of balance shifted, as he lost Elizabeth's breasts and height. He shivered as he ran a hand through his hair and discovered it was a tangled mess.

Then he turned and stepped through the glamours into the room where Draco waited for him.

Draco lost the thread of his conversation with Blaise as he looked up and in the direction of the gasps and murmurs and pointing fingers of the crowd. The noise quickly died away under the pressure of Draco's own frantic heartbeat.

Harry was walking hesitantly towards him, his head up and his eyes brilliant with the kind of feverish glaze a unicorn might show before it ran away and hid itself in the woods. But he kept walking towards Draco.

And he wore no disguise at all.

Draco began to tremble. He took a step forwards, swayed, and found Blaise's hand bracing him. Harry's gaze darted to the hand, then snapped to Draco's face, and his stride became faster.

He came up to Draco and stood for a moment, scanning his face as though seeking out a signal. Draco held his breath and hoped silently that Harry would find whatever it was he needed to see in his expression.

Harry found it. He nodded, gave Draco a small, panicked smile, and turned to face the people shouting about him. They fell silent at once when they saw his mouth open, and leaned forwards. Draco winced. The weight of expectation that had met his own speech was nothing to this.

"Yes, I'm really Harry Potter," Harry said clearly. "Yes, as you might have decided by now, I am gay. And for the past few weeks I've been going about under the guise of Brian Montgomery, Draco's boyfriend." He looked sideways at Draco, and his hand slipped down to Draco's elbow, clasping it with frantic tightness, out of the sight of anyone in front of them. "We were protecting me from publicity. I wasn't ready to let anyone but Draco know I preferred men. But the time comes when every mask has to drop."

He turned to face Draco, and reached out.

Draco met him halfway there, seizing the back of Harry's neck and kissing him hungrily. Harry opened his mouth in a soft gasp, his tongue darting out as if he thought he could content Draco with a single pass, and then he leaned forwards and snogged him back, his hands clasping Draco's shoulders until the bones hurt.

Draco was dizzy with happiness. He wrapped his arm around Harry's waist and pulled him closer, vaguely sorry they were in the middle of an audience and he couldn't simply lay Harry down on the floor and make love to him right there.

But Harry's gesture of courage and trust and terror and love would have to do for now.

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Chapter: 32

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Two—Reaction*

Harry could feel the tremors creeping into his hands again as his kiss with Draco came to an end. He would have to face the people staring at his back now, and he didn't think all of them would be clapping. At least, Pansy and Blaise would not, and they were the two people in the room whose opinion would be most important to Draco. Harry surprised himself with how badly he wanted to impress them.

*At least, I do if Blaise is not intent on stealing Draco.*

He turned around, his hand resting on Draco's shoulder partially so he could hide it and thus disguise some of the tremors, and faced the room again. Draco crowded close to him before he could say anything, and Harry glanced at him in surprise. He received the most piercing look he'd ever got in his life in return. He thought it tore through several of his more spectacular uncertainties, and left him swallowing, startled and flayed but unexpectedly exhilarated.

*Draco's on my side. If I can remember that, then I should have the courage to take on most of the accusations that they fling at me.*

He lifted his eyebrows and waited, suddenly sure that he need not speak first. After all, he had made a speech and then kissed Draco. He could not state his case more clearly. If someone had an objection, a question, or a complaint, they would have to give it.

Nusante spoke first, as Harry had thought he might. He was good at quick reactions, even if he doubted himself during the building of long-range plans. "Why did you hide for so long?" he asked, stepping past several people who were trying to crowd closer as if that would give them a better look at Harry's scar. "We could have used your help *years* ago. If you had come out after the war, when your popularity was at its height, we might not be having problems with the Ministry now." His voice was soaring rapidly. Harry winced.

Draco's hand settled on the small of his back, fingers splayed and then softly stroking in towards the center. Harry relaxed. Nusante's accusations still hurt, but like beestings instead of knives.

"I'm sorry that I didn't," Harry said, "now that I've been witness to what the Ministry thinks on this issue. But, at the time, the last thing I wanted was more publicity. I don't think the battle would have ended, anyway," he added, as Nusante opened his mouth, probably to argue that Harry shouldn't be so selfish. "Yes, it might have been lessened, and easier now, and for that I apologize. But it's not my responsibility or my power to make the whole of the wizarding world accept gay men and women—and bisexual men and women—all at once. I'll give you what help

I can now. Blaming me for what help I didn't give in the past will be counterproductive for all of us."

He stopped, barely controlling his urge to pant. Where had *those* words come from? Why wasn't he curling up in pain and guilt, or at least awaiting the advice of the merciless voice before he spoke?

Draco hugged him, pulling him closer than ever. Harry thought he heard a whisper from him, along the lines of, "I'm so proud of you." But he didn't dare look at Draco right now. He would break if he did.

"Even if we ignore that question, there's something else," called someone who stood near the back of the room. "Where have you *been* for the past ten years? You still could have helped us. Created an identity for yourself, one that could funnel money and approval our way, so no one would ever know it was you."

Harry bit his lip savagely. He could feel laughter churning like a volatile potion in his stomach, and he didn't dare let it out. He would never stop until they took him to St. Mungo's if he did.

"That's true," he said. "I could have. Instead, I hid and spread rumors about my own weakness. I was trying to excuse any public responsibility I might have had, and destroy my own reputation."

"*Why*?" said someone. Though Harry couldn't be certain because the voice died too fast, he thought it might have been Pansy.

"Because—"

"That's mad," someone else interrupted. "Do we want a madman leading us?"

"He should have come forwards before now if he wanted a place in the rebellion," came the murmured agreement from what seemed to be several corners at once. "Nusante is enough for us."

"What does he actually have to offer, with his power so decayed?" demanded what sounded like the person who had said he should create an identity. "Maybe it would be better if he stayed hidden, so people don't start thinking of us as 'Harry Potter's group' instead of paying attention to our message."

Harry found himself lifting a hand before he knew what would happen. Anger had blasted through him like a fountain of fire, and the best way to handle it was to call forth his magic and spread it through the room like invisible smoke, the way he had done when he focused it on Lucius in the Malfoys' dining room.

The complaining voices fell silent at once. Harry saw jaws drop open, eyes glaze, and people shiver. Some of those who probably had an erotic reaction to powerful magic, like Draco, licked

their lips. Others huddled, and Harry realized that simply using his power without words to accompany it could seem like a threat.

"*This* is what I have to offer," he said quietly. "The power to defend us from our enemies. The courage to use that power—now, if I didn't before. And the ability to lead a charge if need be." He dropped his hand and retracted the magic, so that it swirled around his shoulders in a sparkling haze, leaving the crowd free to think and react more clearly. "I know some of you distrust me, and it's true that I've been a coward in the past. But now that I've come out—" *announced myself, put myself on a fucking target,* babbled the most frightened part of him "—I'll be associated with the movement no matter what you do. Use me instead of distancing yourself from me. It's the best way."

Draco's jaw dug into his shoulder, and Harry reckoned he was irritated about Harry's wording. But it was not Draco's support he needed at the moment. He kept his eyes on the crowd, and tried to ignore the growing feeling that he had no idea what he was really doing.

Blaise stepped forwards, and he was too close not to draw Harry's attention at once. He had a smile on his face that was hard to read, and his eyes traveled back and forth from Draco to Harry, just slowly enough to escape looking as if he were darting them frantically about. "I was wondering how you met Draco," he said. "And why you chose to reveal yourself now, when you'd successfully hidden your identity for weeks."

Draco's jaw dug into his shoulder again. Harry ignored the signal, if it was meant as one. He had to get used to telling the story that would cover his odd behavior, sooner or later, and he would prefer it if he were allowed to make up the lies.

"I met him at one of the locations in the wizarding world that are frequented by gay wizards looking for partners," he said easily. One could call Metamorphosis by such a description if one stretched the truth far enough. "I didn't know what to think of him at first; I thought it was a trick, or perhaps he'd drag me into the open the moment he found out. But we came to a tentative liking for one another, and whilst he didn't agree with my reasons for remaining hidden, there were more important things to talk about." He gave Draco a sidelong glance and a wink. "And to spend time doing, for that matter.

"Time went on. We got to know each other better and better. The connection between us…" Harry let his breath flutter out shakily. "I don't think you were in the country then, Zabini, but ask anyone who was in the appropriate party at Clothilde Castle. Or ask his parents, though you might not have much luck getting a coherent answer out of them."

Zabini smiled, looking as if the expression had been dragged out of him. "And why did you come out in public now?" he pressed.

"Because that's what I wanted to do next," Harry said simply. "And Draco's gesture—which not even I knew he was going to make—surprised and inspired me." He reached back over his shoulder, and Draco's hand was there to grip his, exactly as if they often touched each other like

this. "I didn't want him to stand alone. And I know how much he's risking. It was one thing when we came out to his parents and knew he might end up getting disowned. This? It's a much bigger field. It'll involve people who aren't the pure-bloods he's grown up among. I couldn't let him stand alone," he repeated. His heart was beating in a crazy rhythm in his ears, but keeping his voice steady wasn't even an effort.

*I think that might be true.*

"And do you love him?" someone else said. Harry looked to the side and found Pansy had stepped up very close, her eyes bright with anger. She had one hand poised on her hip, her fingers curled around her palm. That wasn't enough to keep Harry from seeing that she held her wand.

Harry nodded. "Yes, I think so," he said.

And then Draco's hands closed hard enough around his waist and shoulders to make Harry wince, and spun him around. Once again, he was being kissed, but this time Harry sensed restrained anger behind the plunge and twist of Draco's tongue. He leaned back and gave up control of the kiss, letting Draco do as he liked. His attention soon shifted from the people around them to the erection he knew he wouldn't be able to hide if he pulled away.

When Draco at last lifted his head and Harry was panting to recover his breath, he heard Draco's hard voice say, "I think that's quite enough questions about Harry's honor, bravery, and purpose. He's outed himself now, and there isn't a wizard in Britain who won't hear of this by tomorrow morning. What more do you want from him?"

"Support long ago would have been nice," said Nusante.

Harry started to turn in Draco's arms and apologize again, but Draco tightened his grip and held him in place. He was snarling as he responded, though Harry thought he was the only one close enough—other than perhaps Pansy and Blaise—to recognize the extra vibration in Draco's chest and what it meant. To others, he would sound only as if he had become extremely polite. "Harry's given you his reasons for why he didn't do that. We cannot stop you if you blame him, but don't do it without remembering that he's just destroyed his only hiding place because he decided that he should do what's right."

Nusante muttered something sullen. Harry sensed Draco's nails digging into his back in response, and he stroked the nape of Draco's neck reassuringly. Draco sighed out a heavy breath and recovered his self-control.

"Is there anything else that needs to be said?" he demanded, and Harry saw him looking around the room.

Either all the speech-makers had already given their speeches, or they were wise enough to realize that few people would listen to them for glancing at Draco and Harry, Harry thought. He

had lost track of time and who was on-stage during his moments as Elizabeth and making his decision. He heard murmurs of agreement, and then people moved towards the front door, sounding as eager as Draco was to end the meeting.

Harry frowned. He wasn't sure this was the best course. Among other things, Draco had just marked himself as leader of the rebellion, and conflicts with Nusante over that could lie ahead, as well as with those who would resent Draco's high-handedness.

But Draco held him closer, and once again he was trembling. Harry thought it might be better not to ask more of him than he could give.

*Not right away, at any rate. What he can give is obviously much larger than I thought it was.*

Draco fought to keep his jaws closed. Most of the words he could speak at the moment were far too poisonous for the atmosphere around them. The rebellion was a delicate potion, with a sparking ingredient added in the form of Harry's sudden revelation. Did he want it to overflow the cauldron or explode? If not, then he needed to keep quiet.

But it was so *difficult.* His tongue ached with his chewing on it. His mind continually whispered new and more creative insults for the fear in the eyes of those who trooped past them, and others for their resentment as they stared at Harry, and still others for the way some people tried to linger and speak to him, even though the way Draco was holding him should have told them they didn't have a prayer of doing so right now.

Harry had made a sacrifice that they could have appreciated just as well as they had Draco's. Draco had risked his public reputation; Harry would risk a bigger one. He had come out first to his parents and the guests at his birthday party, a controlled environment. Harry had revealed his true orientation in front of a group of people without knowing their feelings about Harry Potter. Draco's contributions to the rebellion would be largely financial still, even if they were open now. Harry had offered to fight.

And what did they do? Turned on him as the wizarding public had turned on him when he was a student, blaming him for not being perfect, blaming him for not having *already* solved their problems.

Harry's hands were rubbing soothingly up and down his spine, pausing now and then to dig into his muscles as if in a massage. Draco held his breath for a count of ten, and then nuzzled Harry's neck. He was the one who should be comforting Harry, not the other way around.

That thought finally helped him recover his temper—that and the knowledge that Blaise and Pansy had not left with the others but were waiting for him with harsh smiles and fury buried deep in their eyes.

Draco glanced up, then turned to face them, drawing Harry around so he stood at Draco's side.

He made sure both Blaise and Pansy saw his arm about Harry's waist, the hand he lifted to adjust his glasses, the way he leaned his weight on Harry unselfconsciously. He would answer his friends' questions, but he would not allow them to dictate what he did and said.

"So," Pansy said, "this is why you were so certain that Brian Montgomery wasn't part of a revenge plot."

"I knew his true identity all along, yes," Draco said simply. That was a lie, but one he could be fairly sure Blaise and Pansy wouldn't detect, stunned as they were. "And I knew Harry was falling for me. He wouldn't hurt me. I was far more likely to hurt him. We had some close scrapes." He touched his lips to Harry's temple and watched Blaise.

Blaise shook his head. Then he said, "And do you love him in turn, Draco?"

"Why, yes," Draco said. "I think so."

The deliberate echo of Harry's words brought his head around so he was staring into Draco's eyes. He shivered for a moment, as if he found the force of Draco's stare a little much, but then he grinned and kissed him on the cheek. Draco crowded closer yet. The churning emotions still filled him, but had moved lower than his belly. He hoped Blaise and Pansy would leave them alone soon.

"Do you realize how much danger you've put Draco in, Potter?" Pansy demanded.

Harry turned to face her. He looked troubled, and Draco tensed. If Pansy hurt him, he would insist that she leave so he could talk to Harry. The danger didn't matter as much as the burst of triumph and anxiety that still filled him when he thought of what Harry had done. Besides, Harry's danger was greater. Did no one care about that? Where were the people to worry about him as Pansy worried about Draco?

*Will his friends understand? Or will they be too angry about his deception and the fact that he's dating me to accept him?*

Draco was beginning to understand why Harry had hidden all these years. Even for the people who didn't see the hero, or not only the hero, the expectations of him were simply too high. Perhaps it was better that he create the personas, who would at least please him and the clients they served, than drive himself mad trying to be everything to every wizard.

"He will be hunted and targeted, yes," Harry said in a low voice. "But so will everyone who stood in this room today."

"Not every one of them is equally important to you," Blaise said. "What will you do about the people who try to hurt him or take him?"

"Destroy them."

Harry said it so casually that it was easy to miss the implications of his words at first. His eyes were fixed on Blaise again, though, and now Draco could feel a cool breeze on the side of his neck and moving through his hair where there had been none before. Harry's mandate for destruction obviously included Blaise if he tried to take Draco.

*I wonder if he's jealous,* Draco thought, and clung to the thought as one that lightened the tension he was feeling. *Perhaps he thinks Blaise really does want to get into my bed.*

"That's quite a claim," said Blaise, looking unmoved, though Draco knew the gleam in his eyes of old. "You're sure you could do it?"

"You've felt my magic," Harry said quietly. "I realize that feeling my love in the same way is impossible for you, but I will try my best."

"That's not good enough," said Pansy.

Harry tossed her a weary glance. "Then I don't think any reassurance I can give you will be."

The weary look made Draco put his hand on Harry's chest and glare at Pansy around the side of his partner's head. Pansy knew that look of old, too. She shut her mouth, raised her eyebrow, and nodded. She was not satisfied, but she would continue the conversation later.

"Blaise, Pansy, I'll meet you at my flat in a few hours," Draco said, and they departed without fuss. Blaise's eyes did still travel back and forth between Draco and Harry with more than ordinary curiosity, but he followed Pansy.

The moment the door closed behind them, Draco grabbed Harry's shoulders and propelled him gently but firmly backwards until he rested against a wall. Harry stared at him, blinking, as if he hadn't quite realized that there was no one in the room but them.

"You don't need to stand by yourself," Draco whispered. He kissed Harry's cheek. "Never again." He kissed him on the mouth, and Harry parted his lips to let his tongue in, moaning softly. Draco felt sharp sparks of magic roll past them, but this time, they seemed to stay under the surface rather than springing up to connect him and Harry. Perhaps they could sense how tired both he and Harry were, that they needed their rest.

"You have me." Draco unbuttoned the robe Harry wore and slid a hand down his chest. Harry arched, gasping. The sound was barely more than a breath, and Draco felt a surge of need that made him step closer, driving a knee between Harry's legs. They parted for him easily, and closed around his thigh with a tight grip that thrilled him.

"You'll always have me," Draco said, and squeezed Harry's right nipple, delighting in the way his head rolled back, his throat bared. His eyes were shut, and Draco wished he would open them, but given Harry's utter surrender in this posture, that was only a minor and selfish wish. What

more could Draco ask for than this openness? Harry was yielding himself freely, as he had not done yet; the last time they had made love, he had still been disguised as Brian, and under the impression that Draco didn't know who he was.

"You don't need to do anything stupidly heroic just so people will like you," Draco said, leaning close to whisper the words into Harry's ear. He let his fingers drift over to Harry's other nipple, then rolled his arm so his wand fell into his hand. A flick, and Harry's robes past the waist were sliding down, the cloth tangling itself neatly around his feet. Draco reached out and slid his pants down, too, and then he was grasping Harry's cock. "You have me, and in any case, I won't let you do something like that."

Harry murmured something. If there were words in it, Draco couldn't understand them. He leaned in and kissed Harry again, sliding his knee back and forth against the underside of Harry's erection on every second stroke. Harry gasped, his eyes flying open at last, though they were so filled with a shimmering glaze Draco wasn't sure if Harry saw him.

"I won't let them hurt you. I won't let them hector you into trying to please them. I'll deflect all their expectations. I'll stand by your side as no one has ever done, and I'll expect the same from you."

Harry opened his eyes further, and concentrated on seeing Draco this time. "I love you," he said clearly, and reached down towards Draco's erection.

Draco turned so as to make it impossible for him to reach. He wasn't going to need any help. Just watching the flush that crept up Harry's neck, the widening of his eyes, the helpless, restless toss of his head against the wall, was enough.

"And I love you," Draco whispered. "Neither of us is what we were. You aren't the Savior of the Wizarding World anymore. You'll commit yourself to the cause; you already did that. But you won't be responsible for doing everything alone. If someone tries to tell you you are, laugh in his face."

Harry smiled and leaned forwards to kiss the wrist of Draco's free hand. Then he cried out as Draco's knee hit just the right spot, and jerked his hips. Draco hissed in triumph. God, he loved touching Harry. He'd never had another partner he wanted to bring pleasure to so completely, just as he'd never felt that overwhelming protective instinct that had made him drive both the group in general and then Blaise and Pansy away when their questions and accusations became too much for Harry.

"And I'm not the oblivious boy I was," Draco said. "I'm not too proud to accept your help. I'm not going to ignore what standing up to everyone, even your friends, costs you. I am *right here*, Harry." He rested his free hand on Harry's cheek this time and leaned in to cover his lips once more.

Harry sighed out his orgasm into Draco's mouth, panting and whimpering in pleasure. Draco

came a few moments later, from the sight of Harry's face, filled with hope and trust and *belief.*

Then he wrapped his arms around Harry's shoulders, and they stood together like that for a long time. Draco thought back to Pansy and Blaise's questions about how Harry would protect him, and snorted inwardly. The moment a threat appeared, he would be filled with protective fury because it might hurt Harry, and that would be the best weapon against being hurt himself.

*I wonder if my father ever understood it—how strong a defense love is.*

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Chapter: 33

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Three—Answering*

Draco paused for a moment before he entered his flat. He envisioned the chairs he kept in the main room, and made a silent wager with himself about where Pansy and Blaise would be sitting. If he was right, he would have gauged their mood correctly enough to have an advantage over them in the conversation that followed. If not, then he would have to be on his guard and play defensive for the moment.

His hands tingled as if he had slept on them as he opened the door. That might have been simply an effect of the wards, which he had given Pansy and Blaise the ability to bypass, but he thought it was anticipation. The secret was out now, and no matter what happened, he and Harry would not be able to act as they had before.

And if his friends were still as rattled as they had obviously been at the meeting, then Draco could knock down their objections joyously whilst still explaining enough to soothe their fears and worries.

Pansy and Blaise were sitting across from each other in the two chairs nearest the hearth, leaving the one between for him. Draco smiled as he closed the door behind him. Yes, he had thought they would do this. They would want him subject to attack from two fronts, and that chair was also the least comfortable one, used mostly for clients with delusions of grandeur who needed to be set in their places. But the very fact that they had chosen it for him argued that they were not as confident of their ability to convince him as it might appear.

Draco sauntered towards the chair, not showing his own increasing excitement that made his belly tighten. *I wonder how people who aren't Slytherins conduct themselves in situations like this,* he thought as he sat down in the chair and spun slightly to face Blaise and Pansy. *Whatever*

*they do, it can't be half as fun.*

He thought for a moment of the way Harry would act and think when he was confronting his Weasley friends, and then knocked the thought away. Harry had insisted Draco leave him shortly after their lovemaking, and that he was strong enough to deal with any owls, Howlers, or impatient visitors who might come through his Floo himself. That he was recovering strength, Draco knew; he had only been set reeling by the first open disapproval and ridiculous demands on his name in ten years, and Draco's protection and show of love had done what Draco hoped it would, allowed him to recover enough to defend himself.

Draco would not want a partner who needed to be sheltered all the time, and Harry would have hated to be that person. He had created dozens of personas in an effort to escape that fate, in fact. But Draco suspected they were more likely to have the opposite problem, with Harry refusing to recognize his need for moments of rest. At least this time he had.

"Did you mean what you said, then?" Pansy led the charge. "Are you really in love with him?"

Draco smiled at her, barely managing to quell a laugh. She had waited to question him until she saw him sinking into contemplation. No doubt she thought she would catch him dreamily smiling and make him flounder that way. Too bad for Pansy that he never let himself relax so much around people who might be hostile.

*And that goes double for anyone who might be hostile to Harry.*

"Yes, it's true," he said, and carelessly crossed his legs, making the gestures so large that they couldn't doubt the expansiveness of his mood. "Why not? He's handsome, he's clever, he's brave, and he complements me extremely well in the weaknesses he does possess."

"There are other people who fit those criteria," said Pansy. She was leaning forwards with her hands on the edges of her knees. Ostensibly, the pose was neutral, but Draco darted a glance at her hands and saw the knuckles whitening. "Blaise, for example. Why choose a Gryffindor? Why choose someone who will cause you political trouble? I know you, Draco, and I know that you wouldn't simply tumble into something like this without due and careful consideration. So share those careful considerations with us. Tell us what makes Potter so perfect."

"Yes, do," Blaise echoed. "If I had known you wanted your parents to disown you, I would have been happy to come back and pose as your boyfriend. No need to go to Potter, of all people."

Draco smiled gently at Blaise, which made him draw back into his chair and narrow his eyes. Well, good. That was the first step in his doubting his own conclusions and coming to see how ridiculous his statement was.

"You don't understand," he said. "You who know me so well, Pansy, do you think I would have tried to force my parents to disown me if I had any other choice? I did seek other options, and all of them ran against the blank wall of my father's refusal to listen. I chose to come out in the end

*because* it was Potter I was dating—"

"Bollocks," Blaise snapped. "You were just as stunned as the rest of us when he revealed himself today. It was in your eyes."

"Because of the sort of person he was," Draco said, with exaggerated patience. "Not because his public reputation might help me. He wanted to go under the disguise of Brian Montgomery at first, and I agreed to that." He tilted his head against the back of the chair, appearing to luxuriate in how uncomfortable it was, and smiled at them. "Consider that. I *agreed.* Can you imagine me letting anyone whom I didn't love remain safe whilst I took the risks?"

The glance that flickered between Blaise and Pansy over that was brief, but Draco saw it. They really weren't very subtle at the moment, he thought idly. He would have to remember to thank Harry for his sudden decision. If Draco had been in on the plan from the beginning, his friends would have picked up clues from his behavior, and he wouldn't have been able to surprise them so well.

"But it might not be safe for you," Blaise said, taking the lead this time whilst Pansy leaned against the back of her chair and frowned at Draco. "Perhaps you have fallen in love. You know I always was pants at Legilimency, so I can't know for certain. But I want you to consider this rationally. Don't let your emotions override your logic. You're in enormous danger as it is, proclaiming yourself gay in a wizarding society like this." Blaise's lip curled, and his right hand made a sharp motion as if he were seizing a rock. "And then there's the extra risk of what any number of people, not only your father, will do when they find out you're dating Harry Potter. Do you really want that risk? Is it worth it?"

"Don't think I don't see what you're doing, Pansy," Draco said idly. "And it had better be nothing more incriminating than *Finite Incantatem.*"

Pansy, about to begin the second gesture of a spell with the wand she'd drawn quietly from her robe pocket as Draco listened to Blaise, fell still. Then she shook her head and spoke with hard tones of exasperation edging her words. "I only want to find out if he's cast a spell on you."

"A love spell? Imperius? A lust enchantment?" Draco snorted. "What makes you think he'd want me to be in love with him, even?"

"You're everything he is, and you have extra qualities that he doesn't," Blaise answered at once.

"Since you know him so well after ten years," Draco murmured.

"It has everything to do with *logic*," said Pansy. "You didn't listen well enough to Blaise's words, or you would have anticipated this, Draco. There was no warning of this. No rumors that you were dating someone new, no strange mentions of Potter in any unusual places, no speculation that Potter was gay—"

"And now you know why," Draco said. "He's good at hiding. So am I."

"But it doesn't make sense," said Pansy. "And frankly, I think it's more likely that he's lying to you than that he's really in love with you."

Draco held her gaze. "Really."

Pansy nodded. She had tensed, as if she were prepared to cast a Shield Charm if Draco even looked like he was reaching for his wand.

"How nice to know that you assume I could never catch the attention of someone like Harry," said Draco. He had a simmering coil of hurt gathering in his body, but it was the cold anger he directed through his voice. He started to rise to his feet. "Well. That's clearly left the conversation at an impasse. You think I'm not in love with him. When I say I am, you accuse me of lying. Or being under a spell, which is as good as the same thing. And Harry must, of course, have enslaved me for mysterious purposes of his own. That's logic, for you. There's really no reason for me to stay beside you when you can't trust me with the most basic knowledge of myself, and want to put me on leading strings. I do hope that you will continue to contribute time and money to the rebellion, but I think it's for the best if we don't meet anymore." He strode rapidly towards the door.

"Draco!" Pansy had never cried his name like that before, the kind of shriek Draco imagined a mouse would utter before an owl swooped down on it. He paused with his thumb on the handle of the door, but didn't turn around.

"It just doesn't make sense," Blaise said to his back. His voice still held an edge of the demand that Draco believe him, but now there were nervous harmonics to it, too. Draco smiled at the door. "You'd abandon us for him? Even though you've known us for years and him for only a few months, at the most?"

Draco glanced over his shoulder. "You're right," he said. "It doesn't make sense that the people who claim to be my best friends would make me choose between them and the man I'm in love with."

Blaise closed his eyes. Pansy rose to her feet and hovered, not quite daring enough to move away from her chair yet. "You don't—" she said, and then stopped and shook her head, starting over. Draco was grateful. Sentences that started with "you" in the middle of an argument were not often a good idea. "We didn't know you were capable of falling in love this fast, and with someone you've despised since you were a boy," she said. She extended her hands towards him, clasped, in what was not quite a gesture of peacemaking. "You can understand our confusion?"

"I can," said Draco. "But you're also demanding that I place your confusion above my own feelings, that I abandon Harry because it turns out you don't know me as well as you thought you did." He leaned an elbow on the door, because pressing his back to it would seem too defensive.

Pansy winced, but then gave him a faint smile. "That's about the size of it, isn't it?" she said. "And it doesn't sound so flattering, in those terms." She hesitated, searching his face. "As far as you know, you're not under any spell or any potion?"

"As far as I know," Draco said solemnly. "If it turns out I'm wrong, you have my permission to curse Harry, assuming you can get to him faster than I can."

"And as far as you know, you're in love with him?"

Draco shrugged. "I've never felt anything even remotely similar, but if it was indigestion, I think I would know by now."

Pansy laughed, sounding as if it were very much against her will. Blaise stepped closer to her side, his own face taut. "Pansy—"

"No," said Pansy, her gaze clear and untroubled. Her hands reached out for Draco's again, but she was extending them to hold his now, and Draco strode up to her and took them. "If he's our friend, we have to trust him, and privilege his understanding of his own feelings."

"Thank you," Draco murmured, and kissed the back of her hand.

Blaise clapped his shoulder then. "It's a great thing," he said when Draco looked at him. "Assuming it's real."

Draco raised an eyebrow, and said nothing. For the moment, he had them on his side, and that would be enough.

Harry had owled Nusante, but he did not actually expect to hear from the other man from hours, and even then he thought it likely that he would only respond with a Howler. Nusante had been caught so completely off-guard by Harry's emergence that he had reacted emotionally instead of logically. It would take him some time to recover from embarrassment, possible jealousy, and disappointment, and begin thinking about the future of the rebellion instead of what his future in it would be.

There was another factor Harry planned to keep in mind, too, which made him doubt whether he could reconcile Nusante and some of the more outraged men and women who had supported him to his own reappearance. They had been children when the war with Voldemort happened. To them, Harry had literally become a legend, someone they had never known, as Draco had, as a student who got red-faced when he shouted or nearly fell off his broom when he played Quidditch or got bad marks in Potions. They would demand that he not be human because, as far as they knew, he wasn't.

But if he had to endure that, he would.

There was Draco.

It was for his sake that Harry had summoned up strength after a few minutes of resting with his head on Draco's shoulder and told him to go talk to his friends, that Harry would be fine. Draco gave him several doubtful glances which turned into lingering kisses and soft touches, and Harry thought they might have made their way to bed if he hadn't grabbed Draco's wrist and squeezed it warningly.

"You've done what you could to spare me having to face everyone at a time when I was vulnerable," he said. "But it's best for me to control the Ministry's and the wider public's reaction as much as I can. For the moment, we shouldn't appear together, or they might come to the conclusion that we can't act separately." He gave Draco a smile that he hoped wasn't as watery as he felt. "And we need to show them that we're powerful on *all* levels, in *all* ways, so they'll be more likely to fall in line with us."

Draco laughed, and then said, "Are you going to confront your friends?"

Harry released a shaking breath. "Not immediately," he said. "I need to tell them about Metamorphosis as well as the fact that I'm gay and dating you."

"They may feel betrayed that they didn't hear it from you first." Draco had been still, his gray eyes searching Harry's face. Harry wished he wouldn't do that. It made him want to hand all his burdens over to Draco, in the unknown luxury of having someone who could actually comfort him instead of make him wind himself up more tightly trying to please them and be what they needed.

But to become that would be to truly betray Draco and what he had sacrificed to support Harry. Somehow, Harry managed to straighten and smile. "They heard the first part before anyone else did. The second part—they'll be angry in any case. Let me worry about this," he added more insistently when Draco opened his mouth. "Please. I'll tell you if you can do anything to help."

Draco had stood gazing irresolutely at him for a moment, then nodded, kissed his cheek, and departed to Apparate to his flat.

Harry allowed himself five minutes to wrap his arms around his torso after he heard the door close and wonder how in the world he would do this. Then he closed his eyes and listened for the merciless voice.

Nothing. And still nothing.

*I'll have to do this on my own, then.*

He stood and went to owl Nusante, Narcissa Malfoy, Ron and Hermione, Kingsley, the witch named Caroline Garrett Draco had told him about who'd stopped him in the Ministry, and another of Horace Longbottom's long-time letter friends, a reporter on the *Daily Prophet* named

Malcolm Therris who produced less drivel than the others. Each letter would contain a different request, a different explanation. He doubted that any of them would be enough to satisfy the people who received them, especially Therris, though he would probably follow up on the invitation Harry extended to him to visit the house for an interview as soon as possible.

His hands shook when he wrote out some of the letters. Annoyed, Harry stopped and thought of the way Horace would write them, and his writing steadied. He didn't think he made more ink-blots than was natural in the margins, and he was sure he'd spelled all the words correctly. Then he sent the owls flying and sat down to wait.

Less than twenty minutes later, his Floo in the library flared, and the head of a wizard with glasses and thinning blond hair appeared in the flames. He glanced up at Harry as if to make sure he had the right address for a long time before he spoke. Then he said in a high, cracked voice, "Harry Potter? There's—this owl you sent me." He paused, and then spoke in a tone that conveyed disbelief and excitement all at once. "*Really*?"

"Really," Harry said with as welcoming a smile as he could manage. He'd been sprawled on the couch in front of the fireplace; even if he had to face the public as himself and not a persona, there was no reason he couldn't use the lessons he'd received over the years in body language and facial expression to make himself appear as relaxed as possible. He sat up and stretched his arms casually along the back of the couch. "I'm gay and want to explain my reasons for saying so and my relationship with Draco Malfoy to the public. And you're the reporter I've chosen to interview me. Aren't you lucky?"

Therris's face smoldered with the look of a werewolf about to make a kill. "I'll be right there, Mr. Potter."

Draco had got Pansy and Blaise out the door via a system of threats and vague promises, under which they went away satisfied that he would notify them before making any important move even though he not exactly said he would do so. Of course, they had probably also been lying when they said that they wouldn't watch Harry from the corners of their eyes and be prepared to attack every slight mistake he made. By means of such oil did Slytherin friendships run.

He was glad for every moment he'd spent at it when he turned around and saw his Floo flaring. The face that formed in the flames was his mother's, and even through the green color, Draco could make out that she was pale.

"Draco," she said. "I have just received a letter from Potter in which he stated his intention to make your relationship public by going to the *Daily Prophet* and asked if I would support his actions." There was a long pause, during which Narcissa opened and closed her eyes in a series of slow blinks. "Did you agree to this course?"

Draco knelt down slowly in front of the fireplace, using the motion as a chance to recover from his own shock. By the time he was level with his mother, he thought he had. "I agreed to

whatever Harry feels comfortable doing," he said. "It was his decision to show himself, and though I didn't expect that either, it turned out well enough."

Narcissa shook her head slowly. "Lucius is going mad already, Draco."

*Of course the news would have reached him.* Draco knew better than to think that his father didn't have spies in their group, whether or not he had access to the person who had informed Counterstrike and the Ministry of the rebellion's first meeting. "What about, specifically?" he asked. "Harry is the one who's putting himself in the most danger, after all. The wizarding world has already had some time to come to terms with the idea of me as gay."

Narcissa shut her eyes and sighed. "I do not think you have ever understood how much your father cares for you," she said.

"You're being very careful not to say the word love."

"I do not think you would call his emotion by that name, no." Narcissa continued to speak with her eyes shut. Draco would have thought it a way to deny that the situation was real, but his mother was not so great a fool. More likely she wanted to disguise her own reaction from someone who could read her as well as her son could. "It is—a mingling of loyalty and possession, Draco. Do what you can for the Malfoy name, and he will repay you by doing what *he* can to see that you inherit it with the reputation spotless. He has felt he owes you a debt for decades, because of the bad decisions he made in serving the Dark Lord that tarnished the name. Thus he has been patient and tolerant with you, and even his suggestions of marriage have not increased until recently. But now the balance has tipped. He will feel that you owe *him* a debt, and that you should redress it in any way possible."

"And if I refuse to acknowledge such a claim?" Draco asked. He let his pride inform his words, making them steel covered with ice. His parents had taught him the tone, and if they had thought it would never be used against them, they should reconsider now. "If I say that he has no authority over me any longer, since he has disowned me?"

"He will remove the obstacle he feels responsible for your disowning," Narcissa said, and opened her eyes to look at him again. "He feels certain that he knows what it is now. I saw his face when he heard the message. He never looks like that but when he is certain."

"If he hurts Harry—"

"I would not put it past him to try," said Narcissa. "However, I think he has learned at last that such an action would only confirm you in your stubbornness, and increase your pride in your opposition to him. I think he will target you instead, but subtly." Her eyes had a shine of careful fear in them now, which made Draco more than a little alarmed when he thought of how much terror she must be hiding. "Oh, my son, be careful."

"I'm not afraid of Father," Draco said, which was not a lie. He was afraid of what Lucius could

*do*, but that was not the same as being afraid of the man who had raised him and looked up at him in pride as he flew for the first time.

"I know," said Narcissa. "And I think he will use that fact to his advantage."

Draco clenched his jaw. He could do nothing but brace and respond to Lucius's attack when it came; he had more active steps that demanded his attention. "And will you stand by Harry's side, as he asks?"

"I do not know yet." Narcissa smoothed a hand down her skirt and didn't look at him.

"Mother," Draco whispered.

"It may very well be natural and the best outcome for you to challenge Lucius by yourself," said Narcissa. "I am not sure that having Potter at your side will make it better for you."

Draco clenched his jaw again. He remembered the way his mother had slowly come over to his side after she had learned who Harry really was. And she had already done much for them by warning him of Lucius's reaction. It would be cruel to ask her to do more than she was ready for.

"I understand," he said. "Thank you. And I *do* love you, Mother, even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes."

Narcissa smiled back at him, and closed the Floo connection.

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Chapter: 34

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Four—Avalanche*

"But what made you decide to come out now?" Therris's fingers were twitching as he leaned forwards, uncurling from the quill as though he wanted to reach out and touch Harry's hand to prove he was real.

Harry supposed he had more tolerance for someone reacting like that towards him than someone who flinched away from him as if he were covered in disgusting slime. But whatever reaction he received, he would simply have to endure. He kept a small smile on his face and a calm, relaxed tone in his voice. "I chose to come out because I wanted to support Draco. There's no one more important to me right now."

"You didn't plan on a specific date or time?" Therris leaned even closer and sniffed twice. He really did look like a ferret, Harry mused, and then wondered whether Draco would want to hear that comparison even if it was true, and funny. "That seems quite strange, if you really are taking every effort to ensure the wizarding world knows about it now."

Harry snorted, and let some of his own humor show through. He hoped Therris wouldn't be able to tell if the laughter was slightly frantic. "I'm working with what's going to happen anyway," he said. "If I weren't Harry Potter, I would still have revealed myself to support Draco. But since I'm who I am, everyone will be interested in reading the story. I'd rather they read my side of the story, not something made up of rumors and half-truths." He looked straight at Therris and smiled. "The sort of thing some of your colleagues are in the habit of printing, for example."

Therris nodded without taking offense. Harry permitted one muscle in his back, out of the reporter's sight, to unclench. *Good*. He had read the man's professional jealousy whenever he'd written in his letters about his job correctly, then. Therris was more loyal to his own career than to the *Daily Prophet.*

Therris tapped his quill thoughtfully against the parchment he had already covered with scribble after scribble containing, Harry hoped, Harry's words. "And what do you plan to do now? You've told me a little about your decision and what you've done for the past ten years and your relationship with Mr. Malfoy. But there must be another step, mustn't there?" He looked at Harry expectantly.

"Yes," said Harry. His throat was clogged as though he'd tried to swallow a whole carrot for a moment. He coughed and forced his way on. He had known this confession would come when he'd chosen to contact Therris. Somehow, he had not thought it would be so hard. "I plan to fight for the rights of gay and lesbian wizards and witches to live as they will, to hold jobs without prejudice, to associate with each other in the street without incurring disgusted looks, and to act like normal members of the wizarding community." He smiled for a moment, remembering some of the more eccentric people who had gathered around Nusante in his house not two hours ago, and Elizabeth. "As normal as they want to be, in any case."

"And you don't think the Wizengamot and the Ministry will oppose that?" Therris demanded.

"On the contrary." Harry met and held his eyes. "I expect them to fight me for even the simplest things, those they might grant if I wasn't going to lean on them so hard. But I don't want us to be seen as the simple beneficiaries of gifts. We have to fight for and earn our rights if they're going to be *ours.* I'll do that."

"You aren't frightened of the forces that the Ministry and the Wizengamot could bring against you?" Therris's voice had deepened and softened. Harry thought, seeing the gleam in his eyes, that it was only his native interest in a dramatic story, but that was all right with Harry. The more he could build up a public interest in the story, the harder Counterstrike and Lucius Malfoy and his and Draco's other enemies would find it to hide in the shadows and do them damage from

there.

"Of course I am," said Harry. "Heroes are afraid, but they keep on fighting. And, well, do forgive me for mentioning this, but I don't fear the Ministry, or even the Wizengamot, as much as I feared Voldemort."

Therris laughed, a true, open, relaxed sound. He nodded, wrote down Harry's last words, and then held out a hand. Harry clasped and shook it. "I look forwards to covering the story," said Therris. "And to finding out how you confront the naysayers. There will be naysayers, of course." For a moment, his look was very direct.

Harry grinned back at him, unsure of where he was getting the courage from. Surely the thought of Draco alone couldn't be enough. Maybe he had invented another persona without noticing and called it forwards, or maybe he was playing the merciless voice again, which was braver than he was.

*That is you.*

Harry batted the thought away. He couldn't afford to be distracted right now, thank you.

"A great many of them," Harry said calmly. "Probably more than we'll have supporters. But I fought for seven years to rid the world of Voldemort. I'll fight for three or four times that to support this movement, and longer if I must."

Therris ducked his head. For a moment, he had looked genuinely moved. Harry suspected he was trying to hide it. "The world will go mad," he murmured.

"Good," Harry said. "It's been too long since they've had something more substantial than Celestina Warbeck's latest love affair to talk about."

Therris turned and stepped into the fire without another word. He wasn't a courteous man, Harry thought, but, in his own odd way, he could be trusted. He wanted to spread the story and do it well, and that would mean ensuring he was as polite and true to Harry's words as possible, so Harry would trust him enough to grant another interview.

Kreacher stepped into the room then with an owl perched on his arm and a letter in his hand, looking disapproving. "Owl is being fixed here and will not go away without a reply from Master Harry," he grumbled, and pushed the envelope into Harry's hands. At least it wasn't red and smoking, Harry noted before he ripped it open.

He had expected Ron and Hermione to write first, but this was from Nusante—probably only reasonable, since he would have got over the first shock of Harry's public revelation and moved on to dealing with the consequences. The paper was ripped in some places with the force of his underlining.

*Do you know how much it hurts, to know that one of the heroes I've looked up to since I was a child shares something with me—and* hid *it? That's one reason I'm so bitter. It's very, very personal. You were always an example of courage to me. And now I learn that you're not really that* brave *after all, or you would have done something about the unjust treatment we suffer years ago. Or did you figure that it didn't really matter as long as no one managed to find out who you were?*

*I don't like liars, and I don't like people who deny what they are. All those politicians who try to persecute us at the same time that they're getting blowjobs from men and telling themselves it* "doesn't count"*—are you proud to have something in common with them? Did you just turn your head away whenever there was a tale of someone being discovered and having to flee the country? Did you care at all about the people who had to use some sort of trick to cover their tracks instead of feeling able to tell their families the truth? Have you heard of Metamorphosis? I always despised the man who owns it, whoever he is, because he was adding in the spread of lies, but at least he's done more to help and aid the people like you and me than you have.*

Harry felt his lips twitch spasmodically, and he took a moment to picture Nusante's face if he ever heard who actually ran Metamorphosis. Then he focused back on the letter, choosing to ignore the fact that his hands were shaking.

*There's nothing you can do to make this up to me, except* fighting *from now on. You have to. There's an enormous debt owed us from the ten years when you did nothing. If you have a lot, you should give a lot. You have fame like no one else in our world, strength, courage, and powerful magic. If you go back into hiding, I'll never forgive you, and I'll do everything I can to root you out.*

"No fear of that," Harry breathed, but he doubted Nusante would believe him until he saw the interview, and probably not even then, not until Harry had stood between some curse-wielding Auror and a helpless witch or wizard.

*Consider this restitution, if you like, the best kind you can make. No, the* only *kind you can make. I know other people who will never forgive you if you back away now.*

*Raymond Nusante.*

"And Draco is one of those people," Harry murmured, and folded the letter, and sat with his head bowed for a moment, composing many replies in his head and discarding them all. Nusante wouldn't accept apologies at the moment, he thought; in fact, any letter that tried to explain or excuse Harry's actions was likely to anger him.

*And why should I try?* An unfamiliar surge of refusal overcame him, to the point where his teeth stung as if he had suddenly taken a huge gulp of a lemon fizzy drink. *He isn't the one who's owed those words. And he's already said that the thing he really wants is to see me fighting, not explaining.*

So in the end Harry took up one of those pieces of parchment he kept for his best official correspondence—some was still required even with the weak Harry in hiding, notably concerning the Charity—and wrote back to Nusante. He watched the owl take flight feeling something like peace.

The letter said simply, *I will fight.*

Draco came out of the Apparition with a small jolt and then looked around sharply. No matter that he had been invited here and chosen to accept the invitation, he still didn't entirely trust the person mentioned in his letter, and wouldn't until he saw Harry.

Luckily, Harry waved at him from a far corner of the garden he'd landed in. Draco raised a hand in reply and trotted towards him, turning his head from side to side to get a good glimpse of his surroundings. They were tangled and overgrown, flowers and thorns and vines and trees and bushes run wild. He wasn't entirely sure if he was in an abandoned Muggle place or a wizarding estate barred from house-elves. He only knew that he couldn't see a house no matter where he looked, and that one clear path led from the Apparition point towards the small square of stone in which Harry stood with Caroline Garrett at his side.

Garrett extended a hand when Draco was still some distance from her, making him walk faster than he really wanted to so he could clasp it. He bent over and kissed her wrist, which made her smile. She looked larger than he remembered from the Ministry, as if it without the confinement of walls and roof she could expand in all directions. She wore a yellow robe at the moment, which looked less awful on her than it should have.

"Welcome, Master Malfoy. I'm glad you remembered my offer of help." She turned and faced Harry, and thought her face remained mostly calm, Draco could see twitches of excitement running around her eyes and lips, which kept pulling into a wider smile. "And now that we're both here, Mr. Potter, wherever here is, I assume you'll tell us about your plan?"

Draco looked at Harry in surprise as he stepped past Garrett to put an arm around Harry's waist and kiss his cheek. He had assumed Harry had contacted Garrett, but that the meeting place and the plan were hers. Harry should only try to do so much, after all. He still wasn't used to acting on his own yet.

But Harry gave Draco a perfectly steady smile and then faced Garrett. "Yes," he said. "I did intend to invite one more person, but he refused to accept." He bit the inside of his cheek in a gesture Draco hadn't seen before. *Was it Harry's*? he wondered, gazing at him with a rapt interest he didn't bother to disguise in front of this ally who knew they were gay and had chosen to meet with them still. "He'll need some time to get over suddenly having his leadership taken from him."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Nusante, you mean? Don't worry about him, Harry. He'll either come around or stay out of the group and let us lead. What can he really do about it, given who you are

and who I am?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "There are some of his very close friends in our group, and they might prefer to follow him. I simply don't want to divide our strength, when we're still vulnerable to pressure and force from the outside." He turned to look at Garrett. "As for this location, it was part of an old estate I purchased from a man who moved out of the country several years ago. I had no use for most of the property, and I haven't kept it properly tended. But this suits me." He made a wide circle with his arm at the countryside. "It offers good hiding places, for one thing, in case someone ever chooses to come after us."

Draco drew back enough to give Harry a long look. He hadn't known that Harry had secret sanctuaries as well as secret identities. Given those, he really could have vanished if he wanted after exposing himself as gay in front of the entire wizarding world, and Draco would not have known how to find him even if he was dosed with Veritaserum.

*I need to know more about him. At the moment, we're still too unequal. I might be more emotionally stable, but Harry has his magic and his secrets to hide him, surround him, protect him. He could fight off an army—but I'm not part of the army, and I want him to realize that.*

Harry shifted uncomfortably against him. Draco realized after a moment that his fingers had closed hard on Harry's arm, and he softened their grip as much as he could given the revelation that had just struck him and made soft petting motions. Harry relaxed, briefly kissed his neck, and then addressed Garrett. "You were telling me that you had studied matters of, ah, unconventional sexuality. Would any of your publications and research give you the power to act as a voice for us?"

Draco stiffened. He couldn't help it. Garrett was straight as far as he knew, and he thought it should be people actually affected by the rebellion who took the roles of leading it and speaking for it.

Garrett, though, only smiled. "They make some people more likely to listen to me," she agreed. "The Aurors have often brought me in as an extra voice on those cases that contain some bizarre amalgamation of murder and rape, and I've worked with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on bestiality."

"Being homosexual is comparable to neither," Draco hissed. He might have to accept Garrett's help, but hearing the way she approached the subject made him more and more certain he couldn't accept her attitude.

"I was not saying it was." Garrett had lost her smile at last, and she spoke with a weight of seriousness in her words that made Draco reluctantly compelled to listen. "I've made a name, but you should know what kind of name it is. When people hear me speak, they expect me to give them quick, easily understandable bits of information. They want to know why someone rapes, or why someone has sex with an animal—or why someone has sex with a man when he's a man himself." She straightened her shoulders and looked sideways at Harry. "And though I don't

consider them linked, you should know that many people in our society do."

Harry simply nodded. Draco stared at him for a moment. Where had this calm, confident man come from, the one who wouldn't let any revelation put him off his determination to do battle? Draco didn't know, but he did hope that this persona, or way of dealing with the world, was one Harry would keep for a while.

*I wouldn't mind taking him to bed at all when he was in this mood.*

"Then you still might be able to help us," Harry was saying. "Prepare the small bits of information about homosexuality for people who will *listen*. I've studied Muggle tactics, Muggle history. This is an area where they're far in front of us, unfortunately." His face grew somber for a moment, and Draco experienced another tug of curiosity in his belly, wondering whether Harry had ever considered fleeing to the Muggle world and simply remaining there. "Tell them that it isn't always about simply having sex, that you can't deny your sexuality like a bad dream, that many people have had experiences with their own sex and yet somehow managed to survive unscathed." Harry paused for a moment, as if considering something, and added, "You might remind them Dumbledore was gay. It was known at one point among some of the wizards I associated with, but most people seem to have forgotten it. And that makes two of their precious war heroes outcast in the same fashion." His voice altered, becoming light and cynical at once. "It does seem to be one of the hazards of the profession."

"You're more than that," Draco whispered impulsively into Harry's ear. "More than what you did during the war, more than what you did to defeat Voldemort."

Harry smiled, and tiled back his head so it briefly rested on Draco's shoulder. "Even that would have been impossible without you," he said, and stole a kiss.

Garrett waited patiently until they were finished, then nodded. "But you did mention something more definite in your letter, Mr. Potter," she said. "What was that?"

*His* letter hadn't mentioned anything specific. Of course, Draco thought, watching as Harry bowed his head and closed his eyes, bracing his feet as if against some heavy push, perhaps Harry knew that Garrett would require that hint to come at all, whilst Draco was much more likely to trust the plan from the beginning.

"We've been hiding too long," Harry said quietly. "We've even hidden the meetings of the core group, as if we didn't have a perfect right to gather and talk about matters important to us if we like." He looked up, and Draco wasn't sure he liked the fire that had entered his eyes. "I want a public gathering. A party, and a festival. Somewhere you can present your speeches, Madam Garrett. Somewhere that anyone who attends it would know he or she stands in 'danger' of encountering homosexuals. Somewhere that would remain absolutely safe, because I would make sure it was, along with other people." His eyes blazed, and his voice carried such conviction that Draco thought it might be enough to make Garrett ignore the sheer insanity of what he was saying.

There was no way Draco could ignore it, though.

"Are you mad?" he demanded.

Harry turned to face Draco. He had thought he might have a problem from the moment when Draco's hand had tightened on his. He seemed unnerved by the idea that Harry had a plan of his own at all, never mind the fact that the plan was so daring and public.

But then Harry shook his head inwardly and told himself that was ridiculous. He was simply on edge. Dozens of Howlers had come yesterday, and though they couldn't cross the wards, he could hear the owls colliding with the spells and occasionally smell singed feathers or hear the edge of a yelling voice through an open window. There was no answer yet from Ron or Hermione. The interview with Therris had been printed on the front page of the *Prophet* this morning and looked less impressive than he remembered it. He had received a heavy, careful letter from Kingsley begging him to reconsider coming out, to announce that this was a deep practical joke, perhaps arranged with George Weasley. The letter had hastened to assure Harry that Kingsley had no moral objections to Harry's orientation. But he would have to have legal ones if Harry kept on as he had been.

Draco didn't deserve to have that anger taken out on him. Harry would just have to master it and keep it under control, and he could use the techniques he had used to create his personas to do that, even if he could no longer retreat under a persona when Draco was near him.

"It's dangerous, I know," Harry said quietly. "That's why we'll publicize it as having the possibility of physical injury, and we'll have an Age Line to ensure that no children or teenagers can enter—"

"That won't be enough," Draco said darkly. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides. "And if anyone does accept that, there will still be people who claim we're endangering and corrupting their children." He shook his head violently. "Pure-blood sons and daughters don't stop being children to their parents just because they're of age, Harry. I ought to know."

"We can't prevent the stupider things people think of us," Harry pointed out. A hot prickle ran up and down his spine. But this was an argument he *needed* to have with Draco. He wanted to force a confrontation, instead of allowing Counterstrike and the Ministry to do everything. He was tired of simply reacting.

And he needed the assurance that he could disagree with Draco about something not related to sex or his personas and have Draco not immediately abandon him. Harry had spent the last ten years resisting the temptation to confrontation. His personas could do it well enough, because their goals and cares were usually different from his, and most of the time he'd built the courage for the exercise into them. But he'd bent to the needs of his friends and family and even the needs of the public in some ways.

His relationship with Draco *had* to be different. Everything had to be different from this moment forwards. Draco could help forge that path, but Harry needed a partner, not a guide.

Draco stared into his eyes for long moments. Then he made an explosive sound and stepped closer to Harry. Harry felt himself half-relax. It was yelling and hurtful words he feared, more than physical confrontation. He could heal from bruises; he was many times magically stronger than Draco. Words would echo in his mind for decades and make him regret or suffer as wounds never could.

"Harry," Draco said softly, "you're forcing it into people's faces now, not simply taking it public."

"That's the kind of language *they've* used," Harry said flatly. "And I won't demand that any gay wizard or witch who's about in London come to us then. They'll have the choice. I'll take measures to protect everyone, just as I did at the Theater-in-the-Round."

"We won't have much attendance with the danger so high," Draco muttered.

"I think you'll be surprised."

Draco stared at him for a moment longer, and then shook his head. "What happens if Aurors *do* show up?" he asked.

"I face them," Harry said.

"No."

Harry frowned and opened his mouth to argue—what was Draco going to suggest, that Nusante do it?—but Draco seized his hand and held it against his chest. "*We* face them," he said. "Your plan is mad, but I do admire it, in some ways." His breath was quickening, and he licked his lips before briefly leaning in to kiss Harry. "I assume you'll have some press coverage, to make the Aurors look as bad as possible."

Harry smiled. He was giddy and knew it, and he was aware, in the part of Harry Potter that was always alert, of Caroline Garrett watching them with a wide grin. He didn't care. Draco was with him.

"Yes," he said. "And I intend to show us in as good a light as possible. We'll defend ourselves, but without injuring them. This'll be an ambush, but not a physically violent one."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I'd like to see you manage that."

"*We'll* manage it," said Harry, and turned to face Garrett. "I've chosen a place to host this party, and the owner will accept the damages." The owner was, in fact, him, but he didn't see why anyone needed to know that right now. "Can you have a speech ready in three days?"

"I can," said Garrett. "If you are sure this is wise. If you are sure you wish to punch wizarding society on its collective jaw."

Harry smiled, and ignored the cold sweat breaking out on the nape of his neck and the trembling in his limbs. He had Draco's touch on the small of his back to counteract them.

"We're going to show them," he said, "that they can't ignore us, and they can't silence us, and they can't make us go back into hiding."

Draco's hand twitched, hard, his nails scraping along Harry's flesh in a short flash of pain that Harry reveled in. It helped anchor him in this body, in this moment, behind these eyes.

*We really are going to do this.*

*We will fight.*

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Chapter: 35

Thank you for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Five—Potter's Party*

Harry rifled through the letters, then flung them away from him in a burst of temper. They scattered against the far wall and fell rustling. Harry stared at them, not moving even when Kreacher appeared abruptly next to him and said, "Master Harry is needing help?"

Harry shook his head. He didn't think he could have confessed his intense disappointment not to have received a letter from Ron or Hermione yet even to Draco, let alone his house-elf. "Thank you, Kreacher, but no," he said. "If you'll just pick up the letters and put the thicker ones on top?"

Kreacher did so without a grumble, watching him with intense eyes that reminded Harry uncomfortably of Dobby. He managed to muster a smile, and Kreacher finally bowed and Apparated away to return to his household chores.

Harry ran a hand over his face, gave one deep sigh, and then began to read through the thick, important letters. Most of them were from Horace Longbottom's correspondents, but a few were people connected to Caroline Garrett who had heard about her upcoming speech and wanted directions to the estate it would be presented at. Not many of them said anything about attending the party afterwards. Harry didn't care. He had arranged matters with most of the party attendees

already; no one in Nusante's group was established yet as a traitor, thanks to the lack of Auror raids at any of the locations Harry had baited. If prominent names in the wizarding community chose to attend the party itself, either in genuine support or out of curiosity, they would be welcome, but Harry didn't intend to waste time courting them when he would have to break through thick walls of prejudice in any case. He could only let them know what a movement like this meant and then leave it to them to make up their own minds.

Harry wrote a standard response to the most similar letters, then tapped his wand against a pile of blank parchment and cast a replication spell. His writing promptly spiraled across all of them, reproducing the words. Harry nodded in satisfaction. Of course, if any two of the recipients compared their letters, they might feel offended, but he simply had too many other things to do to waste time writing each one individually.

*Especially since the party will be tonight.*

He sat down in his chair to answer the more complicated letters, murmuring his thanks when Kreacher brought him a cheese sandwich from which steam was still rising. He was deep in consideration of the best way to phrase answers to what were more or less polite versions of the demand: *Convince us to support you. We might, but you have decades of propaganda about the "unnaturalness" of gay relationships and the declining population to get past.*

For each one, Harry chose different wording and whichever of several explanations he thought might work best, based on either direct knowledge of the person in question, his knowledge about their reputations, or the way they wrote in their letters. To concerned members of pure-blood families, he explained that many of their children didn't desire to break away from the family altogether, but to end a deception that was intolerable to them. To the Ministry officials and the two Wizengamot members who seemed hysterically concerned about declining numbers of children, he pointed out the long pure-blood habit of having only one child and the reluctance of many wizarding families to adopt any child not related to them by blood, ensuring that some Muggleborns left the wizarding world and others went abroad into more welcoming environments or to distant relatives. To those investors, inventors, magical theorists, and prominent Healers who seemed convinced that gay sex led to unhappiness, madness, and early death, he chose a more personal tone, explaining that the stress came from mostly from being told that one must hide all the time, and referred to his own decade-long lie. He hoped those words would reach the Healers, at least, if not others. They should be well-acquainted with the way that fears of Dark Arts were often more detrimental to health than the Dark Arts themselves, especially curses that were rarely used.

He leaned back against his chair and rested for a moment when he'd answered the last letter, then reached for the sandwich Kreacher had left him. It was cold now, but he ate it anyway, slowly, trying to enjoy the contrasts of the soft bread and rather rugged cheese Kreacher favored for making them.

This was exhausting work, and in some ways he wished he could have left this up to Draco. But Draco had his own preparations to make, and he had agreed, reluctantly, that the Potter name

would command more respect than his, especially considering his disowning. Instead, he was trying to persuade some of the pure-blood men and women he knew who had used Metamorphosis or who sometimes frequented the discreet houses and pubs that catered to gay clients to step forwards. Their number might be small, but considering the public furor when Draco had announced he was dating a man, they could cause ripples far beyond what someone like Nusante could.

*If Nusante is willing to come at all.*

Harry grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. For the last two days, Nusante had remained as frustratingly uncommunicative as Ron and Hermione. He had replied to Harry's declaration that he would fight with the single sentence, *You had better*, and then not answered when Harry asked him if he would attend the party.

And Ron and Hermione…

Harry swallowed the last of the sandwich, ignoring the churning in his stomach. Then he closed his eyes and slid mentally into the space Horace Longbottom would occupy, so that he might deal with this situation.

*I reached out to them. I owled them. They haven't responded. Whatever comes next, they have to make the first move. I have too much to tell them to simply step blindly into their house, at what might be the worst moment of all. I want to preserve our friendship whilst still dating Draco, and that means choosing the best moment and meeting them on my own ground, so that I don't become intimidated into choosing between Draco and them.*

*Besides, I've had too much to do the past few days to wait on them.*

Harry opened his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Yes, that would work. He still felt obscurely that he had betrayed Ron and Hermione by not going to them at once, or even by coming out at all, but he couldn't wait forever for their response. Perhaps they wouldn't make one, and Harry would need to send another owl after the party was done. Well, so be it. He wouldn't let their friendship die without trying to save it, but he also wouldn't put reaching out to them ahead of everything else he had to do.

He wasn't comfortable, of course. But what about this situation was?

Harry rose to his feet. Draco had worried about what robes he would wear for that night during their strategy session yesterday, which had made Harry laugh. He'd pointed out that he probably knew more about fashion than Draco did, since he'd had to choose clothes as well as faces and histories for his personas.

Draco had paused, stared at him very directly, and said, "But those are what the other personas wear. What does Harry Potter wear?"

Harry had lowered his gaze and swallowed hard. It comforted him and made him excited that Draco shared Harry's perception of the personas as separate people, not mere reflections of himself.

"I'll find something," he'd said.

"You'd better." Draco had eyed him meditatively, then reached out and brushed Harry's hair back from his face. His need to touch him seemed to have increased over the past few days, Harry had noticed, as though he were the one who needed reassurance that Harry wouldn't vanish behind a wall of denial. "Among all the roles you've got to play, you're my partner. You can't show up in just *anything*."

Harry faced his closet now and put his hand out, running his fingers lightly over the collars and shoulders of the robes that waited inside. He stopped for a moment when his fingers brushed over dark blue robes, but no, those were the ones Brian had worn to the Malfoys' party. He shook his head and moved on.

He knew the ones he wanted when he found them.

Draco raised his eyebrows as he looked around at the site that Harry had chosen to place the party. One of his personas had taste, then, though Draco thought some of the acquaintances and friends he had convinced to attend would have preferred a manor house.

This was, instead, a groomed version of the wild garden where Harry had directed Draco and Caroline Garrett to meet him. The field sprawled across several gentle hills, with a distant gleam of Muggle lights to the west and south; the shimmers of Repelling Charms would keep any of them from stumbling close. The grass was thick but short, a luxuriant green that Draco approved. Small trees ringed by benches shaded fine paths, both of dirt and of gravel. As small and regularly-spaced as the trees, ponds caught the light of stars, moon, the fairy lights and paper lanterns swinging from branches and awnings, and tiny boats lit with Incandescence Charms and set drifting on their surfaces.

The banquet tables were placed in the middle of the field, between two small hillocks, away from any of the trees or even large bushes that might have masked the approach of Aurors. Draco approved that, as well. Harry had a sense of battle strategy, and had chosen the placement for the tables before Draco could suggest it. Long benches lined the tables, cleverly constructed to look as much like the Hogwarts House benches as possible, in hopes of rousing fond sentimental memories.

At the top of the rectangle formed by the tables glowed a bonfire, carefully and artistically contained in a ring of glittering quartz stones. Wizards and witches stood around it already, though it wasn't yet fully dark and it certainly wasn't cold, cradling platters full of food and talking quietly. Now and then one of them would cast a glance at the wards humming around the edges of the field, at the stage where Caroline Garrett would stand to give her speech, or at the

circle of brilliant light near the largest gap in the wards, where Harry stood.

Draco came towards him from the back; he was the only person, as far as he knew, who had been trusted with the coordinates of an Apparition point within the wards but not overshaded by them. Still, Harry heard him coming and turned around. Draco flattered himself a moment by thinking that Harry must have recognized his footsteps.

Then he halted, literally between one step and the next, and stared at Harry in amazed admiration.

He'd pulled, from God or Merlin knew where, dark green robes that brought out the shine of his eyes without striving to match them. They were exquisitely tailored, too, emphasizing the broadness of his shoulders and the strength of his arms without being so tight as to seem tawdry or cause for Draco's jealousy. The collar was ornamented with a touch of gold that looked stunning next to his dark hair.

Harry smiled. Draco thought he was the only person there who would have seen a touch of uncertainty in it.

"I told you I knew something about fashion," Harry said.

Draco took a long step forwards and touched the shoulder of the robes with the edge of his hand, making sure not to brush Harry's body with his finger. Harry's eyes fluttered shut in pleasure nonetheless, and he turned more fully towards Draco. His wand remained aimed at the gap in the wards, and Draco was sure Harry could have reacted at once if any danger had appeared.

"I wondered," Draco said softly, "because when you appeared as a persona, you were always about achieving a particular effect. And the effect you wanted when you appeared as Harry Potter was one of weakness, or at least to show people that you weren't as impressive as they thought you were. I wondered if you would dare to choose clothes that make you genuinely handsome, genuinely desirable." He couldn't stop touching the sleeve of the robes, and he couldn't stop himself from swaying closer to Harry, who lifted his head and parted his lips as if he were drinking in some delicious perfume.

"When it's important," Harry whispered, "I can do that. You don't have to tell me how much depends on our success tonight, Draco."

"And after tonight?" Draco moved his hand up and stroked the skin of Harry's neck. He knew people were watching. Their eyes didn't deter him, any more than Garrett's amused attention in the garden the other day had. He *did* want to show how clearly Harry belonged to him, how he wasn't available for some other gay man to take to bed or straight witch to try and "convert." And a certain amount of public demonstrativeness was probably necessary at this stage in the game, to show their critics and detractors they weren't afraid.

*Bollocks,* he thought then. *I just like touching him.*

"Of course I'm fully committed to the struggle now." Harry was frowning at him, his eyes clear and steady, as though he doubted Draco's sanity for questioning him.

"After tonight," Draco said, "will you show yourself as so handsome again? Because you should. You deserve to wear fine clothes without caring what anyone will think of you for doing so. You deserve to eat fine food without worrying that the *Prophet* will castigate you for spending too much money. You deserve to be happy."

"Hedonist," Harry murmured, and leaned near enough to press a kiss to Draco's cheek. Gossip had already started behind them, and at least one camera flash had exploded. Draco reveled in the fact that the knowledge of what happened here would no doubt travel swiftly to Lucius. "I don't need those all the time to be happy."

"But you need them sometimes," Draco replied insistently. "Everyone does. Will you let yourself have them, sometimes?"

"It may have to be more than sometimes, if I'm to date you." Harry raised his eyebrows at him. "And the answer is yes."

"Good," Draco said, and moved his hand down Harry's shoulder to touch the fine material of his robes again.

Harry swatted his hand away, smiling at him. "You should circulate among our guests," he said. "They're here on my invitation—"

"Mostly."

Harry inclined his head to admit the truth of that, but didn't allow any hint of the truth into his words. "But you're the one who'll convince them to stay." He turned to face the gap in the wards, which looked out on the only hillock in the field not enclosed within the protections. "I'm better at the dramatic gesture. You go use your small talk and your smile and your connections and your knowledge of politics to win us the numbers and supporters we need."

Draco smiled. Harry was one of the first people he had ever heard talk about those things without a slight undertone of contempt; even men like Lucius, to whom they were weapons of choice, spoke of them as if they were worth less than wands and open confrontation. Draco didn't see the reason for open confrontation if it could be avoided and people persuaded or charmed instead.

It was good to know that Harry shared his opinions, or at least valued Draco's talent at these things.

"I will," he said, and brushed the side of Harry's neck one more time before he moved away, content to see that Harry turned his chin towards the touch, his eyes falling half-shut.

Harry contented himself with a glance over his shoulder now and then, ostensibly to check on any disruptions that might have occurred in the party itself. If the atmosphere was peaceful each time and he took the opportunity to watch the cautious faces that became relaxed as Draco spoke, the hands that reached out as if they would touch him when he lingered near, and the laughter he caused and provoked—soft, sympathetic laughter, not the braying kind that would have meant the people around him found him ridiculous—that was no one's business but Harry's own.

Whenever he looked beyond the wards again, his magic lifted above him, swirling and beating like invisible wings. He had cast several spells that should make violence impossible, but it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that someone could recognize and counter them, especially an experienced Auror. He'd set trip-wards on the spells, as well, to let him know if anyone even tried to counter them.

His eyes were in constant motion, sweeping the hills, the field, the tables, the gatherings of gay wizards and witches and the straight ones who uneasily eyed the others, the trees, and the isolated benches or conjured chairs where some people sat as observers. He watched the others who had volunteered for guard duty, as well. Several of them were Nusante's friends. Harry thought he could count on their devotion to the cause. But maybe they would think that their loyalty to Nusante should come first.

He listened to Caroline Garrett's speech rather than turning to watch it; he'd had no doubt she would speak professionally, and she did. She summarized many of the basic misperceptions of those who were gay or bisexual, including the idea that they were only in it for the sex and that openly gay activity would ensure the demise of the British wizarding population, and demolished them with a few well-chosen words. At points her audience laughed; at others, Harry felt the intense, listening silence behind him as they leaned forwards to catch the nuances of her speech. When Garrett stepped down from the stage to move among her audience and answer their questions on a more personal level, some of Harry's tension had dissipated. The number of people won over by purely rational arguments would be small, because this was such an irrational prejudice, but those who were present, Garrett would do her best to reach.

He felt the differing motion of the crowd behind him after that, as more people drifted towards the tables and the center of the field, where a large space of grass had been trimmed flat and smooth for a dancing floor. Harry smiled when he glanced over his shoulder and saw a small number of couples standing hand in hand and looking around in perplexity. They had been promised music, but obviously saw no musicians.

Harry raised his wand and cast the spell that he had earlier draped over the trees and time-delayed, to wait for this moment. Quivering lines of blue and silver flashed through the dusk for a moment, and then released the contained Weird Sisters tune, a song appropriately called "Pride and Honor." Laughter and cheering started when the waiting dancers recognized the notes, and Harry heard some of them begin to spin, clap their hands, and stamp their feet in time with the beat.

He triggered the second part of the spell with a small downwards motion, and voices began to sing the lyrics. The beginning was simply a high cry of "Pri-ii-iii-de!" that reverberated over the noise of voices and bodies. Harry couldn't resist the urge; he turned around and watched the people of the rebellion, *his* people, to see what they would make of it.

The edge of the dance floor nearest him hosted a lesbian couple who were whirling around each other, matching not the current pace of the song but one which would pick up in a few moments. They both wore golden robes, and the robes mingled at the edges, as did their flowing, unbound hair, though one was a redhead and one was dark. Then the dark one leaned in and began to openly kiss the redhead, a sight Harry couldn't imagine taking place in any other gathering in wizarding Britain right now. Even the establishments devoted to the satisfaction of gay and lesbian tastes had a furtive atmosphere about them, as though they existed only for sex; dancing would be too open, too hard to disguise, whilst if Aurors or strangers suddenly appeared, sitting or standing patrons could pretend to be talking to each other as friends only.

The redhead wound her arms around the dark-haired witch's neck and kissed her more passionately, causing them to lose their place in the dance. That hardly mattered. Other people were beginning to dance if an observer cared about that, and Harry was as happy to see openness and eagerness as he was a polished performance.

*We've had to give performances all our lives,* he thought, straining his neck to catch a glimpse of Draco's pale hair. He was dancing in the middle of the floor, but by himself, which soothed a jealousy Harry hadn't realized he was beginning to feel. *As good little sons and daughters, as people interested in the opposite sex and marriage and babies and* nothing else. *This is freedom. Freedom we had to create, temporary freedom, but it's the more precious for that. And they're not going to take it away from us.*

Harry felt his soul blazing with something he could have called contentment, though it felt fiercer than that. It wasn't joy, because it had its tinge of anger, and Harry thought joy should be pure.

Pride of his own, maybe. Commitment to upholding that pride no matter what happened, what came next.

*This is what starts a revolution,* he thought. *Not declarations made in the heat of the moment. Seeing what it can accomplish, getting a hint of the way things can change, and falling in love with that vision.*

A movement outside the wards alerted Harry. With reluctance, he removed his eyes from the dancing figures and turned to face the hills again.

Nusante stood staring at him, his hands clenched into fists.

Harry blinked. He had expected Nusante not to appear when he hadn't done it by the time Garrett began to give her speech. But he was still welcome. Harry nodded slightly and stepped out of the

way so he could pass.

Nusante didn't move. Instead, with a quick, shaky voice that told Harry how frightened he was without the need for any deep reading into his character, he snapped, "I want you to know that I still intend to be important in this rebellion."

"I know that," Harry said.

"You can't take my place," Nusante said. "Either of you." His eyes flickered to Harry's side as if he expected to see Draco standing there. Harry was pleased with his look of faint surprise when he realized Draco was elsewhere. He wanted other people realize that they were united, partners, no matter where they were.

"We didn't want to try," Harry said. "What I think you should realize is that Draco's case and his financial contributions are a source of publicity at the moment, and so is Harry Potter's outing. Wouldn't it be better to accept that than to worry about whose name is on people's tongues?"

"It's not that simple," Nusante snarled. "Movements can collapse or falter depending on who leads them, and who's perceived to be leading them."

"I know that," Harry repeated. "What I won't allow you is to destroy this—" he gestured over his shoulder to the party again "—because you're jealous of fame I never wanted in the first place, or a plan Draco succeeded in because of pure courage."

Nusante's eyes followed Harry's hand. A moment later, his face softened. He opened his mouth as if he would reply, then shut it again. His expression had settled into a marrow-deep yearning Harry understood all too well. These were his companions, his friends, his natural kindred, and he longed to be among them.

"I understand," Nusante whispered. "That you achieved this is a good beginning." He turned back with such a quick movement Harry heard his neck pop, and added, "But it's not good enough, not enough to excuse ten years of hiding and lying. You have a lot to make up for."

Harry dipped his head slightly. He was sure Draco would disagree, but he could understand Nusante's words with the part of him that was most Gryffindor. He *did* owe a debt. He might not want his fame, but he could have done good things with it if he had acted immediately after he killed Voldemort. It would be harder now, and with the vision of freedom burning in his blood, he had to regret not making it easier for himself, never mind other people.

"I'll try," he said.

Nusante stepped past him without another word. Harry watched him go for a moment, then turned as he heard a second *pop* of Apparition.

Lucius Malfoy stood staring at him.

Harry felt a moment of dull, hammering panic. Then he remembered that this man had disowned Draco, and that Draco was fully committed to war with his father, if he had to be, in order to eventually get what he wanted most in the world.

Harry grinned and jerked his thumb back towards the party. "You're welcome to go in," he said in a normal tone, then lowered his voice conspiratorially for the next words. "But I think I should warn you: there are *men kissing* in there."

He waited for Lucius's response, confident in a way he hadn't felt in twelve years, since the moment immediately after Voldemort had crumpled to the ground, waiting for his opponent's attack and unafraid.

A voice spoke softly, shyly, in the back of his mind.

*I think I could like being this Harry Potter.*

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Chapter: 36

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Six—What Can Be Worked With Will*

Draco was glancing far more frequently at Harry than Harry, or the people who thought they had Draco's full attention, would have been pleased to know. Thus he saw Nusante's arrival, and snatched several glimpses of the conversation he had with Harry, though of course he couldn't hear the words over the music and the distance that separated them. Harry bowed his head and kept it bowed for a few moments after one of Nusante's little speeches. Draco hid his sudden agitation with an emphatic nod to the pure-blood witch who was talking to him, an acquaintance of Pansy's who was discovering, to her amazed delight, that gay and lesbian and bisexual people were much like normal wizards.

But he fixed the remembrance of Harry's gesture in his mind. He would have something to speak to him about later.

Then he took his next glimpse, and saw his father standing in front of Harry.

The witch he was talking to hadn't finished her spiel yet. Draco didn't want to offend her by suddenly departing, however. He took her hand, brushed a light kiss over the knuckles, and winked, which had the effect of making her blush and shut her mouth. "Excuse me," he

murmured. "There's a confrontation approaching that I've relished happening for a long time. My father is meeting my lover."

"Oh," the woman said, her eyes widening. "Of course." She didn't have any more words, so Draco gave her one more smile and then turned towards the gap in the wards, forcing himself to walk without hurrying.

Draco studied the relative position of Lucius and Harry's bodies as he came up behind Harry's shoulder. Harry was leaning forwards, his hand on his wand, not bothering to disguise his eagerness to have Lucius try something. Lucius had drawn his wand now, but he was tapping it idly against his leg. He looked up and nodded when he caught sight of Draco, as if he wanted to prove that he didn't need to focus on Harry to defeat him.

"I wondered if you would bother to speak to me again," he said.

Harry didn't turn around as Draco came to a stop at his shoulder, but his body went tight. Draco slid a hand slowly up the back of his neck, meaning to reassure Harry but not distract him from his focus on his enemy. Harry was the wiser in this confrontation. If something suddenly changed, Harry could react faster.

"I wondered why you would want to, when you disowned me," said Draco.

Lucius's face worked, but if there was really emotion beneath the surface of his coldness, its struggle was brief and doomed from the beginning. The longer he watched his father, the more Draco doubted that emotion was real. Instead, Lucius wanted it to *seem* as if he were affected by Draco's words.

*Hmmm.* Draco let his hand fall away from Harry, into a better position for the both of them—for him if he needed to move fast, for Harry in case he was worried about defending the gap through the wards. *What does he want?*

"I have figured out your plan now." Lucius's voice was soft and careful, as if he were picking his way over uncertain ground. Draco held his face motionless. *Even his wanting me to think he is cautious is a deception. I'm certain of it.* "You wanted me to disown you so that you could have greater freedom away from me." His eyes flickered once to Harry. "You chose the surest method you could think of. Of course, if you will not reproduce the Malfoy line, I have no reason to choose you as my heir."

Draco let his silence speak for him. Lucius's wand was still tapping against his leg. Draco watched it, but it didn't flick up or sideways into any spellcasting pattern he recognized.

"I am not the man you thought I was," Lucius whispered, and his eyes glittered like river stones. "I am cleverer, more perceptive."

Draco just barely restrained himself from nodding with approval. He had been sure Lucius would

speak of his love for Draco, which would have made Draco laugh in his face. But this tactic was intelligent, because it ensured that he could talk a little longer.

"I have carefully studied your past love affairs," said Lucius. "I know you once slept with women, and one does not lose the taste for that. You can still marry and father heirs for the Malfoy line."

Draco parted his lips in what he was careful to show as a sigh, though not the type of exaggerated one that would have mortally offended Lucius. "And why should I wish to?" he asked. "When such a sexual relationship would constitute an abandonment of my partner?"

"I refer to ability," said Lucius. "Not willingness. I have known men too perverted by the way they lay with men ever to tolerate a marriage bed. I make only the point that you are not one of them."

Draco looked his father in the eye and ignored the way Harry was shifting restlessly next to him. He would not let himself be bothered by the word "perverted"; he had heard worse things from Weasley's mouth, and from some of the people here tonight. "You disowned me," he said. "You can't convince me to crawl back to you, and you won't suddenly make me your son and heir again. You're too proud."

Lucius lifted his wand. Draco tensed, but Lucius only drew it gently from his heart to the base of his throat. Draco thought the gesture odd; still, though, it was no motion of a spell he knew, and Lucius's left eye tended to twitch when he was using a nonverbal incantation. That didn't happen this time.

"Think on it, Draco," Lucius said. "You could have back your old life. You could have—"

Harry whirled around and Apparated from between them with such an economy of motion that admiration stunned Draco speechless for a moment. He knew what that meant, of course. There was a large disturbance at some other point in the wards. Lucius's presence at this one was probably just a distraction.

"You won't convince me to come back to you," Draco said. He had not recovered from the sudden shock of Harry's disappearance, but he didn't think Lucius could notice that in his voice. He also had no intention of moving or going after Harry. That would leave this gap undefended, and Lucius or his friends could come through. "I chose the course most calculated to irritate you. I gave up the lands and the money that I expected to possess, and I'll have a life without many of the luxuries I've always enjoyed because of that. Do you really think I'll come back when I was willing to risk *that*?"

Lucius drew the wand smoothly up over his throat to his brow. He was still holding it oddly, but Draco thought now that was only for dramatic effect. His father could become quite invested in pointless gestures at moments of extreme tension.

"Luxuries are not as important to you as your own will," Lucius said. "Do not think I have not noticed that, Draco. And so I propose a compromise. Do the one thing I wish you to; come back to the family and promise to marry. You may do anything else. You can retain your Potter lover and send your money to whatever rebellious groups you desire."

"I won't do it." Draco made his words as rough as possible, containing all his disgust, as a deliberate contrast to his father's cultured voice.

Lucius said, "Alas," without any expression in his voice, and paused. He had slipped his wand back into his sleeve, but Draco didn't allow himself to relax. Lucius watched him unblinking for a moment more, than added, "Your chosen bride is Alice Moonstone."

"Better her than her sister," said Draco. "But you should find a different heir, one who would love her."

"You *can* love her," said Lucius, and gave him a wolf's smile. Then he vanished, with that silent Apparition he could master when he wanted. He rarely cared to put forth the effort, of course.

Draco forced himself to look thoughtfully at the spot where his father had stood for some moments, and not to show any open sign of frustration. Then he drew another ward up that enclosed the gap Harry had been standing in, and would alert him instantly of anyone approaching, by Portkey or Apparition or broom.

Only then did he dare to turn his back and seek Harry with his eyes.

The attack was coming at the point where Harry had suspected it would come, a "corner" where several wards joined and were weaker for that reason, as power passed from spell to spell. He'd made it noticeable and attractive, a joining point for five wards instead of the more usual three, and then layered an alarm ward behind it the way he'd often layered glamour under glamour. Unless the witches and wizards serving in Counterstrike or among the bigoted Aurors had received certain very specific training, then they wouldn't see the alarm even if they looked carefully.

Harry appeared beside the corner, behind an oak tree ornamented with swaying pink lanterns, with a small grim smile on his face. He suspected the attackers hadn't come far enough yet to unravel the wards, which meant that Counterstrike or the Aurors hadn't yet discovered his special surprise.

He swept the potential battlefield with swift eyes. As he had ordered them to do, the wizards and witches watching the border of the wards had sent off distress signals of red sparks and then herded away the curious, the fearful, and the terminally fearless. Harry didn't want targets in the way, and he didn't know any of the watchers, mostly from the core of Nusante's group, well enough to feel comfortable with their fighting at his back.

He drew his wand when he discovered a witch in heavy dark robes—nondescript, and not made of the special cloth that indicated Aurors—had cut through three of the wards at the corner. It was nearly time to bring up the special spell he'd set, which was different from the other magic on the party field merely encouraging good cheer and peaceful conduct. If he had left *this* spell out in the open from the beginning, then most of their enemies would have sensed it and not attacked. And Harry had wanted an attack, to show how their group responded to violence.

It would not be by bringing more violence.

The witch had probably recognized him, because she sped up the Severing Snake that was chewing through the wards. A moment later, the strands of the guard spells parted with a crack like tent ropes releasing a stake, and then the witch and several other dark-robed companions piled in.

Harry made the threefold pass that triggered his special spell, hissing the incantation under his breath. The chance was small that any of the attackers would know this spell, yes, but still, he would prefer that it not be turned against him at some later date. "*Veritas absoluta!*"

A wind tossed the hoods covering the attackers' faces back, and a flash of lightning in the next moment burned their clothes away without touching their flesh. Several of them stumbled to a stop, and Harry heard loud, confused cries. Some were clutching at their crotches or their breasts, as if that would really prevent anyone from looking. Harry heard a few Apparitions, but most were scrambling for dropped wands.

Marks on their bodies began to glow brilliantly—tattoos, scars, freckles, moles, anything unusual that might identify them. Harry laughed as he noticed a small phoenix tattoo just above the buttocks of the witch who had sawed through the wards. She'd obviously tried to cover it up with layered glamour spells, but it was stirring now, as though the light of the spell were life to it. It spread its wings and beat them, and then flames cut across the witch's skin. Though they obviously hadn't hurt her, she whirled away from Harry, her face brilliant with embarrassment.

Harry whistled.

A figure stirred under the oak tree, where he'd been standing with a carefully applied Disillusionment Charm covering him. Therris lifted his camera and began to take pictures of the wizards and witches who had thought they could get away with raiding the celebration of a group of people who had never done them harm. *Click, click, flash, flash,* and the scrambling of the victims grew more and more desperate. A few more of them had found their wands and Apparated away, but still not many. There were also five or six who seemed to think that screaming at Therris would make him stop.

Harry laughed again, and then felt a tug at his awareness. Another strike was going on at the second weakest place in the wards, concealed behind a large bush where the intruders must have felt confident no one would see them come in. He nodded to Therris—though he thought the reporter was having far too much fun to notice him—and Apparated. He had relaxed the wards

for himself as well as Draco, a few minutes after the trickle of visitors had slowed. No sense in tearing his own protections to pieces *or* moving so slowly that he might arrive only after someone had been injured.

And no one was going to be injured tonight. He had meant it when he told Garrett and Draco that he wouldn't let anyone in the party retaliate with violence, or be hurt. That meant the Counterstrike members or Aurors had to be protected as well, from Nusante or friends of his who might have had enough of silent suffering.

The bush rustled as Harry landed next to it, but the small group of wizards filing through the hole in the wards only had time to look up before they found themselves each confronted by an illusion of Caroline Garrett. Like the spell that had started the Weird Sisters music for the dancing, this was a time-delayed piece of magic, and it also utilized a very simple principle of Legilimency. It located whatever sexual memory the victim found most embarrassing, and then the illusion of Garrett began to explain gravely what sexual disease or perversion the memory was symptomatic of.

"Obviously, sir, you've been repressing fantasies of bestiality all your life—"

"How interesting, madam! I never would have thought that someone as highly important as you are could have advanced so far in the Ministry without someone suspecting her tendency towards pedophilia—"

"Did you know that those who dream often of sex with their mothers may actually have inherited a tendency towards incest?"

Harry let the illusions speak for only a moment before he swept his wand around in a circle and called, "*Accio* leaves!"

The leaves on the bush blew off, revealing several parchments with branches stuck through them. Over each parchment traveled a busy Quick-Quotes Quill, transcribing the words the illusions spoke.

Harry winked at the nearest horrified face, then raised a block that would prevent them from coming any further into the camp even if they managed to break away from the charmed rapport before the illusions—Garrett, when she agreed to let her image be used, had suggested adding a bit of hypnotism to the magic—and Apparated again. A third attack was coming in a fairly daring point, near the gap in the wards he had been guarding, and he had no specific trap set up to receive it.

But that didn't matter. He had his magic, surging and seething around his shoulders as if it were excited to be used for something beyond Transfigurations and glamours, and he had his presence. That would work.

The moment he landed near a ragged entrance cut in the wards, the spell that alerted him to the

presence of fabric in Auror robes twinged hard across his chest. Harry breathed as if he were about to dive underwater. The other attackers could have included Aurors, but if so, they had been probably unofficially associated with Counterstrike. These would be men and women who had the Minister's permission backing them up.

But why should he let that change things? He had informed Kingsley, along with everyone else in wizarding Britain who possessed the ears to listen, of what he planned to do, and he wouldn't hurt the Aurors. Nor were the spells he had planned to use on them illegal, and Harry himself would watch to see that they didn't cause unintentional harm.

He stepped forwards and blocked the Aurors' path into the grounds, smiling a little. "I own this land," he said, tilting his head to make sure that the light of the bonfire fell across his face and revealed his scar. "Do you have a reason for trespassing? I'm assuming you're trespassers, understand, and not legitimate visitors, because otherwise you would have used the front entrance."

He expected many things, including the anger and disdain and worry that swept through the Aurors staring at him. He didn't expect the convulsive movement from the middle of the line, or Ron's voice calling, "Harry! Mate!"

Harry held still. He kept his arms folded as Ron hurried towards him, stopping maybe five feet away and scanning his face with a desperate eagerness that wrung Harry's heart. It would have been easier if Ron had showed up hating him and calling him names. But Harry had long since become resigned to the fact that his life would never deserve the adjective *easy*, whatever else he might choose to call it.

"Thank Merlin we found you!" Ron's eyes were shining. He fumbled for his wand, not seeming to notice the way the motion made Harry take a step to the side. "I know that you wouldn't have agreed to this of your own free will. Malfoy must have enchanted you. And Hermione gave me a charm against the most powerful mind-controlling enchantments."

Harry found his tongue. "Ron," he said, as gently as he could. His heart wavered and vibrated as if it were a glass balanced on the edge of a table and stroked by a breeze. "You're making a mistake. Listen to me."

"I know that you wouldn't betray us like this," Ron was babbling on. He had his wand free now and was waving it straight up and down in broad passes Harry wasn't familiar with. "You would have *told* us if you were seriously considering being open about your homosexuality, let alone dating Malfoy. I know you would." He smiled at Harry.

"Ron, I love Draco," Harry said strongly. "I was waiting for an owl from you before I came to you, but I—"

"It's all right, it's almost done," Ron said soothingly. "*Apsolvo mentem!*"

Harry winced. It felt as though someone had tossed a stinging puff of sand into his eyes. He staggered, coughing, and winced again as his head began to ache. He put a hand up and massaged his temples. He didn't think there was any change, but at the same time, that had been powerful magic. Ron was by no means a weak wizard; it was his temper and his emotions that got in his way.

*And that's about to happen again,* Harry thought. For a moment, just a moment, he was shaking like a newborn fawn. Here was one of those moments he had begun Metamorphosis in the first place to avoid. He didn't *want* to choose between his friends and living a life that was exciting and fun for him. He didn't know if he could bear it. He knew that something in him would shatter irrevocably at the look of betrayal on Ron's face.

He plunged himself into Brian's courage and opened his eyes.

Ron was smiling at him hopefully. "Say it now," he urged. "Say now that you love Malfoy, or that you'll really prevent us from arresting anyone who's engaging in public displays of homosexuality here."

Distantly, Harry knew he was twisting apart, wrung with pain as exquisite as a snakebite. He managed to smile, though, because it was Brian and not Harry who was moving behind his eyes now. "No," he said quietly, his voice deepened into Brian's. "I still love Draco. And I still won't let you hurt anyone here. Including yourselves."

Ron's face crumpled. Harry saw tears in his eyes in the moment before he unleashed the spell he'd decided to use on them.

It was the same enchantment that Dumbledore had used on Ron and Hermione in Harry's fourth year when he'd put them to sleep under the lake. They'd wake when someone who worked for the Ministry touched them, and not before. For now, they fell to the ground, snoring. Ron's face washed clean of anguish and sorrow as he tumbled, and moments later Harry could have imagined that he was seeing his friend asleep on his own pillow at home, with nothing more than dreams of an argument with Hermione to trouble him.

Harry turned around and began vomiting uncontrollably. He leaned forwards enough that it didn't drop onto his robes or his shoes or his legs. The persona named Gerald whom he'd used for bodyguard work, as fierce and wary as a wild cat, flickered into existence in his head and kept watch even as some distant part of him expelled every bit of food he'd taken in that day. When he was down to dry heaves, Gerald pulled him back to his feet and forced his stomach to stop spasming with a muttered spell. Whilst he was busy being weak, someone else could have sneaked past his defenses and into the party.

But when he listened, there was nothing but the music and the chattering from the dance floor. Slowly, he relaxed. The party hadn't been disrupted; some of the attendees would leave certain that no one had even tried to invade. He had preserved the peace and the lives of those involved. No one could ask for more.

Then he turned and saw one who could striding towards him. Draco's hair was brilliantly colored in the light of the lanterns he passed beneath, now straw, now gold.

Gerald tensed. There was no way he could allow Draco to realize who had come here. He would probably insist on casting some spell on Ron that would make things worse between them, or on making Harry talk about it. And Gerald had already made some important tactical decisions. For one thing, Harry *had* betrayed his friends and would have to atone for it somehow. That made a confrontation with them as soon as possible inevitable. If he wanted to preserve their friendship, he would need to explain. Confronting them in Draco's company was impossible, since it would only result in shouting and a wider rift. Therefore, Harry would have to do it alone, and lying to Draco by omission was a necessity.

For another, Draco would not be pleased that Harry had had to call on personas to survive the aftermath of Ron's accusations. He was so joyful that he was getting the real Harry, as he would call it, back. Should Gerald allow the happiness of the person most important to Harry to be disrupted, when he had gone to such lengths to preserve the happiness of relative strangers?

No, he thought not.

There had been one disastrous year with failure after failure. There would be no more.

Gerald closed his eyes and folded himself into the back of Harry's mind as Draco came closer and closer. It would have to be Harry who met him; Draco would accept no less. But Harry would have the silent strength of hundreds of others backing him up.

And as soon as ever he could, he would get away and make arrangements to contact his friends.

Draco thought Harry was rather pale and quiet when he came up to him at first, but almost immediately he understood it must have been a trick of the light. Harry smiled at him and reached out to embrace him, bowing his head and sighing deeply. Draco stroked his back.

"Everything's all right?" he whispered.

"Everything," Harry said, and then looked up at him, his eyebrows rising. "Unless you left the gap in the wards unguarded."

"Garret is watching it," said Draco. "And I put up blocks of my own, secured with both certain spells I know and a potion, which no one is going to get past without a Potions mastery. You deserve to have some food."

"And to dance?" Harry asked. "I'd like that."

Draco relaxed. The action against the attackers must really have gone well. Harry wouldn't put

his own pleasure ahead of duty. "Of course," he said, and hooked a hand under Harry's elbow, and led him towards the dance floor.

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Chapter: 37

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Seven—Shatter*

"I've never known you to dance that well."

Harry kept his eyes half-closed as he leaned against the tree to which Draco had guided him. His smile was lazy and carefree and a masterpiece of deceit. "We've only danced together twice before this," he said. "You don't have much of a basis for comparison." He straightened then and opened his eyes fully, despite the fact that doing so made it more likely Draco would figure out something was wrong. He seemed able to tell Harry was lying when he looked him in the face. On the other hand, hiding his expression would be an even surer indicator.

*Things would be so much simpler if I didn't have to lie to him.*

But telling the truth about Ron's appearance at the party would mean that Draco would change his mind on Harry's ability to confront his friends alone, and he would demand to come along. And then Harry would have to refuse the request, and that would hurt Draco further, and put distrust between them that hadn't existed before.

*This is the only way*, said a voice that might have been Gerald's, or Elizabeth's, or Horace's. *It won't be for long. If you need help after you've confronted Ron or Hermione, you can always owl him then.*

"Still." Draco stretched out a hand to him, face still glowing softly, as if with the reflected light of the moon. "That was something special, wasn't it?"

Harry brushed the center of Draco's palm with two fingers, and thought of the way they'd whirled around each other on the dance floor, briefly dependent on each other for existence, brilliant because of and for each other, like two binary stars. He nodded.

"Let's get some food," Draco said, and slung an arm around his shoulders, and walked him towards the benches.

Various people stopped them on the way. They had questions, complaints, suggestions for further

plans, praise for Harry and Draco's dancing and for the way Harry had guarded the gap in the wards. Harry let his mouth and one small part of his brain deal with them. The majority of his mind was occupied with ways he could cushion the blow of the confrontation coming, the words he could speak to let Ron and Hermione understand how sorry he was whilst still preserving his own position. Giving up his relationship with Draco simply to please them was impossible, but he was prepared to say farewell to a good many other things.

*God, I love them. I've lied to them for years, and avoided their company when it meant they might find out my secrets, and not felt free to speak of things I've said to other people without thought, but so much of that was because I love them and it would kill me to lose them.*

Maybe he could say just that, and it would be enough. He was convinced Hermione would be the reasonable one, at least, and restrain Ron. Even if she had given that spell to Ron to prove that Harry was under an enchantment, she'd probably reckoned it would fail. But Ron would need magical proof before he consented to listen to Harry's reasons.

The rest of the evening proceeded softly and sedately outside Harry's head. Within, he built strongholds, chose and then discarded words, looked at memories and recoiled from them, all the time trying to soften what he knew he could only endure.

He'd arrived back at Grimmauld Place twenty minutes ago and managed to convince Draco, with a well-placed yawn or two and a wobble on his unlocking spell, that he was suffering from magical exhaustion and needed to sleep alone to recover. He'd removed the dark green robes, chosen some of the patched, fading Muggle clothes he was more likely to wear around his friends, and sent an owl to Ron and Hermione saying he had something important to tell them.

Now he was pacing the study he'd chosen for the meeting and trying to listen to anything other than the crazed beat of his heart. There'd once been an annoying clock in this room that he'd told Kreacher to remove because the tick interfered with his reading. He would have been grateful for its presence now. He opened his mouth to order Kreacher to remove it from storage, then turned around when a *whoosh* from the fireplace announced the opening of his Floo connection.

Harry braced himself with a hand on the back of the couch. Maybe he wouldn't tremble so badly when he had support.

Hair appeared in the fire, turning bushy and brown as it moved outside the green flames. Hermione stood up, shook soot from her robes, and turned to assist Ron. Harry was glad she hadn't looked at him immediately.

On the other hand, that was a bad sign, wasn't it, just like their long silence was a bad sign? Hermione usually wanted to confront a problem as soon as she could, and castigated Ron and Harry when they avoided talking. Harry winced and shuffled his feet, then bit his tongue when his throat tried to release a moaning noise without his permission.

Ron kept his eyes on the floor. He was unnaturally quiet, which Harry could welcome only because it wouldn't mean shouting. Hermione whispered to him for a moment, then embraced him with one arm and looked straight at Harry.

There was pity so intense in her eyes that Harry had to glance away.

"Two of the most important things you already know," he made himself say, "and you've known for a few days now. I've dating Draco Malfoy, and I'm involved in the rebellion to ensure the rights of gay wizards and witches."

Ron swung his head up. He looked haunted, as though the sleep spell Harry had cast on him had given him nightmares. "And isn't that *enough*?" he said. His voice was at normal volume, but so filled with hurt Harry began to flinch and found he couldn't stop. *He would have been hurt worse if I had let Draco come with me,* Harry thought, but he could not make himself believe it. "Harry—why? If you had to date someone, couldn't you do it discreetly? And if you had to date another bloke, did it have to be Draco Malfoy?" He rubbed his cheek, where a bruise was forming, and looked wistfully at Harry.

Harry licked his lips. "No," he said. "I was tired of lying, of hiding who I was—"

"But it's worked for ten years!" Ron exclaimed. "Not so much as a hint of a buggering for ten years! If it worked for that long, why couldn't it work for longer?"

Harry felt anger flare to life in him like the fire flaring in the hearth to let Ron and Hermione through, and immediately suppressed it. If his best friend wasn't yelling at him, he wouldn't be one to yell, either. "Because the reason I kept quiet was out of guilt," he said. "Guilt for failing Ginny in the first place, guilt because I couldn't live the kind of open life I wanted without publicity following me everywhere but I should have been brave enough to risk it, guilt because I was doing the *easy* thing and not the thing my conscience most insisted on. Recently, I began to realize that I shouldn't feel guilt for something I can't help."

"You can't help your orientation," said Hermione. Her voice was quiet, sad, but nonjudgmental. Harry looked at her. He could see hurt in her eyes as there was in Ron's, but it didn't seem as deep or as personal. Well, women often didn't feel the same way about gay men as straight men did; Harry had noticed that. "But you can help your behavior. Why didn't you *come* to me, Harry? I could have helped you set it up so you emerged into a mood of acceptance. It would have taken longer than the rebellion you're organizing now, but it would also have had less of a chance of getting people killed."

"Because it's not just personal anymore," said Harry. "I didn't want to emerge and be an anomaly, tolerated as gay because I was the Boy-Who-Lived." He leaned forwards, striving to call up memories now, seeking the light of them in Hermione's eyes. His eighteenth year was not as painful to remember as his nineteenth. "Besides, do you remember what happened when the war ended and the press swarmed Hogwarts? I don't think you could have made much of a dent in that."

"The way you're acting now, anyone would think you'd planned for the greatest public exposure possible," Ron muttered.

"I did."

Silence, so thick and heavy that Harry could feel it pressing on his shoulders as a physical weight. Hermione was nodding, but Ron burst out, "*Why*? That's what I don't understand. You didn't care for ten years. Why now? Why *now*?" He ran his hand through his hair in agitation, and Harry was absurdly glad to see how well he moved. That fall after the sleep spell took him had not really hurt him, then. "And why Malfoy?"

"Malfoy was the one who got me involved in the rebellion," Harry said. Telling the simple truth behind his actions was easier than explaining his motivations. "He wanted to come out as gay to get his father to disown him—"

"That makes no *sense.*"

"If you knew him as I know him, it would," Harry said, striving to sound unruffled. "And I hope you'll have the chance to learn to tolerate each other."

"I don't want to," said Ron, but it was a mutter and not a yell, and Harry dared to hope that his friend would be amenable to the idea. Eventually.

"He respected my decision to remain behind glamours—" And then Harry stopped, because this was the story he had told to Therris and other reporters and Nusante's group, but it was not the story as it had actually happened. To reveal the full truth meant revealing the third secret he had to tell them.

Absently, he looked around the study. There was a faint buzzing noise in his ears. Had Kreacher hidden the clock somewhere in the room instead of getting rid of it? Sometimes he indulged in such small rebellions, not because he disagreed with Harry's orders, but because he could convince himself the Black home looked better with the original artifacts more nearly in their natural place.

He had told Draco the truth. He loved Draco. He loved his friends, and not less than he loved Draco. They deserved to know the full truth as well.

*One, two, three,* he thought, clinging to the passing moments before he would have to speak as long as he could. But when they passed, he began speaking, clearly so Ron and Hermione could understand him, but fast enough that they shouldn't have a chance to interrupt him. Break off this recitation, and he was not sure he could begin again.

"We originally met because he went to Metamorphosis and hired me." He looked Ron in the eye, then Hermione. "I assume you've heard of it?" He didn't wait for acknowledgment, though for

some reason Ron's eyes were widening whilst Hermione only frowned lightly. "I had no way of knowing which actor he would choose, but he chose a persona I created that was very similar to me in personality, and even appearance. So I played Brian Montgomery for a little while. And then I came out, and we adapted. He'd already learned I was Harry Potter by that time, though, and learned about my connection to Metamorphosis."

"You own it, don't you?" Hermione asked softly.

Harry swallowed. "That's why you stayed silent so long," he said. "You were doing research on Metamorphosis and trying to find out who actually ran it."

"Yes," Hermione said. "It's hard. You were secretive." She didn't smile. "But I remembered that you'd been interested in studying Transfiguration and glamours that last year we spent at Hogwarts, and I picked up other hints you'd dropped during the years, and I remembered questions you'd asked Bill about setting up false Gringotts accounts and creating good paper trails. It didn't bother me when you asked those questions. You deserved your privacy from the public, and the *Daily Prophet* doesn't need to know every little thing you spend your money on." She drew in a quivering breath. "But it was for Metamorphosis, wasn't it? How many of the actors are you, Harry? Two? Ten? Twenty?"

Ron was glancing back and forth between them as if lost, but Harry couldn't spare the time to attend to his mystification. He was still riding the high tide of that courage he would have to pay for later. He held Hermione's gaze, and said, "All of them."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. They fell quietly down her face and dropped off her chin. She made no attempt to stop them. Harry braced both hands on the back of the couch this time and concentrated hard. He had to hear any words his friends spoke past the whirlwind that had come to occupy his head.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You're sick, so sick and you don't even know it."

Harry had to fight to keep from sinking to the floor. This had been the reaction he'd known and feared from Hermione for years, even when he dared to hint at concealing his features under a glamour or going into the Muggle world on a lesser scale. She *said* she understood his need for privacy, but when he actually took some steps to secure it, she disapproved of them and thought he should go out unshielded and just somehow deal with the storm that fell on him when he did so.

The spark of anger caught and began to burn in spite of Harry's best intentions. He heard himself breathing, so loud and so noisy that it sounded like sobs, but it wasn't, yet, and he wouldn't let it become crying. He *would not shed tears.* He had done enough weeping.

"Why?" he demanded. "It's kept me sane for years. It's a challenge, a game. I can become anyone I want, produce any effect I want. That's something I can never do as Harry Potter, where all shades of gray vanish from anyone's mind the minute they hear my name." Hermione was

shaking her head, but she hadn't said anything to oppose him, so Harry went on, his voice growing louder and harsher as he did so. "*I* control the nuances, the reactions. That's all I wanted to do. I can pass for normal if I want to, or extraordinary in a way that *I* choose, or eccentric, or much older than my actual age, or—"

"You wanted to play hundreds of people?" Ron asked. He wasn't dumb, but he did seem to absorb revelations more slowly than Hermione did.

"Yes," Harry said.

"That's—mate, that's *mad.*"

"And what would *you* know about it?" Harry demanded, his anger frightening him now, because it was growing and he didn't know if he would be able to restrain it, even with the help of the merciless voice. "You've been able to do what you want, largely. You were feted as a war hero, but that ended, and you dated Hermione like a normal person and got married like a normal person and passed your Auror training like a normal person. You fought bravely in the war, but that's not the only thing anyone remembers about you. Your life *went on* past the day when Voldemort died. Mine didn't, because no one would *let* it go on. I refused to be tied down to the conception everyone had of me, that's all. I made lives for myself. I'm good. I'm careful. Metamorphosis only handles one case at a time, as I'm sure you know. I retire personas on a regular basis, and some of them only exist on paper. I keep them separate from the real me in my head. I'm not losing anything. I'm creating it."

The words sounded better than Harry had expected, because he hadn't practiced them. They were the thoughts he'd had for years. They sounded free and good and strong and brave and proud, and he finished with his heart beating hard enough to ruffle the cloth of his shirt and his hands trembling and his body feeling lighter and more hollow than it had at any point in his life.

And then Ron spoke.

"You did have a chance to be normal," he said flatly. "If you could really create personas that did anything, why didn't you create one that was straight and could marry Ginny? You said you didn't want to hide any more, to lie, but Harry, you've been hiding and lying for *ten fucking years.* Ten years!" He was yelling now, stalking forwards until he almost passed Hermione, but she touched his shoulder and he held back even if he didn't calm down. "And then when you *do* come out, *Draco bloody Malfoy* is the first one to know and not one of us! God, I don't— I don't even have the *words* for all the ways you've betrayed us—" He broke off, choking with pain and anger, and put his hands over his face.

Harry felt part of the firm ground on which he'd stood for so long crack like rotten ice.

"Why was Malfoy the first one to know?" Hermione whispered, her voice fragile for the first time. "Why not us?"

Harry closed his eyes. He could hear earthquakes if he concentrated. He was trying not to hear them. "He forced the truth out of me. Or, rather, he figured out I was Brian, and then I told him I was Metamorphosis. I—I'd hurt him. I owed him the truth—"

"But not *us*, I suppose?" Ron's words were muffled because he still had his hands over his face.

"I did—I was going to—"

"Not soon enough, mate," Ron whispered, and turned his back, slumping against the mantle with his head resting on his arms.

"There were so many things wrong with your life the last ten years, Harry," Hermione said, her eyes large and yearning. "You could have told me you were struggling with being gay. I would have helped. You could have told me you liked Malfoy, were falling in love with him, even. I would have helped."

"When I tried to tell you about why I wanted to hide behind Transfigurations and glamours in that last year at Hogwarts, you didn't want to help," Harry snapped, desperate to clutch at his anger and use it as a defense against the shattering that was coming. It approached on soft feet, but he could hear it. It surrounded him like the rumors of a snowfall, far-off yet but there, persistent.

"That's *wrong*," Hermione said firmly. "It's all wrong for the kind of person you are—"

"You have no bloody idea who I am anymore!" Harry shouted.

Hermione went white. Ron stilled his trembling, but didn't turn around. Hermione reached out a hand as if she would touch him, and then let it drop.

"I've shown you a mask for ten years, too," Harry went on. He should stop. He knew he should stop. But like tearing a scab, pulling it away and showing the old and bloody wound underneath, he was past the first few moments of care, given in to impulse, and couldn't have ceased his own painful digging if Draco had been present. "I gave you what you needed, because that was what I didn't do for Ginny and George and Neville and all those other people after the war, I couldn't give them what they bloody *needed*, but I learned, I learned, all right? And I got good at it. You've known a Harry for the last ten years, someone hardly anyone else got to see, but it wasn't me. All of them are me and not-me. But that one is closer to the part of me that I despise, the part of me I *hate*, because he failed people again and again and again and again and again and again and—"

"Harry," Hermione said. "Harry, be quiet. Please, be quiet."

*I'm on the edge of hysteria,* Harry's mind said in Horace's voice. He shut his mouth hard and breathed through his teeth. Then he said, "I beg your pardon. But what I said is true, and being quiet won't make it a lie. This is the truth, Hermione. This is everything I am. The man who

could decide to make a leap into public as gay because he couldn't take the hiding any longer and because Draco's courage inspired him. The man who fell in love with the schoolyard bully who used to torment his best friends. The man who changes names and faces like other people change their moods. And *all* of it is non-negotiable. I won't give up Draco or the rebellion because you don't like him or Ron thinks being gay is disgusting—"

"I don't!" Ron swung around again, and his face was streaked with tears and snot. "I just—do you have to do it in *public*, Harry?"

"Funny," Harry said. "That's the exact sort of attitude Lucius Malfoy has, only he's a little more honest about it."

Ron looked at the floor. His shoulders were set and weary.

"I'm in love with Draco," Harry said, staring at Hermione now. "I won't give him up. I won't let you abuse him. I won't let you drive him away. He's mine, and I'm his, and he's changed my life for the better, and I don't want to choose between you—"

"I won't make you," Hermione said. "But. Harry."

Harry tensed up again. He had had a single blissful moment of relaxation when Hermione had spoken the first four words. "What?" he demanded.

"Metamorphosis is wrong," Hermione said. "No one can sustain that many personalities indefinitely. It'll fracture you. I think it already has, since you thought you needed a mask to lie to *us*." Harry opened his mouth to argue that Ron's dislike of homosexuality had in part made that necessary, but Hermione simply continued, voice quiet and very adult. "Being gay isn't wrong, and I'll take your word for it that you're in love with Malfoy. But I'm going to go to St. Mungo's and tell the Mind-Healers about Metamorphosis, because I don't think I can make you stop on my own."

Heart, blood, breath, mind, soul, they all froze. And then they shattered.

Out of the swirling chaos into which he'd been dropped, Harry heard Brian's voice say, "Hermione, please don't do this."

"I'm sorry, Harry." And she did look sorry, but also queenly and proud and calm. "It's not good for you. I won't make you choose between Metamorphosis and us, because that would be a stupid move, like making you choose between Dark magic and us. I'm going to get you help for your problem. I'm going to see you healthy again."

"Hermione." That was Elizabeth, her words, but not her voice, so they wouldn't know. "Please. I need this."

"You don't, Harry. You only think you do." Hermione put a hand on Ron's shoulder and guided

him to the fireplace. "We'll talk more later. Probably tomorrow."

And then she and Ron were gone, and she hadn't lifted a hand to stop them. Well, how could she? They were her friends.

One of her personas' friends.

Friends Harry had depended on and loved and cherished for ten years, friends he'd taken a risk for, and friends who had done the one thing that he had most feared they would do.

*Confined. Forced into one person. My art taken away, my experiences, my strengths, my security, my job, my livelihood, my lives.*

He was running. He knew it was upstairs he was running, but not in which direction. The air around him bloomed with the chatter of voices soon to be silenced, a thousand living people who clung to him and cried in fear.

Until—

Unless—

Unless—

Until—

*Unless he did something to stop it.*

There was smooth wood beneath his hand, and he didn't hesitate, because all was lost anyway, wasn't it? He had lost Ron and Hermione unless he wanted to magically coerce them, which was no keeping at all, and he would lose Draco when Draco found out he'd lied and that Harry's personas were a sickness. He'd wanted to know all of Harry's personas. They were going to die. He couldn't know them.

"Voldemort," a voice said. "Nagini."

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Chapter: 38

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Eight—Containing Multitudes*

Draco stood alone in the middle of his flat, head bowed, fingers laced together, and eyes closed. His mind was racing as it had the day when he tried to analyze the wand movement Harry used to disguise himself as Brian.

This time, the conclusions were just as fragmentary, drifting in and out of each other, snapping into place briefly and then whirling apart again as Draco realized they didn't quite fit. He shook his head frequently, but he didn't open his eyes and he ignored his own impulse to hurry.

Something had been wrong with Harry when he emerged from the last attack tonight, the one Draco suspected had been led by Aurors. His face had been a touch too pale, his manner too careful. Draco hadn't noticed it at the time, but he'd been caught up in his pride at the way Harry had handled the attacks, and then in the grace with which he moved during the dances.

*Since when has Harry ever seemed as perfect as he seemed tonight? Since when has he managed to do everything right, or anticipate your desires as he was doing? This is the man who didn't understand why you would want him to stop sleeping with clients, because he couldn't accept the idea that you would want exclusive possession of him.*

Draco's head came up, and he felt himself snarl more than heard it. Harry had been showing him a persona, much like Brian, sculpted to fit Draco's needs, doing what Draco required because he required it. There was no reason for Harry to retreat behind a mask like that unless something really had gone wrong during the party, and he needed his inner strength to deal with *that* whilst he delegated the persona to deal with Draco.

*Why wouldn't he tell me? What could have been bad enough that he would break the promise he made to tell me the truth? He didn't hurt me, so it couldn't have been the same impulse as the one that made him give me the truth after he injured me with his magic.*

Who else mattered to Harry that much?

And Draco began cursing, because he could not believe that he had been that blind. He swung around and charged out the door of his flat.

Harry's friends mattered that much to him. Weasley could have been among the Aurors, because he worked with them. And Harry's over-dramatic acting at the door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place probably indicated that he was meeting with them tonight.

Meeting with them when tired, stressed, over-balanced by whatever had happened between him and Weasley as well as by the effort of arranging the party, and so worried about what Draco wanted and needed that he had taken up more of his own energy lying to Draco and keeping him at bay.

Draco was going to tear *someone* apart. Whether it was Harry or Weasley depended on who was standing when he got there.

Amanda Pearson, Potions expert, eyed the bubbling cauldron for a moment, and then glanced back at the dark Pensieve, unlocked from its cabinet by the name of a long-dead Dark Lord and his snake. Really, the man who had originated them all had the strangest ideas sometimes. Amanda would have chosen more secure passwords for a secret this mighty, ones that no one else would ever guess.

But her concern wasn't the passwords for the moment (even if she couldn't help thinking about them; her mother always had said that she had a wandering mind). It was the potion dancing in the cauldron, without which their originator couldn't complete the process of transforming himself into someone else. She had to make sure it reached exactly the right temperature before she added the next ingredient, a handful of porcupine quills. She spent some moments counting under her breath and more estimating by eye, then tossed the quills in. The potion flared once and turned orange, and the most difficult part of the brewing was done.

Brian leaned over the cauldron and sniffed once. It smelled right to him from the notes spread out in front of him, like cedar shavings, though really, he wouldn't want to drink it anyway.

But this was what Harry wanted, and Brian could only agree and pity him. Harry had thought he would always have two things to depend on, whilst everything else in his life changed on a daily or weekly basis: his friends and Metamorphosis. The third, Draco, had come too late for Harry to have the same confidence in him. Now Ron and Hermione were trying to destroy Metamorphosis, and his relationship with Draco was not strong enough to reassure Harry on its own.

Brian believed he was wrong on that last, actually, but his reasoning couldn't make headway against Harry's despair and the anxiety of the other personas to survive. He was only active at the moment because he was the calmest of them, the most level-headed, and thus the most fit to handle the potion and begin revising the spells they would need for the moment when Harry performed the transformation.

*Has he even chosen who he wants to be?*

Brian snorted. Of course he hadn't. Harry wanted to be as many people as possible, but he also wanted to be someone who could survive the relationships he believed were ending. That cut any version of Harry Potter out of the equation. So he would have to think and choose the best of them for the situation, the one clever enough and discreet enough to vanish and start up a business like Metamorphosis elsewhere.

*A pity I don't have a house in Britain which would do,* Horace Longbottom thought, carefully smoothing down the page of notes that contained the spells necessary to make the transformation. *But there is too much chance of being discovered if I go to one of them, and even Ireland is too near. Germany would be the best choice.* Horace had made some contacts there over the years, mostly pure-bloods and half-bloods who were interested in how to integrate their

culture with Muggle culture; they would have to be quiet about it, as violating the International Statute of Secrecy from a position of inferior power would bring the other European Ministries down hard on all their heads.

The top spell on the list had a smudged letter in the second word of the incantation. Horace leaned over and carefully cleared it up, then squinted and decided he couldn't really tell whether it was an 'e' or a 'u'. He sighed. He would have to fetch the original list of spells and make sure.

As she left the room, Amanda glanced at the cauldron and made sure the potion wouldn't overflow in the next five minutes. A small squirming of excitement moved under her breastbone. Even though use of this potion could mean her destruction, she was always excited to watch something new work.

Draco stood on the doorstep of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, knocking. No one had answered so far, and he was beginning to lose the urgent impulse that had driven him here. Maybe Harry really had told the truth when he said he was tired and wanted to go to bed alone, because if he and Draco went together, they would do something other than sleep. If Harry was having a confrontation with his friends, there ought to be raised voices, surely? And the flash of spells? Though Draco thought the spells would come solely from the Weasleys, because he couldn't imagine Harry lifting his wand against them.

*Maybe they've been and gone, and he needs help.*

He tried the door. It was locked. Draco whispered an *Alohomora* and tried again, but the knob still clicked stubbornly against his best efforts. He proceeded to more and more powerful unlocking and unwarding spells, and still nothing let him inside. And now he was growing steadily more worried, especially at the thought of the time it would take up if he returned to his flat and tried to Floo in, on the off-chance that Harry had left his fireplace unblocked even though he had made sure to lock the door.

"Can Kreacher be helping Master Draco?"

Draco turned around with his most radiant smile as the house-elf appeared on the threshold next to him. If he had been a praying man, he would have given thanks then. "Yes," he said. "I was supposed to visit Harry tonight, but he had a shock earlier and may have forgotten about it. I'm sure he wouldn't bar his door against me ordinarily. Could you let me inside?"

Kreacher nodded, his ears flapping against his head. "Master Harry is being most busy," he said. "But his face is not normal. Master Draco could soothe him!" He snapped his fingers, and though Draco hadn't felt the house-elf touch his arm, they both vanished and reappeared in the entrance hall of the house, well inside Harry's wards.

"Thank you, Kreacher," Draco said. He didn't stay to see the house-elf's happy bow. He had already turned towards the stairs, and his wand was aimed up them. The throb of Dark magic that

traveled through the house made his teeth hurt. What in the world did Harry think he was playing at? Draco didn't recognize the specific spell being used—he had never spent enough time using curses for that, though he knew Lucius had a library of them in his head—but he didn't need to. That spell, whatever it was, needed to be stopped.

Harry appeared on the stairs above him. He halted when he saw Draco and stared at him with wide eyes. And Draco felt any uncertainty he'd had about the situation clench and crack, because the movement with which Harry placed a hand delicately on the banister and the way he stared without blinking or looking around for an advantage didn't match the man Draco had fallen in love with. He was facing some other persona.

*But since when does Harry keep the same face and clothes when he's assuming another persona?* Though he wasn't wearing the green robes he'd left the party in, Draco couldn't help but note. He was swimming in baggy, rubbish-looking Muggle clothes of the kind he'd often worn during school.

"Harry," he said gently. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not Harry right now," said a precise, high-pitched voice. "My name is Dave."

"All right," said Draco, though he wanted to shout. He made sure to keep his hand well away from his wand when he realized how closely "Dave's" eyes were tracking him. "Do you know if Harry's in trouble? I can sense Dark magic here, and he put up locking spells on the door strong enough to keep me away, which isn't something he'd do ordinarily."

Harry gazed at him intently, then nodded. "Some of the others like lying," he said. "I've never approved of it. I'm on my way to look at a spell that will help transform Harry into one of his personas for good and all. We don't know which one of us it will be yet," he confessed, blushing lightly, as if sharing a secret. "But whichever one he chooses, he's not going to remember being Harry Potter anymore."

Panic made Draco's hand slip where it gripped the banister. But he cleared his throat and managed to stay upright, if only by sheer concentration. "What made him want to do this?" he asked. "Do you know?" That question might show he had an interest in Dave himself, and disguise his burning ambition to leap forwards, wrestle Harry to the floor, and Stun him.

"He confronted his friends and told them about you and his involvement in the rebellion, along with Metamorphosis," Harry said. "They didn't take the news well." He frowned and shook his head. "I could have told him they wouldn't. I'm a lot like that Hermione woman, and I know I've lost myself with my face in a book too many times. She thinks the answers are all in books about Mind-Healing. She's gone to St. Mungo's to ensure that the Healers there know about Metamorphosis and can stop Harry."

*Ah, no.* Draco felt so helpless that those were the only words his mind could repeat for long moments. Meanwhile, Harry Summoned a book and opened it, flipping slowly through the

pages, looking for a particular one. Then he smiled, muttered, "Yes, it's spelled with a u. I thought so," shut the book, and started back up the stairs.

"Harry," Draco whispered. "Please. Wait. I love you. I love *you*, not just the personas or whoever you choose to become."

Harry's back stiffened. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Draco, and his eyes had gone emotionless, so Draco couldn't be sure whether he was wearing the Dave persona or someone else. "But you'd agree with Hermione," he said. "You'd want me to stop using the personas."

"I want you to be in control," Draco said. "I want you to remember who you really are at all times." He dared to climb a step, not watching his footing, not watching the bob of his wand in his sleeve, not watching anything but Harry. "That's not the same thing as wanting you to stop using the personas. What scares me is when you vanish into them completely, the way you vanished into Horace Longbottom the day you rescued me from the Ministry."

"But you'd still want the one you think is the real Harry out," said Harry, his voice as cold and empty as the Malfoy dungeons. "You'd want me to wear the others like masks, instead of immersing myself in them."

Harry had heard enough lies for one day. Draco said simply, "Yes."

"You wouldn't want me to use the Pensieve I have upstairs."

*Pensieve?* "No."

"Ah," said Harry. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

Draco had no warning. Suddenly the air around him was solid, thick with magic like a snowfall. He tried to raise an arm and found it frozen in place on the stair railing. His legs froze, too, even though he was in an awkward position, with one foot crooked and the other resting not quite flat on a step. The air in front of his eyes flickered and then turned crystalline, as if he were seeing Harry through a heavy film.

"That will keep you still," said Harry, and put his wand away. His voice had a faint tone of satisfaction to it now. "You can decide what to do when my new self comes down the stairs. Decide you're in love with him or not, as you choose. I don't have anything to do with you anymore." He turned once more.

Draco made an enormous effort and managed to open his mouth. It seemed Harry had paralyzed him only from the neck down, because he could blink his eyes and move his nostrils as well. "Harry," he said. "Wait."

Harry sighed and turned around. "You can stop pretending, you know," he said.

"Pretending? I don't understand." Draco had no coherent plan. He only knew that as long as he was talking to Harry, Harry wasn't walking up to the Pensieve that was waiting for him.

"You don't need to pretend to like Harry anymore, to want the real one." Harry waved his arm impatiently. His eyes were fixed and staring. Draco had never heard anything as bitter as his voice. "You don't want him. One of the other personas would have suited you better. Why couldn't you be content with Brian?" The eyes flickered to Draco for a moment, but they were an alien's eyes. "Then you never would have had to know the truth, and you could have gone on your way at the end of the job, like an ordinary Metamorphosis client."

"I want Harry," Draco said. He didn't think saying *I want you* would be a good idea at the moment. Better to humor Harry, to treat the persona as real.

For a moment, Harry glanced up the stairs. Draco found himself panting, but Harry turned back to him. "My potion will have boiled over," he said. "But I suppose it doesn't matter. I can brew another one. Amanda will be happy to help. I'm more curious about this at the moment." His eyes sharpened, and he retreated two steps down towards Draco. "Why do you want that Harry?"

He was a broken man, and he called himself by the name of Harry Potter only because he deserved no other.

He hadn't been this aware in quite a long time, because every second of his existence was one of screaming pain. He'd been awake for a month at the end of Harry's nineteenth year, bitterly looking over week after week of failures, trying to swallow the sourness in his mouth and knowing he never could. He had stayed awake just long enough to organize the first efforts towards Metamorphosis and introduce Harry to the joys of playing characters who could go on jobs, characters who were unlike him in history and looks and personality. Then he had wrapped himself in darkness and only risen towards the surface when there was no other choice, when Harry made the mistake of thinking his life could be normal or he could tell someone else the truth.

He was the only one who understood that Metamorphosis was an atonement, an ongoing sacrifice, as well as a game.

He had not been pleased when Draco Malfoy discovered the truth about Brian and then forced the truth of Metamorphosis from Harry, but on the other hand, it was an action he had to reluctantly approve, since it satisfied the debts Harry owed Draco. But *this*—this was intolerable. Draco couldn't want the broken, tattered thing, the dying butterfly on a withered leaf, that was all that remained of Harry Potter. So what did he really want? Did he not understand the extent of the truth?

If not, then Harry would be happy to reveal it to him. But perhaps Draco did understand his brokenness and possessed an answer. If so, then Harry wanted to know the answer.

"Why do you want that Harry?" he repeated, when Draco only stared at him as if the question had been above his hearing range. He looked ridiculous frozen like that. Harry experienced an enormous surge of mingled self-loathing and satisfaction. It was another debt, another unforgivable mistake, and soon enough Harry would settle all those debts by stripping away the person who owed them. He would be dead in truth as he had been for all but random moments during the last ten years.

"Because that Harry is the one who told me the truth," Draco said softly, at last. "The one who came up with the personas in the first place. He's clever, brilliant, giving, intriguing, and my match in every way that matters."

"No, you don't understand," said Harry. "That Harry doesn't exist, either."

"Who does?" Draco said at once, as if he had awaited just that statement, which he couldn't have, because he didn't know the broken man existed. "I thought all your personas were equally real, and if that's true, then the Harry I fell in love with also exists."

He hesitated, confused. Then he shook his head slightly and said, "You can't fall in love with a person just for a few qualities. You'd have to love them through their faults, too, and that's impossible with me."

"Tell me your faults, then." Draco swayed as though he would fall down the stairs and break his head open. Harry hastily strengthened the spell holding him in place. Hurting someone else was intolerable to him when it was not done in self-defense. And he had hurt Draco, and he had hurt Ron and Hermione.

He could not commit suicide when so many other people depended on him for their existence. But he could do the next best thing.

"I'm the Harry who lashed out at you with my magic when you cornered me," the broken man said swiftly. This was like pouring a tide of poison into Draco's ears, but the truth often did hurt. If this made him understand, it was worth it. "I'm the Harry who lied to you this evening and told you that I wanted to be alone, and concealed from you the fact that Ron and Hermione were coming over, because it was the easiest thing to do. I'm the Harry who almost Obliviated you when you announced that you knew me as we lay in bed together. I'm the Harry who's made so many mistakes I can't count them all. I'm the Harry Nusante scolds, the one who had a chance to be a hero, and *lost* the chance." He laughed, though the sound scorched his throat. "The very first thing I ever failed at was being a hero."

"Maybe I don't want the hero," Draco said, and again his response was too quick. "No, I'm sure I don't want the hero, except insomuch as he's part of you. And what I hear from you now is a catalogue of impulsive moments and cowardly ones—"

"The worst of me."

Draco looked him straight in the eye. "If that's the worst of you, then I should burn myself alive."

The broken man began to tremble, but he did not allow himself to shatter, because that had already happened. "I've lost my best friends," he said. "One of them thinks I'm sick and she's gone to tell the world, and one of them can't accept that I'm gay. And didn't I deserve to lose them? I lied to them for ten years, and when I did come out, I told you first, and then many other strangers. I should have told them first. At least if I go away and become someone else, I can't hurt them anymore."

Draco drew a deep breath. He'd spoken the right words so far, but he doubted his good luck could last. He had to say the right thing because he had consciously chosen to do it, not because he was hitting out randomly.

"I want to help you face them," he said.

"Of course," said Harry, and in his voice was so much pain that the corners of Draco's eyes stung. "You would want to harm them. You always have wanted to harm the Weasleys. And I hurt them further by falling in love with someone they have reason to distrust." His voice recoiled, once again, on himself. This version of Harry hated only one person in the world, Draco knew, and it was not him.

"I want to help you win their friendship back," Draco said.

Harry froze and stared at him.

"I want to help you do everything," Draco said. "Argue with me, heal me, make up for your mistakes. Find the best way to face the world as the owner of Metamorphosis and a hundred masks, if Granger really does tell everyone." Was the pressure of the magic against his chest lessening? He thought it was. He forced his left foot up a step and managed to relax it so it lay flat. "Make love to and with me. Sit at the Weasleys' dinner table and manage to do no worse than scowl at a thoughtless comment. Outface the nightmares. Come to peace with yourself and *keep your personas.*

"Harry, what you've done is brilliant. You might think I only admire you because I'm a Slytherin, but it's more than that. So *dazzling.* An art played out under everyone's noses for your own private joy and satisfaction, whilst at the same time giving so much to others. And you master the personas, keep them under control and sustain them." *Most of the time.* Given the loathing with which Harry spoke of himself for hurting Weasley and Granger, Draco thought the shattering blow must have been the loss of his friends. "And you chose to let me into that secret first. *Me.*"

"I should have told them first—"

"Why? I was the one who was there, and I was the one you owed the truth to, and I was the one

you were beginning to fall in love with."

"That was a mistake. I don't deserve—"

"Maybe just this part of you doesn't deserve it, no," Draco said fiercely. "This part of you is *small*, Harry. You're wide. You contain multitudes. You've shown me that. Choosing to be just one of them would do all of you a disservice."

"I—I could become someone who remembers most of them—"

"And that would destroy Harry Potter. You announced your intention of doing that." His legs were moving now, carrying him closer and closer, by nothing more than an effort of his own will. Now he was in front of Harry, framing his face with his hands, and those beautiful green eyes were staring at him in shock. "I don't want any of you to die. Not a whit, not a one. I don't want you to change simply to have me in your life. I don't want you to lie to me just because you might hurt me if you don't."

"I could fail you." Whispered, choking words.

"I don't think you will. And if you do, then we'll storm and scream about it for a while, and you'll apologize, and we'll go back to balancing again." Draco drew in a breath that dragged against his teeth, let it out. "I know you won't ever be stable or sane in the sense Granger probably means. I'm prepared to accept that, and more, to love you for it. I'm prepared to let you weather the moments when you blame yourself, and to weather, for myself, the moments when you change personas. I won't like all of them, no, but you don't like everything about me, do you?"

"You're so stubborn," Harry murmured, which could have been an answer.

"There you are," Draco said. He combed his fingers through Harry's hair, gathering up a palm of it and tugging him forwards enough so that their brows rested together. He could feel the scar lying between them, and wondered how many people had ever touched it. "Harry, don't die or go away before I get the chance to meet all of you. Please."

He floated deep in a stinking sea of blackness—

And then he blinked and was in the light, shaking, uncertain, nervous, the Harry who had guarded the wards during the party and supervised the nonviolent attacks against their attackers and walked into the middle of the entrance hall beneath them to tell everyone he was gay and loved Draco.

His hold was fragile yet. He could feel the personas swarming beneath the surface, and the dark Pensieve called from above him, compelling as a lost child. But he was there, and this was—this was the persona he liked best, he thought, with support from the others.

*This is who I would have chosen to be if I were honest,* he thought suddenly, in wonder. *This is the only one big enough to hold all of me.*

Even if he had plunged into the dark Pensieve, he could not have rejected Draco, or Ron, or Hermione, or all the past that had gone into making him. He flinched from the memories of his nineteenth year, but they were not all of who he was. He was Dave, and Amanda, and Horace, and Brian—Brian, who did not want to die—and the weak self-loathing Harry and the meek one whom his friends knew and the proud one who had faced the press when he had to and the one in front of Draco now.

For so long, the only thought that had taken place in his mind in regards to his personas was, *I am all of them.* And he had hugged his secret to himself, secure in the knowledge that no one else could accept it.

But Draco had accepted it, and then he had taken the thought and turned it around for Harry.

*All of them are me.*

It was—

He had brilliance, and cleverness, and strength, and bodyguard instincts, and Potions knowledge, and self-confidence, and the ability to make others happy. They might be incarnated in other people, but they belonged to him. They had come from him in the first place. If he was all of these things, so many of them so good, then Harry Potter did not have to die.

The world was made anew.

He grabbed Draco and squeezed him tight, tight, shutting eyes too hot for tears.

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Chapter: 39

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Nine—An Actor and a Liar*

"I want to tell you what happened to me to make me start Metamorphosis."

Those were the first words Draco heard after Harry began to act uneasy in his embrace, and they shifted the balance of tension. Suddenly he was the one who felt he might fall backwards down the stairs if a pair of arms weren't holding him up. He lifted his head and stared at Harry. Harry

looked back, and despite the wariness around the edges of his eyes and the sharp lines surrounding his mouth, it was unmistakably Harry, the same man who had spoken to him about Metamorphosis after Draco awakened from his injury.

"You don't have to," Draco said, and then wondered why in the world he had spoken *those* words. Of course he wanted to know why Harry had chosen the extreme tactic of his personas combined with disdain for his original self, instead of simple reclusiveness. "I want you to tell me because you've actually chosen to do so, not because you think you owe me another debt." He had regained his composure now, and stepped backwards, gently withdrawing from Harry's arms. "Besides, don't you want to stop Granger before she reports you to the Healers at St. Mungo's?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "The hospital has someone on duty during the night as well," he murmured. "She's probably already told them." A shadow darkened the back of his eyes, and Draco blinked; it was like standing in a room from which all the sunlight had suddenly vanished. "Besides, I can handle her, but my plan for doing so depends on my remaining calm and apparently untroubled until she appears.

"As for this being my choice—" He reached out and hooked an arm around Draco's neck, drawing him smoothly closer. In moments, their foreheads rested against one another's, and their breaths mingled. Draco found himself shivering. The mere gentleness of Harry's touch could do that to him.

*If my father could see me now,* he thought, but that failed to break the strange mood brewing within him, as he had intended it to. He did wish Lucius could see him at the moment; that might make him acknowledge defeat at last.

"I've never been more certain of what I want to do in twelve years, since I killed Voldemort," Harry said. "I've never been more certain of my *self* in twelve years. Let me do this, Draco. I want to."

And that was what Draco had been waiting for, after all. He relaxed, and raised his hands to lightly encircle Harry's wrists.

"All right," he whispered.

Harry doubted that any of his words would be enough to really convey his guilt and self-loathing to Draco, particularly when they were seated in front of a fire, in comfortable chairs, with glasses of Firewhiskey in their hands. One of his personas, Jocelyn the Amazing, was a fine storyteller, but she would not be able to reveal these experiences; they had not happened to *her.*

Slowly, his eyes on the flames more often than they were on Draco's face—if his words inspired pity, Harry did not want to know it—he told the stories. There were many of them. Any one of them by itself was a small occurrence, not sufficient to break his determination to simply *exist*

after the war, and avoid the mantle of hero again. He wanted to live and love among his friends and family. That was *all*.

But he could not have that. Because, one after another, his friends and family asked favors from him, normal favors, small ones, not because he was Harry Potter but because they valued and knew the real him.

And he failed them. Each and every one of them.

He could not be the husband and father he'd always envisioned, because he wasn't straight and couldn't marry Ginny. Ginny had taken the news well after her initial fit of weeping. She'd cleaned herself up, nodded to Harry, and agreed that they should keep Harry's orientation a secret from her family, with the exception of Ron; it would only trouble them and make them uncertain as to how to react to Harry.

But in the moments when she wept, her head against his chest, her tears making the cloth damp and warm in uncomfortable ways, and whispered that she had only dreamed of marrying him for years—that she hadn't wanted many other things because that was the one desire for her—Harry had felt guilt stab him. The wound it opened stayed there, stinging.

His life had cost his parents theirs. His attendance at Hogwarts and the way he looked had meant pain every single day for Snape. Dumbledore's love for him had cost the old man peace of mind and had made him make mistakes with regards to the prophecy and the way he fought Voldemort.

Harry had hoped, when the war ended, that simple things about him, private things, which should affect only himself and the people he loved most, would stop exacting a price.

He shouldn't have been such a fool.

Costing Ginny her dream was only the first of the prices other people paid. George had asked Harry to accompany him to Fred's grave. George visited it more than anyone else in the family thought was healthy. Of course, George blamed them for trying to forget about their grief by avoiding the cemetery entirely.

But Harry had a violent nightmare about Fred's death the day before he was supposed to go with George, and he'd hidden in his bedroom for hours, vomiting and trembling. He hadn't owled George to tell him he wouldn't be coming.

He'd received a Howler in return, and then a much quieter, sadder letter saying that George understood if the trauma was too much for Harry; it was too much for him, sometimes. Still, Harry could have *told* him before making George think, if only for the space of a day, that promises didn't matter to him.

Another open wound. Harry and George still weren't entirely easy around each other now, and

never would be.

Neville had asked Harry to tend to a special plant of his whilst he went on holiday with his grandmother. Harry had forgotten about it completely, and the plant had withered and died. Neville hadn't even scolded him, but Harry never forgot the devastation on his face when he came to the door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and saw, past Harry's shoulder, the plant sitting in a brown mass of crumbling leaves on the shelf where he'd placed it.

Kingsley had asked Harry to attend one Ministry party, small and intimate and filled mostly with people Harry already knew and who would respect his privacy, as a favor to him. Harry had made his plans to go, he really had, and even chose a set of formal dress robes that would suit him, with Hermione's help and approval. Then he'd had a panic attack after a score of reporters working together somehow rooted through the wards around Grimmauld Place and cornered him in his study, yelling so many questions so fast that they faded into one stream of noise in Harry's ears. He hadn't attended the party just like he hadn't visited Fred's grave with George, and he'd embarrassed Kingsley in front of several prominent guests, some of whom had since decided that they distrusted the Minister in general.

There was no end to the consequences of small actions. Harry had known the truth of it before that year, but he had never had such heavy proof.

When he did try to make up for his mistakes, to prove to himself that he really wasn't as cowardly as all that, his actions skewed; things went more and more wrong. He had visited two of the last Death Eaters held prisoner before they went to trial, because his panic attacks and fevered memories of the war were so ridiculous. He had faced Voldemort without flinching, he hadn't even *suffered* torture in the way that Hermione or other Muggleborns had; how in the world had the war come to affect him so strongly?

But one of the Death Eaters had a second wand hidden away, and he risked drawing it when he saw Harry. The first thing he did was free his companion. Harry had dueled with them both and killed them; a flash and roar of magic through his body had knocked him out, and he woke up to find them dead. He had tried to convince himself he'd killed them in self-defense, but when one of them didn't have a wand, the words rang hollow. He'd sneaked out of the Ministry, and left Kingsley with a mess to clean up, and himself with the conviction that he must never allow his own magic to get so far out-of-control again.

And he'd murdered two people.

That might be the wound that went deepest, the one that still woke him up sometimes in the middle of the night when he was being Harry Potter. Harry Potter was the killer of the Dark Lord, maybe, but what he really was was a murderer. That action was so easily avoidable, along with most of the things he'd done to those who loved him. Why had he done it?

Other failures stung him that year. He'd been in Diagon Alley when a child fell from a roof, and he hadn't been able to stop her in time. What good was magic if it couldn't do such a simple

thing? Bill had asked him to try and heal the scars on his face when Harry admitted he was now more powerful than he had been during the war; Harry couldn't do that either, and the disappointment on Bill's face hurt him so deeply that he Apparated home without another word. Mrs. Weasley had shoved him together with Ginny, and Harry couldn't come up with convincing lies—then—or tell her the truth without dissolving her into a storm of tears. So he hovered awkwardly between stupid words and silence, and Mrs. Weasley cried anyway when she realized Harry was lying to her.

Owls poured in every day, asking for help with diseases, collapsed wards, Dementor attacks, sudden and inexplicable loss of magic, reversing Dark curses—all those things the wizarding world had a firm faith Harry Potter could cure. And Harry really could have helped with some of them. He'd scattered dozens of Dementors at a time with his Patronus. But it was never enough. There were always other people who had died in the meantime, and the press and admirers who followed Harry inevitably got in the way and curtailed what he could do.

Rationally, he knew he should forgive himself, knew that he wasn't the hero everyone had always imagined he was and that he had decided not to go in for Auror work anyway. But there was one truth that whispered in his head in the middle of the night, over and over again until it almost drove him mad. Maybe he could have done everything that needed to be done, saved everyone, if he had taken up the Elder Wand. Was his refusal to do so actually the good act he had always assumed it was? Or was he merely being selfish? He could take the Elder Wand out *sometimes*, and then put it back to rest in Dumbledore's grave. Why wasn't he doing it? He had never been someone to respect the rules before.

Mistake after mistake. If he had been normal after the war, then he could have said he simply couldn't be perfect. But here was his late-blossoming magic, mighty, faultless if he wielded it correctly, to mock his assertions and always remind him he *did* have the power to change things; he'd only let exhaustion and fear overcome him, and those were not good excuses.

Who was more evil, the person who actually committed vile acts or the person who saw those vile acts happening and wouldn't lift a hand to stop them?

And so, in the end, Harry had created a number of perfect selves, personas who could do their jobs and give people what they wanted, because they were limited. Harry Potter was a pathetic, magically weak recluse who had killed the Dark Lord by good luck and could provide a sympathetic listening ear to his friends. Gerald was the trained bodyguard who didn't have to be good at listening or at Quidditch. Jocelyn the Amazing told her stories with a laugh and a wink, and if she wasn't amazing at ducking and dodging curses, no one held it against her.

Metamorphosis worked miracles. No one asked them of Harry, but he could still perform them on a limited basis. And that had saved his life and his sanity.

At the moment, Draco was very glad he had extended empathy to only a small number of people throughout his life. He had been flinching almost constantly since the beginning of Harry's story,

and it hurt now as though his muscles were spasming.

*You know that's not what hurts.*

Draco leaned his forehead against his glass of Firewhiskey and was still for long moments when Harry finished the recitation, until he heard an anxious shifting across from him and looked up. Harry had clenched his hands together and was pulling steadily on his fingers. Draco knew he had to say something soon, or Harry would begin doubting whether he should have revealed this at all. Perhaps he would even think that Draco was too disgusted to spend any more time with him.

He leaned over and put a hand on Harry's knee. At once the fear-edged green eyes focused on him and Harry went utterly still. Draco wondered if he was still talking to the same man who told him the story, but he doubted it mattered. Harry had listened to him even when he longed to disappear altogether, when he was in the thrall of the most self-hating persona he had. He would listen to Draco now.

"I can only imagine what it would have been like, because it wouldn't have affected me the same way," he told Harry quietly. "I've never been that concerned about failing the people I love, and I didn't have a heroic reputation to live up to. But—if what you suffered was even a tenth of what I did when I realized you were in danger of losing yourself tonight, I can only shudder. And I'm sorry."

Harry said softly, immediately, "That's enough. Hearing that you *can* imagine it, and not try to laugh it off as an overreaction or tell me I should be rational and not affected by it, is enough." He stood and came to a stop sitting on the arm of Draco's chair, bending his head until their lips brushed.

Draco would have liked to pursue talk about those other reactions. Were they the ones Harry feared from Weasley and Granger? Were they the ones he'd actually received if he'd tried to talk about what had happened to him when he was nineteen?

But as Harry pressed him backwards more insistently, Draco decided he could let the conversation go for now. He and Harry would have other chances to talk, something in severe doubt when he'd first Apparated to the house. He set his glass of Firewhiskey blindly on the floor, and thought his leg might have knocked it over a moment later. When Harry put his focus into a kiss, Draco felt as if he were caught in the midst of open flame. It wasn't the skill that mattered. It was the *attention*, the sure and certain knowledge that a dragon could have barreled into the room right now and it would still be secondary to Draco in Harry's attention.

"I want to make love to you," Harry whispered to him. "Will you let me do that?"

Draco stiffened for just a moment. He remembered the way Harry had made love to him in the guise of Brian, distantly, as if he were a machine using his body to make Draco feel good and no more.

Harry kissed him more frantically, sliding his tongue around the back of Draco's teeth, and whispered, "Not like before. Not anything like before. I was still trying to prevent you from finding out who I was then. My focus was still on myself, even though I pretended it was on your pleasure. Now, I want to show you how much I really *do* appreciate you."

Draco nodded and raised his hand to brush his fingertips along the back of Harry's skull, pushing through the thick hair until he touched skin. "How can I say no?" he asked.

Harry sat back at once, and stared him in the eye. "You always can," he said. "If it ever becomes too much for you, too painful, too close to your heart, you can walk away from me. I'll handle it."

"*Such* a liar," Draco said, and dug his fingertips deeper, making Harry close his eyes and whimper. Draco relaxed. That was enough for him to be sure he was affecting Harry as well when he touched him.

"Take me to bed."

Harry's hands shook when he undressed Draco, and that was something he never would have allowed ordinarily. But it was all right now, because Draco had heard the deepest and at the same time the weakest secrets of his soul, and hadn't rejected him.

Harry kissed his way down Draco's back. Draco lifted his hips lazily towards him. He was thrusting into the bed with every other movement, but with no more than desultory interest, as if he cared more about how Harry's hands felt on his skin than the sheets against his cock.

*That isn't possible, but it's a beautiful illusion.*

Harry spent so much time learning Draco's body with his hands and tongue that he lost track of time entirely. The world seemed to lengthen and run around him, soft as strings of stretched cheese or butter. He urged Draco onto his back at last and lapped at the salt and sweat in his groin. Draco huffed a laugh that made Harry wonder if he was ticklish there. He hadn't noticed that at Clothilde Castle.

Harry lifted his head and met Draco's gaze. Draco's eyes had gone sleepy and dazed in the same way Harry's sense of time had. Harry felt the air around them crackle and shift as the magic that could connect them reached out. He broke the enchantment with a little shake of his head. For the first time *he*, instead of Brian, made love to Draco, he wanted no artificial conduits between them.

He used lubrication as slowly as he'd done everything else, keeping his eyes on the flex of Draco's muscles and the bob of his neck as he tossed his head back on the pillow, rolling his entire body downwards on Harry's hand. Harry let his fingers spread wide, play and wander, until

finally Draco clenched his thighs hard, trapping his hand. His eyes were dusky gray, almost frightening in the intensity of their lust.

"Enough teasing," Draco said, his words so soft and hoarse Harry wouldn't have made them out if there had been any other sound in the room.

Harry smiled, and stood. When he guided himself into Draco, Draco winced. Harry held still and tried not to think of this as yet another mistake he would have to add to the long tally of them he kept in his head.

*Draco chose to be with me. And hurting him slightly isn't unforgivable. He would be rolling out of the bed and grabbing his clothes right now if it was. Draco wouldn't let himself be used like that just to soothe my pride.*

Sure enough, Draco nodded a moment later, and though he had Harry wait one more time, he never grunted or shrieked with pain. When Harry did pause and try to let him have some more time, Draco shook his head and stiffened the muscles in his legs. A sharp gust of pleasure blew through Harry, weakening him so he almost slumped on Draco's chest. He licked his lips and realized he was panting. He *hadn't* realized until now how much the mask of the persona distanced him from his body and kept him from feeling simple physical pleasure.

"Move," Draco said, and the single, sole voice in Harry's head, the voice of his greedy and demanding body, echoed him.

It wasn't perfect, wasn't the miracle of skill and technique that he'd used in the past to bring his partners to orgasm without touching them. He did have to wank Draco as well, and then his hand moved too fast and slipped off, and he left bruises on Draco's hip, and he had to control the impulse to thrust madly and wildly until he found his own completion without having enough care for Draco.

But the orgasm swept all thought from his mind just as the one in Clothilde Castle had, and when he did drop to rest on Draco's chest and close his eyes for a moment, he felt as he had during the moments when he was speaking the real truth to Ron and Hermione—hollowed, empty at last of the guilt he had carried so far and for so long.

Draco grunted again. Harry rolled to the side and gathered him in his arms. Draco started some protest, maybe about the stickiness that clung to his chest, but the hollow feeling had dissolved into weariness, and Harry fell straight into sleep without enough of a pause between to evaluate the complaint.

Granger came to the front door the next morning with two Healers behind her.

Harry met them and invited them in, speaking in what Draco felt was an inappropriately happy voice all the way down the entrance hall. Draco was seated at Harry's table in rather

tatterdemalion borrowed robes, sipping a cuppa; he rose when he heard the voices and leaned against the doorframe to watch.

The nearest Healer had just refused Harry's offer of tea. He drew his wand now and aimed it at Harry. Harry raised his eyebrows and held patiently still as the man cast several diagnostic spells at him. With each one that flashed with clear and radiant light when it was done, the first Healer looked more perplexed, the second Healer more intrigued, and Granger more upset.

"Stop *lying*, Harry!" she snapped at last. "I know you're sick, and I've told the Healers the truth!"

"Hermione." Harry glanced at her, and Draco was grateful to see that his smile did turn brittle around the edges. He would have been concerned for Harry's mental health if Harry could confront her as if nothing had happened. "That was your interpretation of the evidence I gave you. I can't lie to magic. Could you let me tell the Healers what happened?"

"Do tell us, Mr. Potter," said the one who hadn't been casting the diagnostic spells. She was a tall, deep-voiced woman who examined Harry's face as if that would tell her something the spells couldn't.

Harry smiled at her. "It's true I do work for Metamorphosis," he said. "I've been one of their actors, under various names, for some time now. It was a way to escape publicity." He leaned nearer confidentially. "I'm sure you must remember one of the times I had to come in for basic health care and was trailed by half a dozen reporters who thought they had all the right in the world to know what was wrong with me."

The Healers' faces stiffened. Draco swallowed tea to prevent laughing. Harry had judged them correctly after only a few minutes of study. They would remember and resent the interference Harry's publicity caused in their daily routines and the care of other patients, and that deflected their attention effectively from the Harry standing in front of them.

"But I only told Hermione that I ran the whole of Metamorphosis to spare a friend of mine, the man who actually runs it and needed some time to flee the country and make his business a bit harder to find." Harry gave Granger a disappointed glance. "I'll admit, that you *believed* it came as a surprise. But you've believed my lies over the years and haven't listened when I told you the truth, so I don't really know why I was startled."

Draco stuffed a fist over his mouth this time. Those were Harry's cutting words, the only ones he could deliver to Granger in the circumstances, and if she were wise she would listen to them.

"There's a long distance between being an actor for Metamorphosis and being crazy enough to act as a hundred different people." Harry faced the Healers and lifted an eyebrow. "Really, if I were like that, wouldn't one of your diagnostic spells have shown it? Madness can't be hidden so easily."

The second Healer cast a spell at him without answering. It also flashed clear. She smiled. "That

would have shown any hiding personalities in his mind who thought of themselves as separate people and whom he didn't know about," she said with some satisfaction. She glanced sideways at Granger. "Ma'am, I can understand why you were concerned, but there's absolutely nothing wrong with him. You must have misunderstood, or simply believed the lie he wanted you to believe."

Harry looked at Granger with open, shining, sane eyes. Draco sipped tea again. The spell, of course, was not designed to reveal separate personas who all knew about each other, and whom the true owner of the body controlled.

And Draco really shouldn't have been so worried. Harry was an actor and a liar. It was no wonder he had been content to let Granger come ahead when he knew he could make *her* sound like the mad one.

"But he *is* Metamorphosis," said Granger. Her eyes had started to grow cloudy, though, and Draco knew she was remembering the way Harry had lied to her for ten years and hadn't let her notice. Would she really notice the difference if he claimed he was telling the truth and then didn't?

Draco strode up the corridor and curved an arm around Harry's shoulders. "I do think that's enough," he said. "Harry's not mad, except in the way he spends his life serving people who don't deserve it, and there's no spell to find low self-esteem."

He was speaking both to Harry and Granger with those last words. Harry nodded against his chest. Granger looked at him with a tremble to her lip that said she couldn't decide between hurt and surprise, and then looked away.

"If he was as you described," the male Healer said to Granger, "he wouldn't be able to talk to us like this, let alone hide it." He turned away then, and his companion followed him to the door. Draco heard the sharp crack as they both Apparated. He was sure they would tell this story and laugh over it for days, but at least the secret of Metamorphosis was unlikely to spread far from them.

*If it tries, then Harry can appear as the Manager again and 'prove' his existence to anyone who cares to inquire.*

"I know you were telling the truth," Granger whispered.

"You know no such thing," Harry said. "You haven't listened to me in ten years. Maybe part of that is my fault, for not making you listen—"

Draco controlled the impulse to shake him.

"But you also didn't want to look." Harry shrugged. "If you try to spread this story further, I'll deny it. And I *can* deny it, and prove the separate existence of the wizard who owns

Metamorphosis and his employees."

"I don't understand, Harry," Granger said, and there were big tears in her eyes. "Don't you want to be our friend anymore?"

"If you make me choose between your friendship and my own freedom and sanity," Harry said, "you're not going to win."

Granger walked slowly up the entrance hall, looking back several times. When she Apparated, it was with a muted, chastened little pop. Harry sighed and shifted his shoulders, then looked back at Draco.

"Thank you for being here," he said, "and for reminding me who else I wanted to protect." He kissed Draco's chin.

"Which persona were you using?" Draco asked, because he hadn't seen Harry's face for some of the conversation and wasn't sure.

"All of them," said Harry, and gave him a smile that was extraordinarily sweet. "After all, they're all me."

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Chapter: 40

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty—Brave New World*

"Harry. We need to talk."

Harry glanced up and smiled at Kingsley. The Minister had come in quietly, so quietly that Harry wouldn't have seen him if he didn't have ten years of training at noticing those things other people didn't want him to notice. Kingsley had Apparated in beyond the field, like all the reporters invited to Harry and Draco's afternoon press conference, and walked in without guards. He wore plain black robes, which a closer observer might recognize as Ministry cut, but that proved nothing, given how many employees the Ministry had. He'd also used a faint glamour to cast a shimmering haze over his features, enough that someone else would turn away under the impression that he'd stood too much in the sunlight to be clearly seen. Had he managed to disguise his walk, his way of standing rigidly when he came to a halt—an indication that he was very angry—or the Hit Wizards who shadowed him as guards, Harry might not have seen him.

"I'm not surprised, Minister." Harry leaped lightly off the small hillock on which he'd stood to receive some informal questions and show interested parties that he was actually here. They occupied the same field the party had taken place in. Harry saw no reason to abandon it, not when it made a beautiful setting for photographs and still contained the defenses set up to protect his people. "I'll walk apart with you, and we can talk."

He caught Draco's eye briefly. Draco was on another hillock, sitting instead of standing as Harry had done, his voice so crisp and precise that the posture simply made him resemble a king on a throne instead of making him look informal. Draco's eyes were hooded as he nodded back. His wand moved in a swift flash from hand to hand, as if he were merely passing it across to warn the people who stood beneath him that he was ready with spells if they should attack. Harry had recognized the gesture, however, and felt the slight sting as the Locator Charm grabbed the hem of his robes.

He turned away from the hillock and walked along beside Kingsley. The Hit Wizards had melted away from them, Harry was glad to see. He'd already had to handle three people intent on disrupting the press conference, several protestors, and a few of Nusante's group so nervous and defensive that they would have caused more trouble than the protestors. The last thing he needed was to have someone else notice dangerous-looking strangers closing in on Harry and launch an ill-considered attack.

"I saw the pictures in the paper this morning," said Kingsley at last, long past the moments when Harry had thought he would begin speaking. Of course, he recognized that intimidation tactic, having used it himself, and had paced on in happy silence, committing the shine of the sun on the grass to memory. It was truly a fair summer's day, with a high and brilliantly blue sky and enough of a breeze to protect against heat. The trees that had been decorated with lanterns and fairy lights last night bent before the breeze like dancers now.

*It was only last night. Only one night for the world to change.*

"They were good, weren't they?" Harry said mildly. "Therris is a passable writer, I suppose, but I think he missed his calling when he decided to be a writer instead of a photographer."

Kingsley turned on one heel to face him, moving with a grace that reminded Harry forcibly that this man had been an Auror, as well as an accomplished member of the Order of the Phoenix, and the survivor of several battlefields. Harry met his eyes and didn't move, didn't back down, didn't alter a line of his face or a lash of his eye. He *did* quietly flick his wand hand and use a small bit of magic to remove the glamour on Kingsley's face.

Still staring at him, the Minister of Magic said, "You are disrupting the peace of wizarding Britain irreparably. You've broken at least a dozen laws I know of, laws that have been on the books a good long time without being enforced, but which certain officials are *urging* me to enforce in the face of your disrespect for order—"

"They were urging before that," Harry said quietly.

Kingsley's eyebrows came together; Harry couldn't be sure if that was because of the information he wasn't supposed to notice or because he'd interrupted. "What?" Kingsley hissed at him.

"There's a group calling itself Counterstrike," Harry said. "Started and funded by Lucius Malfoy, though I'm sure he's disassociated himself from them on paper. They attacked the first meeting at which this group met. Gay wizards and witches, doing nothing but gathering in a manor house to discuss the finer points of politics and what they would have to do to get the wizarding world to accept them. The attackers included Aurors, and they were using deadly force—Dark curses—against people who had not attacked them."

"That raid," Kingsley said, "was made based on information that the meeting would explode in violence."

"Who provided that information?" Harry asked quietly.

Kingsley merely looked at him.

"Even if the meeting had exploded in violence, shouldn't the Aurors have waited until it had?" Harry asked. "And is using Dark Arts against peaceful protestors really a measure required to maintain the peace and order of the wizarding world?"

"No Dark Arts were used."

Harry looked closely at Kingsley. He could make out muscles twitching in his jaw, though he was doing his best to hold his face steady and present a blank mask. His eyes had a touch too much white around the edges. And Harry could hear the edge of panic that had blurred his voice on the words *Dark Arts*.

Gerald's voice murmured in the back of his head, *Not a threat, and not an accomplice to the threat. But someone who does not want to believe what you tell him.*

"I'm willing to give you my Pensieve memories of the attack," Harry said. "I recognized a flaying curse, the Bone-Breaker Curse, Haristo's Dazzling Lightning, the Mind-Bender, and several others."

Kingsley's muscles clamped one by one: a muscle in the side of his face, one in the side of his neck, one in his right arm. Harry thought they were the remnants of a gesture that once would have brought his wand up into prime casting position. He hadn't often seen Kingsley in battle, and couldn't say for certain. "You *were* there," he whispered.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You were the one who disabled our Aurors."

"Yes." Harry and Draco had already discussed this, and agreed that Harry would take credit for the potion Draco had thrown which had erased the attackers' memories, if need be. Kingsley was unlikely to question it, since he had been so sure Harry was present because of the use of powerful magic in the first place.

"And you tell me this and expect me to be—what? Merciful?" Kingsley's voice had become harsh, and he took a step towards Harry unconsciously, as if he'd forgotten who he was looking at and imagined he could intimidate him. "You attacked Ministry workers who were doing their jobs—"

"Raiding a peaceful gathering," said Harry, and placed the stinging scorn that Brian would have felt for a man who tried to defend stupid actions in his voice. "Using Dark Arts. Acting on the orders of someone who wasn't you, if Counterstrike told them to use Dark Arts, or acting on their own prejudice, which isn't a good sign that they can control themselves in any situation where they might have to *defend* my people from attack. Attacking another peaceful gathering last night, when they came through my wards—"

*I was right,* he thought, as he saw Kingsley's eyes widen slightly and his nostrils flare. *I was right, and the risk was worth it. Draco owes me a blowjob.*

"They were not ordered here last night," Kingsley said. His voice was calm because he was exercising immense control to keep it so.

Harry answered in the same tone. "Not by you."

The Minister stood very still and shut his eyes for a moment only, giving himself the time and silence he needed to deal with this surprise. Then he looked at Harry again, and waited. Harry nodded slightly; keeping silent this time would be counterproductive for all of them.

"We will not stop this struggle," Harry said. "We are willing to change how we wage it. The first demonstration, the play in the Theater-in-the-Round, was a mistake in some ways. The eruption of violence was expected, but not enough was done to guard against it—"

"There was a spell that prevented people from using very dangerous magic," Kingsley said, frowning.

Harry bowed from the waist. "My doing, yes. From the start I've been as concerned about the safety of innocent bystanders and those who are stupid enough to hold outdated and irrational prejudices as I have been about those who only want the freedom to live and love as they choose."

Unexpectedly, Kingsley chuckled, a dry, rustling sound. "You can make insults sound almost charming, Harry. That wasn't a talent you had when I last knew you."

*Which of me did you know?* Harry smiled, if you could call a twitch of the lower lip a smile.

"Minister, someone within your own organization is reaching your Aurors and twisting them into weapons for his own purposes. He *wants* open violence. He knows exactly how to play on the biases of those who serve under you, biases you want to cater to by ordering us tame and silent. And I know there were disturbances this morning because of the photos in the *Daily Prophet.* Tell me, though. How many of those disturbances were begun by someone who identified as gay or lesbian?"

Kingsley shook his head. He didn't need to say the words.

"So." Harry put his hands together, pointing his fingers slightly at Kingsley. "On one side, you have people doing something you may personally find repugnant, led by a friend you may consider traitorous, but who are doing everything they can to keep their rebellion peaceful, and who are willing to work with the Ministry. Gatherings will be public. Magic will be used to avoid injury, even to our enemies. We aren't breaking modern laws, only old ones that no one cared about until recently." Harry sharpened his eyes until he was studying every shadow of expression on Kingsley's face, every flick of his fingers, every hitch of his breathing. "On the other side is a group who doesn't care about corrupting the Ministry or about the distrust they breed and the violence they cause, as long as they can stop us from dancing and kissing and protesting in public. They've shown no inclination to come to you and explain their motives or their cause. Who would you trust more?"

"It is not a matter of personal trust," Kingsley said. "It's a matter of who my public will stand with and which side will, in the *long run*, cause more violence. You spark violence simply by existing—"

Harry laughed at him. "And so did the Order of the Phoenix," he said. "Yet I never heard you use that as an argument for laying down our wands and surrendering the war to Voldemort."

Kingsley hissed between his teeth. "Do you have any concrete information about Counterstrike for me? Who runs it, who is contacting my Aurors and persuading them to head out on missions that could have devastated them?"

Harry shook his head. "No. But you must have wondered why their violence started so suddenly, and so quickly after Draco Malfoy came out in public."

"Tell me."

"Lucius Malfoy started this organization in order to strike back at his son and force him into silence and shame again," Harry said. "That was the original reason. What Counterstrike might have become beyond that, I can't tell you. But think about this, Kingsley. Intimidation. Fear. Hatred. And an old man's mad stubbornness. Glorious ideals they're fighting for, aren't they?"

Kingsley's nostrils were fluttering a little faster than usual. Someone else would not have noticed it, but Harry, with the twin advantages of his knowledge of Kingsley and his observation skills, did. "I told you, my main concern is that those people, mad though they might be, have more

support in the wizarding world than your group does."

"I don't expect to change minds overnight," Harry said. "But I don't think most of the people who find homosexuality disgusting will find it worth their while to fight a *war* over it. I'm concerned Counterstrike will push them into thinking that, and give them the outrage and the propaganda necessary to keep a war running."

He paused for just a moment. It would be appropriate for him to do so before he said something as deadly serious as his next words, so Kingsley shouldn't suspect anything. In reality, he was gathering his own strength and courage.

*As we agreed, Draco,* he thought, and briefly wished he had the connection with Draco he'd had with Voldemort, so he'd have a chance of touching his mind.

"If it comes to that," he said, "if the Ministry doesn't care that Counterstrike is corrupting its own people, if laws are abandoned and they're allowed to commit murder and use Dark magic on us and get away with it because the Ministry is too afraid of the widespread public disruptions that *might* happen, then I'm prepared. My people might not be, but I am. Even Draco might not be, and he advised me against this course." He looked at Kingsley and let his magic rise around him.

Kingsley shivered; Harry had deliberately made his magic cold. Ice crystals formed around Kingsley's lips and earlobes, not even struggling with the summer heat. A small cloud formed over them and snowflakes began to whirl down. Harry dropped the temperature lower and lower, until Kingsley gave in and cast a Warming Charm. Harry watched his face, and waited for the moment when he figured out that charms couldn't fight Harry's unnatural winter. And Harry was doing this wandlessly, and without breaking a sweat.

A moment more, for the realization of what that power must mean to settle deep into Kingsley's gut.

Then Harry said quietly, "I will fight Counterstrike on my own if I must. If I see that no one prevents them from using violence against us and no one cares to do so, I'll change my mind and value their lives less than the lives of people who stand with me." A pause, and then a slow, gentle, impressive speech, the more frightening for its gentleness. "I have the magic to identify those who believe deeply and imperatively that homosexuality is wrong, and will never change their minds. I have the magic, as well, to hurt them in commonplace accidents, in such a way that their pain would never be traced back to me."

Kingsley stared at him, his face gray.

"I don't want to do this," Harry said. "I don't *want* to fight a war. I told you that. But what you're essentially saying is that I should allow people like me, people who love their own sex, to be slaughtered, and put in Azkaban if they dare to lift a hand to defend themselves, because otherwise there might be riots. That is *not acceptable.* I will *not allow it.*" The cold deepened until Kingsley was shivering violently. "I wouldn't threaten you if I had any other choice. But I

don't see that I have any other choice."

And then he waited, watching Kingsley in what would look like glacial patience, awaiting his decision.

The Minister inclined his head. His eyes were wide, but his voice didn't hold the fear that Harry had expected—or, at least, it was a different kind of fear. "Harry. Don't follow Voldemort's path, or Grindelwald's. Don't become a Dark Lord. It's not worth it."

Harry felt a great wavering warmth well up from his heart. *He's concerned for* me. *He's been a friend all along, even though he might not have shown it in the best way or approved my every action.*

He didn't allow the warmth to destroy the plan, of course. He said, "I don't *want* to," and allowed his voice to ring with longing. "But, Kingsley, should I abandon all trust in the Ministry? Who are you going to arrest when the choice comes, my people or those who bring violence into the situation first? I need an answer, and so far it sounds to me as though you're relying on my morals to prevent me from acting as though my people's lives are worth something."

Kingsley shook his head. His face was nearly its normal color again. "Harry—it won't come to that."

"You'll act against Counterstrike?"

"If your information about what the Aurors have done under their direction is correct."

Harry smiled. "One of the Aurors who attacked last night was Ron. Ask him questions in a firm tone. You know he can't lie."

"Your best friend attacked you?" Kingsley stared at him.

"He thought I was under an enchantment." Harry snorted. "He believed it was the only reason I could love Draco." He looked up at Kingsley entreatingly. "Do you see what these irrational prejudices do to us?" he whispered. "Turn us against each other, make wizards the destroyers of their own friendships because of a disgust that has no foundation in reality."

Kingsley nodded. His eyes were bright and deep with thought. Then he turned and walked away from Harry without waiting for an answer. Harry eased the winter as he went, tucking his magic safely back into his body.

He had a small smile on his face, but if Kingsley glanced back, he would think that was satisfaction over having thrown the Minister.

He didn't know he had already faced Harry's most potent ability, his acting, and lost to it. Harry's magic wasn't powerful enough to identify all the wizards who hated homosexuality, much less to

destroy them. He doubted he could become a Dark Lord even if he wanted to.

But he had made a good show of it, and he had made his living in the past decade by knowing when a good show was all that was needed.

The press conference went well.

As they had agreed, Harry and Draco answered the questions alternately until the reporters and ordinary observers adapted to the pattern, then changed it. Draco answered two questions in a row, Harry three, and the questions became less accusatory and more general. The ones that were simply irrelevant or silly, such as how many children Draco and Harry had already corrupted, they both turned away from with smiles.

Draco sat with his head leaning back against a stone he'd conjured behind him, his body utterly relaxed, and watched as Harry calmly explained what, exactly, "the rebels" wanted. Freedom to demonstrate in public without harassment as long as they were also peaceful, freedom from persecution by laws no one had paid attention to in years, ideally freedom from the blinding fear and social ostracism that surrounded homosexuality at the moment. Harry had already admitted that he didn't expect to earn most of those things for years, but he did hope to demolish the opposition that was coming solely from those who couldn't abide the thought that Harry Potter was gay.

*The strange thing is that he might have handled the publicity well all these years, if he'd been able to lie like this.* The crowd was responding to Harry's words, listening instead of interrupting, accepting the bright, steady gaze of his eyes and his modest hand gestures as honesty instead of a calculated effect. *He could have made them leave him alone if he'd tried.*

Draco was not blind, however. He doubted Harry could have done this ten years ago, without the constant practice that Metamorphosis had given him. Even now, he was playing a part, and that was probably the only thing that allowed him to bear up under the scrutiny. He would play it again and again in the future, because neither of them thought this problem could be solved in a day.

But there would be a time when it didn't dominate their lives as it did now.

Draco smiled slightly. That would be the time when he could talk to Harry about his personas, meet more of them, determine quietly which ones were likely to escape control and which were detrimental to Harry's health, and talk about leaving them behind. He would never expect Harry to get rid of all his personas, since without them Harry as Draco loved him would not exist. On the other hand, neither should they take control away from him, and Horace Longbottom among others had the potential to do so.

And he could talk to Harry about doing some work for Malfoy's Machineries and other concerns that Draco wanted to start. Harry would probably be resistant at first. Draco fully intended to

frame it as Metamorphosis jobs if that was needed, and let Harry appear in any guise he wanted.

Draco felt his smile widen. The life ahead of him shone more brilliantly than he could have imagined when he first decided to hire Brian. There was the challenge of a partner who would never cease intriguing Draco, the way that Harry's ability might change Draco's own life, building up his own business until even Lucius had no choice but to yield, and…

Pure-blood society wouldn't accept him back any time soon. Draco knew that. Circles like the one at Clothilde Castle had inevitably been part of the sacrifice when he chose to come out the way he had. But that didn't mean he couldn't build a social circle of his own, one not dominated by his father's connections or his mother's glittering reputation. And the core of that circle could easily be the pure-bloods like Pansy who were partially sympathetic to his cause, or the people like Nusante, half-bloods and pure-bloods and Muggleborn, who had lost their patience with pretending. Among them Draco could find friends, allies, investors, political partners, and artists he would sponsor.

No, Draco didn't intend to let the rebellion dominate his life. But there was no reason the things that did couldn't grow out of it.

"Draco. I would speak with you."

He had seen his father's hair coming through the crowd sometime ago. Draco looked down now, lazily, from his seat on the hill. The crowd was paying more attention to Harry than anything else at the moment, and since he was speaking well, Draco would let it stay that way. "Lucius," he said.

His father gazed at him without expression for some moments before he said, "Once you did not address me that way."

"You rejected my right to claim our surname." Draco leaned forwards in interest. "Is all the paperwork on that filed as yet? I wanted to know if I should tell people to stop calling me Malfoy, and then I realized I had no idea when the process had begun or if it had ended."

Lucius was again silent for a short time. Draco took the opportunity to study the lines on his face. Were they more pronounced than a few weeks ago? He thought so.

"I am giving you much," Lucius said at last, in that low voice that nevertheless carried. "I am willing to accept you back into the family, and accept Potter as your visible partner—for a year."

"A year," Draco said thoughtfully. "Much can happen in a year."

"Yes. You may find that you like the elder Moonstone girl better then than you do now. I have settled on her for your bride."

Draco would have narrowed his eyes if he didn't care about his father observing his expression.

His father had mentioned Moonstone last night, when he confronted Draco at the gap in the wards. Draco doubted this second mention was a coincidence. And now he remembered the slight wand movements Lucius had made—only *after* Draco appeared, not when he was confronting Harry—and the way that his father had worked in the past to remove weaknesses of gesture and routine once he realized they were weaknesses. If he had realized the way his left eye twitched when he cast a nonverbal spell…

Moving in the midst of conclusions he could not yet be sure of, since they had not yet solidified or settled to the ground, Draco seized one of his instincts and said, "I would discuss this with you at a later time. In a venue not so public." He glanced at some of the people in the crowd who had turned to look at him, and they turned hastily away again. "At the same time, I would not embarrass you by coming to the house that I no longer expect to inherit. At Pansy Parkinson's home, perhaps?"

Lucius gave him a genuine, warm smile, of the kind Draco had not seen for years. "That would be welcome," he said. "Today?"

"Tomorrow." That should assure Lucius that Draco was still acting with a proper degree of caution, and thus that hs spell was still undiscovered. "At three?"

Lucius inclined his head and then walked slowly back to the entrance to the field. Draco watched him go and made sure to wear a soft, melancholy expression in case any cameras clicked just then.

He was certain now that his father had cast a spell on him, and that it had something to do with the Moonstone girl. He was *not* yet certain that it had taken effect; he only knew he did not feel any differently. He doubted it was a spell to compel him to meet with his father, since Draco would still cancel the meeting in a moment if there was danger.

But perhaps it had been meant to make him more suggestible, or inclined to take a wife.

Draco turned his face to look at Harry. Harry was already looking at him, and though his voice spoke steadily on to the crowd beneath him, his narrowed eyes asked a question.

Draco blinked slowly, once. *Yes, I think I may need your help now. And if I am right about what my father was trying, then we can use this opportunity to cast a harness around one of the biggest opponents to our cause.*

It was unlikely Harry had picked up all the particulars from a shared glance, but the sudden metallic gleam in his green eyes, the glimpse of strength to defend and kill if he had to, reassured Draco that Harry would be behind him nonetheless.

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Chapter: 41

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-One—Lent Strength*

Harry grinned as he watched from an obscure corner of Diagon Alley. The post owls he and Draco had hired would be leaving their perches at any moment now; currently they were roosting along the roofs and corners of the shops, indistinguishable from the other birds taking a mid-afternoon nap. It had taken some time to convince the owls that Harry and Draco only wanted them to fly over the alley and drop the letters instead of delivering them to a specific person, but the result would be worth the work.

Harry himself wore one of his most ordinary disguises, as Jessica Porter, a painfully thin half-blood woman who made her living running messages between points that post-owls couldn't approach because of their paranoid owners' wards. She wrapped her arms around herself at all times and huddled as close to any source of heat as she could get, so no one would look twice at the girl sitting on a bench in the sunlight. Harry kept his head bowed and watched from between the strands of Jessica's long dark hair.

Madam Malkin had become prosperous enough in the past few years to afford a little ostentation. She now had a large gold clock sitting on the roof of her Robes for All Occasions, modeled after the Muggles' Big Ben and keeping time with sonorous clicks. Most of the clicks went unheard, given the bustle in the Alley, but when it struck four, it did so in tremendous fashion; four was often the hour Madam Malkin closed her shop nowadays.

Harry counted seconds under his breath as he watched the clock's hand turn, majestically, nearer and nearer to the required number. He exhaled hard when it reached it at last, and looked up at the roofs.

*Cling,* sang the clock in a high, sweet voice. The owls spread their wings and took flight, swooping across the alley. There were more than thirty of them, and they got the desired attention. People halted in the middle of their errands and tilted back their heads to watch, wrinkling their foreheads and pointing the birds out to the slow.

*Clang,* said the same voice, low this time, and calm. The owls opened their beaks and let the parchments go. They spiraled down like heavy leaves into the middle of the alley, stray breezes carrying them straight into the hands and faces of some unlucky wizards. Harry grinned again as he watched them pluck the parchments loose and frown, their eyes running automatically over the words.

*Tick*, said the clock, as the first startled sounds began rising from the mouths of the "letters'" recipients.

*Tock*.

Harry rose to his feet and made his way in a leisurely fashion past an older woman and a thin man, perhaps her son or perhaps a chance bystander, huddled together and sharing a single sheet between them. Long years of training had made it easy for him to pick up slight noises; he needed no special concentration to hear what they were saying.

"It's a joke, isn't it?" the man asked.

"I don't know," the woman said stiffly. "It's not surprising that people who spend so much of their time concentrating on perverts would turn out to be perverts themselves, if you ask me." She sniffed.

Harry walked a little faster. He could hear arguments breaking out now, and snickers, and laughter. A few people had drawn their wands and cast *Incendio* on the parchments, or placed their hands protectively over their children's eyes, but there were still plenty of letters and readers to go around.

The parchments contained the sexual fantasies that the illusions of Caroline Garrett had pulled from the minds of the attackers at the party and the Quick-Quotes Quills had recorded. At the top, in a hand that Harry had taken care to remove all distinguishing features from, was the legend, *The Fantasies of Those Who Wish to Persecute Homosexuals*.

Harry took one more step and then Apparated out with a crack. Everyone was much too busy to pay any attention to him.

Harry tensed when the knock on the door came. Draco hadn't expected him to do anything else if such a thing happened. The most probable candidates for visitors at the moment were his friends, whom he still wasn't ready to reconcile with, and the Healers, in case some had believed Granger's wild story. Draco rose to his feet from the couch where they'd conducted their strategy session and glanced over his shoulder at Harry.

"I'll just answer that, shall I?" he murmured.

Harry glanced up at him and nodded gratefully, then returned to staring at the map in his hands. It marked all the properties, both houses and lands, that Harry owned in Britain. Draco had been stunned by how many there were, and under how many different aliases—including, in some cases, people Draco had heard of.

He shook his head as he crossed the entrance hall. He was glad the secret of Metamorphosis didn't look likely to travel any further. It would have changed the face of British society in ways unfavorable to the rebellion and made that many more people have unrealistic expectations of Harry.

*Speaking of unfavorable expectations of Harry,* he thought, when he opened the door and found Raymond Nusante standing on the front step. Of course, the man had been Apparated directly here, so it only made sense that he should know how to reach the house again, but Draco was regretful, both for the necessity of the Apparition in the first place and because he couldn't let the wards snap to and destroy the idiot.

Draco hadn't forgotten what the man had said when Harry had come out in front of his little group of friends. And from the strained courage in his face, he was about to say something else stupid. Draco let one hand rest on his wand and mustered all the cool contempt he had to shine straight at Nusante.

"You had something to say?" he asked, when the silence had continued for some minutes and he'd seen Nusante take a single small, fidgeting step.

Nusante audibly breathed in, which amused Draco so much he had trouble keeping his mouth under control, and then scowled at him. "I had something to say to Potter alone," he said. "Just fetch him, if you will."

Draco's left hand, safely out of sight behind the doorframe, closed into a fist. He'd never been fond of someone else treating him like a house-elf. He managed to maintain his temper by imagining how Nusante would crumple if he learned about Metamorphosis, but it was hard when he remembered that this man had neither bloodlines nor wealth nor Harry's skill to be proud of. Perhaps he was an artist and a leader, yes, but that meant little outside of certain small arenas.

"I will not," Draco said. "Whatever you meant to say to Harry about the rebellion or the party the night before last, you can say to me, and I will escort you to him if it's important enough. And if you have something *else* to say, I think it best you speak those words to my face, not his."

Nusante's expression changed, but Draco knew how fragile the fury filling it was. He had shown the same kind of emotion when he demanded a toy from his father that he knew Lucius wasn't about to give him. Nusante knew he couldn't win, but he would try to make other people miserable in the process of acknowledging it.

"I don't know what he thinks he's playing at," Nusante hissed, taking a step forwards. "But the confrontation with the attackers at the party was *not* of the kind I had imagined would prove him to us. He didn't face them wand-to-wand; he did not battle, as some of us have done, openly and proudly for the right to meet and associate as we liked. Instead, he used tricks and jokes and any means of avoiding combat that he could." His face was almost purple with suppressed rage by now, giving Draco a new appreciation for the cold pallor Lucius would employ in a situation like this. "It makes him the wrong leader for this type of rebellion. We are locked in a *war.* We need a leader who is a *warrior*—not one who acts like a schoolboy on a lark."

Draco had intended to let the man speak until he fell into silence of his own accord. On the other hand, he had never realized Nusante would say something so senseless. He raised an eyebrow

and sharpened his stare, and the man dropped his eyes in spite of himself.

"Multiple explanations," Draco said, his voice hardly louder than the sound a nundu's footstep would make as it stalked its prey through a jungle, "have been given to you of why Harry did what he has done. He remained in hiding until the moment came when he could face his past and the scrutiny of the wizarding world. He used 'tricks and jokes' as you name them to avoid heavy casualties, on either our side or among those who oppose us. He *was* a warrior when you were still a child. He's lived more lives than you can imagine." He drew himself up slowly, never once releasing Nusante from the pinning effect of his gaze. "What, exactly, does he owe you now?"

Nusante was panting with rage. *I am glad that we displaced him as leaders of the rebellion,* Draco thought, cocking his head to one side so he would give the effect of looking down his nose. *A leader needs to be able to hold the reins not only when things are going well but when people are arguing with him or when a potentially powerful rival arises. And the rebellion would have self-destructed around us if we had relied on Nusante.*

"He's received more from the wizarding world than he gave," Nusante said in a low, savage voice. "The constant adulation, the attention to his slightest move, the offers he received when he killed You-Know-Who—no one could possibly be worthy of all that. But others would at least have tried to disclaim it and explain the true scope of their accomplishments, so they could be honored as they *deserve.* Instead, he cowered inside his house for a decade, and then he hid beneath yet another identity when he ventured into public again. And what did he assume that identity for? Not to help others, but because he wanted to date his boyfriend and not let anyone know he was gay. All the sacrifices he made are twelve years old now. He hasn't known a day's hardship in his life since then, at least not without more than enough coddling to take away the sting, and now—"

Nusante couldn't speak further. Draco had moved his wand and cast a temporary silencing charm. As Nusante touched his throat and opened his mouth in what was probably a murderous shriek of rage, Draco cast another spell, though he murmured the incantation so softly Nusante had no chance of making it out.

For now, let him be without guilt, not only angrily denying it. Let him froth and spew his useless rubbish if he wished when he departed from the house. The only people who would listen to him would be the imbeciles whom Harry's and Draco's strategies stood no chance of convincing in any case.

But when the moment came that he really understood how much Harry had sacrificed, then the guilt would crush him like a tumbling wall. He would barely be able to stand up under the weight of it, and he couldn't dismiss the emotion until he had worked through it. Draco hoped the experience might wring a true apology out of the git at last, though the spell did not guarantee one.

The curse had once been used to "encourage" confessions from prisoners by freeing them from guilt about their crimes, so that they might brag about them more easily. When the guilt returned,

it punished them more effectively than many older wizarding laws had been able to, at least in the case of crimes that didn't merit a stint in Azkaban.

"Listen to me," Draco said. "The wizarding world has not honored Harry enough, as far as I am concerned. And he did what he could to refuse those attentions, but if you had paid attention to the implications of your own complaints, you would have known that no single man could stop the tide of praise they insisted on pouring on him. He did not enslave himself with guilt about not being worthy of the praise. Instead, he dared to live his own life for a decade, and to only emerge when his principles and his love moved him to do so. You are a poor representative of an artist, Raymond Nusante, if you cannot understand the heroism and the sacrifice inherent in his actions."

Nusante turned his back and walked away from the doorstep. Draco laughed at him, making sure he heard, and then closed the door.

When he got back to the couch, Harry lifted his head and gave him such a dazzling smile that Draco hesitated for a moment. "What?" he asked.

"You did that for me," Harry murmured, and rose to kiss Draco on the cheek. "Yet you don't look at me as if you think me weak for not being able to deal with visitors on my own right now." This time, he kissed Draco on the lips.

Draco kissed him back, then pulled away with a small shake of his head. "You're too much absorbed in your own weakness," he said. "*That* could become tiresome. Think more often of your strength and the other reasons I am with you."

Temper shone in Harry's eyes for a moment. Draco grinned. He enjoyed seeing that more than the humility. Yes, Harry had made sacrifices, and as far as Draco was concerned, it was time that he started enjoying the rewards instead of refusing them with flushed cheeks or downcast eyes.

"Now," said Harry, deflecting the argument by picking up the second map they were consulting that morning, "tell me again about the plan of Pansy's house upstairs."

"And of course you didn't think to ask me before you volunteered my home for this ridiculous purpose." Pansy didn't look back at him as she led the way up the spiral staircase, but Draco could read the set of her back. It was stiff with exasperation that could become true anger if she wasn't soothed.

"Your home was the safest place I knew of, after Malfoy Manor," Draco said, pausing with a hand on the banister. "And I didn't want my father gaining access to one of Harry's safehouses. God knows what he would do with the information."

Pansy turned to face him and gave him a perfect sneer—the one, in fact, he had modeled his own after during the stage in his early twenties when he was obsessed with separating himself from

his father. "His gaining access to my house, meanwhile, is not something you need worry about."

"I know you can defend yourself," Draco said softly, refusing to back away. Backing away on stairs was a tricky business, as he had learned when he confronted Harry on the steps at Grimmauld Place. "Besides, you're part of a social world that my father respects. He's less likely to do stupid things to you for the sheer pleasure of doing them."

Pansy smiled at him, if one could call a twist to that sneer a smile. "Someday you won't have the perfect response, Draco, and on that day I think my words will gut you."

"Oh," Draco said, waiting until she turned and began climbing again so he could follow, "but I try not to worry about the future until it arrives." *I try to plan for it instead, so that when it arrives, I have no need to worry.*

He and Harry had come an hour early, Harry in his disguise as Gerald, a persona he said he had done bodyguard work in the past. If Lucius had spies watching—and Draco thought the chances better than even—he would be reassured that his son feared him enough to need expert protection. Harry had stayed below, carefully examining the corners of Pansy's house where danger might be hiding, whilst Draco went upstairs for the meeting.

When Harry was done familiarizing himself with the lower rooms and casting such small spells as would warn him of danger and keep Pansy from ever knowing how thorough his investigations had been, he would retire to the gardens. There was a large expanse of flowerbeds immediately beneath the enormous window in the back of the house, the room of which Draco had chosen for the meeting. Harry would be within the range of a loud shout if needed, and Draco could not yet pretend that he would get out of this afternoon unscathed.

Harry had touched his arm before he went up the stairs, and looked steadily at Draco for long moments with his own eyes before he turned away and became Gerald. The memory of that look was a warm gift for Draco to carry with him. No matter what happened, Harry would protect him in the single-minded way that he would only ever protect someone he loved.

Harry had to admire whoever had built Pansy's house. It had an aura of privacy, with numerous small rooms and alcoves, but it was possible to survey any room from the doorway, and most of the alcoves from the start of a corridor. Some of the credit also had to go to Pansy herself, of course, because she hadn't chosen furniture that would block the line of sight or provide a good hiding place for anyone who wanted to ambush someone moving through the house. Harry was smiling by the time he stepped out into the gardens. His alarm spells were planted, and would detect a drawn wand as well as hostile curses and several kinds of blades—but he wasn't sure they would be necessary.

The gardens were more plebeian than he had expected, or else Pansy only liked white flowers. Daisies, white roses, and narcissus surrounded a tall stand of lilies, by which Harry lingered for some moments. Perhaps it was silly to feel such a connection to the flowers that his mother had

been named after, but he had few other connections to her. He had searched out and questioned everyone who had known her and might have memories to share shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts. Those memories were thin variations on a theme; Lily Potter was brilliant at Potions, hot-tempered when she needed to be, and not afraid to stand up to other people in her House when someone from another House required defending. No other heirlooms beyond the photos Hagrid had given him had ever turned up. Harry had to take his solace where he could find it.

He wondered if Draco would understand that. They hadn't yet spoken of Harry's parents, and he wasn't entirely sure that he was ready to share what he had discovered in Snape's memories even with Draco.

He looked up at the window of the room where Draco had told him the meeting would take place, and smiled absently. Draco was used to houses with enormous glass panes and plenty of sunlight—neither a quality which Number Twelve Grimmauld Place could boast. Harry wondered if that would be a change he would need to make, should they live together.

Or would he move out of that house and into another with Draco? Except for Kreacher, Harry couldn't think of a single thing in the place he had much attachment to. He had always spent more time in his offices at Metamorphosis, both when handling paperwork and when constructing his personas. His business had been his life in more ways than he had found the time to name to Draco.

He heard a sudden slight movement behind him, but didn't permit himself to turn just yet. That would make it seem as if he were startled. He did pivot when the motion sounded closer, and his wand came smoothly up in his hand.

A young woman stopped with a hand across her mouth, probably to prevent herself from yelping. She stared at him for long moments, shaking, and Harry had the time to recognize her: Alice Moonstone, the sister of that bint Marigold who had tried to convince Draco at his birthday party that it was impossible for one man to love another. Harry remembered Alice as being more intelligent than her sister, and that meant she would probably wonder how a strange man—Harry wore Gerald's scarred features and heavy beard—knew her name.

Harry pointed his wand and said, in an absolutely level and uninflected voice, "I'm Gerald Handler, Draco Malfoy's hired bodyguard. Who are you? What are you doing here? These gardens should have been free of anyone else's presence."

Alice smoothed one hand down her robes, gaining time; when she looked at him again, her eyes had become clear and piercing, and she lifted her head with ease and pride. Though she was roughly the same age as Nusante, Harry could only marvel at her greater maturity. Perhaps she was one of the young pure-bloods who had paid attention to the spirit and not just the style of their instruction.

"I could ask the same of you," she said. "Mr. Malfoy did not tell me there would be a bodyguard present. I was to come into these gardens whilst he met with his son, and remain until he brought

his son down to meet me in turn."

"Quite often, those who feel threatened do not find it advisable to tell those threatening them that they are hiring bodyguards," Harry said, and gave her Gerald's humorless smile. If he knew how to smile with anything other than bitter irony, he'd never revealed it to the man who came up with him. "And I still need your name, and I still need to know why you think you've been brought here. If you are part of the threat my client faces, I will have no hesitation in destroying you." He twisted his wand to the side.

Alice fell back a step. Not stupid in any way, Harry thought approvingly. If Draco had been content to remain within the embrace of straight pure-blood society, he could have done much worse for a bride.

"My name is Alice Moonstone," she said at last. *Smart enough not to lie before a drawn wand, either,* Harry noted. "I—don't know why I was brought here, exactly. It's common knowledge that Mr. Malfoy's son has rebelled against him, but he seemed to think he had a solution to that. He did tell me that by the time he came into the gardens with his son, I would be the next acknowledged Mrs. Malfoy."

"And are you looking forwards to that with all your might, when you must know your marriage would rest on treachery?" Harry asked.

Alice fisted her hands in her robes. "I highly doubt that someone like you can understand the obligations my society requests me to put up with in exchange for its graces and sanctions," she snapped, "and men almost never understand the responsibilities of women. No, I would not want to enter a mansion built on ground that shaky. But why should it be? Mr. Malfoy managed to persuade his son to obey him for thirty years. This is only a temporary rebellion."

If it had been anyone other than this woman he faced, Harry would not have taken the chance. But she was still young enough not to be practiced in the kind of deception that made Narcissa Malfoy's face hard to read, and Harry thought she was telling the truth. Best if he could turn her against Lucius in the same way Draco already was.

"My client brought me here precisely because he thinks his father will use magic to try and force him into marriage," Harry said gravely. "I can't understand the graces and sanctions you speak of, but surely it would be an insult to the Moonstone family if your husband was *compelled* to marry you because of a spell?"

Alice's lips settled into a thin smile. "At least you know better than to mention love to me," she murmured. "Love comes after the ring is slipped onto the finger, not before. The metal teaches the heart." Harry recognized the proverb from one of his earliest lessons in pure-blood socialization, though right now he was doing his best to look blank. She looked gazed at him. "Yes, if you can offer me proof that Mr. Malfoy was lying through his teeth, I would refuse to wed Draco."

Harry just restrained himself from a laugh of triumph. An attack was coming at Lucius from two fronts, and he would never see the second in time.

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Chapter: 42

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Two—The Language of Force*

"Draco. It *is* a pleasure to see you again."

Lucius's voice was soft and pleasant as he stepped into the room at the back of Pansy's house, bowing to Pansy as he passed her. He never took his eyes from Draco, though. Draco had taken a seat near the window so that the dazzle of sunlight around his face and hair would somewhat blind his father; Lucius never once blinked as he gazed at him, however. Instead, a suspicious look of contentment took over his features.

*He thinks he has me trapped.* Draco stared back stoically, as though he were at a meeting with an investor who had shown interest in Malfoy's Machineries but no innovative ideas and no money as yet. *That may be an advantage, if I can play the man who suspects the trap is closing in but cannot see the jaws.*

It wasn't a pleasure for him to remember that he might very well be that man, since he still had no idea what the spell Lucius had cast on him really was. But he would not show that, either. He had his own set and system of masks and the proper emotions to show at the correct times, though it was not as extensive as Harry's.

"Father," he said, after a moment of silence to make it seem as if he were having an internal debate about the necessity of addressing Lucius by that title.

"I have hopes that you will call me that without prompting by the time we are done here," said Lucius, and took the chair across from Draco's, which was just as comfortable and padded as his own. Draco hid his snarl. Pansy had changed the enchantments on her chairs, then. It was only a fitting vengeance for Draco's having volunteered her home for this meeting without telling her, but it still irritated him, a distraction at a moment when he could afford none of them. "After all, a father wants what's best for his son. And I have gone to some lengths to get what is best for you."

Draco waited, his hands folded in his lap. Lucius's expression cooled only a little when he realized Draco was waiting for him to speak. Behind Lucius, Pansy shut the door softly. Draco

thought her wise not to stay for this conversation.

Lucius wore fine dark green robes that Draco had seen him in when he was meeting with someone he respected, a powerful political rival or a pure-blood wizard who had stayed true to the traditions of their social circles. Lucius knew he knew the significance of those robes, which rendered the gesture both genuine and a manipulation. How many more layers of games there might be under that surface one, Draco did not yet know.

But that did not mean he had to succumb to worry. He had already won the first gambit. Lucius spoke.

"The terms of my offer are the same as that which I gave you yesterday," he said. "A year of public approval of your liaison with Potter, a year to do as you please. Then you will be married to Alice Moonstone."

"A year in freedom in exchange for the rest of my life in slavery," Draco said. "Yes, I could see why you would think that a fair bargain."

He watched his father intently. Depending on his response to Draco's statement, Draco could judge more accurately how dangerous a foe he was right now, how high his confidence level was. Would he accept that Draco was speaking melodramatically? Or would he decide Draco was being a bit sarcastic but was ultimately persuadable?

"A year in freedom," said Lucius, "without obligation, without responsibility. I will support you and your liaison, as I said. That includes in money matters. Buy Potter as many expensive gifts as you like, and know that I am paying for it—though since you stand to inherit the Malfoy vaults, I hope you will consider that money as your own, and have more regard for it than my offer implies."

"I stand to inherit the Malfoy vaults?" Draco let his voice rise high with surprise, whilst he worked furiously to bury his disappointment. If his father had decided to reinstate him as the Malfoy heir, then several of the things he and Harry had achieved had come to nothing.

"When you agree to this bargain," Lucius said, just a touch too quickly. "But of course you should. There is no reason for you not to. Where else will you find someone willing to indulge you, Draco? A father who loves his son alone can do so, and Potter has no parents to do something like this for him."

"And what about public attacks?" Draco demanded. "I can't see that our lives would change much even if I accepted your offer. I have enough money to support Harry in luxury if I like." He noticed that his father had winced. *Ah. He doesn't like to think I might do that. That would make Harry* my *kept lover. If he pays for it, and knows that he's paying for Harry to have sex with me for a limited period of time, then he can think of him as a whore.*

"I will use all my considerable assets to shield you from such attacks," Lucius said, and his face

was solemn. "Do you imagine it has been easy for me to read newspaper articles that call my son disgusting names? Of course reporters must stay away from you when you are the Malfoy heir again. If they are incapable of understanding and respecting the terms of our bargain, then I will make sure simpler terms are spelled out to them."

Draco suffered a moment's regret. He wished there was a way he could accept this offer and then defraud Lucius at the end. It would be pleasant to have a year to work with Harry, to coax him past the instinctive use of masks and into a more healthy course of wielding them as weapons, and to know that no one in the *Daily Prophet* would write a nasty word about them whilst he was doing so.

But it was impossible, what with the rebellion and Harry's morals, and Draco told himself he knew that. It was only the most Slytherin part of him that regretted the loss.

"And what comes after the bargain?" he asked. "You've offered me a very pretty honey-dipped pearl, but what happens when the oyster shell closes on me?"

Lucius blinked. Draco had chosen the metaphor on purpose to confuse him; it was one that Blaise had used more than once, and it had thrown Draco the first time he heard it. But Lucius sat up after a moment, with a slight shake of his head, and smiled at Draco as if they were only friends who had had a quarrel.

*His confidence is high. This spell must be strong.* But so far Draco had felt nothing unusual, no headaches, changes in his vision, or sudden and unexplained desires, the most common symptoms of the lust spells he and Harry had studied.

"After that, you marry Alice and live in happy, healthy marriage with her," Lucius said. "I will make sure that the *Daily Prophet* also provides favorable coverage of the wedding and is polite to Potter when they speculate why you let him go. I will expect at least one child from the marriage, of course, to continue the Malfoy line, and that you keep your wife free of disease. However, you may take male lovers in secret, if that is necessary to content you."

"And what about Harry?" Draco asked.

Lucius shook his head. "Neither I nor anyone connected to me will make a move against him, insofar as that is possible to promise. Of course, if Mr. Potter does insist on thrusting himself into politics concerning pure-blood laws and sexual morality, I cannot answer for what an offended parent might do."

"You misunderstand me," Draco said. He watched his father until he felt as if his entire world hung on Lucius's breathing, the widening of his eyes, the way his fingernails gleamed on the hand that lay in his lap. "Would I be free to take Harry as a lover during my marriage?"

"I think that question a wrongheaded one, Draco," Lucius said softly. "You are still thinking of what you would be required to give up with this arrangement, not what you would gain. So, no, I

would not allow Mr. Potter back into your bed. Only a god like Janus can look backwards and forwards without pain. It would be best if you were to look to the future. Tell me, do you know what you would like to name your son?"

"Did you think I would agree to this?" Draco asked.

"Frankly, yes, I did," said Lucius. "I chose carefully for that reason. Otherwise, I might have chosen Marigold Moonstone, who is more beautiful and magically powerful than her sister. That would be my choice if I cared only about breeding bloodlines and not about your opinion. But I know that it will take a unique woman to compete with Mr. Potter in your esteem, and Alice has recently shown me she is most remarkable. Will you meet her? She is waiting nearby, and will come at my call."

Draco scrutinized Lucius more carefully than ever. He still showed that intense confidence, but no more than he had before, truly. And he had become a bit more subdued since Draco had mentioned taking Harry as a lover whilst married. No effects of the spell were showing up, either.

To make the understanding with his father plain which he had come here intending to establish, he would have to force Lucius's hand.

"By all means," he said. "Let her be escorted in."

Lucius raised his wand, smiling. Draco tensed. But Lucius, with simple, exaggerated movements, cast a bright flare of red sparks that streaked out the window of the back room, and then settled back to put his wand on the floor and bare his hands, open-palmed.

Draco braced himself to wait as well, muscles poised to move in any direction in an instant.

"You can't be certain Mr. Malfoy was casting a spell on—on Draco, though," Alice said. She stumbled frequently on Draco's name, as if she wanted to address him as "Mr. Malfoy" as well. Right now she faced Harry with her eyes as hard as dragon scales and a faint, contemptuous smile curving the corners of her mouth. "You've said that you can't find a spell matching its description. And the only testimony for the existence of those gestures at the party is your own. Why should I believe you? Why shouldn't I believe that you're doing—Draco's work instead, trying to discourage me from the marriage?"

Harry smiled at her. He admired her stubbornness despite the trouble it was costing him at the moment. If she had given in credulously when he first explained the gestures of the spell, he would have thought her either playing a game of her own or less than the pure-blood witch with an eye on future comfort she pretended to be.

"I know Harry Potter," he said. "You have heard that he went about in disguise as Brian Montgomery at first?"

Alice nodded. "I still don't know why—Draco would let him do that," she said. "If he was taking the risk of being cast out of society, then Potter should have run the same risk."

*She's half on our side already, although she doesn't know it. She values fairness, and equality between partners. Certainly she would want someone who stood a chance of desiring her for herself, rather than through magic.* "He should have," Harry said, with a small nod. He tamed the wider smile he wanted to give her then. Gerald's features were not made for such sentimental gestures. "But Mr. Malfoy not only forgave him for that deception, he came to love him the more for it."

Alice frowned. "Why?"

"He values a cunning partner," said Harry. "Someone who can create a plan and then spin it so that it works out for him. True, Potter gave that up when he appeared in public at his side, but his plan before that was working perfectly. No one had connected Montgomery with Potter— " his voice as he told the lie was steady, of course "—and yet everyone knew that Mr. Malfoy had a boyfriend, as he had desired. That was what allowed Mr. Malfoy to be content. He loves the methods Potter uses; he loves that he can act like a Slytherin, to use the most banal metaphor, or a Gryffindor at will. He admires a cleverness on par with his own and a mind that forces him to leap like a horse on a chase. Could you offer him that? Without such qualities, he will never respect you. And even if he does marry you because of the spell, he will know in time that it was his father and not you who chose that method of bringing him to the wedding bed. I think he would despise you for letting someone else do your hunting and catching."

Alice blinked repeatedly. Harry didn't blame her. The argument he had just used was a load of bollocks for the most part, but it *sounded* good. And if it allowed Alice a graceful out—she didn't want to marry a man she knew would despise her—well, that was all to the good. Harry wasn't in favor of embarrassing his allies or threatening them unless he had no other choice.

"Why would he tell you so much?" she asked at last, studying him with one eye whilst she turned her head away, as if that would somehow shield her doubting face from him. "You're only a bodyguard."

"I'm close friends with Potter, not Malfoy," said Harry, delighting in the mixture of lies and truth, and in the wavering of Alice's expression into reluctant belief. "He told me so much because he knew I wouldn't understand why he was dating Malfoy openly without it." Harry shrugged, in Gerald's heavy manner that was more like a resettling of his shoulders into a good attack position. "One reason Mr. Malfoy could trust me is my tie to Potter. He knows I won't let anything happen to someone a friend values."

Alice bowed her head for long moments. Then she looked back up. "I'm still not entirely sure I trust you," she said.

Harry casually shifted his balance so he could reach his wand if she should pull out hers.

"But on the other hand, there's not much reason to tell a story like this if it's a lie," she added, shaking her head. "Draco could simply refuse to marry me, and that would settle things. If he's not *certain*, however, and still wanted me to know—well, that was gentlemanly behavior."

"He doesn't actually know you're here," said Harry. "I'm the one who thinks you deserve better than to be tricked into marriage."

"Would he care, if he knew I could be a victim?" A flush touched Alice's cheeks that made Harry think she might not be so indifferent to Draco's looks, wealth, and reputation as she had tried to be.

He swallowed a gulp of jealousy as tart as pickles. There was no way someone like Alice could threaten his hold over Draco's heart, particularly when she was a part of Lucius's plot to control his son.

"I don't know for certain," Harry said, and once again smiled slowly and tried to avoid letting it grow out of control for Gerald's face. "The point is, *I* care. And I was hired to protect Mr. Malfoy from his father's magic as well as any attempt made to physically harm him."

"And you're out here instead of in the house with him?" Alice looked up at the window above them.

"He'll let me know if he needs me. If a real chance for reconciliation comes, he'd want to take it."

Alice opened her mouth to say something else, but just then a fountain of red sparks struck out through the window. Harry looked up alertly, but relaxed after a moment, certain that the sparks were not the brilliant blue he and Draco had agreed on for a distress signal. Alice whistled under her breath and shifted her feet anxiously.

Harry understood. "That's the signal Lucius Malfoy was going to use to summon you, isn't it."

Alice nodded in some distraction. "But now I don't know if I want to go to him," she said. "There are at least some questions I'd like to ask. For example, he was very insistent on my accompanying him today. He said it was simply so—Draco could meet his future bride, but we could meet later, and it wouldn't violate any formal requirement of the marriage ceremony. He looked as if he'd have an apoplectic fit if I refused."

Harry let his stare orient on her until she shifted uneasily. She would expect that behavior from a bodyguard like Gerald, and Harry would have had to fight harder than it was worth to prevent himself from doing it now.

He would have wagered the secret of Metamorphosis that the spell Lucius had used would be triggered when Draco saw Alice. And that meant she had to stay here in the gardens, even if he had to bind her.

"He might be up there musing to himself on his cleverness," said Harry. "He won't be alarmed yet that you haven't appeared. What can he think of you as but a pawn? You're not a person to him, not the future Mrs. Malfoy or his daughter-in-law. You're another rein for his son's neck. Is that really all you want to be?"

Alice's face darkened. Then she said. "If there's the slightest chance you are speaking the truth, then I will not go to him."

"Perhaps there is not," Harry said, allowing doubt to leak into his voice. "Perhaps you should—"

"No." Alice stood tall and folded her arms, taking several steps away from the window. "You may go up, if you will, and inform Mr. Malfoy that I no longer plan to comply with his every wish. If he wishes to make me an *honest* marriage offer for his son, he may send me a vial of his memories of the night of the party, including the moments when they confronted each other. Only then will I be disposed to accept Draco." She said the name without hesitation now, Harry noted with approval. "In the meantime, I do wish your friend Mr. Potter the best. I would not want to be treated as second-best in his place, and I will not be treated as second-best by a Malfoy man who is really in love with him."

She spun on her heel and walked away, robes rustling around her, until she reached the place where Pansy's anti-Apparition wards ran out. Then she vanished without a glance at the house. Harry grinned and began to walk back in, flicking his wand several times as he went. The next part of the plan was unfolding in his mind, so smoothly that he barely had to think about it to know what he should do.

As the moments went by and no Alice Moonstone appeared, Draco watched his father's confidence disintegrate.

It started with a glance at the window, so swift Draco could have believed his father was looking in that direction by coincidence, if he were stupid. Then Lucius fisted his fingers briefly in the material of his robe. Then he let his nostrils flare, and his cheeks lost all color for one moment, before he summoned it back again. Something unexpected had gone wrong, and his father was trying to decide how to deal with it in front of a son he knew would notice the smallest slip.

"Where is she?" Draco asked at last, and salted his voice with impatience. "When you said that she was the perfect bride for me, I did think punctuality would be among her virtues."

Lucius opened his mouth to answer. Draco leaned forwards to convey his sincere interest.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. Draco looked up expectantly. They were too heavy for a woman as young and slender as he remembered Alice Moonstone being. Perhaps Pansy had decided to interfere after all.

Instead, Harry, wearing his own face, stepped into the room and fixed Lucius with a stern glare.

Draco promptly bit his lip so he wouldn't chuckle aloud and sank back into his chair. His father and Harry were engaged in a silent staring contest, so neither of them noticed his lack of contributions to the conversation for the moment. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Why are you here, Harry? Where's Gerald?"

"He contacted me," Harry said, "when he discovered someone unexpected lurking in the garden." He kicked the door shut with one foot, never taking his eyes off Lucius. Draco didn't miss the way Lucius's hand twitched towards his wand.

"That would be Alice, I think," Draco said. "But what did she do to convince him she was so threatening?"

"Her presence was enough," Harry said, "for a cautious man like Gerald." He sauntered a step closer to Lucius, and now a smile Draco had never seen before was narrowing his mouth and his eyes. He looked like a vampire about to bare its fangs. "He summoned me, and together we questioned Alice as to what she knew and suspected about your father's sudden offer to meet with you. I commend you, Mr. Malfoy." His voice dipped and became so soft that Draco had trouble hearing it. The room was turning hazy, as though heat shimmers had somehow manifested without the necessary heat. "You did indeed choose an intelligent woman for your son's bride. But you shouldn't have given her occasion to turn her intelligence against you. She was able, on hearing the description of the curse you cast on Draco, to tell us what it was, and that it would become active on Draco's seeing her."

Lucius actually swayed in his seat. Draco blinked. Of course, perhaps it was Harry's building magic, whirling closer and closer to Lucius like the shadows of invisible dancers, rather than his words.

"You have not listened," Harry said. "We've given you multiple chances to understand, to forgive, to change your mind and realize what sort of world you're living in—a world where your prejudices no longer hold any power. I should have remembered. Wizards like you only understand one language: that of force." He took a step closer, and his eyes were more brilliant than Draco had known was possible; Draco couldn't look away from them. The shadows closed in as Harry said, in a voice that shook the walls, "Lucius Malfoy, I command you to *cease to exist.*"

The shadows bent inwards, joining at the corners like reflections of light stirred from a pool of water, and Lucius's body wavered as if it would collapse inwards to join them. He screamed as Draco had never heard him scream before, a sound of pain and panic, and then the shadows were gone and Harry was standing above Lucius, his hand fisted in the cloth at his throat, dragging him out of the chair. Draco hastily stared at his father, but at least from one quick scan, he couldn't tell that Lucius was missing any of his body parts.

"We know you're behind Counterstrike," Harry said. "We know you're responsible for nearly

killing your son through funding their madness. We know you oppose us. I've spared you for the moment because it's possible that Draco *might* retain one crumb of affection for you. Though I doubt it.

"But you felt what I can do. If you do not withdraw your support from Counterstrike and cease troubling Draco and me, then I will make that happen. Permanently. You'll be nothing more than memories. Your grieving widow won't have an ash to bury."

He threw Lucius back into the chair; Draco wouldn't be surprised if he'd used magic to strengthen his arm muscles. Lucius bowed his head with a motion of dejection and submission that was painful to watch.

Harry caught his eye. Draco stood and strode across the room to him, pausing only to say, "I'll write," before he followed Harry.

As they came down the stairs, Harry put a casual hand on the banister—to support himself through the wash of magical exhaustion, Draco knew. He rested a hand on his shoulder and leaned nearer to whisper, "Did that really—"

"No." Harry grinned a little and turned his head so Draco could see one eye peeking out from beneath his fringe. "When have you known me to use reality when I could use illusion? It was a complicated glamour to make him *think* he was breaking apart, separating his thoughts from one another and making various parts of his body invisible."

Draco nodded. "I knew that, of course," he said.

Harry let the obvious lie pass. "But the spell he cast did seem to be tied to Alice's appearance," he said. "With that, we should be able to figure out which one it was and reverse it. We looked under lust spells. I think that was the wrong course. We should research enslavement spells."

Draco shuddered in revulsion and walked faster. "You did your job as a bodyguard very well," he said.

Harry chuckled. "Of course," he said. "Within certain well-defined limits, I would challenge anyone to stand up to me."

Draco eyed him sideways, a complicated combination of admiration, pity, lust, longing, and pride rising in him. *I do not think I could love you if you were not what you are. All of it.*

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Chapter: 43

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Three—Conflicting Visions*

"I'm almost certain this is it."

"That's what you said about the last three spells you looked up," Draco muttered, but he stood and walked over to lean on the back of the couch in Harry's study, stifling a yawn. He hadn't realized how badly the encounter with Lucius would drain him, or how much he'd been worried about the spell until it seemed unlikely it would actually affect him.

He would have been glad to forget his weariness by taking Harry to bed, but Harry had headed for the study as if they had only a limited period of time to figure out the spell's true nature and dived into the books. Now and then, spontaneously, Draco could see Granger's influence emerge in him.

*This is the only way she should be able to influence him,* he thought, as he craned his neck to make out the page of the book Harry was excitedly holding up. *Indirectly and from a distance.* Of course he knew that Harry would insist on reconciling with his friends eventually, but Draco didn't have to hope for it soon. He had rather enjoyed having Harry to himself in private, even whilst they appeared in public as the two gallant leaders of the rebellion against oppressive tyranny.

The spell Harry had found was called the Lover's Face Curse, and it was indeed supposed to become real on the appearance of the person being used as a trigger, or specifically as soon as the victim's eyes met the trigger's eyes. Draco felt his emotions changing as he scanned the list of the spell's side-effects. By the time he reached the end—which mentioned permanent sexual enslavement, and the inability of the victim to achieve physical intimacy with anyone else—his anger had become something cold and dangerous. He reached out and squeezed Harry's shoulder until Harry winced. Then Draco bent down and whispered into Harry's ear.

"Does it say anything about how to reverse it?"

"Not on this page," Harry said, his voice a bit breathless. "Maybe the next one."

He started to turn the page, but Draco laid a finger on it, just above the end of the list, and prevented him. Harry shivered and tilted his head back. Draco recognized the shine in his eyes. He wasn't frightened at all, as Draco had thought he might be, or angry about the pain Draco had caused him; he looked as if he were restraining himself from kissing Draco by his hold on the book alone.

Draco bent his head to take away that restraint, nipping hard at the shell of Harry's ear and then at his neck. Harry snarled back and dropped the book on his lap, then shoved it irritably to the ground and grabbed Draco's head. The next moment, Draco was losing his breath in the ferocity

of their kiss.

"That's it," Draco gasped, when he finally decided he wanted to breathe more than he wanted to kiss Harry. His mouth was wet and sloppy with saliva, but his lips felt dry with the force of his desire. "Upstairs, *now.*"

Harry stood and walked backwards to the door of the study without taking his eyes off Draco. Draco followed, his anger surging into gladness. It soothed his pride to be regarded as if he were dangerous, and the implied compliment in Harry's not wishing to remove his gaze from him didn't hurt, either.

Harry had never had someone pin him to his own bed and kiss him until small red spots exploded in front of his eyes.

He had the feeling he'd rather missed out.

Draco had collapsed on top of Harry as if his legs couldn't hold him anymore and begun kissing him, sucking his tongue, and nipping at his jaw. When he tired of one activity, he went on to the next and performed it with the same single-minded determination. Harry enjoyed them all, and he was squirming against Draco now, rubbing his erection against the knee planted between his legs, making tiny noises in his throat. So far, Draco hadn't regarded the pleas as important enough to notice.

Harry planned to *make* him notice.

He wrapped one leg around Draco's waist and pushed. Draco fell to the bed on his side, his mouth finally losing contact with Harry's face. Harry whined in spite of himself, but he had more important things to contend with, such as Draco's hands running up and down his chest, yanking at his robes and shirt, trying to get them both off without attending to either. Harry pushed the hands out of the way and focused hard, channeling as much wandless magic as he dared after what he'd done to Lucius earlier that afternoon.

Draco's robes wavered about him and collapsed suddenly to the sides, lying like the shriveled skin of a worm. Harry only had enough time to blink and wonder why that simile had occurred to him before Draco grabbed him in turn and wrestled him to the bed. Harry tipped back his head and shivered as teeth scrapped down his throat, followed by a blast of breath that made the wetness left behind tingle.

"This time, I want to be inside you," said Draco, his tone rendering it a request rather than a demand—just. The hand not holding Harry on the bed by his waist grabbed his erection and squeezed. Harry bucked and made an undignified squalling sound. Draco drew back and smiled at him, his hair hanging loose and fluffy around his face. "I'm so glad you agree."

"I'd be more agreeable if you'd get the damn *clothes* off," Harry huffed, and then ripped Draco's

shirt off. He hadn't meant to; he'd meant to catch his hand in the collar and pull him close enough to start undoing the buttons. But the angle was wrong and Draco jerked backwards as if startled, which didn't help. Harry suddenly found himself with a handful of cloth. Draco was fixing him with a slow, appraising stare.

Harry stared back, aware that his heart was beating frantically, and that Draco would be able to see it, since his shirt was pulled back enough for that and Draco had a good sight of the pulse in his throat.

"Well," Draco said softly, at last, "you have no appreciation of the merits of teasing, or of going slowly, do you? I think that should be corrected." And he bent his head and pressed his lips to Harry's throat above his pulse for long, lingering moments before he began to strip off his trousers and pants as carefully as though he was undressing some scared idol.

Harry was going mad before the last button on his trousers had been undone. Draco paused every few moments to brush his thumb or his smallest finger against a patch of bare skin, and whispered to himself about the pleasure he intended to enjoy and have Harry enjoy as soon as they were both naked. Harry squirmed about and tried to bring one hand into play himself, but Draco caught it, kissed his wrist, and looked at him from beneath lowered eyelids with a sweet smile.

"Let me have this," he whispered. "It's so little, but it would mean so much to me. Please?" And he used his tongue to touch the underside of Harry's wrist this time, tracing first the veins and then the bones. Harry gave a little involuntary jerk of his hips; he hadn't realized before that being hard to the point of pain wasn't just a metaphor.

"All right," he said, because what else could he say?

Draco rewarded him with one more touch of the tip of his tongue to the skin of Harry's wrist, and then he sat back on his haunches and began to undress himself. Harry reached out to touch as Draco's trousers slipped past his knees, but Draco gave him a direct look, and Harry dropped his hand back to his side with a sigh. He fisted his fingers in the blankets to prevent them from digging into his palms. God knew what Draco might do if he drew blood from clawing at himself; probably stop the whole affair and request earnestly if Harry needed to be taken to St. Mungo's to see the Healers.

Draco rose to his feet to kick the trousers off, and then touched his pants, running his fingers thoughtfully over the front and pausing as if surprised at the small wet patch that his cock had caused. He didn't even whimper, but Harry did, the sound high and piercing. Draco peered at him with one half-shaded eye, smiled, and then touched his cock again, closing his thumb and index finger in a pinch and opening his mouth in a soundless gasp of pleasure.

"Damn it, Draco, *now*," Harry whined.

Of course that made his pulling off of his pants slower than ever, and he was humming under his

breath now, as if this were a show he were putting on in time to the music. He paused and went through a long passage when the cloth was bunched above his groin, just on the point of revealing his cock, as if he couldn't remember how the song went. Harry uttered several pleading whispers, mostly so low that Draco couldn't have heard what he was saying, before Draco consented to pull the pants down. His cock was gleaming, giving it an oddly soft look even as Draco arched his back and thrust several times.

Harry was panting and couldn't catch his breath or wet his lips no matter how often he closed his mouth and swallowed. He made another restless movement, and Draco froze like a statue with the pants around one foot. He wavered, but Harry didn't want him to either fall over *or* hold that position forever. He held still, his hands up to show he had no intention of grabbing anything, and at last Draco kicked away the pants and stood naked. He turned in a slow circle, his own hands also lifted, for Harry to admire before he approached the bed.

Harry was in a haze of drugged desire by now, his neck and hips and spine and fingers and mouth twitching with the longing to move. "Please," he whispered, but didn't dare put much voice behind it. He held Draco's eyes instead, trying to show him exactly how much he wanted this. Words wouldn't have been enough in any case.

Draco smiled at Harry in spite of himself, and decided that he might move a *little* faster. Harry had presumably learned part of his lesson, and Draco didn't want him to become so sexually frustrated that he simply took himself in hand.

He let his fingers still stay in one place from time to time and smooth the skin as he pulled Harry's pants completely off and his robes away from his body, and his eyes express his own appreciation. Harry was far from perfect, but he was handsome enough that Draco didn't know why he had ever felt the urge to disguise himself to have sex with someone else. Shielding the scar and perhaps those distinctive eyes would have been enough. He'd certainly found Brian attractive enough with nothing else.

He kissed Harry's hipbone and then Summoned lubricant from the corner where they'd left it. He held it up, dangling, and let Harry think for just a moment of the delaying games he could play with *this*, if he wanted to.

Harry met his eyes defiantly and spread his legs, canting his hips up in a gesture of trust and longing so absolute that Draco found himself kneeling on the bed without quite remembering how he got there. Harry smirked at him, but let his mouth fall open and a slight moan escape him the moment one of Draco's fingers ventured inside.

Then he tilted his head back and gave himself up to it completely.

Draco shivered with what he couldn't pretend was less than delight. Harry didn't look weak; he looked as though he had forgotten what strength and weakness were. He was moaning openly now, panting between the sounds, his hands stretched luxuriously open at his sides, his head

lolling back as though he fully trusted the support of the pillow. Once he opened his eyes and looked at Draco, and a single intense smile broke over his face before he closed them again and returned to moaning.

Draco used two fingers before he thought about it. Harry always made him do slightly more than he meant to, give things he had planned to hold back, speak words that he would have regarded himself as careless or at least unguarded for speaking a few weeks ago.

*So strange,* he thought, as he slid carefully into Harry. The magical connection between them didn't exist this time—it had started to rise when Draco was stripping, but he had refused without thinking about it, and so had Harry—so he could concentrate more on the heat that engulfed him and the tightness that made him gulp back a sob. He leaned forwards and panted, his forehead resting on Harry's chest. *Two months ago, I wasn't thinking about Harry, and I would have said the most important gift anyone could give me was my freedom from my father. And now I have that, that and more, and it's only a small part of my life, not the most important. Why? Why did things change, and how?*

But then he was rocking, and Harry was rocking beneath him, driving himself backwards with a faint amused smile on his lips, as though to say, "*This* is how you fuck someone." Draco lost track of his thoughts, of most things except the definition of Harry's muscles beneath his tracing fingers and the clench of legs around his hips and the need to breathe and thrust at the same time, which seemed impossible half of that time.

Release rushed through him like a curse that turned his blood to fire, but behind it was satisfaction such as he had never experienced with any other lover. He stretched out beside Harry after he pulled out and noticed the small pool of wetness trickling down Harry's hip that meant he had also reached orgasm. Harry shifted towards him, covering Draco with it, too, before Draco could protest, and threw a leg over his body. Then he yawned and went to sleep, snoring before he drew three breaths.

The trust in the gesture made Draco catch his breath in his throat, and cough to clear it.

*What he gives me. Is there any limit to it?*

"Have you thought about what we're going to do, when the work of the rebellion no longer consumes us as much as it does now?"

Harry looked up from his toast. Kreacher had insisted on cooking breakfast this morning, and the toast was perfectly brown and gold with melted butter. Harry had thanked him, only to have the house-elf retreat into the kitchen and emerge with fresh fruit, porridge drizzled with honey, milk, orange juice, pumpkin juice, and several strips of bacon popping and crackling with their own juices. Even Draco was licking his fingers over the food without any sign of shame.

But it seemed he'd finished licking for the moment and wanted to talk. As Harry watched, his

tongue darted out to catch a gleam of wetness on the edge of one lip. Harry put away images of what else it could catch and answered the question.

"I was thinking about it yesterday, but no answer came to me," he said, and deliberately licked a trace of butter off his own lip to prove that he could play the game, too. He saw Draco's eyes darken and narrow, and smiled. "I don't even know if you would wish to live here, and I can abandon everything here, except Kreacher, without much regret. But you have only a flat in London, don't you?"

"You have other houses, too," Draco said softly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And I have no wish to live in them, or draw more attention to them than I already have. We'll probably need all of them in the rebellion before long, as safehouses for fugitives from the Ministry—especially if Kingsley decides that I was lying about the Aurors' involvement after all, or if he can't uncover Counterstrike—or as hosting places for festivals or as safe meeting places. And I'd prefer to keep the owners distinct as people from me. It makes our support seem even wider than it already is, and that will widen our support in reality." One aspect of pure-blood culture Harry hadn't liked as much once he began learning about it was the sheep-like tendency to follow the most powerful people in charitable donations and outwards, superficial behavior. On the other hand, if he could use that tendency to drum up more support for the rebellion, as well as to inspire more of the young pure-bloods to become more open about their own "objectionable" behavior, he might learn to like it more.

"I know, I know," Draco said. He toyed with the sugar bowl for a moment, then pushed it away from him. "But I was thinking—well. Of other things. After the rebellion is over, you'll still have me in your life."

Harry frowned, puzzled. He would have feared that Draco was talking about leaving him, but his trust in him went too deep for that. "Of course I will, and I hope I will for years, if not for the rest of our lives." Draco's face softened in a particular way, especially around the eyes, when he was pleased by an answer he hadn't expected; it did that now. Harry smiled and went on, "But I'll also return to Metamorphosis, since it doesn't seem likely that any of the Healers believed Hermione's story or bothered spreading it. And you'll return to Malfoy's Machineries, I assume."

"I was thinking of ways in which we could set up our own social circle," Draco said, leaning forwards. "There are some people who would follow us but fear being cast out of society—"

"Even if they don't enjoy it much?" Harry asked, thinking of the many bored faces, mostly younger, that he had seen at the parties and weddings and festivals he'd attended when he was acting in various personas.

Draco nodded. "What else do they have to do with their lives? But we could set up our own circle. Metamorphosis could help with that. There are some personas you could bring out of retirement briefly, couldn't you? Simply to ornament the circle I want to set up and bring others to attend?"

Harry sucked in air between his teeth. "And you think that other people would be more likely to come to us, then, when they didn't have to see the price for supporting the rebellion as utter exile?"

Draco nodded eagerly, a faint flush creeping up along his cheeks. His eyes were staring far away over Harry's head, and visions made them move and gleam. Harry wasn't sure what could explain the flush, though. "That isn't the only use I want to put Metamorphosis to, but it's the most important one."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was almost sure Draco didn't see the gesture, since he was still staring at images that only existed in his dreams. But Harry managed to keep his voice light and casual. "What other things would be it useful for?"

"To promote my business. To spread rumors that would cause Lucius to pay attention to me, because wouldn't they seem to be true rumors when they came from many sources?" Draco laughed and leaned back in his chair, and Harry understood the flush now. It was of mounting excitement. Draco had obviously seen a grand and glorious future that he hadn't deigned to share with Harry until now. "To establish new contacts in parts of society where I don't have many yet and to court skittish investors. To—"

"That's not what I want to do," Harry interrupted quietly.

Draco blinked at him, seeming astonished. Then he leaned forwards in the chair and examined Harry with careful attention for some time. Harry folded his arms and returned the stare. His heart was beating as fast as it had last night, but for more unpleasant reasons.

"Really?" Draco asked. "But surely you don't object to aiding the cause of the rebellion?"

"Aiding the cause of the rebellion is one thing," Harry said. "Even insuring that Lucius someday becomes envious enough of your success to demand you as an heir for the Malfoy line is one thing. That's what you originally paid me seven hundred Galleons to do, after all," he added, wondering if Draco had forgotten that. "But protecting and supporting your business…it's not the sort of work I ever did, Draco. It's not something I really *want* to do. I'm much more happy supporting gay wizards and witches and doing bodyguard or curse-breaking work."

"But it's me," Draco said.

"Yes, I know." Harry lifted his eyebrows. "What would you say if I wanted you to spend all your time supporting Metamorphosis instead of running your own business?"

"But you don't have to give up Metamorphosis to help me," Draco argued. His flush had deepened. "The parallel's not exact."

"But it's also not something I want to do, any more than you would."

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it again as if he were listening, or thinking, hard. *Let him be thinking,* Harry thought, one hand clenching beneath the table. He didn't *want* to argue with Draco, but neither would he give him whatever he wanted simply to avoid conflict, the way he had with Ron and Hermione for so many years. That had been possible because they had seen just a single mask, and the other personas could do things they wouldn't approve of, even laugh at and mock them if that was needed. But Draco saw all of him.

"Why don't you want to help me?" Draco asked at last, his voice soft and plaintive. Harry was sure that tone must have won the consent of more than one lover before now.

"I *do* want to help you," Harry said. "Not in that way."

"And why not?"

"I don't like it, I don't understand it, and the primary purpose of Metamorphosis remains what it always has been," Harry said precisely. "A place to give me outlets for my personas and to help many people. I want to help you, yes. But I don't want to change the whole purpose of my life for you."

Draco flushed once more. His voice was low and intense. "I want us to share most of our lives."

"But not all of them," Harry said. "There are things about you I can't understand, such as why you love your father, and things about me you can't understand, like this. We're not going to become one person, Draco. We're going to argue and pursue separate activities some of the time. This is one of those times."

"I can't understand why," Draco said simply.

"Yes, you've made your incomprehension quite clear." Harry stood and braced his palms flat on the table. "Are you going to accept my refusal or not?"

"If you could explain it more clearly—"

"I've given you the explanation," Harry snapped, and swung on one heel. He was sure Draco would be looking at him in shock. By his own lights, he had been reasonable. But Harry detested that calm refusal to anger that he was using, that staring and speaking softly. It wasn't meant to present his side of the argument clearly; it was meant to shame his opponent into giving up the argument altogether. "If you don't like it, that doesn't matter."

He strode from the kitchen into the entrance hall and then up the stairs towards the study. His heartbeat was drumming furiously now, and he had to pause on the way up to lean on the banister and pant, as if he had released a great deal of wandless magic.

Every instinct he had accumulated as the broken Harry Potter and the Harry Potter who had been

Ron and Hermione's friend was screaming for him to go back downstairs and apologize to Draco immediately. Did Harry want to lose him?

But the instincts of Gerald, and Elizabeth, and Horace, and the Harry Potter he thought he had become when all his personas joined together, said that he couldn't give in to Draco out of fear of abandonment, because Draco wouldn't abandon him over a quarrel like this. It was a gesture of trust and the better thing for both of them if he stayed away until the temptation to yield vanished.

Harry breathed deeply for some time. Then he straightened up and went on climbing, and if he wasn't calm inside, he knew no one gazing at his face at that moment could have told the difference.

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Chapter: 44

Thanks again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Four—Chaos*

Draco rose slowly to his feet when Harry had left the kitchen. He opened his mouth to ask Kreacher to clear away the breakfast, but then shook his head and sat down again. No, he was still hungry, and he wouldn't let Harry's unreasonableness upset his appetite.

Because that's what it was, he told himself as he ate another piece of bacon and then placed a generous dollop of marmalade on a piece of toast. *He* certainly had not said anything that was worthy of instigating an argument. He'd simply explained some of his dreams of the future, and Harry had reacted as though Draco had said he meant to set himself up as the next Dark Lord.

The more he thought about it, the more indignant he became. Harry had acted as though he just *couldn't* do the things Draco had asked of him, as though he had some moral objection to them. But what moral objection could there be? He'd spent ten years lying, including lies to his best friends. He knew how to use Slytherin tactics when the situation called for it, as Draco had had plenty of chances to see with the rebellion. He hadn't held back from terrifying Lucius, with such effectiveness that Draco had only barely refrained from interfering. The only crime he seemed to avoid was violence, and Draco had not demanded that of him.

By the time he stood up from the table, Draco's temper was rattling the jugs in which Kreacher had brought the milk and orange juice slightly. Harry hadn't stayed long enough to hear explanations. He'd run up and hidden himself in his room like a child. Draco was sure he would find him there, sulking. He would insist on Harry's opening the door before he explained. If he

really was the only adult in this situation, then he would behave like one and convince Harry to emulate him.

Of course, his righteousness only carried him to the top of the stairs. Then he hesitated, because he had to admit he really didn't know where Harry would be. The door to his bedroom was open, as Draco could see from peering down the corridor.

That might mean Harry was a bit more mature than Draco had thought he was, so he still went to knock on the open door. No response. Draco spoke his name firmly, having made up his mind that he would not yell, no matter the temptation. No response again.

Draco turned, frowning. The house had numerous other doors on this corridor alone, and he thought there was an attic, as well. He began to take wary steps towards some of the further rooms, hoping Harry had removed all the doxies and cursed artifacts he'd told Draco about a few nights ago.

He probably felt it only because he was primed to expect it. As he passed one door, he sensed Dark magic. He flinched. It was like being dropped into the midst of a field of rotten corpses, swollen and stinking with the summer sun.

He aimed his wand at the door and murmured an unlocking charm. Harry would be stupid to leave the door to that room open.

A small maze of shimmering silvery wards coalesced into being around the door's handle. Draco stared. He recognized the general outline of the wards, though he had never seen so many, or most of the intricate folds in which they lay. They weren't the kind typically used to confine a dangerous beast or Dark magical artifact, a disturbing number of which had the power of spreading despair and hatred into the minds of anyone in the same house. These were the kind meant to *protect* a precious object. From the labyrinth Harry had constructed, Draco would have been tempted to think he was keeping mementoes of his dead parents in there.

*Perhaps it's a memento of Black? He might have wanted to keep it even if it was dangerous, because he might not have anything else.* Draco hesitated, his wand poised over the nearest of the wards. If that was the case, he was better off leaving it alone.

But no, he at least had to *know* what it was. Harry hadn't mentioned this or described it, and he must have known Draco would be uneasy with any unexpected Dark magic in the house, no matter where it came from. He spoke the first syllables of an incantation that he would use to cut the wards.

"*Don't do that.*"

The walls around Draco trembled. His sight of the wards dimmed for a moment, but he doubted anything had actually happened to his eyes. Harry was using another glamour to intimidate Draco out of pursuing this matter further.

*Too bad for him it won't work,* Draco thought, and turned around with a smile that he forced himself to make pleasant. "At least that lured you out of hiding," he said, and tossed his wand and caught it, to show that he wasn't concerned about needing it for defense. He tipped his head casually at the door. "What's in there?'

Harry locked his teeth and didn't answer. He couldn't believe Draco had decided to pry into the room that held the reverse Pensieve. Wouldn't the complex of wards have convinced any normal person Harry didn't want to share the secret that lay beyond that door?

Any normal person, maybe. But not Draco.

*This is the price you pay for having an extraordinary lover,* Harry told himself, setting his feet. *Two arguments in one day.* "I don't wish to tell you," he said coolly. "Rest assured, it's not alive. It won't get out and attack you. And it's not something I would ever use on you, or anyone else." He smiled, but Draco raised an eyebrow, and Harry had to concede that his smile might not be the most convincing expression at the moment. "You have to prepare a potion and say several complicated spells just to use it," Harry explained. "And then it would only affect the person who went to it with a willing heart."

Draco shifted his own stance, a quick, irresolute movement that might not have revealed anything to less careful eyes than Harry's. "You went to it with one," he said. "Your knowledge of it tells me that."

Harry chewed the inside of his cheek. Did Draco have magical guilt-sensing powers? "At one time, I did," he said. "But that temptation has been removed from me forever. I don't plan to open the door of that room again, since I moved anything remotely valuable out when I made my decision. And I would appreciate your not destroying the wards it took me several hours to cast." He tried to haul his voice back to friendliness by main force. He really didn't want to argue with Draco again. He'd come to try and explain more clearly, in fact, exactly why Draco's assumption that Harry would always do as he was told had rankled him. "Wouldn't you rather discuss your business prospects and—"

Draco laughed at him, the sneer prominent in his voice if not on his face. "Come, Harry, that's not even a subtle segue. Couldn't you do a *touch* better?"

And Harry lost a hold on his temper he didn't even realize he'd been keeping.

He took a single step forwards and snarled, "Forgive me for assuming I didn't have to use such tactics around you, that you wouldn't grow offended when I spoke honestly, that you wouldn't mock me for failing to be the clever and talented and poised persona you fell in love with."

Draco only frowned the way he had downstairs, as if Harry were being very tiresome. Harry didn't care. This time, he was going to have his full say even if Draco didn't listen. He couldn't

have stopped the words from coming if he tried.

"I've given you the greatest trust I can," he continued, "told you secrets I wouldn't have told anyone else, and let you walk into dangerous situations—like the meeting with Lucius—because I thought you could handle yourself. I've asked you questions you didn't answer, but you told me that you didn't want to answer them or couldn't, and I accepted them. I've let you express condescension towards my friends and even *enjoyed* some of it, because I was feeling bitter myself. The times I've felt hurt, I've told myself that, well, of course you didn't understand, because you'd never been friends with Ron and Hermione. And I accepted *your* friends even when Parkinson was saying things at the party that I would have thrown anyone else out for saying."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, but the flow of words continued. Harry also didn't see why he should be compelled to listen to Draco when Draco obviously wasn't listening to *him*.

"I wanted some trust from you in return. And you seemed fairly good at giving it. Then you said I had to help you in all the ways you wanted, and when I refused some of them, you couldn't trust my reasons for doing so. No, the explanations weren't good enough, so you demanded more. The simple truth of the matter is that *I just don't want to,* Draco. Helping you achieve the goals we share is one thing. Helping you expand your business and gain an advantage over your rivals is another. I'm not comfortable with it, especially when I don't understand the business world like I understand the pure-blood world and don't know what all the consequences of my actions would be."

"Harry, you're being ridiculous—"

"*You're doing it again.*"

The walls and floor shook. Draco fell back a step, lifting one hand in front of his face as if he expected to shield it from thrown curses. Harry sucked in his breath hard, then chuckled. "It seems you don't really trust me not to hurt you with magic, either."

"I'm not—I was just startled." Draco dropped his hand and frowned at Harry. "And you did hurt me once."

"Accidentally," Harry said, closing his eyes for a moment, "and I made atonement for it. And I didn't expect to have that thrown in my face."

"I don't understand what you want," Draco said, some bristling, glittering anger sparking in his voice at last. Harry was glad. He had wanted Draco to listen, but even more, he'd wanted him to drop the emotionless mask and actually *participate* in the argument. "I'm telling the truth. I told you the truth about what I wanted from Metamorphosis. What was I supposed to do? Lie to you, use the Slytherin tactics you just accused me of loving too much to lead into the matter gently?"

"What if I said that I wanted help from Malfoy's Machineries?" Harry asked. "Machines to help

me achieve certain effects in a job, for example? There have been times steel and glass would have worked better for me than a spell, but I had to rely on magic because that's what I understand."

"I might not want to make the machines for you," Draco said, frowning harder. "And I might not have the ability to make them."

"*Exactly.*" Harry snarled again when Draco stared at him. "I know you're not that stupid. You must see the parallel."

"But I do trust you." Draco moved a step off to the side, as though he were about to begin a dueling circle. Harry sneered at him and remained where he was. If it came to dueling, he could overpower Draco in a moment. "I trust you to be able to do whatever you set your hand to well, including wooing business contacts for me."

"And my not wanting to isn't a good enough reason?"

"No."

"Why not?" Harry stretched out a hand towards him, but became aware of how weak the gesture would look just in time—it seemed he had to still worry about such things with Draco—and retracted it to his side so he could pretend he was scratching an itch above his ribs. "Why can't you trust that my assessment of my skills is better than yours?"

Draco blew air through his nose. "Because you've made such good assessments of yourself in the past decade," he muttered.

Harry had to close his eyes again. "I always estimated what I'd need to get a job done accurately," he said softly. "I developed skills in what spells I could and understood the limits of my magic. I—"

"I discovered you fairly easily," Draco said. "Of *course* you knew what you needed to get a job done."

Harry had forgotten words could hurt so much. Stupid of him, really, he thought. It had only been a few days since Ron and Hermione's words had wounded him more than any hostile gesture they could have made.

"I don't see why you would want me to help you with your business, if you think I'm a poor actor," he said. He chose simple words, because his mind was rather busy at the moment, throwing up walls that would shield the broken Harry from Draco's view and thus from his ability to cause pain. He hesitated for a moment, then called Brian forwards. He had a certain strain of irreverence that would help in dealing with this situation. He managed to open his eyes and grin Brian's grin at Draco. "But it's nice to know that you had reason to distrust me from the beginning, even as you demanded that I have absolute faith in you."

"You sound like someone else again," Draco snapped, taking a step forwards instead of sideways this time.

"Do I?" And yes, his voice had deepened into Brian's. Harry shrugged and grinned more widely. "It seemed appropriate for the situation. This is the aspect of me that you've shown you favor and trust most, after all."

"You *promised* you wouldn't do that with me anymore." Draco had the gall to sound injured.

"Well, you've just shown me what you think of my weak, emotional side. You care more about the dent my emotions made in my acting ability than you do about the fact that the connection I felt with you brought us together." Brian arched an eyebrow. "I would be a fool to keep showing you trust when it would only win me mockery."

Draco was not used to feeling helpless. Even with Harry's display of unreason in the kitchen, he had not felt this way. He had resigned himself to its taking some hours, but he was *sure* that, once he found Harry, he would be able to steer him slowly around to the correct point of view.

Only now, staring at Harry, did he realize how little power he would have in any situation where Harry chose to retreat. Harry's magic was the mightier; Draco could not overpower him with physical or magical force, or even bind him without his consent. And if Harry chose to vanish, Draco would never find him. He had thought that danger past when Harry told him he was in control of all his personas. But if Draco hurt him badly enough, Harry could use that control to disappear more effectively than before. And this time, his desire and love for Draco wouldn't betray him.

Draco couldn't *control* him.

His hands closed into fists. He'd never lacked that assurance in any of his relationships before. His lovers had been in awe of his wealth and good looks. His friends had been closer to his equals, but even they knew he could outmaneuver them and so had to go out of their way to hide their stratagems—which was an admission of and a compliment to his power in and of itself. He had avoided controlling his parents, but he had never lacked the knowledge that he *could*, though it would have caused pain to them, especially Narcissa, that he didn't have the stomach to inflict.

In fact, the only being who had ever been able to challenge him by sheer force of presence and will and superior power was the Dark Lord.

Staring at the stubborn, half-grinning face of the man before him, Draco knew he had met another.

The major difference was that Harry *would* submit to his control, surrender to him and offer his trust, as he had proven last night in the bedroom. But he could reclaim his submission at any

time. What was more pertinent, he obviously hadn't hesitated to do that when he decided Draco didn't trust him enough for his liking. Draco might think his reasons for doing so silly, but that wouldn't change or hinder the consequences.

And that, more than the parallel Harry had tried to build between Metamorphosis and Malfoy's Machineries, or his half-incoherent reactions to the facts Draco spoke, which might be blunt or harsh but were still truths, convinced Draco he had been a fool. He had wielded his power without thinking. He had not believed compromise was necessary. And he had simply dismissed Harry's asking for trust, whilst demanding Harry's complete trust in return.

Much more strongly than the time in which he'd cornered an enraged and powerful wizard, Draco could see how stupidly he'd acted. Certainly not the way a wizard who really had power in his hands and grace about using it would act.

He could *try* to understand Harry's reasons, couldn't he? Doing so would cost him nothing but time and a little patience. And Harry might, in the end, explain so Draco could understand, and even reveal what Dark magical artifact lurked behind that locked door.

Draco swallowed and laid his wand down. Harry/Brian watched him with bright eyes which grew more amused. Draco stepped forwards with his hands extended and said softly, "Please don't do that."

"Why not?" Brian's smile faded for the first time. Draco thought it was the tone of his voice and not the words that had really caught his attention.

"Because—because I don't want you to leave me." Draco could have laughed or cried with the force of that insight. Harry mattered more to him than having power over the situation did. He would rather sacrifice Harry's help with Malfoy's Machineries than sacrifice Harry's trust. Put that way, it seemed so simple, but it had cost Draco much of his pride to admit it. "Because I don't want you to think you have to give me a persona instead of your complete self. And because I was being stupid and refusing to trust you. I'm sorry." He hesitated, running the memories of the past few weeks over in his mind, but he couldn't think of any major secrets he'd told Harry, the way Harry had told him the story of Metamorphosis's existence and why he had started the business in the first place. He hadn't even explained the true depth of his relationship, past or present, with Blaise, opting to enjoy Harry's jealousy. "I'd like you to know more about me, too," he finished, and then winced a little at the unpolished sound of his own words.

Brian's eyes widened, and he turned his head almost completely upside-down as though trying to make sure Draco wasn't hiding a secret weapon under his hair. Draco opened his mouth to protest that that wasn't one of Harry's own gestures, then silenced himself. That could hardly help him carry his point now. Besides, was he absolutely sure that it wasn't one of Harry's own gestures? It could be one he'd never seen.

*I assumed I knew everything about him. I obviously didn't.* He tried not to look at the locked door. *I can wait to know if he doesn't want to tell me.*

"I can accept that," said Brian, and his voice had modulated back into one closer to Harry's, tinged with cautious relief. "*If* you mean it."

"I do," Draco said. And then, in case Harry should think he'd given in too easily or surrendered completely, he did nod at the locked door. "Not that I won't insist on an explanation for this eventually. I won't let you endanger your life by keeping it locked up here."

Harry's hands closed into fists for a moment, then opened again. "I should have known you would find out," he muttered. "And I should have explained about it before." He hesitated. "That's the Pensieve I mentioned the night you—saved me." His voice sank as if he were embarrassed. "The one that was meant to help me drown my memories of being Harry Potter and awaken as someone else, someone who could continue Metamorphosis."

"Pensieves don't do that," Draco said. He absently rubbed the gooseflesh that had spread up and down his arms.

Harry curled his lip and met Draco's gaze. "I believe there was an apology for refusing to trust my word."

Draco snorted. "I'm displaying my trust in you by expressing shock but believing, rather than humoring your mention of the Pensieve whilst continuing to doubt you in the silence of my mind."

Both Harry's eyebrows rose. "That explanation's so convoluted I'll need to accept it as true," he said. "And anyway, this one swallows memories instead of capturing them."

"You created it," Draco said. He was *sure* no Pensieves like that were sold within the wizarding world, or he would have discovered one when he was researching to create a machine that could reliably record dreams. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to lose my memories if the pain ever became intolerable," Harry said, curling his lip further. "Why else would I?"

"Will you get rid of it?"

"Not right now." Harry crouched as if he were prepared to resume the argument immediately should Draco insist.

Draco swallowed the shout he wanted to give. He had to listen to the words Harry spoke as well as his own suspicions. Harry hadn't said he would *never* destroy that corrupted Pensieve; he had said he wouldn't do it right now. If months passed and he still hadn't kept his word, then Draco would remind him again. But for now, he could have patience, the same way he'd had when waiting for Harry to confess his secrets. Those secrets would have had less value if he'd simply torn them out of Harry at first. It was a proof of love for Harry to trust him enough to make the

confession of his own free will.

And if he would destroy the Pensieve of his own free will, then that would be as sweet as strong wine to Draco. Insisting on having his own way all the time had cost him Harry's confidence and cost Harry pain. He could compromise, as much as he hated the word. He could wait—and that was something he had more experience in doing.

"All right," he said.

The way Harry opened his eyes and stared at him, then began to smile, made Draco smile back in sheer delight. Harry hadn't expected that. Draco *liked* surprising him. He had thought of doing so with expensive gifts, of the kind Harry had had no family to give him and his friends would never have had the money to buy, but this was even better.

"Thank you," Harry whispered, and paused, studying him thoughtfully. "I'm not trying to say I'm without blame. I did—well, I was incoherent when trying to defend my points in the kitchen, to say the least." He flushed, and Draco liked the look of it, because it was more the red blotchy look he thought Harry would wear, rather than the perfectly polished flirtatious blush he would have associated with Brian. "I'm sorry for that as well." He blinked as though someone had suddenly called his name. "And you know, we never did lift the Lover's Face Curse. I assume that's something we should do before we venture into public again. Maybe there's not much chance of meeting Alice Moonstone right now, but you could see her accidentally in the future, and I'd rather not have my lover snatched out from beneath my nose because of my *own* stupidity." He raised his eyebrows at Draco.

Draco's immediate impulse was to argue that they talk about his past instead. He gave a rueful shake of his head. *So a suggestion can't be good if it comes from Harry?*

"And why not?"

Harry had reinterpreted the shake of his head in a different way. Draco grinned. "We should lift the curse," he said. "I was fighting myself back when I seemed to say no." And then he paused, because a new and brilliant idea had just hit him. He considered it from several different angles, tilted it back and forth looking for flaws the way he would have examined a jewel in a professional shop. Then he nodded briskly.

"I think I've just thought of a way to bring your friends back to you," he announced. "Without humiliating them too badly, even."

"*Draco.*"

The tone Harry spoke his name in was very nearly enough to make Draco drop to his knees, and the shine of his eyes made them hard to meet.

He would not give up everything for Harry, any more than Harry would give up everything for

him. That would scar and deform them both in the end. But he would give up much, because there was very little he wanted more than this.

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Chapter: 45

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Five—The Past Collides With the Present*

"But if your home life really was like that, why did you say all those stupid things at school?" Harry asked, and then added, "Wait, don't speak yet. This step says that you need to remain still whilst I cast the third spell on your face."

Draco waited obediently as Harry waved his wand through a looping motion and murmured a few Latin words, but asked as soon as Harry nodded to him, "Why did you have to cast a spell on my *face*?"

"Because it's the Lover's Face Curse," Harry said patiently, as though he had already reckoned this would be Draco's question. "It creates a link between your eyes and Alice Moonstone's face. You would actually look for her when you went out in public, trying to meet her eyes and start the process of becoming her lover."

Draco shifted uncomfortably. The more he found out about the curse his father had chosen to bind him to Alice Moonstone, the more disturbed he grew. On one hand, he supposed he should think his father respected him; this was no weak magic, and Lucius had finally given up his delusion that he could bind Draco with soft words or false promises. But Lucius had been content to see him spend the rest of his life as a slave, and only fear of Harry's magic had made him change his mind.

Draco would have much to say to Lucius when next they met.

"And now," Harry went on, as he glanced back at the book spread open in front of him for the next step to remove the curse, "you were telling me that your parents loved you and encouraged you to have pride in yourself more than they encouraged you to hate Muggleborns, or even me. Why did you say those stupid things to me and Hermione, then? I know I irritated you, but she didn't seek you out or act in direct rivalry to you the way I did on the Quidditch pitch."

"My parents gave me too much pride." Draco shifted again in the chair, his eyes on the far wall. This conversation was teaching him new things about himself. Harry hadn't asked these questions until now, and Draco had imagined he could answer them honestly without

flinching—certainly far more easily than Harry could tell his many secrets, because Harry was fractured mentally and Draco was whole. But he had trouble either finding the words or thinking Harry wouldn't judge him for what he said. He didn't think *he* would have wanted to date someone who sounded as uncertain as he did about the simplest things.

*He didn't ask, and he should have, if he wanted to know about me. But I also didn't volunteer anything. Now I know why.*

"And I was the first serious challenge to that pride?" Harry glanced up, raising an eyebrow. He looked entirely like himself, and Draco didn't hear Brian in his voice or see him in his face now, but the incredulity in Harry's tone still made him want to glance away. Talking about himself gave up some measure of control, if only the control to steer the conversation.

"You were," Draco said softly. "And Granger was the second. It was *worse* that she didn't compete with me directly, that most of the time she didn't seem to notice I existed. She just went after the marks for the pleasure of winning them, and studied the subjects extensively because she wanted to. I never heard her mention whether her parents were particularly proud of her—"

"I'm sure they must have been," Harry said, and, keeping his eyes on the book, muttered three more Latin words. A white glow enwrapped Draco for a moment, then peeled away like a cocoon. Harry glanced up, grinning. "That should be almost the last of it," he said, and gestured Draco to continue.

"But not like mine." Draco folded his arms and scowled at his stomach. "Lucius was less proud of me than he would have been if I had succeeded in getting the top mark in every class, or if I had won on the Quidditch pitch. He would smile and speak of my accomplishments, but I could see the slant at the corner of his eye, the way he would look at me in disappointment when he allowed the smile to fade. He would never betray that he was irritated with me to someone outside the family; that would have been a severe breach of blood loyalty. Nor did he scold me often. But he could speak a silent language to me, just as he could tell me without scolding me when I was being too loud in public and he wanted me to be silent. I understood what he wanted to say, and because of that code of silence I couldn't even confront him about it."

"There must have been other challenges to your pride," Harry said. "I couldn't have been the only one, and I know Hermione didn't get the top marks in *every* class. She struggled in Arithmancy, she told me."

"You were the first two, and the worst," Draco said. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. I was also certain my father would be as proud of me as he should have been if I could manage to beat one of you *once*. I would have shown him I had the capacity to do it, and then he could choose to think I was conserving my energy on the other occasions for more important things, like studying spells not taught in school. He never expected me to have boundless energy or to be good at everything. He didn't care about Gobstones, for instance."

He shifted again. He hadn't known he believed all those things about his father; they were things

his adolescent self had known without words, and his adult self had been able to put aside, because he knew he was cleverer than Lucius and able to act outside his control. Speaking the words made him sound like a petty, bitter child who still resented his father for actions that wouldn't look large to anyone outside the family.

But he hadn't been that child in a long time.

"That answers something else I used to wonder about," Harry said quietly, and then squinted thoughtfully down at the words on the page. "Buckbeak."

Draco blinked, thrown. "Who?"

"The hippogriff who bit you in your third year." Harry glanced up with unreadable eyes. "The hippogriff you tried to have executed so it would hurt Hagrid."

Draco tightened his hands. He would have liked to say, as he had then, that Buckbeak was a vicious creature who deserved to be put down, and that Hagrid should never have allowed hippogriffs near children. The last was still true, but he also knew that he had provoked Buckbeak on purpose, and disobeyed instructions that seemed to have kept Harry, at any rate, safe.

"But you made it about more than just destroying the hippogriff who hurt you," Harry continued. "You made it about more than hurting Hagrid, even. You were always looking to see how I would take it. You wanted to hurt *me* when Buckbeak died. I suppose you related other challenges to your pride back to the one I gave you?"

"Yes," Draco said through stiff lips. "I'm not proud of it, but there it is." He coughed. "And I am sorry for getting him killed." He wasn't sure what good the apology would do, coming seventeen years too late, but he would give it.

Harry gave him a sudden, brilliant grin. "Oh, but he lived."

Draco blinked. "Father never discussed that with me," he said. "He mentioned that Walden Macnair was less than pleased when he came back from the execution, but I assumed the beast didn't give him the sport he wanted. Did Hagrid let him go before they arrived? And how did he avoid going to Azkaban for that?"

"Hagrid knew he had to give in to the law, actually," said Harry, and grinned more widely. "Hermione had a Time-Turner that year, because she was trying to attend *all* the classes that were available. We used it to go back in time and rescue Buckbeak, as well as—other people." His face darkened for a moment, and Draco opened his mouth to ask for *that* story, but Harry had pressed on. "Macnair couldn't blame Hagrid for it because he knew he was in his hut the entire time."

Draco leaned back in the chair, shaking his head. From the brilliance in Harry's eyes, as if he

were remembering some adventure in one of his personas that had gone exactly the way he planned it, he didn't share the thoughts filling Draco's head. "Dumbledore entrusted you with that, and with many other challenges that weren't appropriate to a child your age," he said.

"And you got entrusted with more responsibilities than you should have, even if you were three years older than thirteen when you had them," Harry responded gently, and leaned forwards to smooth the hair out of Draco's eyes. His hand lingered for a moment on Draco's forehead, as if *he* were the one who had the lightning bolt scar. "The burdens Dumbledore put on you that year wasn't fair, either. And then I cut you apart with the *Sectumsempra* spell, just to make everything harder." He shuddered and shook his head.

Draco swallowed. He had not thought Harry would bring that up; he had envisioned him leaping to an angry defense of Dumbledore's judgment instead. He turned his hand and caught Harry's wrist. "I still don't think you're entirely right," he said, speaking before he could think better of it. "I would have told you these things if you asked me. That's a lot different than hiding secrets from you, the way you tried to hide the Pensieve from me."

Harry looked at the floor. Draco could see him biting his lip as though he were forcing away anger. Then he looked up, and nodded.

"You're right, and I'm sorry," he said. "But I wanted you to offer me information about yourself for two reasons. First, I thought that would show you were really comfortable around me, that you wanted to tell me about yourself because you *wanted* to. Second, I didn't know how much I could ask without driving you away."

Draco stared at him. "Harry, a clumsy question wouldn't drive me away."

"As you so aptly reminded me," Harry said with more fire in his voice, "I know far less about behaving like a normal person than you do. I've gone out of my way for ten years to avoid any conflict because it might make someone else mildly uncomfortable. I translated any and all inconvenience into a belief that I would ruin my friendship with Ron and Hermione if I did something as ordinary as talk to them about a man I dated. And Draco—" His face flamed red abruptly. "I care about you—more than I do about them. *I'm* not particularly proud of *that.* I think I ought to care more about people I've been friends with for nineteen years. But I don't. Maybe that will change when we reconcile. Right now, it hasn't."

"So you feared even more to drive me away," Draco whispered, and lifted a hand to caress Harry's cheek.

Harry nodded, then laughed. "A right pair of saps we are!" he said. "We know so much about each other, and we still can't figure out the best way to talk about things like ordinary people without getting hurt."

"I don't think that's unusual," Draco murmured. "I had something of the same weakness myself. I could have challenged my father years ago and won free of him if it was simply a matter of

asserting my independence. But I tried to spare his feelings and didn't confront him even when it would have been the best thing for both of us, even when I knew I had no hope of making him think I was right by slight hints. Why? I feared the consequences. I feared hurting him. And my mother most of all."

Harry nodded against his hand. "And that's why I'll need you to tell me *openly* when I make a mistake," he said. "I can accept someone talking to me about that. I can't accept someone acting as though I should already know I was making one and apologize for an offense that's not out in the open."

"I didn't—"

"You didn't mean to, and maybe you didn't and I'm just misinterpreting things," Harry said firmly. "But that's the way I felt you were talking to me in the kitchen. The more patient and controlled you got, the more I felt as if you wanted to be the adult and wanted me to be the child who would just listen and do as I was told." He sat back, and his eyes as they held Draco's had the sharpness of Horace Longbottom's. "Coddling doesn't work for me anymore."

Draco sighed. He wanted to argue that everyone needed coddling sometimes, and anyway, some was necessary in this case because Harry could take offense at the slightest things. He'd never meant to suggest Harry was a child.

But he had time to talk like that—years and years of time together. For the moment, he knew what had gone wrong, and he thought he knew how to avoid another fight of the same kind, though not all fights all the time.

And he had the ability to ask for coddling himself, to talk about himself if he wanted and ask for sympathy.

Perhaps someday he would even get used to that.

Harry spoke the last incantation to free Draco from the curse by whispering it into his ear, cradling his face between his hands and working his fingers into Draco's hair. Draco closed his eyes and thought he felt more than hostile magic melt away from him as Harry gently stroked the back of his head.

The owl that hurtled through the window towards lunchtime and began hopping and hooting on the table in front of Harry was the biggest he'd ever seen. He reached out and took the letter, a moment before Draco's hand got there. Draco sat back in his chair and shook his head, staring at him.

"What?" Harry asked, tearing open the envelope. It had come from Kingsley, as he knew from the loop of the writing before he looked at the signature, and the man might well have important news about the Aurors or about Counterstrike.

"You don't know what hexes could have been on that thing," Draco said in a voice that trembled with tension like a cup of water brimming above the surface. "And you didn't check for any before you tore it open."

Harry prevented the rise of his own anger. He understood better why Draco would make such remarks after his explanation about his father and how Draco hadn't wanted to hurt him. Draco wanted Harry to avoid coming to any harm, too.

"The wards around the house wouldn't have allowed the letter to pass if it had such hexes," he said gently. "It doesn't even allow Howlers to pass." And then he lost himself in the sense of the letter, suspecting it would be the best thing for both of them right now.

*Dear Harry:*

*I have questioned Ron, as well as a number of other Aurors. You will be pleased to know that Ron did not realize whose orders he was acting on. He thought the raid on the party, as well as the one on the meeting of your faction, had my full sanction, and he looked sick when he realized they did not.*

*I have been less successful in discovering all the members of Counterstrike. Some of the Aurors I interviewed have argued with me that the Ministry should enforce the laws against homosexuality, and if I didn't care to, they would do it themselves. I have showed I would have no trouble sacking them for such an action, and brought them to their senses. But the prejudice will remain in your dealings with the Ministry, and I cannot promise that you will be entirely safe.*

Harry nodded. That, he'd expected. Counterstrike as an organization might be brought down, disbanded, or deprived of funding, but that wouldn't cure the misconceptions of people who thought no gay wizard or lesbian witch would ever want children, or who believed that gay sex was disgusting because they didn't practice it themselves. This struggle would be protracted, and Kingsley could only help in part of it.

*I have made it clear that I do not consider the enforcement of these laws important given that we have many open cases concerning actual Dark wizards, murderers and rapists and worse. Most of my Aurors have submitted. The names of those who have not follow.*

Harry raised his eyebrows. He had not expected Kingsley to give him any specific warnings. He memorized the names in a few minutes of staring, then read the last paragraph of the letter.

*To my knowledge, the person who informed Counterstrike about the meeting was not a member of any Auror corps. I also believe that the man who dealt with Lucius Malfoy, or at least received his money, to set up the group was most likely named John Grey. He has remained modestly out of sight the last few years, but shortly before the war he was one of the major contenders against Scrimgeour for Minister. He has never made a secret of his own extremist views, which include*

*bending everyone into one political mold, disposing of Muggleborns as well as homosexuals, and cutting off contact with wizarding communities in other countries. He believes that British wizarding pure-blood culture is the only "untainted" one left, and I can see him seizing the chance to fulfill at least one of his political goals through this group.*

*Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic.*

Harry scowled, dropping the letter to the table. He had heard of John Grey before, though never met him except as a distant face at a few of the parties he had attended in disguise. The man was thoroughly unpleasant, but tolerated for his money, the reputation of his grandfather, and some of his ideas, which many pure-bloods like Lucius Malfoy thought vaguely were the "right" ones, if too extreme for everyday use.

"Bad news?"

Harry started and looked up. Draco was leaning across the table, one hand hovering as if he wanted to touch Harry but weren't sure it would be welcome. Harry smiled. They were being very careful around each other right now. In some ways he mourned the easiness between them when they had first come together as Draco and Brian, but they could have achieved it now only by ignoring ninety percent of their lives and emotions.

Harry stretched the rest of the way, clasped Draco's hand in his, and nodded. "We're fighting John Grey."

Draco made a horrible face. Harry laughed. "I take it you've met him? I've never had that dubious honor."

"I've met him, and I hate him," said Draco, with a rawness in his words that made Harry blink. "If he's behind Counterstrike, then of course we have to destroy him and embarrass him publicly if at all possible."

"From what I've heard, he's never yet let himself be lured into an open strike at his enemies, no matter how much he hates the people on the opposite side," Harry said. "That's the reason his power has managed to endure so long. He never lets himself be *undeniably* associated with anything objectionable, and so people still feel compelled to invite him to their houses."

Draco nodded slowly. "He didn't join the attackers at the party, though he couldn't have known you would embarrass them publicly," he said, and closed his eyes for a moment. "I know him, yes, but I still know too little of him. I don't even know where the majority of his money came from, which is something I know about almost every other pure-blood family. That bloody reputation of his holds everyone at a distance." He looked at Harry and raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you don't have a persona who could approach him and find out what we need to know?"

Harry started to shake his head, then paused. A moment later, he began to grin.

"What?" Draco demanded.

"None of the normal ones, at any rate," Harry said. "A few people who only exist on paper, Horace Longbottom's cousins, tried to make contact with him at one point, and he rebuffed all of them. But there's someone I made up in a fit of mischief one night and then never used who might be perfect."

Draco leaned forwards attentively. Now that Harry was looking at him with some knowledge of who he'd been as a child and as Lucius's son, he could see the barely concealed impatience in his expression. That knowledge contented him. Draco was not perfect and flawless in his control after all, and Harry didn't have to worry so constantly about offending him or about seeming inferior next to him.

Harry paused, to see how much Draco might be tempted to let him get away with.

"Who?" Draco said this time.

"His name's Vivian Wilde," Harry said. "He is quite, quite prejudiced. Terrified of nearly everyone different from himself, in fact—Muggleborns, women, Muggles, people of some other skin color than his own, foreigners, people who aren't pure-blooded."

"If he's supposed to be pure-blooded," Draco said, "I don't know if we have a chance. Mr. Grey *does* know all the secrets of all the pure-blood families, and I think he'd be able to recognize an imposter."

"He never recognized my characters as imposters," Harry said softly.

"He might have decided that he shouldn't interfere in concerns that didn't directly touch him," Draco said, folding his arms. "But it would be different with someone approaching him and daring to make contact with his august majesty."

"Trust me," said Harry, and here his grin began to break forth, "his genealogy will not be *good,* but it will be impeccable. He's going to be your cousin."

"But I only have—"

Draco stopped. "My cousin Maxwell," he said. "Who's a scapegrace and certainly could have had a bastard child we've never heard about."

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "At the very *least*, Grey wouldn't be able to disprove it right away," he said "And Lucius's denials wouldn't mean anything, since he doesn't acknowledge that side of the family in any case. I think Grey would be intrigued enough to meet with a cousin of yours who's intent on betraying you."

"Maxwell would cooperate, I think," Draco mused. "The one thing I know about him is that he's

never let the chance for a joke go by. He sent a card to my father when I was born, congratulating him for melting the icicle, as he called my mother, at least once." He nodded. "His owl ought not to take more than a few days to arrive." He raised an eyebrow. "And then?"

Harry smiled. "I offer valuable, *true* information about the rebellion, and get Grey to appear in public with Vivian. And—"

He paused, as the plan changed and unfolded again in his mind. "I wonder if I dare," he muttered, but he already knew that he had the courage for it. The real question was whether he could morally go through with it.

*Yes, I think I can, especially when Nusante has not been helpful these past weeks. I hoped he would come around to reason given time, but we* need *him reconciled to the rebellion, and that means reconciled to Harry Potter.*

He grinned fiercely at Draco, who looked simultaneously frightened and entranced. "How good are you at glamours?"

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Chapter: 46

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Six—The Glamour Principle*

Harry peered at himself critically in the mirror. Well, he had the *face* right—short black hair, skin paler than necessary, gray eyes that resembled Draco's—but John Grey would require the spirit. Closing his eyes, Harry summoned forth Vivian Wilde.

To sink within such a spirit, one that resented and feared everyone around him, was disgusting. But Harry managed a single shudder and then did so. Here, his newfound control was an especially good thing. Vivian's persona could surround and encase him without seeping into and dirtying him. Harry looked out as through a pane of scum-smeared glass, whilst Vivian looked anxiously around and then covered up the mirror by hanging a white cloth. He didn't wish to look at himself in such a mood. When he peered too closely, he thought the coarse features of his Muggle mother drowned out the aristocratic ones of his Malfoy father.

Vivian began to pace up and down the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his mind racing on what he would need to do to impress Mr. Grey. His importance made him of even more account than his wealth. He must balance between respect and fawning, between pride and fear. Mr. Grey couldn't think him a cringing coward or a disgrace to the Malfoy family, even though

he had little reason to regard the Malfoy family favorably just at present.

Harry snorted to himself and let his body walk, settling into the jerky gait that Vivian preferred to use. He was a little taller than normal thanks to insets in his boots, and he preferred to practice before he had to show off in front of his audience.

That is, if he *did* show off in front of his audience. Grey hadn't yet responded to the owl Harry had sent off to him, weaving a complicated but plausible tale of a way they could meet in public and embarrass Harry Potter and his cousin Draco.

No, *Vivian's* cousin Draco.

Harry grimaced wryly to himself. Draco had been more right than he knew about the necessity of Harry asserting control over his personas. He was so used to slipping into them, not as a defensive tactic but because it was the way Metamorphosis had survived, that he was apt to do it when he didn't need to. He would do well to become more conscious of the process and decide when he shoulddo it and when it wasn't such a priority.

"Cousin Draco! Well, this is a pleasant surprise."

Not even long training in Lucius's disdain of the man could keep Draco from relaxing at the sight of his cousin Maxwell, kneeling down to peer into the fireplace through which Draco had firecalled. A young boy was standing on his back and attempting to choke him, but apparently Draco's call was more a matter of concern for Maxwell. Considering the thick flaps of skin that guarded his neck, Draco could see why.

Maxwell was Lucius's opposite in being jovial and bearing thick traces of gray in his pale brown hair that he never bothered to disguise, but those were superficialities. Draco knew that humor could be pointed and cruel. No, the real difference was in the feeling he exuded. Maxwell made people *comfortable* around him, and that was not something Lucius could be accused of doing, even by mistake.

"Not entirely a pleasant surprise, I'm afraid," Draco admitted. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Go see what Constantia's doing," Maxwell said, and swung the little boy off his back. The boy leaned against his knee for a moment and opened his mouth, into which Maxwell dropped a sweet. Then he trotted away with his thumb in his mouth. Draco barely kept from shuddering. Maxwell turned back to him and nodded. "Well, what is it?"

"You've probably heard that I'm Harry Potter's partner by now, and the leader of a movement that requests equal rights for homosexual wizards," Draco said. Maxwell *had* to know. He didn't keep up on the pure-blood social news that made up the substance of most of Lucius's conversation, but he read the *Daily Prophet*, always alert for any move Lucius might make to disgrace him or take away his small amount of money.

"Yes," Maxwell said, a grin speeding across his face like a comet, "and a capital disgrace to the family, too!" He thrust out his hand as if he would shake Draco's through the fire. "Always said that Lucius would spoil your perfect obedience by raising you up too tightly. The colt who accepts a rein when he's young doesn't always want to take a full harness when he's older, you know."

Draco, though he didn't like this metaphor much better than his cousin's overindulgence towards his grandchildren, let his hand be clasped and wrung. Then he said, "And this will make me even more of a disgrace to the family, if you agree to help."

Maxwell widened his eyes and flapped his ears, a trick he had learned to do without magic, for some reason. "Do explain."

"Harry wants to use the identity of a scapegrace son of yours to bring down the major enemy our rebellion—"

"Rebellion?" Maxwell's smile almost touched his ears by now. "Better and better!"

Draco coughed. He'd become accustomed to referring to the movement by the same name Harry gave it, and would have certainly reconsidered it if he was talking to his father. But he wasn't stupid; he could follow up on a fortuitous mistake. "Yes. The major enemy is a man named John Grey. You might have heard of him."

Maxwell lost his smile. "Yes, I have," he said. "Never mind the context. I'm sure he's too much of a *gentleman* to have revealed it, though that didn't keep him from trying to blackmail me." He leaned closer. "What do you need me to do? Testify to the existence of this son if anyone inquires? Living at a distance from the wizarding world and mingling with the Muggle one has its advantages, you know."

"If this plan works as we hope," said Draco, "Grey will agree to meet your imaginary son in public. To do that, we'll need your permission to use your name, of course, but we might need your testimony as to Vivian Wilde's existence—"

"*Vivian*?" Maxwell interrupted, with a snort.

Draco smiled a little. "Harry chose the name, not I."

"*Wilde,*" Maxwell continued, and then threw his head back and laughed. "Well, at least your Harry doesn't have to worry about Grey reading Muggle history and recognizing the reference! Or seeing a Muggle drama, for that matter."

"I beg your pardon?" Harry hadn't told Draco he'd chosen a famous name. That was something they would have to speak about. Likely he hadn't believed it would be a danger, but Draco thought he should have been asked about it nonetheless.

"And neither do you." Maxwell grinned at him. "If it's to destroy Grey—which is certainly a good cause—then I'll give you all the support you could wish. Swear to Vivian's existence and make up a whole story about it, if you like."

"Actually," Draco said, reaching with some relief to the leather-bound folder beside him, "Harry asked me to give you a few particulars he'd made up himself, so that the stories won't contradict each other."

"So sure of my acceptance, was he?" Maxwell asked, but he reached through the flames and took the folder without any sign of offense. He flicked past a few pages, chuckled, and then shut the folder with a decisive snap and nodded. "Well. This will do nicely. Tell your partner that he's quite a storyteller, and he'd be welcome at my house to exchange a few tales. I could tell him about the time when Lucius convinced himself he was in love with another man, for example."

Already mentally withdrawing from the conversation and attending to the second part of the plan—which would require much more concentration and magical strength, at least from him—Draco winced as his head snapped around to face his cousin. "He was *what*?'

"Oh, it was in the days just after Hogwarts," said Maxwell, grinning widely at him now, "just before he became quite so tied up with that Dark Lord nonsense, and certainly before he married. You needn't fear he was ever unfaithful to your mother. As I said to him some years ago, she must have frozen his—"

"Sir," Draco said as coldly as he could considering his fascination, "I will not submit to having my mother abused."

"Then get her out of Malfoy Manor," Maxwell said, but continued before Draco could make any other objections. "He fell in love with one of the most charming young men I've ever laid eyes on. Augustus was his first name, but I'll be damned if I can remember what his last one was. And Lucius had a passion for him, oh yes. Augustus could outthink him, outdance him, out-ride him when they went up together on winged horses. He knew more jokes, and Lucius could actually appreciate his sense of humor. I don't know if it ever got into the bedchamber, but I don't think it can have, because Lucius would smile more often, if that happened."

"He told me nothing of this," Draco muttered.

"Of course not," said Maxwell. "He woke up rather abruptly when Augustus told him that he expected Lucius to stay with him permanently and give up notions of marriage, if he really was in love. He'd thought of the affair as a summer matter, but Augustus had a constitution that wanted—demanded—more than that." He leaned forwards and peered at Draco keenly. "It sounds like your Harry is the same way. See you don't disappoint him. I know all sorts of embarrassing family secrets and could quite easily make your life too interesting to live in Britain."

Draco pressed his hand to his heart, which was already beating faster with the revelation of Lucius's hypocrisy. "And what happened between—my father and Augustus?"

"Lucius rejected him and went off to the bride his father had been urging him to marry for several years." Maxwell shrugged. "Understand, I don't blame your mother for making Lucius the humorless bastard he is—he always was that way—but I think he would have been better if he'd allowed himself to let go once, if he'd been able to sustain one insult to his pride. He certainly would have treated *you* better."

"He should have done that in any case," Draco said coolly.

"There, we can agree." Maxwell nodded. "You have my permission to use the Malfoy name. And do tell your Harry he's welcome here." He gave Draco a grin that had a touch too much innocence to really pass. "There's some people I'd like to introduce him to, as second choices in case you ever argue with him too much."

And then he cut off the Floo connection, leaving Draco to stare at the fireplace. He stood up after a moment with a shake of his head.

He could see why his father avoided his cousin's company, and it had nothing to do with notions of propriety. Well, less than he had thought, in any case.

"Again." Harry's voice held an iron patience, which Draco disliked, but he knew he might have sounded much the same way when he was explaining to Harry why it was necessary that he control his personas. This was one of the simplest things for Harry to do, the exercise of magic. Draco was determined to measure up to him, but even more frustrated to find that he couldn't do it on the first try.

For now, he gritted his teeth, nodded, and took a step back to face Harry across the large drawing room on the ground floor at the back of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. All the furniture had been moved away from the center of the carpet, leaving several deep indentations in it. The large black curtains covering the windows had also been tugged back so they could clearly see one another's faces.

Harry was wearing Vivian Wilde's face at the moment, and Draco had to admit that he looked completely different; even the tilt of his head was different, and he'd acquired a nervous mannerism of starting at the slightest sound that was sufficiently annoying to please John Grey. Despite what he'd said the other night, Draco knew he'd been lucky that Harry's emotions had caused him to reveal his real self to Draco. If he'd remained secure in the persona of Brian, Draco doubted he would ever have learned the truth.

*And that would have been a pity.*

"Fix your eyes on me," Harry said in a commanding, soothing voice that, luckily, wasn't different

from his normal one. Draco hated to think he needed soothing, but he *had* failed five times to perform this spell, and perhaps he'd shown a little temper. He looked Harry in the eye, and Harry nodded encouragingly. "Good. Now think—you can't say it aloud, in case Nusante suspects something—*Surrogo Harry Potter in loco suo cum vultu meo*."

Draco drew in a long breath and nodded. It was useless to explain that he thought the incantation too long, and that he'd always had more trouble putting power into nonverbal spells; this was what had to happen to make Harry's plan work, so he would do it.

And then Harry gave him a single rich smile, out of place on Vivian's insufferable face, and whispered, "I love you so much for being willing to try. I know it isn't easy for you."

Draco smiled back, ridiculously comfortable now. He locked his eyes on Harry's once more and repeated the incantation faithfully in his head. At least he didn't need to worry about forgetting it, now that Harry had drilled him in so relentlessly.

Magic gripped him and flung him through space. Draco staggered a little—Harry had warned him that would happen, and also that he would need to come up with a plausible explanation for Grey—and then stood up straight on the patch of carpet Harry had occupied, gasping. The first thing that caught his eye was his own face in the mirror beyond Harry's shoulder, on the other side of the room. When he'd last seen himself, he was wearing a glamour of Harry's features. Now gray eyes stared back at him.

*I replace Harry Potter in his own place with my own face.* Harry would have used the same incantation, except he would have substituted Draco's name. And, sure enough, he was missing the glamour of Wilde now, and standing where Draco had been.

Before Draco could get his breath back or get over his astonishment that it had *worked,* he found himself caught in one of Harry's embraces that made his ribs and spine squeeze. He'd discovered in the last few days that Harry had one of those and used it whenever he was pleased. Draco folded his arms around him and hugged him smugly back. He might be the only person in the last ten years who'd ever received one of those embraces just because Harry wanted to give it.

"Now only Grey's acceptance remains, and the owl to Nusante," Harry said, his eyes brilliant. "Neither of them is ever going to understand what happened. Isn't that wonderful?"

Though Draco generally preferred his enemies to know what happened so he could hold it over their heads and gloat about it, he nodded. Harry would probably always hide behind deception to a certain extent, but how could Draco forbid him from taking joy in that, when it made him so powerful?

Vivian shifted from foot to foot and looked over his shoulder twice. It had taken a week to get Grey to agree to this meeting. Suppose he gave up all notion of attending at the last moment? Vivian would be in trouble with his father, and Maxwell would certainly inform his cousin

Draco. And then—

"Wilde?"

Vivian heaved a sigh he sincerely hoped would pass unnoticed, and then turned and bowed to Grey. He was a tall man with short dark hair, unexceptionable features, and eyes of a muddy color somewhere between gray and green. But those eyes were also piercing, and they studied Vivian in a fashion that made him certain Grey knew everything about him, from his past sins to how much his robes cost.

"Sir," Vivian said, and managed not to stutter. He was proud of himself. "Thank you for meeting me."

Grey stared at him for a moment more, then said, "I don't care to talk about inconsequentialities. I'm here to find out if you can deliver to me what you promised."

"Yes, sir," said Vivian, and put his hands in his robe pockets to keep the sweat from showing. From Grey's contemptuous stare, he knew perfectly well what he was doing, and why. Vivian cleared his throat and tried to ignore his own flush. "If you'd care to come this way, the restaurant has a private table from which we can observe Nusante's arrival unseen, and where we can talk without fear of being overheard."

Grey inclined his head sharply and followed him across the floor, which was scattered with a variety of small white tables. They'd agreed to meet in a small wizarding restaurant not far from Hogsmeade, the haunt of artists drawn by the splendid Scottish scenery to be seen through the glittering stained glass windows, and where Raymond Nusante was a frequent visitor. Vivian had promised Grey he'd draw Nusante and Harry Potter to the restaurant at the same time, and afford him the means of publicly embarrassing them. He'd also said that he'd diverted his cousin Draco's money which was supposed to go to support the rebellion and was ready to place it in Grey's hand the same day.

And there was another reason he had asked Grey to come here—

Anxiously, Vivian cut off the other thought. He wasn't ready to think that yet.

The private table had mahogany walls and benches, on either side of a table of richly carved marble decorated with veins of blue. A large, though plain, glass window beside them looked out on a waterfall and green hills. Grey ignored the view and leaned forwards to stare directly into Vivian's eyes once more.

"So talk," he said.

Draco resisted the temptation to run a hand through his hair. He knew it would do no good for Harry's disordered mat, which he was wearing at the moment thanks to a complicated

combination of glamours and Transfiguration that Draco doubted he would be able to perform himself. Draco had wanted to know why they couldn't just use Polyjuice, but Harry had pointed out, with commendable patience, that that wouldn't fade on a nonverbal spell command. When Draco had asked how he could be sure the glamours and Transfigurations *would* fade with the spell, Harry had gone off into a long explanation about triggers and linked wards and binding threads that Draco couldn't follow.

*I can't follow it* yet. Draco intended to correct the deficiency in his knowledge as soon as he could. Maybe he would never be Harry's magical equal, but he intended to be his intellectual one. For the moment, it was enough to know that the glamours and Transfigurations would pull apart and collapse together, as long as he could use the spell correctly.

"I still don't see why we had to come *here*," whinged Nusante from behind him, a piercing sound which went straight through Draco's head. "We could have spoken in the privacy of your home and not been overheard."

"I didn't think you would be comfortable there." An audible glamour made Draco's voice a copy of Harry's, and from there he just had to be careful not to use certain inflections and tones that might betray the difference between them. He glanced over his shoulder at Nusante and smirked. It was not a normal expression of Harry's, but only one person in the potential audience of three would know that. "And I prefer not to invite you into my home if at all possible."

Nusante lifted his chin. He was so much the picture of offended youth that Draco had to wonder for a moment if he had ever *really* been that young, even when he was nineteen, Nusante's age. Of course, this boy hadn't had to go through a war and see his parents revealed as cringing servants to a Dark Lord. "You know my terms," he said. "I won't consent to support you wholeheartedly until I see you physically fight for us."

"I know," Draco said, and it was surprisingly easy to put compassion into his voice. Yes, he had been this young once, though when he was fifteen rather than nineteen. He knew that same longing to strike back, to shed blood because he thought it was the only way to repay the intense humiliation and rejection he was suffering. And at least Nusante was suffering at the hands of an entire society, not one boy who beat him roundly at Quidditch. "But I can at least speak to you and try to smooth this matter over. I don't want the rebellion to splinter because some of us follow you and some follow me."

"And your partner," Nusante muttered, but he suffered Draco to lead him into the restaurant.

Draco became aware of Harry, in the guise of Vivian, and Grey at the same moment as they became aware of him, if the way Grey stiffened in his seat was any indication. But Nusante wasn't glancing at them, and nor was anyone else in the restaurant. Harry would have cast a spell the moment he sat down that would mimic the effect of a Disillusionment Charm for anyone not keyed into it. Draco was carrying the key, a small silver ring, on a chain around his neck. He felt the tingling wash of magic over him, and then a reversal of the tingling as Harry's magic met more of Harry's magic and rebounded.

He led Nusante to a table in the middle of the restaurant and ordered a glass of the flavored Firewhiskey that was their specialty. Then he leaned forwards to make meaningless talk of reconciliation with Nusante—the sort of thing he could do in his sleep—whilst he waited for Harry to make his move.

Harry surfaced through the mask of Vivian holding his breath. Dear *God*, hiding beneath his prejudice was foul. But the effort had been worth it. He had showed Grey documents—from Draco himself—that absolutely convinced Grey Vivian had got hold of the money Draco meant to go to the rebellion. And he had promised to bring Nusante and Harry to the restaurant, and here they were.

"You said he would come with Harry Potter," Grey breathed, his attention fully on the disguised Draco. "And you told the truth." Briefly he looked at Harry, and his smile was warm in the same way a lizard basking on a rock was. "You shall be greatly rewarded for your cooperation and information, Wilde."

Harry touched Vivian's thoughts and nervousness, and set them in motion like a clockwork toy. Vivian murmured, "I do have some notion of what I would like for a reward, sir," even as Harry cast *Finite Incantatem* for the spell that had sealed them from observation at the corner table. A few people cast them startled glances, but Grey didn't appear to notice. "One very short-term thing, and one very long-term one."

"The long-term one to be power and influence, of course," Grey said. He was studying Draco-as-Harry critically, and probably observing everything from the way he carried his wand to the make of his robes, Harry knew. Grey was a dangerous man, though Harry hoped to render him less dangerous after today. "And what is the short-term one?"

Harry gave Vivian's nervous cough. Grey turned to him, raising his eyebrow.

Harry paused as if gathering his courage, then lunged across the table, fastened both his hands on the sides of Grey's face, and kissed him.

And, at the same moment as Grey was tensing with startlement and then with rage, Malcolm Therris—whom Harry had invited unbeknownst to anyone, even Draco—stepped out of a corner room, snapped a photograph, and said in his best professional reporter's voice, "Would you consent to tell the *Prophet's* readers the fascinating story of your newly discovered sexual orientation, Mr. Grey?"

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Chapter: 47

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Seven—Various Brilliant Plans*

Draco tensed as he watched Harry kiss Grey, even though he knew Harry was perfectly disguised and no one else would ever suspect that he'd cheated even that much on Draco. Could he help it that he found watching his boyfriend with another man hard?

And then Therris appeared, and only the need to maintain their act kept Draco from snarling. That was another surprise Harry hadn't told him about. They would have to have a small talk when they were done acting out their plan to diminish the threat of Grey and embarrass Nusante.

Grey jerked away from the kiss, one hand prizing like an iron claw at Vivian's—Harry's—face. Harry stared at him with lips parted for a moment, then assumed an expression of incredible alarm and fumbled for his wand. Grey was reaching for his, too, but he hadn't been prepared as Harry was, and his movements as well as his reaction time were slowed. Harry managed to lift his wand and gesture frantically first.

Draco moved his wand under the table at the same moment, reciting the incantation Harry had had him practice with such effort in his head. He used the force of his own anger and shock to power the spell. The sooner they were done with this, the sooner he could have his little *talk* with Harry.

*Surrogo Harry Potter in loco suo con vultu meo!*

Once again he was seized and shaken through a tunnel rougher than any Apparition, and then he landed in the seat where Harry had been sitting, his glamour dispelled. Harry had warned him he would have to give some explanation to Grey as to why he'd suddenly staggered, but he'd envisioned them as standing on opposite sides of the table at the time. Draco was still sitting, so he only had to slump backwards and make a loud noise of shock.

Not hard, under the circumstances. And it was better than laughing at the absolutely stunned look on Grey's face when he saw Draco Malfoy replace Vivian Wilde.

Across the room, Harry, in the place Draco had held and with his own face—to all appearances, he would never have moved at all—leveled his wand but let his mouth hang open. Nusante was on his feet, staring back and forth between the two of them. Therris, the reporter, still stood with his camera trained on Grey, but his muscles twitched in a way that Draco knew meant he wanted to turn and photograph the new arrival.

"*What*," Grey said at last, in a low voice like rocks grinding, "is the meaning of this?"

"I want to know that, too," Draco said, and leaned forwards. He was good at feigning certain

emotions—he'd been doing it in front of his father for years—even if he wasn't good at glamours and Transfigurations, and this time, he had some genuine anger to exercise. Harry blinked at him for a moment, as if suddenly realizing that Draco might have found his unspoken surprise unpleasant.

"You have plotted with your cousin to embarrass me, of course," Grey said. He recovered quickly, Draco would give him that. He was holding his wand halfway between Draco and Harry now, studying both of them. "You have plotted with Harry Potter as well. A strange thing, as I did not think your cousin was gay. But—"

Draco snarled at him. "I knew nothing of this," he said. "Ask Harry. He'll tell you that one reason we haven't appeared in public in the last few days is that I had disappeared, and he was trying to *find* me. He didn't know of Vivian's existence; it's not something my family generally admits. And I had no way of getting a message to him, as my cousin kept me bound and without my magic in a dark cellar." He shut his eyes and put a hand to his forehead. "He told me he'd perfected Apparition, the dunderhead. I didn't ask what he meant. It's perfectly obvious *now*, isn't it? He meant to switch places with me and let me take the blame whenever he'd done—what he intended to do." He blinked up at Grey. "What did he do, anyway? It must have been something boorish, or you wouldn't stare so."

Grey peered at him. Draco peered back. Harry had warned him that this was the most dangerous passage of the plan. Grey had every reason not to believe Draco, and to persist in thinking it was a plan between him and Harry. On the other hand, Apparition that switched two people was at least as plausible as a spell that switched two glamoured people and made it look as though one of them had never moved—especially when no one had reason to think that Harry was good at playing anyone other than Brian.

And Harry was actually counting on Grey not to believe it immediately. It was the reason he had brought Nusante.

Grey took a step back from the table. Then he said, "I will learn the truth sooner or later, and I see no need to waste time responding to your ridiculous lies. *Veridica simulatio!"*

The spell splashed Draco like a glass of ice water in the face. He gasped and shivered, clutching the edge of the table, then shook his head. Merlin, that was worse than the Disillusionment Charm, which at one point had been his standard for uncomfortable magic that was not actually fatal.

When he glanced up, it was to see that Grey had aimed the spell at Harry, too. Harry, instead of trying to deflect the spell, had reacted by raising a Shield Charm in front of Nusante. Draco knew the movements would have been practiced, smooth, instinctive; Harry had shown him before he assumed the appearance of Vivian that morning.

And Nusante would have been able to see that, too—to see that Harry had fought for him at last, had protected him from physical harm, as he had long demanded.

Right now, his face looked devastated. Draco had to fight hard to keep down a grin. Was his spell setting in now and lashing Nusante with the full weight of guilt he hadn't had to feel yet? Was seeing Harry defend him enough to make him understand how much Harry had sacrificed? Draco hoped so. Harry had brought Nusante into this plan in the first place so that he might convince him Harry had protected him from genuine danger, but if they could punish him and convince him in the same moment, Draco was all for it.

Meanwhile, Grey was once again staring. His spell had been a powerful one that would have dissolved the strongest of glamours, as well as most other appearance-changing spells, including Transfigurations. If Vivian Wilde was still in the room disguised as either Harry or Draco, his magic should have revealed him.

Draco shivered and glared up at Grey. "Are you satisfied now?" he demanded. "My cousin isn't here. I can only conclude that he *did* perfect his Apparition, and is right now making preparations to flee the country. He rambled on about doing that if his plan didn't go as he said it would."

"How fascinating," Therris said. "Tell me, Mr. Grey, are you going to follow your absent lover?"

Grey spun towards him, teeth set. Draco caught the slight movement of Harry's head out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't need it. He had already made a clucking sound and reached out, scooping up the documents "Vivian" had given Grey.

"What's this?" he said. "Donations that I meant to go to the rebellion, diverted?" He looked up into Grey's eyes, speaking softly but clearly, so that Therris, at least, would hear every word. "How odd. Why would you need so much Malfoy money, Mr. Grey, when you're wealthy enough on your own?" He paused, as if his brain was at the moment piecing together important clues he hadn't had time to notice before. "Could it be," he murmured, "that you need to fund an organization connected in some way to the rebellion? It would explain why you were willing to come here when my cousin summoned you—you, so careful about avoiding public places and acting on your own initiative. You needed money for Counterstrike. Your people invaded a peaceful private meeting and a peaceful public party. Of course you can't show yourself as connected to such a group."

Grey went white. Draco felt a tiny breeze lift his hair and knew Harry's wandless magic was working, this time concentrating on Grey, pushing at his mind. He was so experienced in holding his balance whilst accusations flew around him that Harry hadn't trusted he would lose that balance now, not without help. Better, Harry had said, to plant a few paranoid suggestions in his thoughts and shift his mood, making it harder for him to be rational about this encounter.

Therris, Draco suspected now, had been part of that same plan, to make sure Grey didn't have time to recover and *think* about what he was doing. But Harry could still have told Draco he'd have a reporter present.

"I don't—I don't have anything to do with Counterstrike," Grey said.

"Really?" Draco stared at the documents again. "Yet my cousin met you to provide you with these, if he didn't do something else—"

"He kissed Grey," Therris interjected helpfully.

"Ah." Draco raked Grey with a slow, thoughtful glance. "And of course, Vivian can be *clever*, even if he's not particularly sensible. He had to know that a way to lure you in would be to give you a way to weaken our rebellion. And you came, didn't you?" He lowered his voice insinuatingly on the verb of the last sentence.

Grey lost his temper, though Draco doubted he would have known it if he hadn't been so close to the man. It was a certain iciness in the muddy eyes that warned him, and the way he took a step towards the table as if he would like to reach across it and wrap his hands around Draco's throat instead of rescuing the documents.

"You may tell your cousin Vivian Wilde," he said, voice low, "that I shall never rest until I have hurt him as much as he has hurt me."

"You'll have to run him to ground first," Draco said, barely moving his lips. "And it might be difficult to do that and manage Counterstrike at the same time."

Grey's glance was so frustrated that Draco felt a small smile tug at his lips. But he reminded himself that he was supposed to be angry over Vivian's kidnapping him and trying to divert his money to Grey, and he schooled his mood until he could sigh and hold out his hand.

"I would be willing to tell you what I know of him and his movements," he said, "as well as what little he revealed to me of his plans to leave the country. He spoke of some of them in front of me for want of another audience. But in return, I would demand that you back away from Counterstrike, and leave our rebellion fighting against prejudice as its sole enemy, rather than your cleverness and your money."

Grey stared at him for a moment, then at Therris. There was a thoughtful look on his face, which Draco had expected. He was a man well used to "gentlemen's bargains" and silent deals that changed the face of the wizarding world without anyone ever knowing where they had come from. He would like this, Draco thought, better than the public battle he must otherwise engage in, trying to punish Harry and Draco for something that he couldn't prove they were connected to.

"Silence him as well," he said, twitching his head at Therris, "and I'll consider it."

Draco shook his head. "I don't have any power over him," he said. In reality, there was no way he would give up causing Grey *some* public embarrassment. It was a safeguard against his changing his mind later and renewing Counterstrike. "But if you back away gracefully now, then I'll deny the full extent of your involvement if anyone asks me. A newspaper story can only thrive so long

in the absence of hard evidence."

Grey paused, no doubt thinking how it would affect him when the *Prophet* printed the photograph of him kissing Vivian Wilde. Then a different kind of look came over his face, one that touched the corners of his eyes more than his expression. Draco suspected that life was about to become difficult for Therris. He would have to remind Harry to warn the reporter of that.

*I could have done that already, if Harry had told me he would be here.*

"Very well," Grey said. "I will, of course, feel free to resume my backing if it turns out that you fed me false information about your cousin."

Draco inclined his head gracefully. "I would expect nothing less."

Grey had recovered his balance now, but it was on the side favorable to them. He would feel some of the same self-blame Draco had when he cornered Harry and tried to force a confession out of him. Such a reaction was common when a pure-blood wizard discovered that his own stupidity had contributed in part to the difficulty of the situation he found himself in. Grey, from the tilt of his head and a variation of an expression Draco had seen Lucius wear, was wondering what in the world had possessed him to believe Vivian and show his face in public in the first place.

He would back away from this. He would be able to recover from this stumble in time, or so he would be telling himself. But he would find it harder if he insisted on pursuing Counterstrike—and here his eyes traveled to the documents on the table—when his enemies were aware of his connection to the organization. Better to let that go for right now and focus on preserving his reputation and punishing the man who had lured him into his trap.

Draco knew now why Harry had insisted on Draco's being the one who should handle the latter part of the negotiation with Grey. Harry understood pure-blood culture well, but Draco had been raised within it, and his ability to closely follow the calculations Grey made, because they were the ones he would have made himself, was nearly as good as Legilimency.

"The information about your cousin first," Grey said.

Since Vivian did not actually exist, and Grey would be tracking a phantom, Draco obliged, spinning out a tale that he and Harry had already agreed on, and Harry had supported by appearing as Vivian to several people in the Ministry and asking anxiously about Portkeys. Grey swallowed it without pausing, though sometimes his jaw twitched with suppressed anger. Of course he would assume that a man who had tricked him and hadn't convinced him to be his lover would flee the country in fear of him. He was far too impressed with his own power, and committed to thinking that other people were, too.

That part, Harry had predicted. Draco would have been more disturbed than impressed at how

well he knew people if Harry hadn't failed to predict that Draco would be angry when Therris appeared without warning. Harry still had some weaknesses and some limits to his power, and that meant Draco still had a chance to be equal to him.

With Therris hovering nearby to absorb every nuance of the bargain, Draco and Grey traded. In the end, Grey shook Draco's hand, barely seeming to flinch at touching a gay man—he had touched one already today, as far as he knew—and then he turned and stalked out of the restaurant. Throughout their talk, he had entirely ignored the audience of ordinary patrons staring at them, and Draco thought he might as well keep up the same tradition.

He rose now and extended his arm to Harry, who had been commendably quiet. Harry leaned towards him and hugged him hard, as would be consistent behavior from a lover who had known Draco was missing for the last few days but hadn't been able to tell anyone for fear of looking weak. Then Draco looked at Nusante. The man was ashen, and supporting himself with one hand on the table where he and Draco had briefly sat.

"Well," Draco said. "I hope you can see that Harry does intend to fight for you if he needs to, and that Grey isn't just a threat to your friends."

"No." Nusante evidently felt his voice was too quiet, so he cleared his throat a moment later and tried again. "No, he's not." He hesitated, and then looked at Harry and caught his hand so swiftly Therris couldn't have snapped a picture of it. "I'll think about what you did for me," he said. "Thank you. I—I should go."

And he turned and hurried away, his movements jerky. Draco smiled. Yes, the guilt spell would be taking effect. Perhaps Nusante had been so convinced Harry would never make any gesture of physical violence against another person for the sake of the rebellion that this one gesture had been enough to overset the balance of *his* mind. And the sympathy Draco had found himself unwillingly showing before might have helped.

"Thank you," Harry whispered into his ear. He sounded close to exaltation. Well, Draco supposed, he had cause. The plan had come off more or less as Harry must have envisioned it, and without a casualty, even of their secrets. "I can't believe—there's no one else I could have trusted with that." His hand slid up and down Draco's spine as though he were trying and failing to find a way he could express his gratitude.

"Trusted me with much," Draco whispered to him, as he turned and embraced him more strongly. Therris was snapping pictures with happy abandon, and either that or Harry's name and face was enough to keep the restaurant's owner from moving in and ordering them out of his establishment. "But not with Therris's identity. And you also didn't say how long you would kiss Grey for."

Harry stiffened for a moment, and Draco prepared himself for evasion. But Harry sighed instead, and said, "You're right. We'll need to talk about that. For the moment, will you accept that the reason I didn't tell you is because I didn't think of it?"

"For the *moment*," Draco said, and then he put an arm around Harry's waist, nodded to Therris and to the people watching them gape-mouthed, and escorted Harry out of the restaurant.

He could hardly wait for tomorrow's headline.

Harry settled himself on the couch with a cup of the tea that Kreacher had had waiting when they walked in the door. Harry wondered idly whether Draco had ordered him to make it or whether he could read his masters' moods well enough to know that they would want refreshment as soon as they returned.

He looked up as Draco stopped in the doorway of the drawing room and observed him narrowly. Harry smiled ruefully and patted the couch beside him. Draco crossed the room to join him, his shoulders dropping. Someone else might not have noticed the release of tension, but Harry always would.

As he turned to face Draco, he experienced a moment of dizzy terror at how necessary Draco had become to his life in such a short time. Harry could no longer imagine wanting to wake up alone, or to keep all the arrangements for Metamorphosis to himself simply for delight in the secret; his life would have lost something if he couldn't have told Draco about the new persona he was creating or the slightly risky plan he had concocted to take advantage of an enemy's weakness. He didn't expect perfect sympathy from Draco, but an argument from him was more precious than the most ardent agreement from someone else.

*What if he feels like this about me? Even half as much, or a fourth as much?* Harry swallowed. For the first time, he understood exactly why Draco resented it so strongly when Harry left him out of something.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, and raised a hand when Draco opened his mouth to speak. "Just a moment. If I don't say it right now, I'm afraid I'll never find the words again."

"I didn't think you had trouble finding words," Draco muttered, but he subsided.

"Those words belong to me," Harry said softly, "but more strongly to my personas. They come back to me like echoes at a distance." He paused, mind straining for a moment after the thought he wanted to express. "I want you to know I'm sorry for not telling you about Therris not because I'm afraid of being scolded, or because you need to know everything I'm thinking—you don't—but because it would have been better for us *both* if I'd told you. I could have shared the delight with you of knowing he'd show up. I could have asked you if you had suggestions for improving the plan, and doubtless you would have offered them." The dry tone in his voice made Draco smile, and that gave Harry courage. "I could have expanded the possibilities, the good possibilities, for the situation. And I would have remembered, if I'd done this, that you have a say in my life too, now. It's been a long time since I wanted to allow someone that kind of a say. I thought Ron and Hermione would only disapprove if they knew everything, and I wasn't truly

close to anyone else. But you—I don't know how you do it, Draco, but you make me *more* than I was. And given how many different people I can be when I want to, I would have thought that was impossible." He had been staring at their hands during the last part of the speech; his hand had crept out and linked his fingers with Draco's. Now he drew a deep breath and glanced up.

Draco was looking half-stunned. He reached out and trailed his other hand down Harry's face.

"It would be better," he said, "if you could back up those words with actions more often. But you do well with the words, when you want to."

Harry turned his head and kissed the palm offered to him. "I know," he whispered. "I *am* sorry. I kept silent from sheer force of habit, more than anything else. I would have known you wouldn't disapprove if I'd sat down and thought about it. But I didn't want to think about it. You know how much I hate being disapproved of—"

"Yes," Draco whispered. "It's a cowardice you'll have to get over eventually."

Harry smiled. The words might have sounded harsh to someone else, but he knew Draco was fighting hard to keep his own principled stand, and not simply give in and let himself be swayed by Harry's speech, no matter how honest it was.

*And couldn't he be excused for having some doubts about my honesty?*

"I will try," he said. "Please tell me if you see me slipping."

Draco leaned forwards and kissed him for an answer. The desperation in his lips told Harry more than ten thousand words could have. He wrapped his arms around Draco and laid his head on his shoulder when the kiss ended.

Having someone else to depend on wasn't as terrifying as he had always thought it would be.

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Chapter: 48

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Eight—Penitent*

Harry patted the bed with one hand, and paused when he realized he couldn't feel Draco's warmth anywhere. He sat up, pushing his hair back, and scanned the room with hazy eyes. No, Draco definitely wasn't there, though Harry probably would have seen that more decisively at

first if he'd put his glasses on.

He scooped them up from a nearby table and took a moment to scavenge among the robes at the back of the cupboard. He had never realized how few robes he had for his "Harry" self, compared to the multitude of clothes he could choose among when he wanted to construct a persona, until Draco moved in. Draco had opened the cupboard, looked inside, and then looked back at Harry with only a raised eyebrow. That was eloquent enough. Harry had already made a resolve to buy more, though as yet they'd hardly had the time to venture to Diagon Alley—and he thought he'd want to go disguised in any case. He wanted to concentrate on *shopping*, not on attacks or hero-worship.

He paused with a faint smile, one hand braced on the cupboard door. When had he last thought of such an ordinary chore with pleasure? Shopping was something he did for the sake of his personas, not himself; he preferred to leave the choice of food to Kreacher, and he had no need to regularly buy furniture, textbooks, cauldrons, or the like. When he did have to venture out to acquire something used by Harry and not the people of Metamorphosis, he did so reluctantly, darting glances in all directions from beneath his glamour. The mere thought of the cracked foundation below the beautiful house of faces and histories he'd built inspired him to doubt and wonder and worry.

*Well, no longer, when Draco thinks the foundation the most beautiful part of the house,* he decided, and placed his arm in a sleeve. No doubt Draco was below, having breakfast already. He had a greater restlessness than Harry did, a desire to make plans that would achieve immediate results as well as long-term ones. He had been content enough during the last few days when they plotted to take down Grey, but now he would require a new amusement to keep his mind racing.

Once, Harry would have thought such a companion would drive him mad. Now, trying to imagine life without Draco made his mind spin in its own useless circles.

Draco sighed and sat back on his heels. He had thought, when he came down the stairs, that he could prepare a breakfast for Harry on his own, simply to watch his eyes brighten. Instead, Kreacher had called his attention anxiously to the fireplace, where someone had been waiting to speak with him—someone Draco hadn't expected to hear from for a few days at least.

"And you're *sure* he's being honest?" he asked for the seventh time.

Narcissa smiled and sat back on the cushion that faced the hearth on her side, her fingers lightly laced along the folds of her skirt. His mother didn't often wear gowns unless she was expecting company, but she did look lovely in the sky-blue one she had on today, which brought out the color of her eyes and hair in a way Draco hadn't seen before, and made even her pale complexion look deeper. "As sure as I can be without putting him under Veritaserum," she replied. "He confessed the whole ridiculous truth when he came back from Miss Parkinson's house, you know—that he meant to put you under an enslavement spell and bind you to Alice Moonstone. I

asked him how he could think of doing such a thing."

She shook her head in wonder. "You would have felt sorry for him, Draco, if you could have seen him. He was so broken-down. He'd finally realized that you never really intended to return to him, and that this exercise was more than just a test of his patience."

Draco made a noncommittal noise. Lucius had not guessed that Draco meant to make him crawl and beg Draco to be his heir again, and he could go on not knowing it. That would make his final groveling all the sweeter.

"I explained to him that you were an adult now, and had been for years, that you could make your own choice in partners as well as the people you wanted to be heir to." Narcissa looked him fully in the face. "And he *listened* to me. That's why I think it's safe for you to come to the Manor, and to bring Harry with you as well."

Draco smiled in spite of himself. His mother had never called Harry by his first name before, or at least not without curling her lip. But Narcissa was clever, too, and she had remained enough on his father's side that she wouldn't defy him openly whilst Lucius still spoke against Harry. She might demand a reconciliation sooner than Draco would like one; she might also have been fooled by Lucius's cant.

"Forgive me for not wanting to enter a house with someone who tried to enslave me not long ago," he said.

"Draco." Narcissa sighed and leaned forwards. "You *are* your father's son. Both of you, so proud and absolute, not remembering how very mixed a thing life is. Your father had to accept the fact that you prefer being with a man to making the very eligible marriage he chose for you. You have to accept that he only slowly changes his mind about anything. The best way to put his back up is to refuse to come into the Manor again. He'll decide that he was right and that you're a stubborn child."

"I want Harry safe," Draco said bluntly. "I want my freedom. Next to that, I have almost no regard for Father's feelings."

Narcissa regarded him so severely for so long that Draco felt himself begin to blush. But he didn't look away. His mother might make him ashamed; she couldn't make him think his demands were unreasonable.

"I taught you better than that," Narcissa said at last. "Lucius might have made you think blood a net of treachery—"

"He was the one who made it so!" Draco leaned away from her. "I certainly never tried to enslave *him*."

"He's still your father," Narcissa said.

"He disowned me!" Draco tried vainly to lower his voice. He knew he sounded like a squealing child compared to his mother, and from the way she stared at him, she was thinking the same thing. He did take a few minutes to breathe before he tried to speak again. "I think that counts as severing the bonds between father and son."

Narcissa sighed. "You deliberately exasperated him that far. And now I want you to make peace. Come to the Manor and accept the truce he's deigned to offer you. I've pushed him for the past few days to acknowledge his own folly and admit that you would hardly marry the woman he chose after you found out about the curse he cast. He's admitted as much as can be reasonably expected without your presence. My work will go to waste if you don't appear."

"I didn't ask you to do that." Draco scowled at his hands. He hated moments like this most of all. He *knew* he would agree, because his mother was bloody good at getting her own way, but he didn't have to like it. "You could have told him the truth: that I value Harry more than all the money I would inherit from him."

"As he values me more than what he has in all his vaults." Narcissa shook her head. "Draco, this petulance will not serve. If for no other reason than he may change his mind later and persuade himself you can't be as angry at him as all that, come home now."

"If he makes *one* threatening movement—"

"I've explained to him the consequences if he does."

Draco peered at his mother in amazement. He'd heard that tone of voice before, but mostly directed at him. And he always obeyed, because he couldn't bear the sighs, glares, and restrictions of small privileges that would result if he didn't. Narcissa had never raised her voice to violence, but she hardly needed to when she could cut into him with much softer sounds.

As a child, Draco had assumed she never did the same thing to Lucius, both because his parents always presented a united front against him and because Lucius seemed a figure of such formidable power he didn't think Narcissa could have got away with it. As he grew older, he had known they kept their fights out of his way, but Narcissa still spent more time on his father's side than not. Why shouldn't she? She loved him—somewhat, somehow—and she valued most of the same duties, privileges, and attitudes that he did.

Now she had gone against Lucius for his sake, and Draco had an excellent idea of the sacrifice it must have been for her to do so. He bowed his head and muttered, "I can't promise that Harry will agree."

"You can't promise that Harry will agree to what?"

Draco yelped and whirled around, only to see Harry standing in the doorway of the study and regarding him curiously. Then his eyes went past Draco and to the face in the hearth. Draco

thought he was probably the only one who knew what the slight flicker in his eyes met, or the cool tone of his voice as he said, "How do you do, Mrs. Malfoy?" He had picked up another persona, one better able to handle the situation than he was.

Narcissa seemed to have noticed the change of expression, at least. She responded in the same restrained manner. "Very well, Mr. Potter. Of course, I would feel better if you could persuade Draco to come for a visit to the Manor soon, and if you would come with him. His father is most anxious to see him and apologize for his conduct."

Draco shot her a swift, narrow-eyed glance. Narcissa hadn't said anything about an apology before, and Draco privately thought that Lucius was physically incapable of it. Now she held his gaze serenely and didn't move.

"I would do that if I thought there was a chance that Lucius Malfoy would ever really change his mind," Harry said. Draco felt a surge of gratitude that Harry could speak to his mother in a way he would never dare, since Harry could disregard the bonds of blood, and reached up to press his hand. Harry squeezed back without looking away from Narcissa. "Draco's told me how many years he spent trying to show Lucius *he* had changed, and how his father ignored anything that didn't take his fancy. Why should we think it's different now? We encounter enough frustration and disgust in our daily lives without taking on an extra load when we don't have to."

Narcissa grew more and more coiled, and colder, the longer Harry spoke. When she lifted her head at last, Draco shuddered a little at what he saw in the corners of her lips, which were pressed so tightly that they were almost white.

"You have a chance to repair the wound between Draco and his father if you come to the Manor now," she said. "If you hesitate and stammer from your fear—"

"I'm not afraid of *Lucius*," said Harry, with a tilt of his head that managed to convey without words that Lucius should be far more afraid of him.

"Then you lose the chance," Narcissa continued, paying no attention to this at all. "I can't say how long this penitent mood he's been thrown into would last. And he learns from his mistakes. Do you really want to tempt him to strike at you, or try a gambit more subtle than the enslavement spell, because you are proud enough to resist meeting him? At least imagine, Mr. Potter—though I know it is difficult for you, raised as you were outside a proper family—the demise of a loving relationship between a parent and a child."

Harry was too experienced to let his color change, but Draco felt him flinch. He kept on staring at Narcissa as he asked, "Draco? How far do you trust your father? Enough to go to the Manor?"

Draco gritted his teeth. He would have preferred to say he didn't trust Lucius at all, but it would have brought a firestorm down on him, in the double form of his mother's anger and Harry's guilt. They were going, he thought. Narcissa knew well enough how to play someone like Harry, who had lost both parents and who loved Draco—and thus wanted to ensure his happiness,

which he must think a strong relationship with his father would contribute to.

At least Harry had still asked him whether he wanted to go to the Manor, rather than simply reassuring Narcissa they would come.

"If my mother vouches for him, I do." Draco stared at her.

"I vouch for him," Narcissa said without backing down. Draco had hoped for at least a hesitation as she considered the multitude of treacherous actions Lucius might try.

"Then we'll come," Draco said. His mother's face softened with a smile that he couldn't help but feel glad to see, even though he knew it meant he had lost conclusively.

Harry leaned forwards so that he was staring into Narcissa's eyes through the flames. "I promise," he said quietly, "if Lucius so much as makes a threatening motion towards Draco, I'll kill him without hesitation. Tell him that. He might want to leave his wand in another room."

Narcissa raised her eyebrows, confident in her victory. "Come, Mr. Potter, do you expect me to believe that? You are letting my son venture into this dangerous territory, after all, and if you meant what you said, it would be far easier to keep him at home."

Harry sneered impressively at her. He had picked up some other persona, one Draco didn't recognize but thought must be closer to the Slytherin one Draco had frequently worn during Hogwarts. "Unlike you, I have more respect for Draco's choices than for Lucius's. He's choosing to visit you. He won't choose to be threatened, or enslaved. So, yes, I will kill your husband if he tries to take away Draco's freedom yet again. Remember how powerful my wandless magic is, Mrs. Malfoy. It might even happen *accidentally.*"

Narcissa narrowed her eyes, but nodded, and shut the connection. Draco slung an arm around Harry's neck, silently grateful that they hadn't lost completely.

Harry gave him a very faint smile. "You can still change your mind," he said.

Draco shook his head. "Not now. I'm sure this will be one of the more…*interesting* meetings I've observed in a while."

Harry hadn't told Draco so when he proclaimed his opinion of the meeting with Lucius, but he intended to make things even more interesting. Namely, the moment Lucius stepped into the large drawing room of the Manor where he had chosen to receive them, Harry gestured at the slight tingle of magic in Lucius's pocket that announced the presence of his wand and said, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Lucius's wand flew towards him immediately. Harry snatched it handily from the air and stuck it in his back pocket. He kept his eyes on Lucius the entire time, and let the faintest trace of a smirk

touch his lips. He wanted Lucius to think about the same time Harry was remembering: the time when he had defeated the Dark Lord Lucius had served with a Disarming Spell.

Lucius opened his mouth, then seemed to remember that he had agreed to be polite and neutral during this meeting. He bowed his head and said, "A reasonable precaution, Mr. Potter, though if you could read my thoughts, you would know I have no desire to hurt my son."

"A pleasant pronouncement," Harry said, ushering Draco into a chair. The room had two sets of chairs spaced around the hearth and widely separated from each other, an arrangement Harry approved of. Draco was tense with shock when Harry touched him, but he went with the gesture, which showed he wasn't truly angry. Harry smiled at Lucius over Draco's head. "But I notice your words do not include me."

"You weren't always so sensitive to nuances, I think." Lucius took the chair opposite Draco, leaning back against the cushions in what seemed to be perfect ease. Narcissa slowly took the seat beside him. Her eyes hadn't left Harry yet, and he thought she was probably unsure of what to make of him.

"I fell in love." Harry squeezed Draco's shoulder briefly, then leaned his arms on the back of his chair. He had no intention of sitting down himself. The chair chosen for him to occupy looked broad and comfortable—hard to stand up from, and even if he leaped up, he would lose a moment to sinking down into the cushion. He preferred to avoid such unpleasant encumbrances. "That gives me something better than Legilimency: the awareness that someone *could* hurt Draco, and that I could lose him." He smiled emptily at Lucius. "Or that someone could hurt him by hurting me."

"This was meant to be a meeting of reconciliation," Draco interrupted quietly, though his hand rose and squeezed Harry's elbow to show how much he appreciated it. "I'll take an apology for that enslavement spell, Father, if you don't mind."

Lucius stiffened his shoulders. He had the look of a man who had been granted a stay of his own execution in which to make a speech. And just like every other criminal who should have been repentant and couldn't bring himself to be so, Harry thought, he was going to fuck it up. "What else could I have done, given what I believe?"

"We've had conversations about your beliefs before." Draco's voice was so gentle that Harry would hardly have believed it was his, except that it had a chiding tone behind it he knew well. Draco hadn't had much occasion to sound like this to *him*, that was all. "I believe there was a period in which they endangered all our lives and the future of our entire family, thanks to your deciding to bow down to someone who called himself a Dark Lord. Or am I misremembering? To be sure, I've had so *many* things to think of since I was seventeen that I might be forgetting the cause of the pain that dominated two years of my life."

"That was not so essential as this is." Lucius sounded half-confused. Harry saw Narcissa wind her hands into each other. Just like him, she probably longed to interfere. But Draco had made

Harry promise that once he took control of the conversation, Harry would only speak to combat threats or to make Lucius understand exactly why he was there, if the man was fool enough to ask. "You are the one threatening the survival of our family now, Draco."

"I have hardly threatened to tear down Malfoy Manor, and I cannot believe that the disagreements between you and Mother over what to do with me are so spirited as to rip you apart in divorce," Draco said primly.

Lucius made a thick noise of frustration in the back of his throat. "You know very well what I mean, Draco! If you stay partnered to Harry Potter, or to any other man, you will never have a child to continue the Malfoy line."

Draco sighed. Harry allowed one hand to trail up the slope of his shoulder. The sigh seemed to come from a very long distance, and by that alone Harry knew how frustrated Draco was. "I asked you once if we didn't have any higher purpose than reproducing, Father," he said, "whether we existed only to have children, who in turn would have children. You don't put any weight even on *rearing* the son or daughter you expect me to have, on being a good parent. You only expect me to have one. Pardon me for thinking that Malfoys—if we really are the sum of all existence the way you liked to tell me we are when I was a boy—should do something more fulfilling."

"You can do that after you have a child." Lucius was speaking through his teeth now.

"But heirs of Malfoy blood exist." Draco lifted his nose. "I've a good mind to legitimize and adopt one of them. I know the proper laws to do so. And then I could have the satisfaction of having fulfilled my legal duties, whilst at the same time living most of my life the way I want to, since my heir would have other parents to raise him or her."

There was a perfect, scandalized silence, which Harry enjoyed, though he suspected he would have had to be born a Malfoy to understand the full implications. Then Lucius extended his hands towards Draco in a helpless motion and murmured, "Tell me—please reassure me that you don't mean to make one of your Cousin Maxwell's children your heir."

"Their blood is good," said Draco with a shrug. "And you should hold him in higher regard than me, since he's actually done the ultimate Malfoy duty and procreated."

Lucius shut his eyes and held his breath for a long moment. Then he opened his eyes and said, "Would you consider having a child if I apologize?"

"Who can say what I may decide in the future?" Draco murmured. "For the moment, my life is devoted to running Malfoy's Machineries, earning equal rights for homosexual wizards, and living in love with Harry. You can't ask me to determine the whole course of my life in a single conversation."

This time, Harry had to hide his grin against the back of Draco's neck. Draco turned and grinned

up at him, not bothering to hide *his* expression. Lucius flinched as though someone had punched him in the stomach. Then he cleared his throat, and Harry saw his hand flex towards Narcissa, who was shaking her head with her lips pursed. At least, if she was displeased with Draco, she was probably equally displeased with Lucius, who was wasting the opportunity she had gone to so much trouble to arrange for him.

"You ask for an apology," Lucius said harshly. "You ask for me to refrain from attacks against your lover, even to welcome him within my home." He looked up at Harry with a burning gaze that convinced Harry he had been wise to take Lucius's wand. "You ask for so much, Draco, and you will not promise me even to continue the Malfoy line, the thing I have always most valued."

"I ask for you to trust that I am an adult, and responsible for my decisions and my future, not simply the future of the family." Draco's voice sharpened as he leaned forwards. "Pushing me, Father, earns nothing but negative results for you. I am constantly astonished that you haven't *yet* learned not to do it. And yes, I do expect basic courtesy to Harry. I'm in love with him, and that's never been true before."

Lucius stared at his son, and Harry saw the final, decisive shift as it took place behind his eyes.

He still didn't like Draco's resolve to act independently of the family; he would probably never really like it, or understand it. And he still blamed most of the problems in his relationship with his son on his son's lover. But he had come to realize, perhaps with bitterness, that he could not control or influence that independence or that lover. Better to surrender and let Draco become comfortable in his presence again. Then, perhaps, Draco would attend to his suggestions.

And at bottom, Harry thought, Lucius Malfoy was a man who loved his son. Harry had heard as much during the final battle at Hogwarts. He didn't really want to drive Draco away forever, and if he had to buy his company on terms distasteful to him, he could bear that.

"Very well, Draco," Lucius said. "It shall be as you say. I will refrain from attacks on Mr. Potter, through Counterstrike or other means. I will welcome him within my home. I will never again use an enslavement spell—and I am sorry that I used one already. I will not urge you to marry and have an heir for five years."

Draco leaned against the back of the chair and released a tiny sigh. Harry used both hands to rub the nape of his neck.

"Thank you," Draco said. "I accept your apology."

After that, the conversation slid back into normality, with Narcissa bestowing an approving smile or two on Harry himself. When the time came they had to leave and Harry handed Lucius's wand back, he did it with a small, formal bow, and then a single intense look, to signal that he still distrusted Lucius and would guard Draco as long as necessary.

Lucius returned the look. And then, the most unexpected thing happened. His eyes softened, and

he murmured, "My son is fortunate to have someone so devoted at his back."

Even knowing he had probably only said it to throw him off-guard couldn't prevent the warm glow that sprang up in Harry.

He needed every bit of that glow to bolster himself when they returned to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and found Ron and Hermione waiting.

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Chapter: 49

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Nine—Epiphanies*

Draco had to control the immediate burst of anger that filled him when he saw Weasley and Granger sitting on the doorstep of Harry's home. He was glad he was behind Harry at the moment. He could clench his hands into fists and glare without having to fear that he would lose control and step forwards to curse them before they knew what was happening.

Granger immediately stood when she saw Harry and reached towards him with an anxious hand. Harry halted on the walk in front of the house and shook his head. His eyes were brilliant, and Draco was glad to see that, though he would have to watch hard to make sure the brilliancy didn't transform itself into tears. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and they both halted there, waiting. The sky was cloudy, but here and there a ragged spot of sunlight fell through. Draco thought it most unfair that one of those spots should linger on Weasley's hair, brightening it. At least it might be behind them in the eyes of Harry's friends, rendering their faces dark and hard to see.

"Harry," Weasley began. He halted, coughing. Harry gave him no help, which heartened Draco more than almost anything else could have at the moment. He waited with his arms folded, his eyes darting back and forth between his two friends. Given his control of his body language, Draco didn't think the defensive gesture was accidental. Harry was telling his friends how very, very displeased with them he was.

"Won't you *say* something?" Granger implored him at last. She was chewing her lip so hard that Draco was faintly surprised she hadn't drawn blood already. "We missed you, Harry. And we haven't understood, but you haven't tried to *make* us understand. I was just trying to do what was best for you—"

Draco couldn't allow that outrageous statement to pass unchallenged. "So you violated the trust he reposed in you and went to tell the Mind-Healers his story," he said. He had both hands on

Harry's shoulders now, and he pushed down, a silent invitation for Harry to lean back if he would. Harry chose to, and Draco reveled in both the brush of crisp, curly hair against his throat and at the stunned expressions on the faces of Harry's friends.

There was no disgust mixed into those expressions, he did note. *Interesting.*

"If someone's about to kill himself, you don't listen to his wishes to keep it secret," Granger retorted. She swallowed. She looked mostly at Harry and not him, whilst Weasley divided his attention equally between the two.

"You thought he was suicidal and yet you left him alone?" Draco arched an eyebrow. "Oh, very intelligent of you, Granger. I can see why you earned high marks in every class you tried to take except Divination."

"Leave her alone!" Weasley said, his voice coming out more as a bark. "She hasn't done anything to *you*."

"I'm grateful that you at least acknowledge the two of you did something to Harry." Draco linked his arms together around Harry's waist and nuzzled into his hair again. "And the pain you caused him did hurt me. I was the one who had to put him together again when I arrived not long after you got done breaking him into pieces."

"Shouldn't he speak up, if he resents us?" Weasley stooped as if to catch Harry's eye, though the posture Harry had adopted didn't put him at *that* much of a disadvantage in height. "Why are you letting him speak for you, mate?"

"For the same reason you sometimes let Hermione make the arguments in rows." Harry's voice was soft and mild, a feat Draco doubted he himself could have managed even with Narcissa, if she had hurt him as these two had hurt Harry. He took a step backwards and lifted his head, so that he no longer leaned so heavily on Draco but still stood close to him. "He speaks the same words I would."

Weasley's face crumpled, and then slowly flushed a deep color, as close to orange as Draco had ever seen human skin come (at least, human skin that was not stained with a number of highly dangerous and illegal potions ingredients). "Harry—you can't be in love with him."

"Life would be easier for all of us if you could accept that some of the things I'll tell you, no matter how distasteful, *aren't* lies."

Draco smiled. He could hear the snap of anger in the back of Harry's voice like lightning hidden in distant clouds. He could remain silent now, if Harry wanted to continue the argument in his own way. He had just needed to make sure that Harry didn't intend to roll over and let his friends trample on him. He fell silent, stroking the back of Harry's head and cupping his hands around the nape of his neck, offering a resting place if Harry wanted to take it.

Harry had felt panic when he saw Ron and Hermione waiting, though he doubted he could have admitted that to anyone but Draco. But the fear had drained out as he rested for a few minutes on Draco's shoulder, not looking directly at his friends, and listened to them scolded.

He didn't really want to antagonize Ron and Hermione. Seeing them again was like receiving a new flush of blood in a limb he'd sat on for long minutes. But Draco's scolding reminded him that at least one other person in the world took his side, instead of theirs. And that was support enough.

At least for the moment.

"Did you come to apologize?" he asked. "I can offer you the truth and my own apologies—"

Draco's fingers bounced against the back of his neck in protest. Harry tipped his head so that his hair brushed them in reassurance and continued without faltering. "—if you have, but if you only intend to nag me about giving up Draco or my participation in the rebellion, you're wasting your breath and might as well leave now."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a speaking glance. Harry felt a sudden stab of sadness. He could tell that the glance was speaking, yes, but not what it said. Ron and Hermione had lived so long with one another that they had developed their own language, and Harry had spent most of his time with them in the last few years practicing silence and the ability to be unreadable himself.

*We argued because we don't really know each other anymore,* he thought, and admitting his own guilt no longer flayed him alive as it would have done at one time. Draco had taught him how to get past that. Harry spent a moment lost in wonder. Exactly what had he done, to deserve someone like Draco?

But Hermione was talking now, and Harry wanted to listen to her as he had never wanted to listen in the last ten years. "We'll—accept who you are, Harry," she said, with some difficulty. She reached up and scrubbed at a tear in the corner of her eye. Harry raised his brows. He couldn't remember the last time Hermione had willingly shown weakness like that in front of someone else, let alone someone she had to still regard as an enemy. Maybe that was as good a sign of her honesty as her actual words. "We'll try, at least." She gave him a faint smile. "And I know you won't give Malfoy up. I've never seen you stand so close to someone else before and depend on them so much. Not even me," she added with a wistful little sigh, as if she were remembering their seventh year together and how many times she had saved Harry's life.

"Good," Harry said, with a little nod. "And what about my involvement in the rebellion?"

Ron spoke now, looking uncomfortable. "Shacklebolt told me that he'd never ordered the Aurors to raid those places."

Harry suppressed the devilish little urge that prompted him to ask exactly what "places" Ron

meant. If his friend found it hard to name the rebellion because of lifelong fear and loathing, Harry shouldn't push him too fast or far in that direction. "Yes," he said. "And that made a difference for you?"

"Of course!" Ron looked caught somewhere between surprised and disbelieving. "First I thought I had orders to do my bloody job, and now I realize I was a puppet in the hands of whoever played the Minister for a fool—"

"His name is John Grey," Harry said, and saw Hermione's lips tighten. Of course, Grey had probably also been active in support of some of the people she was fighting when she tried to gain equal rights for house-elves and Muggleborns. "Draco and I have hopefully given him something to think about other than opposing the rebellion for right now, but I wouldn't count on that lasting forever. I think you missed the import of my question though, Ron." He leaned forwards. "If it turned out Shacklebolt *did* order the Aurors on those raids, would that make it all right with you? Would you want to attack lots of people just like me for the crime of kissing and dancing with each other?"

Ron flushed a brilliant crimson. "They don't need to do it in public," he muttered.

Harry snorted. He could feel his stomach crawling up and down his throat, but he had Draco at his back, warm and steady, and this *needed* to be threshed out before he could decide what kind of relationship he could have with Ron. "The first meeting was held in private," he said, "but never mind that. Do you think I deserve to be dragged off to Azkaban for kissing Draco in the middle of Diagon Alley, which I did?"

That made Ron stagger a little. Harry supposed he hadn't realized until this moment the implications of that picture and the implications of Harry being "Brian."

"It's different for you, mate," Ron said at last. "I know you. I know you're a good bloke, and wouldn't corrupt children or—" He stopped. Harry suspected he'd caught sight of a dangerous narrowing of Draco's eyes.

Harry reached back and ran a soothing hand up and down Draco's arm. He was amazed at how strong he felt, how calm. But he had already gone through the shattering fall that resulted from Ron and Hermione learning the truth about him. If they rejected him again, he wouldn't be alone. And he would walk away stronger for the experience, having trimmed off the fear and weakness that had made him avoid confronting Ron on this issue time and time again. "Ordinary gay wizards corrupt children? How interesting. I think I've known more of them than you have, and I've never heard of or seen any of them doing such things."

"You know what I mean!" Ron thrust his hands into his robe pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Showing them—telling them that it's *all right* to be like that, there's nothing different or strange about it—"

"I see," Harry said, nodding wisely. "Children of good families might learn that gay and bisexual

wizards are human beings like them, and then they might treat them normally instead of recoiling in disgust when they see one of us. We can't have that."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Then explain it." Harry stepped forwards. Draco moved with him, keeping one hand in place at the back of his neck and one arm looped around his waist. Hermione watched Draco with a strange expression, but Harry didn't care. "I've listened to those words and others that are equally nonsensical from you for years, Ron. I'm tired of putting up with them. Explain to me how you know that gay wizards abuse children, or why it's the end of the world for someone to prefer having sex with men to getting married, or why it's disgusting to kiss a man in public but not disgusting for a man and woman to grope each other in public until there's skin showing. Tell me *what you think*, not what you blindly accept, and tell me why you think it."

Ron had his arms half-lifted, as if he wanted to fold them in front of his chest but thought he would be shutting Harry away forever if he did that. His fists opened and closed the same way, and he hissed between his teeth. "I can't explain it," he said. "It's always been true, and it's always—I wouldn't have changed my mind if I didn't know you, Harry, it's not *fair* to say that I should change my mind—"

"You always believed that gay people were some vast evil monolith," Harry said. He ignored the tears now slowly streaking Hermione's face and concentrated solely on Ron. Ron had never been good at holding back his emotions for long. Harry would rather have a flood of vitriol from him than go back to the situation they'd existed in before, a limbo of silence in which Ron could say whatever he wanted whilst Harry had to watch his tongue and not show too much sympathy with people just like him. "Then you got to know me, and realized they weren't. But you pushed the knowledge away."

"You were my friend *before* you were gay!" Ron screamed. "That's the difference! I know you! I don't know them!"

"Really." Harry leaned closer. "And does it make a difference to you at all that I've got friends in the rebellion, that hurting them causes me pain?"

"Harry." Ron was shaking now, and either sweat or tears collected in the corners of his eyes. "Don't."

"Say it, whatever it is," Harry said. He took another step forwards. He was exhilarated, his chest rising and falling with sharp gasps of breath. Draco hummed and murmured approvingly against his neck. Finally, this would be all out and done with, and Harry could make his mind up about Ron. "Say whatever you're afraid to say, though why you would be afraid of driving me away now when you did your best to accomplish it—"

"I don't like gay people!" Ron screamed at him. "I'm uncomfortable around them, I don't understand them, I don't understand why you would *choose* to sleep with a man when you could

have a woman instead!"

Harry nodded. Draco had stiffened behind him, but Harry clasped his wrist and caressed his arm. "That's it, Ron," he said. "Say what you mean."

"I wish I didn't have to change my mind," Ron moaned. "It's so *hard*. Who cares about something like this, compared to the invasion of the Ministry by people who can order Aurors to do whatever they want?" He wiped his face with one hand and glared at Harry. "And then you have to date *Malfoy*, of all people, and you have to acknowledge him publicly as your boyfriend! Someone who hated me all through school. Someone who taunted and threatened Hermione. I don't understand it, and I doubt I ever will understand it."

"I don't understand why you and Hermione stay together, either, given how fiercely you argue," Harry retorted. "But I accept it."

"It's *natural*, that's why." Ron sawed a wild hand through the air. "It's natural for a man and a woman to be together. It's natural for Hermione to have a baby. It's natural for a boy and girl who spend a lot of time arguing to have an attraction between them, a—a kind of charge that draws them together."

"But not for a boy and a boy?" Harry exchanged a quick, amused glance with Draco, then looked back at Ron. His friend's words did hurt, but he hadn't yet decided that he would reject Ron completely. It would depend on what conclusion he came to about several things, including his final treatment of Draco.

Ron stared back and forth between him and Draco for several moments, then sagged against the door of the house and muttered, "Oh, bloody hell." He buried his head in his arms.

"Can you actually name any differences beyond the obvious ones?" Harry asked him gently. "Tell me why your relationship is natural and mine isn't?"

"We can have children."

"I do hate to tell you this, Weasley," Draco drawled, "but a gay man doesn't lose the ability to have children. I happen to know that several of my ancestors who preferred men, long before it became as socially unacceptable as it is now to do so, had children with well-compensated surrogate mothers. They simply didn't like women enough to marry and accept a designated spouse they had to be faithful to in their beds."

"And not every couple has children, either," Harry added. "If Charlie got married and then decided not to have children because he was too busy working with dragons, would you call his marriage unnatural?"

Ron whispered, "I don't know what the difference is. I don't have a reason to feel the disgust and loathing I do." He whipped more tears away from his face with the heel of his hand and stared

defiantly at Harry. "Is that what you want to hear? That I've been behaving irrationally for the last ten years where you're concerned?"

"Yes," Harry told him firmly. "Now that you know it was irrational, you can do something about curing it."

Ron shut his mouth, looking ill.

"You have to decide," Harry told him, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Would you rather be rid of any polluting presence of a gay wizard in your life? Or will you accept me as I am? I won't be the perfect, compliant shadow I was around you for the last ten years because I was so afraid of losing your friendship. If you accept me and count me as a friend again, it has to be as an openly gay friend who dates Draco Malfoy."

Ron moaned and put his hands over his eyes. Harry snorted in spite of himself. Draco buried his face against Harry's back, and Harry knew he was laughing, though he managed to muffle most of it.

"Yes, it's a rather unpalatable decision, isn't it?" Harry asked, with no sympathy in his voice. "Understand, I'm not asking you to like Draco or to forget that he ever insulted Hermione." Draco butted his head against Harry's back in silent protest; Harry ignored him. "But you have to be civil to him and you have to realize that you can't break us up or drive us apart by petty little schemes, the way you might like to. Are you willing to pay that price?"

Ron stood with his eyes downcast for long moments. Harry suspected he would never understand the intensity of the struggle Ron waged in his soul during those moments, and when he felt Draco's mouth open, he pushed it shut again with the corner of his palm. This was something Ron had to choose on his own, and if he was influenced by a joke at the wrong moment—well, Harry didn't want to lose his best friend because of something so stupid.

Finally, Ron looked up and whispered, "I'll never like him, but I can accept it." And then he smiled, a tremulous expression. "I missed you, Harry."

Harry stepped away from Draco and went to Ron, embracing him. Ron shivered a little, as though he thought Harry's hands would wander where they shouldn't, but he hugged Harry back. Harry stood basking in the warmth until he felt Ron shift with serious discomfort, then let him go and punched him on the shoulder. Ron managed a shaky grin.

Then Harry turned to deal with Hermione.

Draco was rather disgruntled. How *could* Harry accept Weasley as a friend after the rubbish he'd spouted about anyone who didn't fit his perfect little mold of marriage and children? But then, he'd never understood how Harry could have befriended a Weasley in the first place. If Harry could live with this, Draco supposed he could, as well. It was only his offended sensibilities that

were tied up in this, after all, and not his emotions.

He turned to look at Granger and was by no means sure that reconciliation would come as easily. Weasley had expressed a prejudice Harry would almost be inured to by hearing it everywhere else on a daily basis, but Granger had betrayed his trust.

Harry walked towards Granger and considered her silently, until she lifted her chin and said, "I did what seemed to be the right thing at the time."

"And that's exactly what I need *you* to change your mind about," Harry said quietly. He sounded smaller and gentler than he should have. Draco stepped up behind him again and hugged him, and Harry immediately straightened and spoke with strength in his voice. *He needs me,* Draco thought smugly. "You need to trust me, Hermione, instead of assuming you know what's best. You need to ask *me* what you need to know when it concerns me, rather than looking in a book or sprinting off to an authority. I could accept that when we were children and you were a rather hidebound little Gryffindor who feared being expelled—or when there was a Dark Lord about and you wanted to check my broom for hexes because there was a real danger someone might have put them on it." Granger flushed. Draco wondered what Harry was referring to. There were still many details of Harry's private adventures with Weasley and Granger that he didn't know but would demand to know soon, so that he might be on an equal footing with them.

"That's changed now," Harry said. "But you never changed your relationship to me with it, and you'll have to. I want you to think about what I said to you about Metamorphosis, and my having hundreds of different identities."

Granger went pale. "That's true, then?" she whispered.

"I'm not going to tell you the truth yet," Harry said, and Draco hugged him tighter in sheer delight of how stern he sounded. "That's your test, as I tested Ron by seeing if he could decide what was more important to him, his prejudice or his friendship with me. I want *you* to refrain from finding out the truth. Trust that I'll tell you when I've made up my own mind about it."

"But, Harry, you lied to us for so long—"

"And I shouldn't have done that, and I'm sorry," Harry said, voice softening. "I'll have to trust you more, too." Draco frowned into his hair. "But first you need to show you can be trusted again. The reason I lied was to avoid the disapproval that was all you handed me when I tried to confess. Now I want you to restrain your curiosity for a little while. If you want to know what my life in the last ten years was really like, *ask* me instead of rooting around for the secret on your own. Accept that I won't answer some questions. Accept that I might not agree with what your definition of right and wrong is—or what your definition of 'healthy' is, either, for that matter." He leaned forwards, staring into Granger's eyes. "Place me first, instead of your own curiosity."

Tears trembled on the edges of Granger's lashes. "I have, so often," she whispered.

"Those times were all more than ten years ago, Hermione. As I said, I rested on the memory of those times when I spoke to you. And then you went to the Mind-Healers and ruined it all." Harry shook his head and took a step back from her, one that Draco was more than ready to help him make. "So wait now. Let this question rest unanswered."

*Harry couldn't have thought of a better torment for her,* Draco thought in satisfaction, watching Granger writhe under the lash of her curiosity. When her eyes fell to the ground, she was biting her lip and clenching her fists in much the same manner Weasley had. Small grumbles and curses forced their way between her lips.

"*Fine!*" she burst out suddenly, jerking her head up. "I'll be silent and let you take as long as you please to tell me!" And then she lunged forwards and grabbed Harry around the waist, most rudely displacing Draco's arms. "Only please don't go away again," she sobbed, whilst Harry embraced her back. "I missed you so much, Harry, I didn't know what was happening, I didn't know how to save you—"

"Trust me to save myself," Harry whispered as he petted her hair.

"I will, I *will.*"

And Harry was going to trust her to make and keep the promise, Draco saw. His part in the matter would be reduced to seeing that Harry didn't make excuses for his friends, rather than helping to punish them.

He sighed.

Then Harry looked back at him and caught his eye, and Draco was reminded that Harry had told him the full secret of Metamorphosis first, that he was the only one who knew exactly why Harry had started the business in the first part, and that Harry fought with him like an equal instead of having to deal with him on the basis of a test.

He smiled.

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Chapter: 50

Thank you again for all your reviews!

This is the last chapter of *Changing of the Guard.* This story may someday have associated stories set in the same universe, but is unlikely to have a novel-length sequel. I haven't said all I

have to say regarding these characters; I think I could take another fic of the same length and still not have said everything regarding them. But the immediate issues are resolved, and all stories have an end.

Or at least, the end is beyond what we can see—and probably a different story.

*Epilogue—Glimpses of a Changing Life*

"But you've slept with women in the past, haven't you?"

Draco ducked his head if embarrassed, smiling, but privately he had decided that he would remember the face of that reporter. It was unfair that *she* should have been allowed to remain in Britain and openly write for the papers when Malcolm Therris had been forced into hiding for his exemplary work on the John Grey article. Of course, Therris was still writing under a pseudonym and collecting information as he could from his refuge—which Draco more than suspected was one of Harry's estates—but it was the principle of the thing.

"I have," said Draco. "I hardly would now. There's a certain philosophy I live my life by, which you may have heard of."

"Which philosophy?" The woman eagerly poised her quill over her parchment and stared at him with her lips slightly parted. Draco had learned to identify that look in the past few months. Some people seemed to think they could *taste* the reflected glory that came off someone who had slept with Harry Potter. Draco now understood why Harry had gone to such great lengths to disguise himself for ten years.

"Fidelity," Draco said, and showed her all his teeth. The woman flushed and looked down, but other reporters elbowed her out of the way and leaned forwards. Draco frequently gave public press conferences like this, since the fiction he and Harry maintained was that he was less "busy" in Harry. In truth, Harry still found confrontations with the public stressful, unless he had planned and utterly controlled the situation as he had in the public party or the trap to catch Grey, and he would begin to slip into another persona after less than half-an-hour. Draco was unwilling to encourage that except in the context of business.

He quite enjoyed the press conferences, rather than minding them. He got to influence the way thousands of people in the wizarding world saw gay and lesbian wizards and witches every day. It suited the fantasies he had once had of controlling the world, either openly or from behind a more powerful companion.

He knew some people had dismissed him because he was "Harry Potter's fucktoy." Draco also remembered their names, and he had already sent revenges into motion that might take years but would produce satisfying results in the end.

He was speaking on an impromptu stage built in the same field where the original party had been held, which had become an unofficial gathering place for the rebellion, including Nusante's

people. Reporters could always find someone to talk to here with a decided opinion on what the homosexual wizards of Britain should do next. Several spirited debates about the changing laws had already happened here. And there had been other parties, smaller ones, but with Harry in attendance. No attackers had come after the second time, when Harry's wards had engorged the cock of one attacking wizard and had it lead him irresistibly to every man in attendance, including his own companions.

None of what they'd achieved was a perfect solution; someone had taken over Counterstrike, though someone with less force of personality and money than Grey, and continued to agitate for harder laws against homosexuality. But Draco was confident they would win in the end. Already more young pure-bloods had attended the gatherings in this field than had been at the party in Clothilde Castle where he and Harry had alarmed the other guests. He might have a hundred and twenty years left to live yet. He was quietly determined that he would see the changing of the guard, the growth of idiocy into acceptance and even astonishment that gay wizards and witches should have been regarded as different from anyone else.

He stepped off the stage, briefly catching Nusante's eye. The man looked away hastily. He had attended every press conference, and the parties, though he usually left the moment he caught sight of Harry. His face was always twisted when he looked at either of them. Draco smiled now. He'd heard that Nusante hadn't written a play in months, and barely left his house. He was still working through the guilt spell, then, and his own pride fighting what he would see as "irrational" emotions would make it worse.

Draco's foot had just settled on the ground when the world dissolved into chaos and light.

Draco could hear screams, distantly, but they seemed unimportant. He was involved in the quite astonishing pain of his own body. He flew through a region that lashed blazes of white radiance into him which hurt worse than the Cruciatus. When he breathed, he breathed agony instead of air. He was sure his father would have found it all intensely interesting, and might have been willing to go through the experience himself to understand it from the inside out.

He landed heavily, thrown against the stage, and then he came back to reality. His ribs hurt, and one ankle was twisted heavily enough that Draco thought it was at least sprained, and probably broken. He blinked furiously, but he couldn't see; afterimages crowded like trees in a forest at night across his eyes. Draco hissed and propped himself up by digging his elbows into the soil. Being blind when an enemy might be sneaking up on him bothered him worse than the rest.

An arm went around his shoulders, and Draco stiffened. But Blaise's voice spoke into his ear, soft and familiar. "Easy, Draco. You were the only one hurt, and even then, I cast a Mitigating Charm, so some of the damage was deflected away from you and hit the stone of the stage instead."

"Blaise? I didn't know you would be here." Draco turned his head from side to side, out of sorts. The afterimages *still* clouded his eyes. "What happened?"

"Some sort of device implanted in the ground next to the stage," Blaise said grimly, and Draco heard him mutter several soft incantations. "I have no idea if they knew where you were going to step," Blaise continued after a moment, "or if it was magical energy gathered under the soil and they simply concentrated it when they'd already seen where you intended to walk."

Draco paused, breathing softly. He noted that it hurt to breathe, but only on the outside of his body; that was an excellent sign he didn't have a broken rib. He felt as though someone had beaten him with sticks, but he would recover. His leg was more of a concern, and he motioned Blaise to check it whilst his mind raced towards the inevitable conclusion.

"I invented a device that did something like that," he said at last. "Or that could do something like that, if you used it in the wrong manner."

"Your leg isn't broken," Blaise said. "You can get around by hopping on me—" He paused. "*What* did you say?"

"There's a Muggle device called a mine," Draco said, and leaned his head back on Blaise's shoulder, blinking steadily straight ahead. His vision was clearing again, and now he could see the ravenous faces of the reporters as they hovered near. *What a story they'll have to take home tonight,* he thought, and part of his mind began making calculations about how much he and Harry and the rebellion could profit from this. "They use it for trapping the ground that enemy soldiers might cross, tearing feet off, that kind of thing. I invented a device that would use a similar force and could be buried underground, but it would only Apparate an intruder uncontrollably away, not hurt him like this." He took a deep breath. "Blaise, these bastards are using one of my own machines against me."

"Or one of your principles," Blaise said. "They'd be stupid to use one of Malfoy's Machineries against you when you've got those spells that could make life difficult for them if they did. Maybe they studied Muggle technology, too, and decided to apply the idea."

The afterimages were almost gone. Draco gave a smile that made several of the reporters step back and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Cast a Lightening Charm and a Levitation Charm so they can think I got up under my own power. Nonverbally, of course."

Blaise opened his mouth as if he would protest, and then he obeyed with no more than a faint sigh. Draco heard the disbelieving gasps as he planted a hand on the stage and heaved himself to his feet. He surveyed the crowd with scorn, as if he were seeking out and memorizing the faces of all those who had thought he was too wounded to move. Several more stepped away from him.

"Well," Draco said lightly. "It seems that a certain person intends to test the resolve Harry and I have made not to use violence." *Always imply that you know who your enemies are, even if you have no idea.* That was a trick Lucius had taught him and which Draco had only refined in the past month whilst he interacted with Harry's friends. A haughty glare when he was sure insults had been used, even when he hadn't heard them, made the Weasleys squirm in their seats like

naughty children, and had brought the confessions of several pranks in the making.

"Who?" asked a voice that didn't belong to a reporter. Draco looked up and met Nusante's eyes.

"Why," Draco said, "I think the identity of our foe should be sufficiently clear to anyone who's been following our activities closely for the past few months." He planted his foot carefully on the ground. He would look as if he were walking normally, since his body was now so light the ankle had hardly any weight to bear, but the bruise had turned an impressive purple-black. Cameras flashed. Draco showed his teeth again.

"Harry and I are fighters," he said, speaking directly to Nusante. "That's different from being warriors, who can't operate outside a context of war. Fighters understand all sorts of struggles. This attack is an attempt to force riots, or maybe to persuade Harry to come forwards and unleash that powerful magic so many people are afraid will make him a Dark Lord someday. Neither will work." He folded his arms and lifted his chin. Blaise, understanding perfectly, conjured a faint breeze to sweep around his head and lift his hair dramatically. They'd used similar tactics in the Slytherin common room to foil the older years. "A large part of winning means choosing the grounds on which you will fight. And Harry and I will win."

He strode off, or so it would look to anyone watching from a distance. He did pause on the Apparition point before he vanished, to meet two pairs of eyes. One was those of Alice Moonstone, who had scandalized her father by attending some of the parties and all of the press conferences. No trace of the enslavement spell Lucius had tried to cast remained, and Draco could look at her without fear. So could Blaise, who Draco had sometimes seen hovering over her, and who he suspected might be the draw for Alice more than the rebellion was. At least, she had never missed a gathering that Blaise also attended. But now she stared straight at him and gave a grim little nod, quietly praising him for doing the right thing.

The second pair of eyes was Nusante's, and in them Draco saw the start of the hero-worship Harry would detest but which Draco had long thought was needed to heal the remaining rifts in the rebellion between their followers and Nusante's artistic friends. And since Nusante was going to worship *him*, and not Harry, Harry should have no objection to it.

Of course, Harry would have some legitimate reasons to protest if Draco didn't return home immediately and tell him what happened.

Draco spun on the spot and Disapparated.

Harry stepped out of the fireplace smiling. That was the first conversation he'd had with Ron and Hermione since their reconciliation that hadn't been filled with awkward pauses because of all the things they wanted to know and he didn't want to tell them. Hermione had got off on a tangent about the history of homosexuality in the wizarding world, and Ron had interrupted with harsh squawks, and Harry had corrected Hermione's history text. Hermione had been astonished that someone could correct a book—well, she had been astonished that *Harry* could do it,

anyway—but she had responded graciously. Of course, she was greedy for more knowledge.

Harry shook the soot off his cloak and gave it to Kreacher, who appeared to take it with a worried look on his face. Harry paused. "What's the matter?" he asked. It was probably a tale of burned food or a Dark artifact that had chased Kreacher out of the attic when he tried to dust it, but such calamities didn't usually happen to the house-elf.

"Master Draco is feeling poorly," Kreacher said.

Harry immediately straightened. "Poorly?" he demanded.

"He was attacked." Kreacher blinked watering eyes at him, as if he found it difficult to see through his distress about the attack on Draco. "Badly bruised ribs and a leg he should be resting." He stamped a little and glared up the stairs.

"Why didn't he go to St. Mungo's?" Harry was already taking the stairs. Draco wasn't a fool. He would have known the Healers were the best people to treat a broken leg or sprained ankle, and he had none of Harry's investment in an air of mystery and privacy.

"He says he is 'pretending it's not as bad as it is to keep the people who want to see weakness away,'" Kreacher said, imitating Draco's voice with uncanny accuracy.

Harry opened the bedroom door with a hasty call of thanks to the elf and a request to bring dinner to bed, and vanished into the room.

Harry had already screamed at him and insulted his intelligence and thanked Merlin for Blaise and sworn vengeance on the person who hurt Draco. Now he had reached the part of his worrying routine that Draco liked best, when he tried to make him feel good in compensation for what he'd gone through.

Draco's upper body rested against pillows so soft and smooth that he could barely feel them; it was as if gravity had simply chosen to spare him a fall for reasons of its own. His legs rested on another pair of pillows, his sprained ankle tenderly wrapped round with cloth even though Harry had already used several frighteningly effective healing spells he'd looked up in the Black library on it. He was naked, and Harry had his head bent, nestled between Draco's hip and groin, carefully licking his cock.

Draco tried to remember the last time he had felt so comfortable, but was interrupted when he shuddered and went cross-eyed, bucking. Harry sucked the head of his cock into his mouth, then looked up at him and used some wandless magic that went past Draco like a wind in water. Draco could suddenly hear Harry's voice speaking directly into his thoughts, lulling but with an undertone that spoke of lust as red as embers. *Not so fast. I have more to offer you than a quick orgasm.*

"A quick orgasm is just fine with me," Draco gasped out.

Harry laughed darkly and returned to his task, licking and swiping the sides of Draco's erection with his tongue, never taking it fully into his mouth. And he had allowed the magical connection to open up between them for the first time in months; Draco knew Harry had been cautious of it and had wanted to make love without being driven into extremes of passion. But sometime between that last overwhelming fuck when they could read each other's emotions and bodies and now, Harry had learned to *control* the damn thing. Now Draco could feel it where Harry's tongue touched skin—brush after brush of fire, of heated satin, of quicksilver wetness—and then he would lose it when Harry's tongue traveled away again.

He growled and, once, screamed when Harry sucked hard on the vein on the underside of his cock and at the same moment sent his mind sliding effortlessly through Draco's, like a shark cleaving water. For a moment, just a *moment*, he was as fully bound as he wanted to be, remembering a conversation with Gryffindor yearmates he'd never had, thinking of Weasley and Granger as Ron and Hermione, experiencing the sensation of Harry's cock lying warm and unattended against his belly. And then Harry leaned back on his knees and smiled at him, eyes deep and lips swollen.

"Please," Draco breathed, and didn't care that he was sobbing like a child. "Please."

And then Harry dived and *sucked*, putting the full force of his concentration behind it, and the magic rolled over Draco. And Draco realized the bastard had added wandless magic to it. Intense sweetness seized him, threw him from the hands of a giant to the back of a dragon, and the buildup to orgasm lasted so long he thought he would shatter—

And when he came, he soaked himself and howled like a werewolf, and returned to himself with a sore throat and more bloody afterimages in front of his eyes. He lay, panting, against the pillows. The pain from his ankle had dissipated.

"How did you do that?" he murmured, opening his eyes and staring down at Harry in awe he didn't want to admit to.

Harry gravely extended his tongue.

Draco swatted him lightly on the back of his head. "Prat. How did you—heal me?" He moved his ankle tentatively, but yes, the ache was entirely gone, and when he undid the bandages, so was the bruise. When he reached up to feel his ribs, he could palpitate the skin as hard as he liked, and still he felt no more than the ordinary pain he would from doing so.

"Willed my magic to do it at the same moment as it was giving you pleasure," Harry said calmly. "It took extra impulsion from my emotions and from your magic, which reached out to me when you came. I wanted to make you feel good. My power decided that to make you feel really good, it had to take away your wounds as well as give you sexual satisfaction." He kissed Draco's hip.

"We'll have to find out who attacked me, of course." Draco caressed Harry's hair.

"Mmmm." Harry exhaled gently across Draco's cock, which couldn't revive yet but appreciated the attention, and then laid his head against Draco's calf and closed his eyes. He breathed so deeply and so slowly that Draco could almost believe he'd fallen asleep, and shook his head when Draco reached down to return the favor.

"Not right now," he whispered. "I want to relax before I have dinner."

Draco stayed awake long enough to eat—he remembered that—but then Harry was on him again, with his hands this time, and he fell asleep dazed and happy and utterly certain he and Harry would defeat this mysterious enemy as they had defeated every other.

He told himself later, when he opened his eyes and Harry had some evidence as to who was behind the attack, that *of course* he should have known Harry was plotting even as he rested in bed beside Draco. He hadn't fully opened his eyes in all that time. He was keeping them half-shut, or shut completely, not to disguise his lust—Draco could feel that through the magic that connected them—but to disguise his racing brain.

Harry studied the calendar hanging on the wall, then nodded gravely. He had another two days before he had to go and play Osiris for Lucille, the witch who was the last case he'd had before Draco.

*"Before Draco" and "After Draco." The two periods that divide my life.*

The time between now and then should be enough to begin establishing contacts inside Counterstrike and the other anti-gay organizations it worked with and trying to find out who could have been so stupid as to attack Draco.

Stupid, Harry thought, as he opened his cupboard and pulled out his most traditional and sleekly-cut gray robes, because whoever had done it should have known that they would bring Harry Potter down on their heads like the wrath of Dumbledore and Merlin combined. And where Harry Potter went, a hundred other people followed.

Their enemy had no way of knowing that, of course. But he should have.

Harry faced the mirror and began casting glamours that shifted his appearance from moment to moment. When he decided on the one he liked, he would use Transfigurations to make it permanent. No doubt he would have to pass through many houses, estates, and secret meetings with anti-glamour wards hung all over the walls and doors. They would not want to take the chance that Harry Potter, who was so good at disguising himself as Brian Montgomery, could be among them.

Harry gave a vicious smile into the mirror that he liked the look of and decided to keep. Then he

paused as his eyes darkened to a slaty color just this side of John Grey's. Yes, he liked that, too. So he had the eyes and he had the smile, and a moment later he had the hair, which darkened and became greasy and fell down his shoulders, and the skin, sallow and puckered with the stains of a man who worked often on potions.

*Here's to you, Severus Snape,* Harry thought, and cast the auditory glamour that would deepen his voice, though not make him sound exactly like Snape. There could be a few people who remembered Snape, where he was going.

"Hello," he murmured. "My name is Charles Awfen. I've heard about your group, and I believe I might be interested in joining."

Already new memories were growing in his mind, the memories of a boy who had grown up lonely and neglected by his mother after a gay wizard had killed his father. He had made extensive psychological studies and become convinced that homosexuality was connected to murderous impulses, but had never tried to publish any of his research, feeling it would be better if the perverts didn't know they had such an implacable enemy. He had been an admirer of John Grey and was saddened to hear he was not in Britain at the moment. For some information he wanted to use to complete his studies, he would let these men have access to some of his insights and his potions lab.

From there, it was only a matter of fixing some of the features by means of Transfiguration rather than glamour, and grooming some of the memories into shape.

On his way to the door out of Grimmauld Place, Harry passed the room where he had locked the reverse Pensieve. He paused for long moments, listening to more than feeling the tingle of Dark magic; Awfen was a man who conceptualized Dark magic in auditory terms.

Then he dismissed the locking wards with a swift motion of his wand he wouldn't be showing any of the people he met today and stepped inside.

"Voldemort. Nagini," he whispered, and the door of the cabinet popped open. He took the Pensieve into his hands and held it, staring into the awful emptiness in it. He could vanish into that void and never come out again.

Then he stepped back and sneered, placing the Pensieve carefully on the table in the center of the room. Charles Awfen was too *proud* to vanish.

A blast of pure white fire—Awfen specialized in fire spells when he decided to take up combat magic; he found the purifying nature and implications of flames soothing—and the Pensieve began to burn. He watched as the Pensieve melted and became slag, now and then fanning the magic with encouraging strength. He nodded when the Dark artifact was gone, and smiled when he thought he heard a very faint scream from the heart of the fire.

"That's what evil things deserve," he murmured.

He walked on his way and paused in the door of the house, smelling the evening air and fixing a destination in his mind. He would take two steps and Apparate.

In one moment now.

But he took that single moment on the doorstep to feel a dazzling pride that he was what he was, *who* he was, a wizard who commanded people and skills, memories and appearances, that his enemies could not even imagine, and who had the love of the one man who was able to accept all that and still hold Harry to a path of honesty, trust, and affection he would have lost to the whirling cloud of his personas otherwise.

Then the moment was past and he was off the doorstep, striding forwards two steps in the company of everyone he was. He Apparated with a strong sense of confidence.

How could such a wizard *not* have good hunting?

**The End.**