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Chapter 1 to 33

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Chapter: 1

Title: Building With Worn-Out Tools

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or the characters, events, settings, and spells in this story. They belong to J. K. Rowling and associates. Nor am I making any profit from this story.

Summary: Right smack in the middle of a stormy divorce from Ginny, Harry has no reason to be attracted to his Arguer, Draco Malfoy. I mean, it's *Malfoy.*

Warnings: HBP spoilers. Slash, sex, language, violence. Also, though I've tried to show what Ginny's rationale is, I'm afraid it does rather come off as character-bashing against her in some parts of the story, since this deals with both divorce and adultery.

Pairings: Draco/Harry, Ron/Hermione, Blaise/Ginny, mentions of past Harry/Ginny

Author's Notes: Hi. This is a story I'm writing because I thought it would be fun. I realize that's not encouraging as far as continuity goes, but I've got burned out on other stories because I attempted to write them too fast, so I'm trying a more leisurely pace and seeing what happened. This story will probably be updated about twice a week.

The title comes from Rudyard Kipling's poem "If":

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools…

Enjoy!

Chapter 1: If Things Had Been Different

If things had been different, Harry reflected, as he stared into the fire and tried to ignore Ginny's calm, waiting presence on the chair opposite his, *then we wouldn't be sitting here.*

It was a ridiculous observation, so obvious Ginny would laugh at him for mentioning it. But that was the level of thought going through his head right now, the night Ginny had told him she wanted a divorce—and why.

"You know it's the best thing for both of us, Harry," Ginny said gently, breaking into a silence Harry wished could have lasted hours. "We're not happy. We haven't been for a long time. Don't you think we should go our separate ways, so that we each stand a chance of building our own lives, where we are happy?"

Harry felt his temper flare. He meant to stay quiet and keep his eyes on the hearth, he really did, but he snapped around to face her and let fly. "If you weren't happy, why didn't you fucking *tell* me about it, instead of fucking around behind my back with Zabini?"

Ginny's cheeks turned red, but she lifted her head and clasped her hands in front of her. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that, Harry."

Harry's barriers had broken, though, and he wouldn't be stopped. "Oh, let's pretend that you didn't say half the sanctimonious shit you've spouted this evening, too," he sneered at her, rising and pacing up and down in front of the fire. "I want to *talk* about this. Why didn't you leave me and *then* start sleeping with Zabini? You could have! Was it *that* much trouble, to keep your hands out of his pants for five minutes?"

"I don't deserve to be insulted like this." Ginny's voice shook, but Harry glanced at her and knew, from the way she was half-shredding her sleeve, that it came from anger and not fear. "I'm just trying to do what's right for both of us, make this divorce nice and friendly, and you—"

"Maybe I don't want to pretend we're *friends,*" Harry snarled, and a vase above the fireplace hurtled across the room and smashed into the far wall. He knew that meant his magic was out of control. He didn't care. "We were husband and wife for five years. Why—"

"And those have been the five worst years of my life," Ginny said, her voice suddenly clear and cold as she leaned forwards.

Harry paused, his throat tight, his heartbeat so loud in his ears that it was hard to hear her. *Well, I did say that I wanted to talk about this.*

"Why, Ginny?" he asked, and he hated the way his voice pleaded and whinged, but he couldn't stop himself. Ginny had sometimes asked him to try a little harder, and they'd had their fights like any couple, and they'd had a shared sadness when she miscarried the baby last year. But those sorrows had only brought them closer together in the end. So Harry had thought, at least.

Now Ginny was looking at him with something very like loathing in her brilliant brown eyes, and Harry wondered if it was new or if he was just seeing her, *really* seeing her, for the first time.

"Can you ask?" She tried to laugh, but something sounded caught in her throat, and the noise came out harsh. "You've been a *failure* at everything you tried since killing Voldemort, Harry! You just sit around the house, or you go and sit around Ron and Hermione's house, or you fly for fun! And that's *all* you do! You wouldn't be an Auror, you wouldn't be a professional Quidditch player—"

"You *know* why that is—" Harry's hand had fallen, not to his wand, the way it sometimes did when he argued with people, but to his right leg, where a long scar still cut across his calf. A legacy of Nagini's bite when he'd killed her master, the scar didn't make it hard to walk unless he was tired, but it had weakened the muscles. The Healers at St. Mungo's had told Harry flatly that he shouldn't ever fly at the insane speeds necessary for professional Quidditch, because his leg would cramp and he'd fall.

"You could have tried!" Ginny was on her feet, shouting at him. "You could have bloody tried, Harry! But you never did! You just shrugged and gave up quietly at the first sign of opposition! That's not the man I married! That's not who you were in Hogwarts, or I would have died down in the Chamber of Secrets!" She stopped talking for a moment, flushed and panting, but she'd probably wanted to say these words for a long time, and they continued tumbling out of her. "And then you couldn't even give me a baby that would *live*—"

"That's fucking low, Ginny," Harry hissed, using the anger to cover just how much that had *hurt.*

"So I went after someone who'd *risk* something for me," Ginny continued, "who'd make love to me even though I was the famous Harry Potter's wife and we'd be tarred and feathered in the *Daily Prophet* if someone found out. And finally he convinced me that staying with you because I wanted you to be happy was its own form of cowardice." She lifted her chin. "That's the truth, Harry. All of it. You can't make me happy. You never could from the day you told me you didn't want to be an Auror. Blaise has helped me grow as a person, he's taken chances for me, lied for me, and worked to win my heart. You never did that. You just always assumed I'd be there, always assumed I'd catch you if you fell, and never remembered that I might need some catching of my own." Her hand strayed down towards her belly. "And Blaise has given me a baby that's going to live this time."

Harry shut his eyes for a moment. Then he opened them and said, "Get out."

Ginny rolled her eyes and drew her wand from her sleeve. Harry tensed, but Ginny just flicked it and called, "*Accio* trunk!" Her traveling trunk zoomed towards her from the bedroom. She caught it easily and spelled it to float behind her. Then she turned to Harry. "Blaise thought you might do something like this. He's waiting for me, and I'll always have a place in his home. Now I'll leave before you do something violent."

Harry growled wordlessly at her.

"And it seems that we aren't having an amicable divorce after all," said Ginny. She smiled slightly. "I'd advise you to find a *very* good Arguer, Harry. You know next to nothing about wizarding divorce law, do you? It's a labyrinth. That was part of the reason I hoped we could avoid this, after all—a last gesture of kindness on my part. I see now that I shouldn't have bothered."

He really might have lifted his wand to curse her if she'd stayed a moment longer, but she swooped through the door and was gone.

Left alone in the small neat house in Hogsmeade they'd bought together, Harry sagged back on the couch, put his head in his arms, and took a deep breath.

He was twenty-three, he'd been married to Ginny since he was eighteen, he'd thought he'd be married to her for the rest of his life, and now he was about to go through a separation from her that she had every reason to make as difficult as possible.

Slowly, he rose and made his way to the hearth to Floo Hermione—the only source of advice he could think of right now, even though it was almost midnight. He couldn't imagine how the Weasleys would react to Ginny's announcement. He'd like to get there first, if possible.

If it was possible. If they weren't all on Ginny's side from the beginning, since she was their daughter and he was just their son-in-law.

He might have lost his family as well as his wife.

Harry shook his head, blinked, and told himself to stop thinking like that. He *couldn't* think like that, not if he wanted to have some chance of surviving this. Maybe Ginny was right and he hadn't done anything worth mentioning in the last five years, but he could still react to danger right in front of him.

He had to be able to.

Draco vaguely thought there was something familiar about the snowy owl that swooped down and landed on the windowsill of his office the moment he opened it, but that didn't stop his jaw from dropping when he read the request she carried.

Then he leaned back in the chair—comfortable and supremely soft, of course—behind his desk and uttered a long and joyous laugh.

Oh, this is just too rich. The very worst thing to happen to him—

Draco's memory helpfully reminded him of the Dark Lord, and he grimaced and amended his thoughts.

One of the worst things ever to happen to him, and he has to come to me *for help?* Me!

With a growing sense of hilarity, the rightness of the world, and the fact that all good things came to those who waited, Draco read the letter again.

September 17th, 2003

Malfoy:

I'm about to get a divorce from my wife, Ginny Weasley. On the advice of Hermione Weasley-Granger, I'm interested in retaining you as Arguer, since you have a reputation as the best there is. I assure you I can pay very well.

Harry Potter.

Draco put his hand across his mouth, but it was futile. He sagged forwards across his desk and started laughing again.

It must have galled Potter badly enough to hear that Draco had made a successful practice for himself as an Arguer, an expert in wizarding divorce law, after the war. But that would be *nothing* compared to how it would feel to ask his old enemy for help. Repressed frustration screamed between every line in the letter, from the spiky writing to the assumption that Draco would make him pay through the nose.

Draco caressed the letter for a moment.

It never really occurred to him to refuse Potter's case. How could he, when it would not only make him richer but would be so much *fun?*

And destroying a Weasley in court was the perfect complement to making Potter pay, in more than one sense.

Draco wrote a measured response accepting Potter's offer and suggesting a meeting the next day to talk about it, and sent it off with the snowy owl, who hadn't once stopped watching him mistrustfully. Draco grinned at her and waved her off with a lordly flap of his hand. Yes, she should mistrust him.

Five minutes after she'd gone, he was still laughing.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you for the reviews on the last chapter! I plan to usually update Wednesdays and Saturdays, and I've got a bit of this written already, so I'll put up this chapter now.

Chapter Two—The Meeting

Harry woke with a sigh. Strange, he thought as he rubbed his eyes, how it was easy to reach for his glasses instead of Ginny.

Of course, it had been months since they'd slept together. Perhaps that should have warned him in the first place. But he'd thought she was still depressed from losing the baby, and he hadn't wanted to push.

That had been some of Hermione's advice, too, he remembered. *Don't push. Give her some room*.

Harry grimaced as he went to prepare breakfast. He could only hope that Hermione's advice about hiring Malfoy as an Arguer to help him work through the tangle of the divorce laws would bear more fruit.

A barn owl came swooping in with the *Daily Prophet* just as Harry was cracking his eggs into a skillet. He rolled his eyes. The headline, in letters three inches high, proclaimed: **HARRY POTTER AND BRIDE ON THE BRINK OF A SHOCKING DIVORCE!**

He knew he should probably read it. If Ginny had given the paper an interview already, and made claims that would be used against him when they went to court, he should know what they were.

But disgust overwhelmed him completely when he realized the photo on the front page showed Ginny kissing Blaise passionately, and then breaking away to grin at the camera, as if she had done it on purpose to show how happy she was. He dropped the paper on the floor just as it began to smolder. Sighing, he waved his wand and cast *Aguamenti*, turning the paper into a sodden mass of newsprint.

Hedwig hooted disapprovingly from her perch in the corner of the kitchen.

"I know, I know," Harry said, and, after setting the eggs to cook with a mild charm that would prevent them from warming too quickly, walked across the room to ruffle her feathers. "I shouldn't have done that. And won't Malfoy be thrilled when he finds out," he muttered under his breath, and glanced through the window. It was a gray day, but the hurrying clouds might break out into sunshine soon.

A flash of a camera cut through the window. Harry ducked back out of sight with a soft growl. That must be a new photographer, who didn't know about the magical effects that tended to happen to intruding reporters on Harry's property.

Sure enough, someone tried to knock at the door a moment later. Harry smirked and went back to his eggs. The wards hummed in his ears, roused by the knock from a stranger. If he left now, nothing would happen.

He didn't. He knocked again.

A moment later, a distinct yelp cut through the air—the wards bringing the sound to Harry, so that he could enjoy it. He poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice and meandered into the front parlor, the windows of which looked out on his garden. The reporter hung upside-down by one ankle in front of the window, in a ward that used a variation of the *Levicorpus* spell. He'd dropped his camera, and now he swatted frantically at the nest of small, hungry black snakes that had appeared beneath him. They hissed and piled on each other, reaching up towards him like vines.

Harry opened the front door. "*Were you going to bite him*?" he asked in Parseltongue. "You know that I've asked you not to do that."

The reporter let out a high whimper of fear. Harry snorted. He usually found it pathetic that most wizards were so afraid of a man who could talk like a snake, but on occasions like this, it came in useful.

The nearest snake turned her head towards him, tongue flicking rapidly. Nemesis had yellow eyes, and was the only snake Harry could reliably tell apart from the rest, unless they reminded him of their names. "*He came to your door. The ones who do that are our lawful prey*."

"*Yes, but you can't eat them*," Harry pointed out. The reporter whimpered again. Harry had heard, from Ron, Hermione, and nearly everyone else, that it sounded as if he were hissing instructions for complicated, gruesome torture to the snakes when he was only having quite ordinary arguments. "*You can't actually manage anything larger than a rat, you know that*."

"*He doesn't know that*."

The poor man had actually wet himself, Harry saw with a sidelong glance. That was probably enough playing for now. "*Well, you've done your terrifying. Back to your burrows with you now*."

Nemesis led her hatchlings away sullenly. She had dreams of today being the day that Harry would cut intruders down into small, bite-sized chunks for her and her brood. She was the most optimistic snake Harry had ever met.

Relaxed—which was important—Harry directed his attention to the reporter, waving his wand so the ward set him back on his feet. "Really, is it so impossible to think that I just don't want to talk to you right now?" he asked.

"But—but I wanted to ask you about the present state of your affairs with Mrs. Potter," the reporter bubbled to him, retrieving his camera. He was young, with the freshness of face that said

he hadn't fought in the war. Most days, Harry envied people like that. Sometimes, as now, he detested them. *Being on the same battlefield as a few Death Eaters might have taught him to control his bladder better*.

Recognizing the rising signs of his own temper, Harry shook his head and attended to the matter at hand. "I suggest you ask Mrs. Potter about that," he said, and stepped back towards his house.

"Is it really true that you refused to have sex with her, so she had to find someone who'd treat her like a real woman?" the reporter blurted.

Harry took a few deep breaths, staring at the façade of the house all the while. He'd fling the pumpkin juice *at best* if he turned around right now. Then he said, "The *Daily Prophet* must be desperate, to print that rubbish as truth," and stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

The idiot started to come forwards again, incredibly, but Harry opened the window and hissed out of it. Nemesis came into view from behind a spectacular clump of roses. This time, the reporter saw the better part of valor and beat a hasty retreat.

His eggs weren't ruined, by a miracle. Harry ate them for breakfast, along with a piece of toast and marmalade, and prepared himself to go over to Hermione and Ron's house. He'd only asked Hermione about advice for dealing with the divorce case; he hadn't faced her in person yet.

He had no idea what the Weasley family thought of the situation, either. He hadn't received any Howlers, at least, and that *might* be a good sign.

On the other hand, maybe they're all too fascinated with Ginny and her new lover and baby. He knew it had been a huge disappointment to Molly that they hadn't been able to give her grandchildren.

He shook his head to rid himself of useless speculations like this and cast Floo powder into the fireplace, calling out, "Weasley-Granger residence!"

Draco wondered who he'd pleased to get this unprecedented run of good luck. Potter's letter had come yesterday, and now he had Blaise's head floating in his fireplace. Blaise had just asked Draco to be his Arguer, defending his Weasley bint from "unjustified accusations," and ensuring that she "received her fair share of that bastard Potter's money."

Life really *was* too good.

"You really should have acted faster, Blaise," Draco drawled, pretending to be intensely interested in the section of the *Daily Prophet* that reported yet another disastrous failure for the Chudley Cannons, rather than the photograph on the front page that showed Weasley kissing his best friend. She had ugly teeth. Draco didn't blame Potter at all for not wanting to live with that any longer. "Potter's already asked me, and we're meeting today to discuss it."

Though peering at Blaise's face was extremely tempting, Draco knew he couldn't risk it or he'd start laughing hysterically. Besides, the outraged silence was almost as good.

"He did *what*?" Blaise finally shouted.

"He asked me, and I agreed." Draco felt ready to lay the paper down now, and peer severely at Blaise over the top of his table. His best friend had called at an hour when anyone with a conscience—and some familiarity with his habits—would have known Draco was still at breakfast, in casual robes. A house-elf popped in with his third pot of tea and poured a cup for him, then carefully laid down an exquisite set of chocolate-dipped strawberries on his plate. Draco began to eat, continuing to frown. "I didn't think you were deaf," he added, when he'd finished the first strawberry and Blaise had so far said nothing amusing.

"I thought you would agree to defend *me*," Blaise said, voice low and ugly. *Oh, dear*, Draco thought, with a glee that he attempted to keep hidden. *He's about to be like this*. "After all, I'm only your best friend. Generally, best friends did favors for each other, I thought."

"And generally, I thought best friends had better taste than to take up with blood traitors," Draco said, rolling one shoulder while he took another strawberry. "It seems that both our expectations could use some adjusting. Perhaps it's part of a general epidemic of snapped expectations in wizarding Britain, since I know many people who thought Potter and his perfect little bride would never divorce. I'll write to the *Daily Prophet* about it."

"You have no idea how horribly Potter was treating her—" Blaise began.

"Oh, please," Draco sneered, nodding to the house-elf who had once again appeared, this time with a plate of wonderfully fluffy toast. Its disappearance was soundless. "She had more than she could ever have expected when she was born a Weasley, Blaise. Five years of the best life money could buy with the Hero of the Wizarding World, and Potter didn't fuck around behind *her* back, I'd bet. He's too sickeningly noble for that."

"He doesn't *do* anything!" Blaise burst out. "That part of the rumors is true. He just lies around the house all day, and talks to his owl, and maybe Flooes to a friend's house if he's feeling *really* adventurous. He should have fought for Ginny if he wanted to keep her." He lowered his voice as if sharing a great secret. "He doesn't love her, Draco."

"It *is*," said Draco, after a carefully judged bite of toast, "extremely hard to blame him for that one, don't you think?"

"*I* love her."

"Please. You love the thrill of fucking the wife of someone powerful enough to kill you without blinking." Draco sipped at his tea. "The moment the divorce is final and she isn't in any danger from Potter anymore, you'll lose interest in her."

"Not this time." Blaise's eyes glowed with what he probably believed was devotion. "It's different, this time, Draco. It's real." He lowered his voice even further. "We're going to have a baby."

Draco stared at his best friend for a long time. Then he rolled his eyes and put his tea down. "Even if I weren't already representing Potter," he said, "I'd drop you just for that, Blaise. Have you any idea how *stupid* that is, to have got her pregnant, and have the proof of her infidelity on display for all to see?"

"We weren't going to hide it," Blaise said. "We love each other, Draco. We want to show that off."

Draco snapped his teeth together. "Fucking the Weasley bint has lost you brain cells, Blaise. I distinctly remember your not being this stupid when we were at Hogwarts."

"Are you going to be our Arguer or not?"

"Isn't it obvious by now?"

Blaise vanished with a flash and a crack from Draco's fireplace. Draco shook his head slowly, and sipped at his tea.

It was true that Potter's stock had fallen somewhat in the wizarding world; there were people who thought he was lazy for not becoming an Auror, and others who thought he was lazy for not making a political career in the Ministry, and still others who had expected him to follow the defeat of the Dark Lord with one miracle after another. And a case like this was never *easy*.

But infidelity, and a bastard child out of it, and Blaise and Weasley both being hotheaded idiots who believed that their *love* would make a difference?

They were handing Draco weapons left and right. At this pace, he wouldn't have enough room to put them all.

"Well, they're not *happy*, Harry. You have to understand that."

Harry had known there would be bad news. Hermione had welcomed him with loud and effusive words when he came through the fireplace, but had avoided his eyes, and after she handed him a cup of tea, she immediately retreated to the other side of their immense drawing room and started chewing on her hair.

"They're not happy," Harry said evenly, setting the cup of tea on the arm of the chair. "I'll need a bit more than that, Hermione."

Hermione sighed and stared at her hands. "Ron is on your side," she murmured. "He says Ginny was within her rights to leave you, but not to act as if she were married to someone else at the

same time."

"And the other Weasleys?"

"Percy is on Ginny's side—"

"No surprise," Harry interrupted, trying to draw a smile out of his friend. "I think he still hasn't quite forgiven me for proving Fudge wrong about Voldemort being back. I don't think he's quite forgiven Voldemort for *coming* back and ruining his nice neat Ministry career, to be honest."

She smiled, but it was weak. "Bill and Fleur—they think that any problems in a marriage can and should be worked out, you know that."

Harry clenched a fist, but told himself to calm down. "Just because they've done it doesn't mean everyone can," he muttered. "I mean, it's nice that Fleur was able to accept the werewolf traits that Bill took on, but sometimes couples just aren't meant to deal with problems like that."

"I'm only telling you what they said, Harry." Hermione raised her hands.

"I know," Harry said. "Go on."

"Charlie's neutral about the whole thing." Hermione brushed her hair back over her shoulder again. "Since he lives in Romania, he really doesn't have to make a decision." She sighed. "Fred and George—apparently Ginny's been talking to them about how unhappy she is. They don't think she should have taken Zabini into her bed, but they *do* think you should have done more to give her what she wants."

"I tried," Harry whispered. "Honestly, Hermione, I thought it was working. I had no idea she was that upset with me until the night before last." The memory of what he'd lost was shuddering through him now, like a delayed earthquake. "I certainly had no idea that she was—well, sleeping with someone else."

"Arthur just wants to ignore the whole thing, and stay friends with both you and Ginny," Hermione said. She hesitated.

"Go on," Harry said.

"Molly's very upset," Hermione said, speaking so quickly that Harry could barely make out the words. "She apparently thinks you and Ginny got married too young, and you should have waited, and if you had children this wouldn't be happening at all, but you don't, and—" She stopped herself. Then she took a deep breath and said, "Ginny told her about the baby, Harry. That trumps everything else for her, her first grandchild."

Harry rubbed his face. "Yeah," he whispered.

"I know you did the best you could," said Hermione, and her expression was wistful when he looked again. "But—well, you really haven't had much of a life since the war, Harry. Either one of you. I don't think you and Ginny were good for each other. I've always thought that."

"Then why didn't you say something?" Harry asked. A wind brushed against his hair. He bit his lip and did his best to calm down.

"You were so in love." Hermione shook her head, a faint smile on her lips. "I thought I was being paranoid and it would work out in the end." She dragged a hand through her hair and fixed Harry with a challenging stare. "I know this hurts, but maybe it'll be better in the end, for both of you."

"Maybe for Ginny," Harry said. He tried to laugh, but it came out sounding funny. "She still has the majority of her family on her side and a lover and a baby," he tried. "I have friends, but—my family's gone, Hermione. Both parts of it."

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry." She hesitated again, and then continued, "I've never really understood, though. Why *didn't* you apply for another job when you knew you couldn't be an Auror or a professional Quidditch player?"

"I was tired of *doing* things," Harry pointed out, standing up. "I'd fought for more than a year, and hunted Horcruxes during the same time period, and got myself ready to commit *murder*. Besides, do you really think I could have held my temper in the middle of a job where people would probably gape at me because of this stupid scar?"

"But you could have—"

Harry turned away. "I'm going to be late for my appointment with Malfoy," he said. It wasn't for three more hours, but what he wanted was his calm house again, not a lecture from Hermione. She worked in the Ministry, attempting to pass laws for the better treatment of house-elves. She always had to be busy. But Harry didn't. He'd conquered the addiction to that after forty hours of straight battle against Voldemort and his forces near Dumbledore's tomb.

"All right, Harry," Hermione said softly behind him. "But I still hope you can treat this as a new beginning."

Harry growled out the name of his own residence without looking at her. When he stepped back into the kitchen, all the shutters flew off his windows at once and became pinwheels of splinters in the air.

Harry slammed a hand into the table, and tried to ignore his racing heart and his own anger. He *hated* not having control of his magic.

Draco stood when he heard his secretary, one of Pansy's cousins, announcing that Harry Potter was in the anteroom just outside his office. It wasn't courtesy so much as that he didn't want to meet Potter on anything other than an equal level.

When the door opened, Draco suffered a bit of shock.

He'd seen Potter countless times in the last five years—but always in photographs, often snapped on the sly through the windows of his house or as he turned away from the cameras in Diagon Alley. Somehow he had thought that would prepare him for the man's actual presence.

Hardly.

Potter had picked up enough weight since their Hogwarts days to make himself look formidable, without running to fat. His black hair looked the same as ever, but his green eyes had deepened. Draco recognized the look in them that he'd seen inside his father's eyes, and in Professor Snape's: the look of a man who had killed. He limped slightly on his right leg, and Draco vaguely remembered hearing about a wound there that made it impossible for him to play Quidditch anymore.

But the thing that really made him different was the *magic*. It was nearly overwhelming. It hung around him in an aura that Draco couldn't see, but could certainly feel. It pressed on his skin like a heat shimmer, and he half-believed that if he opened his mouth, he could catch it melting, sweet and sugar-like, on his tongue.

Draco wondered, in the half-moment he permitted himself before he controlled his own reactions, whether Potter knew that the reason he got mobbed in the rare times when he went into public might have less to do with that ridiculous scar on his forehead and more to do with his magic. Wizards and witches were drawn to power. It was one reason the Dark Lord had managed to collect so many followers in spite of being obviously insane, one reason that people had obeyed Dumbledore.

Not that Potter would have the first idea of what to use that power for, Draco thought, and with that he was grounded again. He leaned forwards to shake Potter's hand, unable to restrain a slight sneer as he did so. "Come crawling for help at last?" he asked.

Potter took a deep breath, which seemed to banish any anger that might have accumulated at the taunt, and barely clasped Draco's hand. The power sizzled under his nerves anyway, making Draco want to be closer. "Malfoy," Potter said neutrally, and glanced at the chair in front of his desk.

Draco nodded. Potter sat down, fixing him with that dark glance in which far too much was visible.

It took a moment of shuffling with the paperwork on his desk before Draco could settle himself, but he'd done this more than a dozen times now. "I should warn you," he said, glancing up, "that my services are *very* expensive."

"I know," said Potter.

"A thousand Galleons expensive," Draco clarified.

Potter didn't flinch. "I can pay."

Obscurely disappointed that he hadn't managed to evoke more of a reaction, Draco dug deeper. "Do you know the first thing about wizarding divorce law, or why you need an Arguer?"

Potter shook his head. "Only that it's what Ginny called a labyrinth." Wistfulness rang in his voice when he spoke of his wife. Draco barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. That was a weakness, and one Potter would need to get rid of soon. Luckily, the process of divorce using Arguers was nasty enough that it usually made enemies of the spouses in the end, when they didn't begin that way.

"Quite," said Draco, and dug out the first parchment he'd need Potter to sign. "The divorce process came about during a period when arranged marriage was common in the wizarding world, but so was the popularity of romantic love. Couples would separate from their arranged partners in a few minutes if it was easy, and ruin the plans of their parents."

"How terrible," Potter said in a monotone.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Potter, because *your* love match worked out so well."

A gratifying flush crept up the other wizard's cheeks, and the magic around him briefly increased. Draco chuckled.

"There's something to be said for arranged marriage, even now," he commented. "Not that I have the least desire to subject myself to it, but for some of my friends, it worked out nicely." He smiled as he thought of Pansy and Theodore Nott, the one match among the Slytherins his own age that had been arranged, and the only one that seemed genuinely happy. "But this is about the *end* of marriage. So. We'll spend most of our time with your former wife, her lover, and their Arguer in a room with a judge. The judge undergoes a spell that makes him as impartial as possible, and is supposed to enable true justice. Other people will enter only when they're called—character witnesses and the like. A number of conditions have to be satisfied, such as the claims that parties on either side of the divide have to shared property, and whether the reasons they're separating are the true ones." Draco grinned. "And meanwhile, there's what happens outside the courtroom, too."

Potter frowned. "If the judge undergoes a spell that makes him impartial—"

"As impartial as possible, Potter." Draco winked. "Besides, the spell only does that *by reputation*. People who actually study the process—" he made an elegant, self-deprecating gesture towards himself "—know that the spell is connected to the larger wizarding world. That was done by wizards who imagined we would be one small and happy community, united by our fear of Muggles, well into the future." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. As often as this practice had

helped him, he still thought those ancient wizards were incurable optimists. "Thus, the couple's actions and their reputation make the judge's opinion of them vary up and down as the wizarding world's opinion varies, and influence what happens inside the courtroom. Just about *anything* is permitted under wizarding divorce law, Potter. Smears, slander, Dark Arts, assassination attempts. You've essentially entered on an armed duel with your wife that will only be ended, probably months from now, by the judge's decision."

Draco sat back and waited for the results of his words.

Potter stared away, towards the wall of the office. Then he frowned and shook his head, as if he'd come to some strange conclusion, or had a thought he wanted to chase away.

Disappointing. Draco said softly, "What are you thinking, Potter?"

"I just realized that the prospect of dueling with Ginny doesn't distress me that much," Potter said reflectively. "At some point, I must have fallen out of love with her, and I didn't even realize it."

Well, that will make some things easier. Draco sat up and pushed the parchment towards Potter. "Sign there if you agree to this," he said.

Potter took up a quill, but didn't sign. "I've heard you've never taken on a case that you didn't win," he said.

"That's right." Draco inclined his head modestly.

Potter gave him one more searching glance, then nodded and bent over, affixing his signature to the parchment. Draco could feel the silent burst as the magic sealed Potter into the case. This time, it was strong enough to push him back into his chair, as the ancient code of laws struggled to encompass Potter's power. Draco licked his lips, and dragged his mind away from certain images it was entertaining.

"Now," he said, picking up another piece of paper, "I need to know as much as possible about your marriage, so that I know what kinds of truths and lies she's likely to use."

Finally, the humiliation Draco had been waiting for crossed Potter's face. It deepened those green eyes, and in general made him look as attractive as ever. Draco raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for him to be attracted to a client, but then, it was also unusual for him to have a client as attractive as Potter. He didn't intend to berate himself for it until and unless it made him act unprofessional.

"All right," said Potter at last, speaking in a low, flat voice. "Ginny's stated reason for tiring of me was that I hadn't done anything, and had been too selfish. She wanted me to be an Auror or a professional Quidditch player." He swallowed. "She wanted me to give her a living child. She had a miscarriage last year."

"Did you know," Draco asked the air in the office, "that witches can call on their innate magic to abort the children of men they really hate? It's why there are so few cases of witches being raped and then becoming pregnant afterwards."

Potter brought his head up like a startled deer. Then he shrugged. "The Healers at St. Mungo's didn't say it was magical in nature," he muttered.

"It's also hard to prove." Draco wrote down a few words on the parchment to remind him of these revelations. "I understand from certain—other sources—that Weasley's been sleeping with Zabini, and that she's also carrying his child."

"Yes," Potter bit out. The aura of magic around him grew stronger.

"That was stupid of her," Draco muttered, while scratching down the confirmation. "It'll make it much easier to prove your case against her." He paused and glanced at Potter. "Unless there's a chance that that's really your child, of course."

Potter shook his head. "She told me that she'd been sleeping with Zabini for months." He leaned back in his chair and blew a lock of hair away from his face. There was no reason for Draco to find that as fascinating as he did. "She didn't specify a number, but we—" He winced, then seemed to commit himself to the necessity and added, "We haven't slept together since last year."

Draco's eyebrows went up and stayed there. Weasley must *really* hate Potter.

"She needed space after the miscarriage, I thought," Potter muttered, and the flush deepened in his cheeks.

"And you haven't slept with anyone else?" Draco asked. His last two cases had been like that. He'd still won them, but it made things infinitely more difficult when the client was the one who'd committed adultery. Some conservative factions in the wizarding world still disapproved of that *very* strongly.

"*No*," said Potter flatly, and the rest of the paperwork on their desk rose, revolved around their heads for a moment, and then landed again. "She was my wife, Malfoy. I never even considered cheating on her."

Gryffindor nobility. How sickening. Draco made a neutral noise under his breath and wrote that down on his parchment. "Too bad she didn't have the same code of honor," he murmured.

Potter abruptly leaned forwards and clenched his hands on the edge of the desk. Draco looked up at him, and tilted his head to the side. "Yes, Potter?" He had powerful wards on the office that would freeze intruders and summon house-elves from the Manor at need. He wasn't afraid, though the pressure of magic on his skin made it shudder and break out into delightful gooseflesh.

"You should know," Potter hissed, "that the reason I washed out of Auror training was that my magic was too violent. I lost control whenever I was dueling and my temper rose. I nearly killed my partners, and tore the targets apart. I would have committed murder if they let me go after criminals."

Draco breathed lightly. His fascination rose sharply. He had always preferred Potter angry at Hogwarts, if only because that made it easier to get away with plans around him. Maybe it was no more than that now. "And why haven't you tried to get control of your magic?" he murmured. "That's something your wife could hold against you; see if she doesn't."

Potter sat back in his chair. "I lost control of it after the final battle," he said, running a hand through his hair and letting Draco have his first glimpse of the famous scar since Potter had walked into the office. "Woke up in St. Mungo's and I was—like this. It's magical. I've talked to Healer after Healer, and they think it must have been part of a curse that Voldemort put on me when I killed him. But a research into the best spellbooks doesn't turn up anything. The only solution for me is to remain calm as possible." He gave Draco a humorless smile. "I've become much better at controlling my temper than I used to be."

Draco frowned slightly. "That sounds like Dark Arts, Potter."

"I would never have guessed that, Malfoy, really."

"I mean that it needs a Dark Arts cure." Draco leaned forwards. "Did you ever consider that?"

"I talked about it with Ginny, once." Potter shrugged. "She said that no husband of hers was going to dabble in Dark Arts. She was uneasy enough about my being a Parselmouth."

Draco laughed.

"You don't know what happened to her in our second year." Potter stared at him, and, for the first time, seemed to see Draco as the boy he'd known at Hogwarts. "It would have been enough to scar *you* for life with fear of Parseltongue, too."

"You really have to give up defending her," Draco said, and turned back to his parchment. "You realize this situation will hardly be calming and soothing, Potter?"

"Of course I do. I think Ginny's counting on that fact to help her win." Potter ran a hand over his face, and laughed unhappily. "This is *so* fucked-up."

Studying him closely, Draco recognized someone near the end of his rope, and decided it was time to let him go. The most important paper had been signed, the first bond sealed. Potter would do best when he wasn't running on too much stress and too little sleep.

"Go get some rest," he said, tucking the list of notes away in his desk. "Nothing else will help right now."

"You're probably right," Potter said, and stood up and nodded to him. "Thanks, Malfoy. You've been—a help. I'll have the thousand Galleons transferred to your Gringotts vault in the morning."

He left before Draco could say another word. Draco peered after his back for a moment, then turned and went to the warded bookshelf in the corner of his room. There, innocuous to any eyes but his, were some of the Dark Arts books he liked to read between cases.

If there was some way to strengthen Potter's control over his temper but leave him with that incredibly attractive magic, Draco was all for it.

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Three—The Killing Ground

Harry ate his dinner thoughtfully, staring out the window of the parlor into his darkening gardens. The meeting with Malfoy hadn't been as bad as he expected. Obviously, Malfoy still had a sharp tongue and thought a great deal too highly of himself, but just as obviously, he knew what he was about, and that was what Harry thought they really needed to win this case.

He started when his Floo connection blazed to life, and turned to look at the fireplace. He couldn't prevent the scowl that slipped across his face when he realized Ginny was looking out at him from within the green flames.

"What do you want?" he asked curtly.

Ginny sighed and rolled her eyes. "I did hope we were past that childishness, Harry," she said.

"Spit out what you want and leave me alone, Ginny." Harry felt the same anger at her that he had when he woke up that morning, but mixed with it was an enormous weariness. He wished the case were already over, the trial won. He hated hating her, and it seemed likely he would, if Malfoy had described the process of wizarding divorce law at all accurately.

"I like that," Ginny said, and sniffed. "I wanted to try a reconciliation, and you're already snapping at me?"

Harry cocked his head. "A reconciliation?" He didn't know whether he should hope for that or not. He certainly wouldn't take Ginny back, not when she'd been sleeping with Zabini, and not

when she was pregnant with the bastard's child. But he could hope—

He might not need to employ Malfoy, and that would be a relief to his vault.

Sternly telling himself that was the only reason he had to feel hopeful, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"We agree, in private and quietly and without screaming at each other, how we'll divide up the property." Ginny gave him a smile full of pity. "I think it's only fair that I should get more than half, since I'll have children to bring up and you're unlikely ever to have them."

Harry ground his teeth. *Too late*. A picture hanging on the far wall of the parlor detached itself and plummeted to the ground. Ginny's eyes darted towards it and then back to him.

"Blaise says you should have got help long since," she murmured.

"I'm rejecting your offer of reconciliation," Harry said. "I'm not going to forgive you."

She blinked at him. "But—you're a forgiving person, Harry. I know that."

Harry tried to laugh, but both the sound and the bite of cheese sandwich he'd taken seemed to lodge in his throat. He laid down the sandwich and tried to find the words that would convey what he accurately felt. He wasn't sure that he could. Finally he said, "It's about the only thing you *do* know about me. You insulted me and tried your best to make me angry enough to kill you. And then you talk to me about needing the money for a child that you conceived with some other man while you were still married to me. Do you really see *nothing* at all wrong with that?"

"All of what I said is true."

Harry said nothing, but studied her in brooding silence. It wasn't like Ginny to admit defeat like this. She was as stubborn as Ron, and as bad-tempered, too. Maybe she'd had the desire to tell him the truth about Zabini as gently as she could, but once she did explode into open warfare with him, he had no hope that she would take it back.

And then something occurred to him, and he laughed. His heart felt lighter. He was surprised he hadn't thought of it before.

Ginny blinked at him again.

"It's because you can't hire Malfoy, isn't it?" Harry asked, leaning forwards. "Zabini probably thought he'd work cheaply because they're best friends. But I'd already got him, and that means you can't have the best Arguer, the one who'd never lost a case, and that means—" He couldn't keep speaking for the laughter, and he bent over in his chair. Finally, he gasped out, "That means you're going to lose!"

"You know nothing about wizarding divorce law," Ginny said, her voice low. "*You* are going to lose, Harry, because what happens inside the courtroom isn't the only part that matters."

Harry lifted his head and smiled at her. "If you were as confident as all that, you wouldn't have tried this stupid tactic now, Ginny." He flicked his fingers at her. "I don't intend to give you any money freely, whether it's to raise someone else's child or buy the best dress robes you can afford. Go away now."

She drew her head out of the flames with an angry huffing sound. Harry spent a few minutes making sure his Floo connection wouldn't admit her anymore, and then returned to his dinner with great enjoyment.

She's frightened. She's thinking she won't win. And maybe she will and maybe I will, but to have her afraid is…wonderful.

And that made him wonder, again, when he'd fallen out of love with her. Surely it wasn't *natural* to relish the fear of a woman he really cared for.

"Draco?"

S*he's having a good day, then*. On a bad day, his mother wasn't capable of remembering his name. Draco pushed open the door of the drawing room gently, and smiled when he saw his mother seated at a table at the far end, in a flood of sunlight from an enchanted window. "What are you doing, Mother?" he asked, crossing the floor to kiss her.

Narcissa smiled up at him, mistily. "Arranging flowers." Petals were spread out on the table around her. Draco smelled rose, lavender, violets, and several he didn't recognize. "I'll make a bouquet," said Narcissa dreamily, combing her fingers through the flowers. "And I'll take it to St. Mungo's and give it to the victims of the war."

Draco kept himself from shuddering with an effort. If Malfoys had been less proud, he would have taken Narcissa to St. Mungo's himself, and not to visit. But she would not receive the best care there; in fact, there were Healers who would abuse her for being the wife of a Death Eater and, as far as most of the rest of the world knew, the mother of another. He stroked her arm. "That's good of you," he said. "Let me know when you want to go."

Narcissa gave him another smile and briefly pressed his hand. "Of course I should be good myself," she said, "when I have such a marvel of a son."

Draco concealed a sigh. There were times he was glad that Potter had killed his aunt Bellatrix during the war, and times he wished she was still alive, so he could destroy her for torturing Narcissa with the Cruciatus Curse until her mind snapped. She wasn't quite as far down the well as the mad Longbottoms, thank God, but she was close enough to it on the bad days that his hand itched with the urge for revenge.

"What did you do today, Draco?"

He sat down across the table from her and told her the mild, harmless things he remembered: a stupid sparrow who had tried repeatedly to fly through his window, which was warded against all birds but owls; his secretary trying to alphabetize his files in a new order that he had patiently corrected; and his research into subjects that had nothing to do with the Dark Arts. Even hearing the names of some Dark Arts spells made Narcissa scream. Whenever he *had* to talk to her about them, Draco called a house-elf into the room and kept it ready at all times.

"And then I saw Harry Potter," he finished, looking narrowly into Narcissa's face. Potter was a touchy subject. Sometimes she screamed at the sight of his face in the *Daily Prophet*, too, but other times she seemed almost grateful when she heard his name, as if she dimly remembered that he had killed the woman who tortured her.

"Did you?" Narcissa's face expressed nothing but warm interest now, and Draco felt his stomach clench in delight. *This really is a good day*. "And what did he want? Some idea on how to live a productive life, perhaps?" She smiled at her own joke, and Draco felt a surge of triumph. Even his mother had heard of Potter's unproductive lifestyle, but the days when she could express humor were even rarer than the days when she seemed this sane.

"He's divorcing his wife, actually," Draco said. "And he wants me to act as his Arguer."

Narcissa stared at him blankly for a moment, and Draco feared his words had gone beyond her comprehension. But then she threw back her head and laughed, in a manner that was almost the old bell-like sound, and not the mad cackle he'd come to fear. "*No* one wants to stay with a Weasley, it seems," she whispered, choking on her own amusement. "Unless she's French, or a Mudblood."

Draco nodded smugly. "It took Potter some time, but he knows their kind at last." He could feel an old tug of resentment at the back of his head. *It took him more than long enough*.

"I wish you good luck on the case, Draco." Narcissa leaned forwards and kissed him on the cheek. "Now, will you leave me alone, please? The next part of the flower arrangement is private."

Draco rose, touched her hair, and left the room, shutting the door softly behind him. As always, his determination to win the next case solidified. He had to make as much money as he did not only to keep his mother safe and well, but to prevent the newspapers from prying into her life, trying to talk about "the madwoman of Malfoy Manor."

He turned, and one of the house-elves appeared in front of him, squeaking and bowing and begging his pardon.

When he made out what the elf wanted, Draco felt his jaw tighten. There was another reason that he had to make so many Galleons, as well, and it had just reminded him of its existence.

"Of course," he said. "I'll attend to it, Seeky."

He strode from the room, already carefully composing the letter in his head. It had to be the right balance of deference—to prevent his father from Apparating back to England to punish him for "disrespect"—and intimidating—to remind Lucius exactly what Draco could do with a wand, even if he couldn't kill.

Lucius had broken out of Azkaban in the middle of what would have normally been Draco's seventh year, but his mind had snapped as thoroughly as Narcissa's had, and far more dangerously. He'd fled to Sweden, and since demanded regular payments from Draco, so that he wouldn't return to England, embarrass them all, and attack his wife.

Draco sat down and wrote the letter, all the while entertaining himself with visions of what would happen should Lucius encounter Potter and his uncontrolled magic. Of course, he couldn't imagine a reason Potter might have to be angry at Lucius.

If I could get him interested in me, and then make him want to defend me…

Draco snorted under his breath and pushed the daydreams aside. Before he could even *think* of things like that, he had to win Potter's case for him. And then maybe Potter would feel kindly towards him, and—who knew?—inclined to show that gratitude in any number of ways.

They *were* very entertaining daydreams. Draco couldn't deny that.

Draco felt his muscles loosen and his eyes light up as he strode into the courtroom. Though he'd come in rapidly, he found himself walking more slowly now, tilting back his head to stare approvingly in several different directions.

He'd been here for several other cases; the number of courtrooms in wizarding Britain capable of handling divorce trials was small. It had dark wooden walls shaped as an octagon, and carved with runes that would make it impossible for someone outside the room to eavesdrop. Draco supposed the ceiling, which had striations across it mimicking the inside of a cave, could have made some people feel like they were underground, but it never had that effect on him.

This was the killing ground. This was the place that he hunted stupid excuses to slaughter, argued people who thought they knew their own histories out of their heads, and made his reputation.

He was a good Arguer. He was more than that; he was the very best. And this was the place he proved it.

"I don't like this," Potter's voice said behind him, predictably.

Draco rolled his eyes. *Of course. No matter what I love, he must dislike it*. "No one is asking you to, Potter," he drawled, without turning around. "But don't let the room have a negative

psychological impact on you, or we don't stand a good chance of winning this case against your wife."

"I won't," Potter muttered, and, from the sound of it—the room's acoustics were excellent—walked towards the right side of the courtroom, the one Draco had already told him would be theirs. Draco turned around then, and watched him go.

His magic was even more impressive in this relatively confined space without a window. Draco fancied he could hear it now, like a swam of buzzing insects. He shook his head. That the Weasley could ever have wanted to leave him was a wonder.

Potter caught his look. "What?"

He must have lived in the midst of it so long that he doesn't notice it any more. "I was contemplating the weapons that Weasley and Zabini will use against you," said Draco, which was at least partially true. "The accusations that you're violent and angry all the time, that you can't sire a living child, that you've never done anything with your life, that you treated her poorly. What else? Is there anything about your marriage that you forgot to tell me?"

Potter laughed wearily and sat down in one of the padded chairs that waited for the client and his Arguer. "You know more about it than Ron and Hermione, Malfoy. You know more than I realize *I* knew."

"Anything at all that might be important," Draco urged, taking a step forwards. "I *won't* lose this case because we're unprepared."

A sigh, and then Potter shook his head. "All right. A few times, Ginny accused me of not being interested in her. Sexually, I mean." A flush had risen to his face, but he forged valiantly on. "She also accused me of adultery several times before *she* started. None of the accusations were true, I promise, but she might still think they were."

Draco felt like purring. *Not interested in women, is he? I wonder—*

And then he caught and shook himself sternly for having such thoughts. It was all the fault of Potter's evil, evil magic, for making him think nearly as much of fucking his client as winning the case.

"Then she'll use that, believe me," he murmured. He glanced once at the high bench, about ten feet above the floor, where the judge would sit, and then to the left side. There were only two chairs there, which he had noted when he and Potter first came into the room. It didn't make sense, because Blaise, Weasley, and their Arguer would make three, but perhaps the house-elves who had prepared the courtroom for them had simply forgotten to bring another.

The judge arrived before their enemies did, stepping quietly through a door on the far side of the room that Draco had never passed. She was an older witch with white hair and blue eyes that

reminded Draco, for a fleeting, irresponsible moment, of Dumbledore. Then he told himself he had no *right* to be thinking of old memories right now, and came forwards with his hand out. "Judge Witherbone?" he asked.

The woman nodded and touched his hand, her eyes distant. She had already cast the spell that attuned her to the wizarding world, but she must have just cast it, because her head turned back and forth as if her eyes were tracing the passage of invisible birds.

Then she fixed her gaze on Potter, and smiled. "Mr. Potter," she greeted him. "We all owe you a great debt for freeing us from You-Know-Who."

Draco grinned, but made sure to hide it in the next instant. The spell was working, then, and Witherbone's words told him that, so far, the wizarding world held a generally good opinion of Potter. That would undoubtedly change several times in the next few weeks—Draco himself remembered all too well how quickly the people had turned on their "savior" when Potter was a student at Hogwarts—but for now, Weasley was struggling uphill against the full weight of Potter's heroic reputation.

"Uh, thanks," Potter muttered. Draco kept himself from rolling his eyes, but only barely. *You'd think, after five years of it, that Potter would be more graceful at accepting compliments*.

The judge nodded again, and climbed towards her bench. Then the door behind them opened, and Draco turned to see Weasley, Blaise, and their Arguer.

But it was only Weasley and Blaise. They held hands, and behind them floated a number of trunks, papers, and cabinets. Draco raised his eyebrows, displeased. He didn't know whom they'd chosen as Arguer, but he wasn't very impressed with his or her professionalism, whoever it was.

"Zabini, Mrs. Potter," he greeted them, remembering Weasley's proper name just in time. He still thought of her as she'd been in school, and the red hair and ugly freckles only helped. But it was worth addressing her the right way, both to show Judge Witherbone that he knew the proper procedures and to watch her grimace in distaste, as if bearing Potter's name had become personally offensive to her now. "Where is your Arguer? It is almost time to begin."

"I'm acting as Arguer, Malfoy," Blaise said, glaring at him with a loathing Draco had only seen on his face a time or two before, such as when they'd had long arguments in the middle of their third and fifth years at Hogwarts.

Draco caught himself before his eyes widened. "Was the notice too short?" he asked, and forced concern into his voice. "I'm sure that both Mr. Potter and myself would be willing to wait long enough for you to find a competent Arguer."

"I'm acting on my own, by my own choice," Blaise said.

"By *our* choice," said Weasley, laying one hand on Blaise's arm and the other on her belly, as if

by some miracle their unborn child was included in the decision.

Draco bit his lip, hard, so he wouldn't laugh out loud. He just nodded, and told himself not to get overconfident. Blaise could have studied wizarding divorce law very hard in the past week, perhaps with a Time-Turner, and made himself into a competent Arguer.

And the winged pigs have got loose from their breeding grounds again and are swooping about over Muggle houses.

"I see," he said, and made sure to keep his voice smooth, even as it slid closer and closer to what he privately called his killing edge—the state of mind in which he wreaked his most devastating victories on his opponents. "Shall we begin, then?"

Draco Malfoy, Harry had to admit, was amazing.

At every point in his life before this, the mere thought of admitting such a thing would have made him laugh himself sick, and then cast *Obliviate* on his own memories when he realized he was being serious.

But now he had no choice. It wasn't just the way that Malfoy's voice unfolded smoothly through complicated legal terminology Harry could have stayed alone with in a library for six months and *still* not understood. Nor was it the perfectly scornful look that he gave Zabini and Ginny, as practiced as though he regularly used it in an enchanted mirror. Nor was it the way he paced back and forth like a lion newly freed from a cage, his hands rising and falling in graceful patterns.

It was all those things, and more. For Harry, it was mostly the light of joy in Malfoy's eyes he could see whenever the other man turned around. He *wanted* to do this. Nothing mattered more to him than being an Arguer, that was clear.

And Harry found it incredibly compelling.

He sat back, narrowing his eyes, as he realized the trend his thoughts were taking.

Just compelling, he decided after a moment. *Not attractive in any way at all. No. Definitely not*.

The last thing he needed now was for Ginny to start up some rumor that he was sleeping with Malfoy, or that he was gay. He shuddered at the thought, and then turned and focused on Ginny's side of the room as Malfoy finished and dropped easily into the chair next to him. Zabini was struggling to his feet, the papers floating around him in a constellation of parchment.

"Uh, yes," he said, while several papers whirled out of control and dashed around his head. "Yes. Judge Witherbone, Madam. I am acting as Arguer for myself and Mrs. Potter, as I stated before. These papers contain the substance of our accusations against Harry Potter, and what we demand from him." He snapped his fingers and waved his wand, and the paper gathered itself together and soared across the room, landing on the podium in front of Witherbone's seat.

She leaned forwards to peer at it. Harry saw the moment when her calm, blank face transformed itself into an angry mask.

Malfoy chuckled next to him. Harry glanced at him. "What?" he mouthed, but Malfoy only shook his head.

"None of these accusations have been filed correctly, Mr. Zabini," said Witherbone stiffly. "There are certain ways that polite Arguers do not *write*." She pointed her wand at the top few pieces of parchment, and incinerated them.

Zabini stared with his mouth open. Then he swallowed and said, "Forgive me, Madam. I, ah, thought you needed to know what we were accusing Potter of right away." His eyes darted across the room to Harry, and they were full of pure hatred. Harry just shrugged at him. If Zabini wouldn't hire an Arguer—and surely there were some available that weren't Malfoy—then that wasn't Harry's fault.

"I need to know them," Witherbone said in a voice that could have frosted rock, "but the terminology is not correct in *any* of them." She leafed through the rest of the parchments, now and then pausing to incinerate another. "In fact, the other claims are barely passable," she concluded, and waved her wand again. What remained of the parchment flew back to Zabini, most of it hitting him in the face. "I expect to see better work from you in a week. Until then, I will consider the first part of the case still unsettled." She stood up and strode down the miniature staircase from her high seat before anyone could object.

Malfoy, when Harry glanced at him, was concealing an obviously vicious laugh. His eyes shone like ice, and Harry felt that stir of compulsion again.

Well, I can just stop feeling it, he decided, and whispered, since the Judge was gone but he still didn't want Zabini and Ginny to hear, "What happens now?"

"The first part of the case isn't complete until Blaise files correctly." Malfoy stretched his arms above his head, and *this* time, the movement was one of a lion relaxing after his justly caught meal. "We have a week to study further and ready our next tactics in the war." He winked at Harry, then seemed to realize what he was doing and smoothed his face out. "This doesn't mean all our victories will be as easy, Potter. Blaise and his little concubine will be busy in this next week, too."

Harry bristled a bit to hear Ginny described that way, but nodded. "I know."

"Good." Malfoy extended a hand, and Harry found himself clasping it, even though he didn't need help to rise from his seat. It felt a bit like being back at Hogwarts, shaking hands before a Quidditch game. Malfoy's eyes gleamed; the same thing seemed to have suggested itself to him.

"It'll be fun Arguing for you, Potter," he muttered.

Harry felt a frisson of something move through him—excitement? wonder?—and opened his mouth to speak. He didn't get the chance, however, as a spell careened through the air and slammed into his face, creating the sensation of an icy slap across his cheek.

He whipped his head around. Ginny stood on the other side of the room, still, but with her wand out this time. Her eyes were dark with fury and what looked like pain and panic.

Harry narrowed his eyes.

He felt his magic spring out of him like a second being, and before he could even *think* to call it back, Ginny had dropped her wand and was clawing at her throat. Her face had already turned blue. It was obvious she couldn't breathe.

Zabini grabbed her elbow and shouted something at Harry, but Harry couldn't make it out through the roaring in his ears.

He did know that he couldn't kill Ginny, though, no matter how angry she made him. He clenched his hand, and counted to ten at the same time he concentrated on calling the magic back to him—something he'd had plenty of practice at, in the last few years. He heard his heartbeat fade, and then he heard Ginny gasping desperately for air. At least she *could* gasp.

Malfoy leaned closer to him. "It's tempting, I know," he whispered. "But don't murder her."

Harry nodded shortly, and then took a deep breath, hoping he'd released the last of the anger with it.

"Do you want to return to my office?" Malfoy asked him. "We should talk, I think, about our next maneuver."

Harry shook his head slightly. "I'll come by tomorrow. I—need some time alone." He didn't trust himself with Malfoy right now, especially with his anger so recently up and his emotions changing so rapidly.

I'm probably just feeling this compulsion towards him because I haven't had sex in eight months. I'll go home and have a good wank, and that ought to take care of matters.

"If you wish." Malfoy's voice held a studied neutrality that Harry didn't dare interpret, since it probably covered offense of some kind.

"You were amazing," Harry said, still not looking at him, but wanting to keep matters friendly between them.

Malfoy paused. Then he laughed, lowly, almost into Harry's ear. "Why, Potter," he said. "That's not the first time I've heard that, but the context is usually rather different."

Harry knew he'd flushed crimson, but he still didn't look up, instead making his way out of the room as fast as possible.

Draco made sure to keep his face turned away from Blaise and Weasley as he looked after Potter. He knew his smile was almost fond, and Blaise would have noticed it and drawn certain conclusions, probably correct ones.

Yes, after the trial was done, he was definitely pursuing Potter. Not only did he squirm in the most delicious discomfort at compliments and innuendo, not only was he so sickeningly Gryffindor that he would be unable to defend himself against seduction, but his use of magic against his wife had made Draco almost salivate.

Imagine someone able to kill anyone he wanted, from a distance and with so little effort!

Entertaining wistful thoughts of Lucius dying like that, Draco went back to his office. He'd already chosen the first tactic he wanted to use in this war, and he needed to set it in motion.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you for the reviews!

Chapter Four—Flirting With Danger

"Hello, Skeeter."

"Malfoy." Rita Skeeter didn't sound best pleased to see him, but she wasn't hostile either. After all, though Draco had forbidden her to write a word in the *Prophet* about his mother, he was regular with the payments that assured she wouldn't suffer monetarily for that silence. "What do you want now? No one's approached me with a request for a story about Mrs. Malfoy in months."

"This time, I have some interesting information *for* you," said Draco, and smiled as he saw her eyes light up in interest. It almost made his undignified position, on his knees with his head through the Floo connection, worth it. "You've heard about the Potters' divorce."

"Trying to find a new angle on that story has been driving me mad," Skeeter said, giving her glasses an irritated twitch. Then she paused. "No offense meant, Malfoy."

Her choice of words had been deliberate, of course. Draco ignored them. He only had to think of

the tactic he'd dreamed up against Weasley and Blaise to make himself smile. "Going on holiday just as it happened was most inconvenient for you," he agreed. "But you're back now. And as for why Mrs. Potter is so eager to attack Mr. Potter—well, that makes you wonder, doesn't it? One would think she would want as amicable a parting as possible, so that she could have more money from him."

Skeeter pursed her lips and tried to look knowing and wise. It didn't suit her, Draco thought. She really only pulled off "sly" well. "This kind of divorce makes enemies of everyone, whether the happy couple was really happy or not."

Draco smirked and held up a sealed packet of papers. "It would interest you to know that she's been angling for Potter and his money since she was ten, wouldn't it?"

Skeeter's mouth fell slightly open.

Draco casually tossed the packet through the flames; it had a spell on it that enabled it to make the Floo transfer even without a human holding it. Skeeter caught it eagerly, and fumbled it open. When she had scanned the first page, she looked up at Draco, fascinated. "Where did you get these?"

"You don't need to concern yourself with that," Draco said. She didn't need to know that Draco had made friends during the war with a rather talented psychometrics expert—someone who could read the impressions or memories of wizards and witches left behind in the objects they'd touched, and someone he'd used on cases before. Nor did she need to know that the expert had visited the Weasley house one morning and learned as much as he could about their daughter. Even *Draco* had been surprised at the conversations that the objects remembered and his friend wrote down. It seemed that Ginny Weasley had been certain she was destined to be Potter's wife from the first time she met him, and she had spoken about him like someone obsessed the whole year before she went to Hogwarts the first time.

And I thought I was bad for spending too much of my time and attention on him in our first year.

"This is gold," Skeeter muttered, flicking through page after page and skim-reading them expertly. Then she glanced up at Draco. "I can't have the article ready before tomorrow, you realize."

Draco leaned back a little, partially to ease the tension in his cramped legs, and waved a lazy hand. "Take as long as you need, as long it's out within the week."

Skeeter laughed a bit. "I do like your deadlines, Malfoy." Then she waved her wand and closed the Floo connection, leaving Draco on the other side without saying goodbye. She often did that.

Draco didn't mind. He stood and stretched his arms above his head, reveling in the thought of what Weasley would think she when she saw that article.

That she should have been more careful, that's what. And that she had no idea whom she was up against. I don't have Potter's morals.

He'd read through the papers thoroughly before he gave them to Skeeter, of course, and removed anything that could have damaged Potter even slightly. He thought he understood Ginny Potter better than her husband did now. The love she'd had for him had been more of an obsession, and, like any obsession, when it soured, it did so spectacularly.

And he doesn't appear to have realized it yet. Poor sod.

Harry grimaced as he heard yet another owl crash against his wards. Then he went back to washing the Dungbombs out of his hair.

He'd awakened that morning to find owls around his bed, but that was nothing unusual; he'd expected it ever since the announcement about his and Ginny's divorce got out into the world. He *hadn't* expected the owls all to be carrying Dungbombs, courtesy of the twins. They'd got him thoroughly before he could reconstruct his wards so as to keep out any owl that was carrying a package instead of a strict letter.

Unfortunately, he wasn't good enough a ward-caster to forbid the ones that carried Howlers; the only spell he knew that prohibited them would also keep his regular post from reaching him. So, when an owl landed on the kitchen table with a smoking red envelope, he heard Mrs. Weasley's angry voice shouting all the way from the loo.

"—KNEW YOU WERE CHANGED, BUT DIDN'T THINK YOU WERE THAT CHANGED! TO TRY AND *KILL* GINNY, HARRY? THAT'S MORE THAN SHE EVER DID TO YOU. SHE WAS TOO GOOD FOR YOU, YOUNG MAN. WHEN I THINK OF ALL THE TIMES I MADE YOU WELCOME IN MY HOME—"

And on and on it went. Harry gritted his teeth and soldiered through it by thinking of all the times that Mrs. Weasley had taken Ginny's part in some argument he and she had. It really shouldn't have surprised him that she would act like this now. She wasn't his mother by blood, she was Ginny's, and the news of the grandchild would have changed everything for her, the way Hermione told him it would.

And, well, he *had* nearly killed her yesterday.

Harry closed his eyes and shuddered even as he raked his fingers through his hair one more time, to stir out the clumped masses of dung. There were times since the war when he hated having magic, and thought it would have been better for the final battle to have made him a Squib. What good was magic he could barely control, linked to a temper that spiked dangerously at the least provocation?

You lived with the woman for five years, you loved her for seven, and you tried to kill her.

Harry took a few deep breaths to soothe the urge to scream. Half the time, his sorrow turned to anger, and his magic had proven reluctant to tell the difference between the *kinds* of extreme emotions.

He was just reaching for a towel when he heard the almost noiseless flaps of an owl's wings. His eyes went to the mirror, and he saw the bird struggling strangely, even though it carried only an envelope.

Instincts developed in the war sent Harry diving to the floor of the loo, though he hissed as he rolled on the tile, and as his right leg cramped, the old wound flaring up. The envelope was obviously heavy enough that the owl couldn't correct its course in time, and it hit the mirror with its side, the left wing working frantically.

The envelope tore on the corner of the mirror, and green smoke poured out of it. Harry covered his face with his arm and waved his wand, flinging the door more widely open and forcing the smoke in that direction.

A Poisoned Missive. He'd thought he'd never see one again after the war. They were an invention of the Death Eaters, letters that would literally kill someone as soon as they read them.

I didn't think the twins would stoop that low.

Then the obvious conclusion came to him, and Harry snorted into his arm even as he kept his wand moving steadily, herding the smoke away from him and caging it harmlessly in a whirl of wind in the front parlor.

They wouldn't. But Zabini would.

At last the smoke had poured away, and Harry could stand up and take a deep breath again. Then he shook his head and used a spell to trap the owl and hang it upside-down from the ceiling.

A few minutes' study was enough to let him pick up Zabini's magical signature around the eyes and wings, binding the owl to fly as fast as it could with the letter, and remain until it was sure Harry was dead. Harry broke the spells with a few flicks of his wrist. Now that he knew the bastard's magic, he'd change his wards to keep *him* out completely, the way he'd already altered them so that Ginny could never intrude in person again; the anti-Apparition spells would automatically reject her.

The owl hooted and thrashed, and Harry released it. It sailed away from him with an indignant sound, and flew as fast as it could for the kitchen window.

Harry, his hair still wet and his leg aching ferociously, did manage to get into the parlor before his anger get the best of him. A glance, and the green, swirling smoke simply ceased to exist. Then Harry spent some moments breathing deeply, so that he could get away without destroying his furniture.

Though he was reluctant to do so, he needed to talk to Malfoy. From what the prat had said yesterday, Harry knew he hadn't expected Ginny and Zabini to move this soon. Harry would have to report that they'd leaped straight to assassination attempts.

He swallowed, and a sharp pain returned to him, one he'd managed to ignore while he had practical matters to arrange in his head.

She tried to kill me.

She really does hate me.

Draco was just eyeing the article on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* and chuckling over Skeeter's work when his wards rang. He put down the paper and lifted his head at once, touching his wand. If Lucius had come to the Manor, then he could conjure knives to attack him or a wall to fall on him, depending where—

Then the wards chimed again, and this time Draco recognized the ones that he'd set to ring when Harry Potter came as a visitor to the Manor. Draco leaned back in the chair and raised an eyebrow. *I certainly didn't expect him to seek me out this soon. He couldn't wait to get out of the room yesterday*.

Seeky appeared to ask what he should do, and Draco nodded to him. "Let Mr. Potter in and guide him to my study, Seeky."

"Yes, Master Malfoy," the house-elf said, and vanished.

Draco paused on the way to check on his mother—it was sheer instinct—but she was dozing peacefully on a chair in the sunshine, with a house-elf near her who arranged the flowers she had never finished sorting into neat piles by size. Draco pulled back, satisfied, and made his way to his study.

Potter was waiting for him there, not seated, but pacing back and forth. His magic danced around him like a series of small whirlwinds, though infinitely more exciting. Draco suppressed his reaction as much as he could, more interested in studying Potter's intensely tired face.

"Potter," he said, with a nod. "Come to discuss the article?"

"What article?"

Strange. I would have thought he was angered by what I had Skeeter write about his wife, not about something else. Draco looked at Potter more closely, wondering if he had missed something. Then he realized that there was barely any hatred in Potter's expression—and he would have thought there would be, whether directed at Skeeter or at him. Instead, Potter appeared desperate, wounded and hunted and driven into a corner.

Draco bit his lip as exasperation stung him. "You know," he said, crossing the room so he could sit down behind his desk, "you'll never last the whole trial if you start buckling this early into it. I *told* you this would be hard, didn't I? And now you're—"

"Zabini tried to kill me this morning."

Draco sat down harder than he meant to. Yes, wives and husbands in this sort of trial sometimes resorted to assassination attempts, but those usually came later if at all. He studied Potter closely, and saw him rubbing his face again and again, as if to dissipate traces of tears, though he obviously hadn't cried.

"How did he get through your wards?" Draco asked quietly.

"He didn't. He sent a Poisoned Missive." Potter closed his eyes and seemed to take a moment to calm himself, perhaps because the whirlwinds around him had started stirring the paperwork on Draco's desk. Then he finally took the chair nearest the door. "I'd warded away all owls carrying packages, and I thought that meant only Howlers and ordinary post could get through—"

"Why are you letting the Howlers through?" Draco asked sharply, sitting up. "With your temper and your lack of control over your magic, Potter, that's only *asking* for trouble."

"I don't know a ward that holds them out but lets ordinary letters past," Potter growled, opening his eyes a slit to look at him.

Draco controlled the impulse to fume, and nodded. "Go on."

"This came in, and it seemed like an ordinary letter, but the owl was spelled to deliver it straight to me. Luckily, it tore open the envelope on the mirror, and I recognized that green smoke. I got rid of it," he added, as Draco leaned forwards tensely. "Don't worry. I looked at it, and it ceased to exist. I was angry enough for that."

He has the power to do that, and he doesn't think to use his magic to ward against Howlers. Draco clenched his jaw so he wouldn't scream in frustration. Why couldn't *he* have been hit by the curse that had made Potter lose control of his magic? He would have put the power to much better use.

"What do we do now?" Potter asked, drawing Draco's attention back to him. "If I need to be on guard against assassination attempts, then I'll need to strengthen the wards to the point that the cottage will almost buckle. Or do you think this is the only one they'll try? Is this the limit of their daring?"

"No," said Draco. "Once Blaise's anger is roused, he's terrible. I didn't *think* he would try to kill you this soon, but he must have been more pissed off than I thought about your trying to kill his whore yesterday."

"Don't *call* her that!"

Draco watched as his inkwell rose into the air and then dropped back to the floor with a concussion that shattered it. He shook his head. Since he was in his own house with his own house-elves, he wasn't worried about restraining Potter's magic the way he had been in his office. "What else would you call a woman who slept with one man when she was already married to one?" he asked quietly, lifting his eyes to meet Potter's. "A woman who was planning to throw herself at you when she was still a little girl?" Holding Potter's eye, he extended his wand and called, "*Accio Daily Prophet!*"

The paper zipped into his hand, and he held it out to Potter. "Read the front page."

Potter did, and his face turned the color of porcelain. Draco snorted, though he managed to keep it under his breath. *He can talk about how much he hates his wife all he likes, but he still cares about her. He'll have to get over that*.

And that meant the suggestion he would make when Potter had finished the article was practical in more than one way. And it would serve his own interests as well. What better reason could there be for a Slytherin to do anything?

Harry knew the article was Rita Skeeter's work at once, even though her name was rather hidden by the headline.

GINNY POTTER: AN OBSESSIVE STALKER AT TEN

Readers of the Daily Prophet *may be interested to know that Ginny Potter, nee Weasley, was planning to marry the Boy-Who-Lived from the time she was ten years old.*

Confidential sources report that she spoke about it to her mother again and again—not as a dream, but as destiny. She would *be his wife. They were "meant" for each other. She dreamed of the Galleons she could spend, the exotic places she would visit, the expensive brooms she would make him buy her.*

What she never seems to have dreamed of is Harry Potter, the man, as himself.

The next year, her first in Hogwarts, she required Harry Potter's help to save her life. Surely intelligent people, at least, must wonder how that happened. How much of the danger was real, and how much was arranged so that Ginny Weasley would become a very convenient damsel in distress for the hero to rescue?

Harry looked up and away from the article, shaking his head. "It wasn't like that, Malfoy," he said. "Our second year, I mean. She really *did* need my help, and I—"

"Your addiction to the truth does you credit, Potter," Malfoy drawled, looking bored. "But this

isn't about truth, remember? It's about influencing the perception of the wizarding world against your wife and for you. That means that Skeeter will stretch the truth as much as she can get away with, if she decides to favor you."

Harry swallowed. He had gone into this knowing it would be hard, but after this morning, and now this article—

This was the first time he'd felt tainted by it.

He couldn't bring himself to read the rest of the article. He put the paper on Malfoy's desk and stood. "I understand," he said. His voice sounded hollow even to his own ears. "I'll go back home and strengthen my wards."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?" Harry wanted to be angry, but he couldn't manage it. He told himself over and over again that he did *not* believe Ginny had spent years lying to him and maneuvering around him just so she could date and then marry him for his money, but thanks to the article, he would always *wonder*. The speculations clung to the back of his mind like a film of dirt.

"I think you need stronger wards than that little cottage of yours can support," Malfoy said. "And, frankly, with your *trusting nature*—" his voice made it clear he didn't regard that as a virtue "—you might believe some sob story about her wanting to forgive you, and let her in even then. I think, Potter, that you'd be much better off staying here and sharing the Manor with me."

"No," Harry said, alarmed.

"And why not?" Malfoy cocked his head at him. "I don't offer this hospitality to just *anyone*, Potter. You ought to be flattered."

"I know, but—" Harry shook his head. He suspected he was blushing, but hoped Malfoy wouldn't notice. *I wanked last night, and it was partially because of you?* How did one say that? "I've heard about your mother," he said, groping for an excuse. "I wouldn't want to intrude on her."

Malfoy's stare sharpened for a moment, as if he suspected Harry was making fun of him, but then he gave a lazy wave of his hand. "Your consideration is appreciated," he said, and his voice was *mostly* non-sarcastic. "But the Manor's huge. You and she can have separate wings, and you'll never see each other, except maybe when she's well enough to eat meals with us."

Harry paused, reluctant, but also aware that he didn't really have a good excuse for refusing. He was in danger if he stayed in his cottage. If it wasn't in danger of losing his life, it was at least in danger of losing his temper, since he thought the twins' packages and the Howlers wouldn't stop. In Malfoy Manor, he wouldn't have to worry about that. And he would just have to ignore this uneasy fascination with Malfoy he'd developed—which, admittedly, didn't feel very strong right now.

And the accusation Malfoy had made stung, but it was true. He might open the door to Ginny if she came begging him, danger or no. He didn't think he loved her anymore, and he resented what she'd done to him, but what he wanted more than anything right now was for things to *stop* and go back to the way they'd been. If she offered that, he didn't know if he could refuse.

"All right," he said. "I'll need to return to the cottage and pack up my personal belongings, though."

"Do hurry back," said Malfoy.

Harry gave a nod he could not make grateful and strode out of the Manor to Apparate home.

He was aware that Malfoy watched him go with a faint smirk on his lips, but he really couldn't tell *why*. Did he like winning arguments that much?

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Five—In This Moment of Transition

Harry kept an eye open for owls, packages, letters, hidden pranks, or Dungbombs as he packed his clothes. He could have used his wand alone, but when he was as angry as he still was about the near brush with the Poisoned Missive, it was better to use his uncontrolled magic to help. It had great fun dashing around the room, grabbing robes and shirts and trousers, shaking them the way Crups shook Muggles' legs, and then depositing them in the trunk.

Harry paused for a short time to watch. He had the odd feeling, only in force during moments like these, that his magic had its own personality now, that it was a being he could feel out and communicate with. But that always dissipated again when it did some senseless thing, like slamming the doors of his closet back and forth. No, it was witless and nothing more.

"Mate? You here?"

It was Ron's voice, but all the same, Harry had turned and aimed his wand at the doorway before he recognized that. He sighed, lowered his wand, spent a few moments counting to five, and then called, "In the bedroom, Ron."

Ron came stomping up to the door, complaining indistinctly about Harry's wards, but paused.

Harry knew the trunk would have been the reason. He didn't look up, though, just keeping his eyes focused on the motions of his hands. Some of the robes were dress robes, and needed to be neatly folded. If God hated him, those would be the robes he'd be required to wear to dinner at Malfoy Manor.

"Letting Ginny have the house?" Ron asked softly. "I didn't think you would."

Harry turned around, shaking his head. "No. The wards are set so neither she nor Zabini can come here. But Zabini sent me a Poisoned Missive that almost killed me this morning, and I decided that enough was enough. I'll be staying at Malfoy Manor, under stronger wards, for the duration of the trial."

Ron stared at him. Harry raised an eyebrow and finally intoned the *Pack* spell to take care of everything still lying about the room.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Ron asked at last.

"Staying with you and Hermione would put a strain on you that's not fair," Harry said softly. "And a flat or a house isn't safe right now. Even if Ginny and Zabini decide to be good little opponents and leave me alone, there're the reporters and the old friends deciding my divorce is the perfect time to see me again and the Dungbombs from the twins…" He shook his head. "It's the best plan."

"I'm thinking less of safety and more of Malfoy trying to poison you against Ginny." Ron folded his arms.

Harry blinked. "She's doing a pretty good job of that all by herself, Ron."

"Yes, but he's an Arguer. And he's a Malfoy." Ron made this pronouncement as if it were the equivalent of Malfoy appearing with a signed and sealed scroll for the sale of his soul.

"I know," said Harry. "And what's he told me about the process does *not* make it sound attractive. But Ginny's left me no other choice."

"She told me she contacted you trying to reconcile."

Harry couldn't restrain a bark of laughter, or the way his magic painted a smudge of some kind on his cheek—it felt like pure dirt—and then erased it again. "Yes. She'd nicely just take half my money to pay for the cost of raising and educating Zabini's kid, and that would be enough." He shook his head and turned away to scan the room one more time. His magic was idly banging the closet doors now. Harry thought the smaller room looked as empty as his heart felt. "I don't know why she can't do it with Zabini's money."

"I thought you knew," Ron said. "Zabini's poor."

Harry turned around and stared at him.

"Well, not *poor*," Ron said, and scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. "Not like Dad and Mum used to be. But he has more debts than Galleons. He keeps up appearances, but hiring an Arguer was impossible for them. He hoped Malfoy would agree to do it for free." He let out a tense breath. "And so they need your money. Things'll be hard for Ginny."

"And so you'd suggest I give her the money she asked for?" Harry cocked his head and studied Ron, hoping he looked cool from the outside. Inside, he could feel his emotions churning like a mud pool. He didn't *want* to hurt Ginny, but she had been the one who decided to destroy their marriage, the one who just couldn't wait, as he'd accused her, five minutes in order to walk away from Harry and enter Zabini's bed legitimately.

She doesn't deserve to be hurt. But she hurt me. Does that make her deserving?

"Not quite that," said Ron. "But if reconciliation was possible—"

"No."

"Listen to me, will you?" Ron's face was turning red, the way it always had in the past when Harry interrupted him. "I'm *not* saying that you should have to pay for bringing up another man's child. I'm just saying that you should try to make this divorce as easy for yourself as you possibly can, and for her. And that would be easier if you *talked* to each other, without Zabini and fucking *Malfoy* there to interfere." He leaned forwards and stared intently at Harry. "My best friend and my little sister are going to war. That's what cases like this mean, you know. I don't want either of you to get hurt."

"So you're worried about the pain and not the money," Harry said.

"Why can both you and Hermione say what I'm thinking in less time than it takes *me* to say it?" Ron whinged, but he was still watching Harry hopefully out of the corner of an eye.

Harry stared at the carpet. He knew what Malfoy would say. Ginny had made her choice, and now she should lie in the bed that choice had, in turn, made for her.

But he remembered Ginny's smile, her laughter when she told him she was pregnant, the quiet grief in her eyes and the way she still reached out to him that first night after the baby died…

He wasn't in love with her any longer, but that didn't mean he was willing to see her suffer.

"Can she and Zabini raise a child on what he has?" he asked quietly.

Ron let out an explosive breath. "Maybe one," he admitted. "Zabini's mother is healthy, but she might die sometime soon, and then they'd have more. They can pay for Hogwarts, I'm sure. But Ginny will want more than one baby. And Mum will push her to have more. You know she will."

Harry nodded. Molly Weasley was almost in hysterics, sometimes, that Fleur and Hermione both preferred working to having children, that Ginny's first pregnancy had failed, and that the rest of her children showed no interest in marrying yet.

There were other considerations than just Ginny, too.

"And you think that, if I talked with Ginny and did what I could to resolve the situation, the twins would stop sending pranks after me?" he asked, unable to keep the hopeful tone out of his voice.

"Maybe not right away," said Ron in an authoritative tone. "But *she's* the one who suggested it. That would matter to them, yes."

Harry drummed his fingers on the bedpost for a moment. Then he spelled his trunk to hover behind him. "I'll think about it," he said.

"*While* you stay with Malfoy?" Ron couldn't quite keep the scandalized tone out of his voice.

"I promise I won't let him talk me out of this." Harry rolled his eyes. "Did you think I would mention in front of my Arguer that I have reasons to think about discontinuing his case?"

"Oh." Ron relaxed slightly, then tensed again. "But he might still convince you. He's sly like that."

"And I can still resist," Harry said dryly. "I'm stubborn like that."

"If you can resist Hermione and Ginny and me all telling you to do something after the final battle, you are," Ron muttered.

Harry gave him an irritated look before he could stop himself, but managed to restrain his equally irritated magic when it reached for Ron. He sighed, rubbed his hand across his face, and then turned away. "I'll see you sometime soon," he said. "Maybe we can talk more about what this talk with Ginny might require."

Ron's voice had a grin in it. "Sure, mate."

"Spill, Potter."

Potter blinked at him from across the dining table. They had ended up eating alone together after all; Narcissa had had one of her screaming fits and remained upstairs under the care of the house-elves. Draco wouldn't admit it, but he found the flickering shadows of the many candles on the crystal and the glass and the pale tablecloth unnerving when he had to eat there by himself. Potter's green eyes at least provided a fleck of another kind of color. "I'm sorry?"

"You're hiding something." Draco gratefully pushed aside his own wineglass. He didn't drink much at the best of times, and in the worst, it was better to practice his wand movements in case Lucius appeared. "It's been obvious since you came back from your house. Was your wife there?"

Potter shook his head and sipped at his own wine, but nearly slopped it over the rim of the glass. Draco was well-bred enough to hide his well-bred wince. "I've set up wards so she can't get inside."

"Tell me who it was."

"It wasn't anyone, Malfoy." Potter's voice had edged towards irritation, and the crystal on the table rattled.

"I will have you know this tableware cost more than one of your precious Firebolt brooms," Draco said mildly.

Potter flushed and dropped his gaze. "Sorry."

"Not half as much as you will be if you don't tell me who you met there and what they started you thinking about—" Then Draco held up a hand, several clues sliding together all at once: Potter's silence, the way he stared broodingly off into the distance and avoided Draco's eyes, the way he sometimes glanced to his left as if someone should be sitting there. "No, never mind, I think I know. Someone convinced you your poor, innocent, little wife doesn't deserve to have her stupidity rubbed in her face."

Potter flushed more brightly. "Well, she *doesn't.*"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Have you *listened* to yourself, Potter? If she doesn't deserve it for adultery and carrying a bastard's bastard in her belly, what would she deserve it for? Breaking into Azkaban and letting everyone there go?"

"She just—" Potter sighed. "Did you know Zabini has almost no money?"

"Not enough to hire me, I know," Draco said smartly. Then he grinned, because he couldn't stop himself. "Oh. You're worried about your poor little wife suffering the loss of her pretty little things?"

"More than that. Trying to bring up a child—"

"Who's not yours."

"But she's Ginny's child—"

"Already decided it's a daughter, have you?"

"Ginny wants a daughter."

"And whatever Ginny wants, Ginny should have."

Potter's mouth, open to snap something back, closed. Then he took a deep breath, and half his strength seemed to leave him. "I thought you were an Arguer, not a Mind-Healer," he muttered.

"I am," Draco said, sitting back and keeping a cautious eye on Potter. The man was so terrible at lying that Draco didn't *think* he'd only pretended to give in, while still believing that his slut of a wife really deserved anything but pain. Yet, one had to be cautious. "I argue people back into sanity. Your mistake was thinking I only do it in the courtroom."

Potter looked up for a moment, startled. Then his eyes lit, and he laughed.

The power of that laugh struck Draco like an avalanche. He didn't think he'd *ever* heard it come from Potter's mouth; the defeated little chuckles he'd sometimes given in the past few days, as they worked on what Draco needed to know about the marriage, were bitter. This was pure merriment, caught up in a net and then shaken out over anyone who happened to be nearby. Draco was glad that he was sitting down, because he would have done something imbecilic like stagger and grab at the table if he'd been standing.

As he recovered and found Potter staring at him in concern, obviously unaware of the power of his own voice, he realized that it might be more than his magic that made Potter attractive.

Licking dry lips, Draco managed, "So long as you believe, now, that she doesn't deserve to see a Knut of your money."

"That might be true," Potter muttered, and picked up his wineglass again. He sounded half-convinced of "poor Ginny's" victim status again.

"I mean it, Potter." Draco leaned forwards, until those remarkable green eyes rose and met his again. "You *have* to believe this. *You* were the one she victimized. If you don't think that, then you stand a good chance of going into the courtroom and hesitating in the wrong place, saying the wrong word, being a bit too slow with the information that can make a difference."

Potter's mouth opened on a long, slow exhalation, then closed again. And then he gathered himself and seemed to shut both the weakness and the openness Draco had heard in that laugh behind a door. "You're right, Malfoy. I'll concentrate on the case, I promise."

"Draco?"

Draco turned his head, startled, the warning he'd intended to deliver to Potter dying on his lips. Narcissa stood in the doorway that led to the stairs, her hands out and clutching the sides of the arch white-knuckled, her pale gown making her look like a ghost. Her face was startled, but

Seeky hovered at her side, and Draco knew the house-elf wouldn't have let her out of bed if she were acting like her mad self.

"I heard the most marvelous laugh," said Narcissa. "Who was it?" She gazed at him expectantly, as if Potter didn't exist.

And Potter, bless him, responded as if Narcissa were sane and he encountered compliments like this every day.

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, standing with just enough speed that Narcissa could turn and face him, and make it look natural on both their parts. "If you thought my laugh good, I'm equally honored, but I hope that you'll flatter us both with one of your own, so we can hear what true beauty sounds like."

He walked over to her, with the same gentle steps that one might use in approaching a feral animal, caught her hand, and kissed it. Narcissa stared a moment longer, then gave him a fragile smile of delight.

Draco stared, too. After the stuttering way that Potter had reacted to the mere title of "savior" in the courtroom, he hadn't expected *this* to happen.

But Potter seemed instinctively to know what Narcissa needed: that gentle flattery that let her say anything she wanted and nothing she had to mean. He kept his gaze focused on her, nodding gravely as she pointed out the decorations in the dining room, and listening attentively even to Seeky's high-pitched interruptions.

And Draco sat where he was and watched his mother treated gently, not patronized or humored, and wondered where in the world Potter had acquired social skills like that.

And if he can *do things like that, why doesn't he do them more often?*

Well, he'll learn to. I won't have anyone I'm *attracted to acting the lazy layabout. It's time to push him, and see what happens.*

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Six—Intensity

"I don't know, Malfoy." Harry had felt a bit uneasy since the end of the dinner, though he didn't know why. Perhaps it was just the piercing way that Malfoy looked at him, as though he knew Harry hadn't been completely persuaded away from Ron's argument. "I'm tired." He faked a yawn. "Why don't we speak tomorrow?"

Malfoy only gave him a bright, narrow smile—the kind of smile a snake would use if it had lips, Harry thought uneasily. "Of course," he said. "I forgot that you *aren't* really eager to have your magic tamed after all, Potter."

Harry took a step forwards. They stood at the top of the Manor's grand, sweeping staircase, with corridors opening into separate wings. Harry had turned down the eastern one Malfoy told him led to his borrowed room, but now he came back towards the western one. "Don't *joke* about that," he said.

The poncy bastard raised his eyebrows slightly. "I wouldn't joke. I did study the Dark Arts books I own, and I think I recognize the curse that the Dark Lord cast on you." He gave a careless shrug and turned towards the western wing. "But it can always wait for the morning."

Harry bit his lip in vexation. He *did* want to control his magic, and he had no good excuse to get out of Malfoy's presence. "All right," he said. "I suppose we can retire to your library for a few minutes and discuss this."

"*So* gracious," Malfoy murmured, and led the way. Harry followed him grumbling, but only under his breath.

The corridor was large and dim, with so many doors opening off it that Harry wondered how it was the house-elves didn't work themselves half to death trying to clean the house. Malfoy finally halted in front of a heavy oak door no different from the others, except for the tendrils of gold clustered around the thick padlock—and the wards that hummed on it. Harry shifted uneasily, feeling the magic prickling across his skin, while Malfoy unlocked the door.

He had tried to memorize the layout of the house, but he supposed it didn't matter, if the only rooms he might have been tempted to wander into were kept locked. He had no interest *whatsoever* in Malfoy's bedroom, he told himself firmly, and the house-elf had led Narcissa away towards a northern corridor on the ground floor after Harry had finished talking to her. He had no desire to seek out the poor madwoman, either, though he could speak politely enough to her when he had no choice. She reminded him a bit too much of many of his comrades from the war.

"Here we are, Potter." Malfoy's voice startled him, and Harry hurried after him into the library.

It was as large and high as the way they'd traversed to get here, it seemed, but far brighter. Lamps flickered in alcoves in the walls, lighting up nooks with chairs, nooks with couches, and shelf after shelf of books, and scrolls on pedestals, and glass cases with artifacts that Harry wanted to refrain from examining too closely, but which glowed with the gleam of gold and silver. Malfoy led him directly towards an island in the sea of books large enough to contain two chairs, and

made him sit down. The chair *was* comfortable, Harry had to admit grudgingly.

Malfoy clapped his hands, and a house-elf appeared with a carafe of wine and two glasses.

"I'm not thirsty," Harry said quickly. He couldn't have explained why, even to himself—no more than he could have explained the odd feeling driving him to get away from Malfoy as soon as possible—but he didn't think consuming more wine in Malfoy's presence than he'd had at dinner would be a good idea.

The house-elf frowned at him and Malfoy, his back still turned while he hunted along the row of books, laughed softly. "Don't be a poor guest, Potter," he said. "You were doing so well until now."

"Malfoy—"

"Have a drink." Malfoy glanced over his shoulder, and the light of the lamps made his face look like a marble statue's, with pieces of hematite for the eyes. "I *insist.*"

Harry caught his breath at the look of that face, and found himself licking his lips and nodding. The house-elf lost its scowl and poured a carefully precise glass of wine, the line of red just lapping the top of the crystal. Harry took a sip and nearly choked, not at the strength, but at the sweetness. He had never tasted anything so good. Only manners kept him from gulping the rest.

Malfoy turned around from the shelf with a faint smile and a book in his hand. A moment later, he'd seated himself in the chair across from Harry and picked up the glass the house-elf had left for him. He sipped, never taking his eyes from Harry's.

"You said you had some insight into the curse?" Harry prompted him.

"Hmmm?" Malfoy came back to himself, then, and shook his head as if he'd been dozing. He turned his gaze to the book in his hands, to Harry's secret relief. "Yes. The curse you have on you doesn't *completely* match the description of any spell I could find, but that's not surprising. I have a feeling the Dark Lord was rather—distracted—when he cast it, and that means he couldn't concentrate well enough to finish the incantation." He lifted the book. "This describes a side-effect of the curse if it's interrupted in mid-casting, and that's what you have. Magic that rises whenever you're angry, and destroys objects in its way, or attacks the people you're irritated at."

Harry nodded quickly. "And what do I have to do to cure it?" He took a sip of wine to calm his nerves, and then wondered if he should have. The wine swirled through the middle of his head, dizzying him, and Malfoy's face swirled in front of him, too. But it steadied again. Harry carefully set down the glass of wine on the arm of his chair, out of easy reach. "I've tried to remain as quiet as possible, these last few years, and not get angry. That's one reason I didn't take a job."

Malfoy snorted inelegantly. "And that's the exact thing you shouldn't have done, Potter," he retorted. "If the curse had worked, it would have driven you away from other people; it would have made your magic toxic to them, and theirs to you. By remaining so quiet, and with so few friends and visitors, you mimicked the effect of the curse. That's one reason your magic has never calmed down. The curse still senses the Dark Lord's intent, and works to complete it. You unwittingly provided it with an environment it could work in."

"But I couldn't chance getting angry."

"Couldn't you?" Malfoy's eyes shone with a light that made Harry uneasy, and they never moved from his face, either. "You could have taken advantage of your fame. Exceptions would be made. You're *Harry Potter.* Don't tell me no one would have welcomed you, even in the face of the danger. You could have *done* something, but you preferred to retreat."

"I was tired, all right?" Harry looked away from the piercing gaze, wishing, now, that he knew more about Malfoy. He would have liked to have something equally as damaging to fling into that smug face. He hated the fact that Malfoy could make him feel guilty, when he'd long since ceased to let Ginny's entreaties make him feel that way. "I didn't want to fight anymore."

"And who said that you have to be an Auror?" Malfoy breathed.

"I couldn't play Quidditch, either."

"And the thought of doing something else *never* occurred to you?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts and Quidditch were all I was good at!" Harry yelled, leaning forwards. Several of the shelves quaked, and Harry felt his magic stretch itself around him, lazily. He winced and leaned back again, breathing slowly to try and calm himself down.

"That's exactly what you shouldn't do, Potter." Malfoy's voice struck home like a whip. "I *told* you, that curse would have made peace impossible for you, even as it would have driven you to seek it. And so your trying to find peace in the last few years only made things worse."

"I had no other choice," Harry groaned, bringing his hands up to rub the front of his face. He *knew* he shouldn't have accepted Malfoy's invitation to the library.

"You did," said Malfoy. "What you need is *intensity.* Passion. You need to live as much as you can. You need excitement, happiness, joy, freedom. That will distract you from your brooding and give your magic something else to react to."

"And what happens if someone else gets hurt in the meantime?" Harry lifted his head from his hands, fretfully. "You saw what I did to Ginny in that courtroom, and a few days ago I would have said I could never hurt her."

"She angered you," said Malfoy carelessly. "Stupid of her. But you aren't going to be angry at

most of the people you see around you in public every day, are you? Go to a Quidditch game. Go mountain-climbing. Venture into Muggle London and do something wild and mad. How you choose to solve this is up to you." From the shadows in the back of his eyes, Harry thought Malfoy already knew how *he* would choose for him to solve this. "But cool dark rooms and meditation won't do it. You should have known that when you saw how badly they were failing you."

"I can't do this now," Harry said. "With the trial—"

"We have six days until the next phase of that," Malfoy reminded him, sipping delicately at his own wine again. "That's how long Judge Witherbone gave Blaise to organize himself and learn how to file accusations against you."

"But I also moved into the Manor so I would be safe from Zabini and Ginny's assassination attempts," Harry pointed out. "Venturing out would strip me of that protection."

Malfoy gave him a dark smile, and took one more pointed sip of wine. Then he set the glass aside and said, "Well. I suppose you'll have to find something within the wards of the Manor to occupy you, then."

Harry clutched the arms of his chair. He knew Malfoy wouldn't hurt him, but at the moment, he looked poised to lunge. "And what would you suggest?" he croaked. His throat felt dry. Resolutely, he ignored the temptation of the wine near at hand.

"Oh, learning," said Malfoy.

Harry blinked. That hadn't at all been the reply he thought he would get. "What?"

"Yes." Malfoy gave a serene nod, although the dark smile remained in place, flitting about his mouth. "Learning about a new subject, preferably a dangerous one. That would fill your head with dreams about that new subject instead of about your wife and your past." He cocked his head to the side. "I think I would be safe in saying that you don't sleep very well, Potter."

"These last few days—"

"Oh, bollocks," Malfoy snorted, and went on while Harry was still staring, amazed that any word so low-bred had ever emerged from Malfoy's mouth. "I can tell when the marks of sleeplessness go deeper than a few days' worth, you know. And yours do. Do you have nightmares?"

"Not your business," Harry said in a clipped voice, and started to stand. "I hired you to help me fight my wife, not to mock me."

Malfoy's hand reached out and closed around Harry's wrist. Harry stumbled to a stop, held by the surprisingly strong grip. He twisted back around again, knowing he had a frown etched between his brows, and feeling his magic pick up and dance in a vortex around him.

"When I'm mocking you," Malfoy said softly, "you'll know." And there *was* no trace of a smile in his expression, not even the dark one Harry had seen before. "I asked you a simple question, Potter. I understand that you may have become less used to manners than you used to be, holed up in your house and wallowing in your self-pity, but I know you haven't forgotten them entirely; I saw you with my mother at dinner. Now, you *will* answer my question, and politely."

Harry stood still, enthralled in spite of himself by the force of Malfoy's voice. He swallowed several times, then murmured, "I—"

But he stopped. It had only really been in the last year that the nightmares had returned; before that, Ginny's company had been enough to keep them away. And he hadn't troubled her with them, because she needed her rest after she miscarried the baby. Could he really just spill them to Malfoy now, of all people?

Malfoy leaned forwards, and his hand on Harry's skin seemed to heat up. Harry closed his eyes and gave a convulsive shiver. The question, now, seemed less to be whether he should spill them and more whether he could keep them to himself.

Draco watched with a hidden smile as Potter swayed towards him, his mouth slightly open. He *had* used a nonverbal spell to make his skin warmer and more tempting to the other man's touch, but mostly he'd just called on the same commanding presence he used in the courtroom. Potter couldn't help himself; he was responding.

Draco shifted a bit, as the idea of Potter unable to control himself tugged on his arousal like a winch. He kept his voice soft, almost a companionable whisper, but with a firm undertone that ensured—or should ensure—that Potter would tell him the truth. "What are your nightmares about, Harry?"

Not even the change in name seemed to startle Potter out of the half-trance he'd fallen into. He moved a few steps closer to Draco, following the pull of his hand. He sat down on the arm of the chair as Draco guided him to, his eyes still shut.

"The final battle," he whispered. "I killed Voldemort near Dumbledore's tomb. And—and he made Dumbledore an Inferius before I killed him."

Draco felt the hair along the back of his neck stand up. He thought it was only partly from revulsion at Potter's retelling. Potter's magic had crowded close, too, biting lightly at Draco's skin. He tightened his grip on Potter's hand, and said conversationally, "I thought that was impossible. That a Dark wizard had to kill the Inferi he wanted to raise himself, so he would have complete control over them."

"Voldemort was different," Potter whispered, and a bitter laugh slipped out of his mouth. "He made the corpse life-like, too, so it was like I murdered him all over again."

Draco frowned. "You never *did* kill him, Harry." His free hand moved of its own volition, snaking up Potter's neck into the wild black hair. God, it felt so good. He wanted to dig his fingers deep and yank, but he didn't think it was time for that yet. "That was Snape."

"But I was coming back with him," Potter said insistently. A light sheen of sweat had broken out along his brow. "I'd already fed him poison. He was dying when Snape killed him."

Draco licked his lips. He was not sure what surprised him more: that Potter had fed Dumbledore some sort of poison, or that he had witnessed Draco's humiliation, his failure to kill. He pushed both thoughts aside for now in favor of asking, "And Ginny never did anything about these nightmares for you?"

"I never told her about them. She was so distant—never wanted to hear. And I didn't want to hurt her while she was recovering from the baby's loss."

Draco nearly growled. Potter had the most *infuriating* concern for the Weasley bint. "I see," he said.

Then he tested his control by pulling sharply, so that Potter bent towards him. The green eyes darted open, startled, but still slightly glazed, as though reliving a memory he must never see except in dreams had taken him away from the everyday world.

Draco kissed him.

Potter let his eyes flutter closed for a moment, and then he moaned. Draco had access to that sweet mouth for the first time, and he took full advantage, tilting Potter's head to the side, kissing him harshly and insistently. Potter's hands rose, but hovered uncertainly above Draco's, as though he wanted to tell him to stop but didn't know how.

Draco drew back from the kiss, licking his lips, and said softly, "Why shouldn't your new intensity be a person, Harry? I'll be inside the wards of the Manor with you, and I want to win this case as badly as you do." He kept his hands moving, smoothing through Potter's hair and up and down his arm, eroding the other man's ability to think. "You're not in danger from me; your magic would protect you if I tried anything wrong." And it was all around Draco now, pushing his own breath to come short, warming his own skin and making his teeth ache. "There's no harm in it," he whispered.

"Malfoy?" Potter's voice sounded as if it were coming up a tunnel. "Why—"

"I'm attracted to you," Draco said easily. "And maybe teenage boys need to stare at each other and blush and look away before they can admit to a crush, but we're grown men. We can admit attraction, can't we? It's simple." He kissed Potter again, but made it only a light lipping this time, drawing back when Potter tried to follow him. "We probably shouldn't sleep together until after the case, but there's no harm in—playing—beforehand." He drew in a delighted breath as the magic grew deeper, like condensed joy. "That's what your wife did, after all."

Harry had almost, *almost*, been lost. He had never felt seduction aimed at him like this. The people who had demanded his presence and his attention after the war had all come on strongly, blaring, as if they imagined that was the only way he would recognize interest. And he had been the one required to seduce Ginny; she had played the coy, blushing virgin at first, and then adopted an attitude after they were married as if she were bored and he needed to actively hunt and capture her interest.

Having someone try to charm him was different. Intoxicating.

But then Malfoy had said the word "wife," and it acted on Harry like a bucket of ice water.

He jerked away. His mouth felt tender and swollen, and he was embarrassingly aware of his own arousal, though luckily there didn't seem to be a visible sign of that yet—beyond his panting and his flushed cheeks and his slowly turning magic.

Yes, you've done a marvelous job of hiding it, he told himself sarcastically, while he wiped at his mouth.

He opened his eyes to see Malfoy staring at him with one eyebrow upraised. "And just when it was going so well, too," he murmured. "Why, Harry?"

A curl of warmth snaked through Harry's belly at the sound of his name. He snarled and shook his head. "Don't call me that."

Malfoy wasn't deterred. "You want it as much as I do," he said.

"Yes," said Harry. "And it's a stupid thing to want. I'm still married, Malfoy."

The other man's eyes widened, and for a long moment he sat still. Then he burst into incredulous laughter.

Harry glared at the chair he'd sat in. He heard Malfoy struggling to regain control of his merriment behind him, but didn't glance his way.

"And she *cheated* on you," Malfoy said, his voice thick with contempt. "You're fighting to be free of her. You owe her *nothing.* What's wrong with a bit of fun while you're still technically married to the bitch?"

"It's wrong," Harry insisted. "And it would probably ruin our case. And Zabini could use it against us, if he found out." His hands were shaking. He jammed them into his robe pockets. "Besides," he added, thinking to end it, "I'm drunk, and I'm not gay."

"I've never bothered with the abstract definitions of words when I'm not in the courtroom, you know," Malfoy remarked. "*Married* is just a word, as I've seen time and time again. So is *gay.*

I'm attracted to *people*, and their gender is irrelevant to me."

"It isn't to me," Harry said.

"You liked it," Malfoy said, and his voice dipped into the same soft register that he'd used to such good effect before, the tone that brought Harry's body to startled attention, even though he didn't want it to happen. "You want me to do it again. You can barely control your longing for me to touch you."

Harry felt his cock filling with blood, and turned away, stalking towards the door as sharply as he could.

"Running away?" Malfoy called. "I thought Gryffindors were braver than that."

"You know a lot about Gryffindors," Harry said over his shoulder, "but not much about me." He shut the door to the library behind him.

He stood where he was, still panting, and then abruptly realized something. His magic hummed around him, but it wasn't attacking or lashing out, upset though Harry was. It seemed *interested*. What he'd done had contented it, in a weird way.

He's right. The intensity is what I need.

But Harry would find it somewhere else than from *Malfoy.* It was wrong, professionally and personally, for him to be involved with the git.

With some dignity, he managed to find his way to the bedroom prepared for him and don the night robes that he'd brought. Then he got into bed with his wand under his pillow, so Malfoy couldn't sneak in and ravish him in his sleep.

His body still ached. Harry resolutely ignored it. He might have a chance at a normal life, once the case was finished and he was free to find something that contented his magic. This was *not* it.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Seven—The Next Six Days

Harry woke from a dream he couldn't really remember to find the sheets sticky between his legs.

It seemed his body had taken its own steps to solve the problem he'd gone to bed with last night.

He grimaced, rolled his eyes, and pried the sheets away, then jumped badly as he saw a house-elf standing next to the bed and holding a tray laden with eggs, toast, and bacon. It had been so long since he'd lived with a house-elf that he could barely remember that they had no sense of shame, embarrassment, or their masters' dignity. Dobby had spent his time since the war at Hogwarts, and he seemed so happy there, working for the two Galleons a week that McGonagall paid him, that Harry hadn't wanted to disturb him.

"Yes?" he said.

"Master Harry is eating here?" the elf asked.

Harry nodded, then took a deep breath. "What's your name?" he asked as the elf carefully set the tray on a side-table, more to distract himself from the mess in his robes than anything else.

"My name is Heeky, and I am being Seeky's sister," she said, with a little bow. "Master Harry will call for Heeky at once if anything is out of place?" She snapped her fingers, and a cup of tea popped into being on the side of the tray, the one thing Harry would have said was missing.

"Yes, I will," said Harry, and smiled at her until she vanished. Then he pulled his night robes off, cast a warming charm on the food, and went to use the shower.

It was the first chance he'd had to really inspect either the loo or the bedroom that Malfoy had chosen to give him, and he had to admit, they were impressive. The loo shone as if the house-elves regularly bathed the tiles in bleach, and the shower was made of a material that rang like glass but was so perfectly translucent Harry blushed as he showered, just in case someone came in and looked. Designs of dragons, feathered serpents, griffins, and unicorns chased around the ceiling—and they moved. Harry found that out when he realized that the exact same golden-horned unicorn he'd taken his eye off a moment before to reach for the towels was now grazing patiently just above the sink.

The towels were thick, soft, and worth, Harry thought with a little groan, coming to the Manor for all by themselves. After he'd dried himself thoroughly and rubbed as much water out of his hair as would come, he wrapped the towel around his waist and wandered back into the bedroom.

He had to shake his head. The ceiling went up so high it looked more suitable as the setting for a concert than a bedchamber. Everything was a cool blue-green color that Harry thought probably had a fancy name like "ultramarine." The bed was big enough for two—

And the edge of that thought *stung*.

Harry took a deep breath and searched through his trunk until he uncovered casual clothes. He was in the process of doing up his robes when the door opened and Malfoy walked in without knocking.

"Do you *mind*?" Harry hissed, as he hastily ducked his head to hide the patch of bare skin on his torso, and his fingers flew over the buttons.

"Not really," Malfoy said. "Since I *do* own the house, and everything in it." Then he leaned against the doorway and watched Harry with lazy eyes.

Harry shook his head. He was determined not to get angry at Malfoy. "Any news about what Zabini and Ginny might do next?" he asked, sitting down on the bed and pulling the small table where Heeky had left the food towards him.

"Actually, yes." There was a rustle of paper as Malfoy pulled out something that was probably the *Daily Prophet.* "There seems to be an article here about Harry Potter's house being sold—"

"*Fuck*," Harry hissed, standing so fast that he tipped the table over and sent his breakfast flying before he'd had a single bite of it. He gave it a mournful glance, but his mind was working fast. He had forgotten that, even if Ginny couldn't get into the house, she still owned half of it. He'd cut her off from the Potter vault when he sent Malfoy's payment to him, but she was still heir on the legal documents.

Which probably explains why Zabini tried to kill me, too. If I die as things are, then Ginny is the one who inherits most of my property.

"I generally prefer offers of fucking made by someone in a less agitated state," Malfoy drawled. "I deserve to be concentrated on, not ignored in favor of a patch of carpet."

"Shut it, Malfoy," Harry said absently. Part of him was relieved that he was too busy to feel much discomfort over Malfoy, even given the incident last night and the fact that he'd almost surely had a wet dream about him, but most of his mind was turning over and over the fact that Ginny might succeed at what she was doing, and he wouldn't have a home to go back to. "I need to go to Gringotts."

He had just reached the door when Malfoy put a hand on his shoulder. "Not alone, you don't," he said calmly. "And not just like that."

Harry tried to shake off the hand. It wouldn't be shaken. In fact, it tightened, and Malfoy gave him an annoyed look. "It doesn't look good if my clients die before I win, Potter."

Harry felt a stab of relief. Malfoy wasn't really interested in him that way, then. He was still just a source of money and a chance to humiliate a Weasley—and maybe fun, if Malfoy's sense of irony was keen. Harry could take his unfortunate attraction and tuck it away, unnoticed.

"You can't help me with this, Malfoy," he pointed out. "You're an Arguer. Do you know the first thing about altering wills and other legal documents so that your wife is no longer an heir?"

"Actually, I do," said Malfoy. That was the moment when Harry decided he was the most infuriating person on God's green earth. "And I know what to listen for, too, when the goblins natter on and on about 'expenses' and really mean charges they shouldn't be inflicting on you. In fact, I'd suggest finding a wizard for this, and I know several."

Harry sighed. "Fine. Let's—"

"When you've eaten," Malfoy said, and proceeded to call up Heeky and order another breakfast. Harry's magic didn't do anything, but that was mostly because he was more stupefied than angry.

And then Malfoy sat and watched him while he ate, licking his lips whenever Harry caught his eyes.

Malfoy is just strange, Harry thought as he swallowed the last bite of toast, and resigned himself to putting up with the strangeness.

At least Potter had shed that stupid look he'd had on his face, eying Draco as if he were a dragon of some kind. He did keep inconveniently out of reach even when they Apparated to Diagon Alley, though Draco had courteously offered to Side-Along Apparate him. And he walked into Gringotts as if he owned the place, with Draco following a few steps behind.

Is he doing it to put me off, perhaps? Draco snorted. *He ought to know that the harder they run, the more I like to chase.*

Potter called for a goblin at the front desk in Gringotts, and one appeared at once, his face as unpleasant as they usually were. Draco eyed him coldly. He didn't like dealing with nonhumans, at least if they weren't deferential like house-elves. Centaurs, goblins, merfolk, giants…all of them only wanted one thing, and that was to harm a wizard any way they could. The goblins were just subtler about it than the others.

"I need any legal documents with the names of Harry Potter and Ginny Potter on them," said Harry, his voice loud enough to make several people turn their heads. "As soon as possible."

He handed over his vault key when the goblin asked for it, and then they were grudgingly admitted to a back room filled with iron boxes. The goblin asked them to wait while it sought the documents. Potter paced slowly back and forth, deep in thought. His magic was wrapped more tightly around him than usual, and Draco supposed his intense concentration took the place of anger.

Suddenly, Potter lifted his head and said, clearly, "*Shit.*"

"What?" Draco asked. *What mistake did you make now, Potter?* he added in the confines of his head. He would never have supposed that Potter was stupid enough to leave his wife's name in the will, let alone anything that would allow her access to the house.

"The Black vault," he breathed. "I never trusted her with the key physically, but she knows where it is. I think she—"

"Then that's our first priority," Draco interposed smoothly. "Or, rather, mine, since you have to stay here and satisfy them that you're really Potter." He snorted and shook his head. "Tell me where the key is, and I'll retrieve it."

Potter spun on one heel and stared at him. "And why would you think I'd trust you with it?"

Draco let a smile stretch his lips. "Because you've already paid me a thousand Galleons?" he suggested softly. "Because you know that *I* couldn't pass myself off as someone with a right to the vault, since we aren't married?" He paused, then winked. "Because I'm so handsome you can't resist?"

Potter turned his head away again, his voice gone noticeably cooler. "You're part Black, Malfoy. You might try to gain access to the vault."

Draco shrugged, admiring the sight of Potter's fair skin flushed with anger. "They wouldn't let me in. I meant it. Only if my name was already entered on your legal documents would you have to worry about that, and it's not, so you don't."

Some moments passed, and then Potter let out a sharp breath. "Fine." He stepped close, apparently under the impression that he should whisper the location because some evil goblin might steal it. Draco didn't correct the misapprehension. He didn't object to having warm breath tickle his ear and cheek, after all. "There's a turning stone in the corner of Diagon Alley between Madam Malkin's and the little shop next to it—I think it's an apothecary. You'll recognize it because there's a mark scratched on it that looks vaguely like a lightning bolt. Tap your wand against it three times and then say my name, as near the same as my own pronunciation as you can achieve. The stone will turn, and you can retrieve the key."

Draco nodded, then turned his head, nearly fast enough to catch Potter's ear with the corner of his chin. "A clever hiding place," he murmured. "Though it would have been better to hide it in your house, which she can't access."

"I never knew that I'd have to distrust her when I arranged *this* one," Potter said shortly, and then turned around and went back to the goblin as it pulled out a thick iron box of the necessary documents.

Magnificent when he's angry, Draco decided cheerfully, and went to retrieve the key.

Harry listened to Malfoy leave, and relaxed a little. He thought better when he didn't have the git's constant distracting presence around.

He did remember what Malfoy had said about intensity, and, as he stared at the complicated tangle of legal terms in the top paper, which happened to be the will, he decided that he could do

worse than look into the law. He wouldn't learn enough about it in the six days left before their next court date to make a difference, of course. But it was a subject that Malfoy *had* to own books on, and this news about Ginny gave him the excuse to study it.

"You'll be needing to remove them from the bank, sir?" The goblin who had brought him here hovered next to Harry, as if he badly wanted to take the documents away and shut them in their iron box again.

"Yes," Harry said firmly.

The goblin looked doubtful.

Harry sighed, and settled down for some gentle persuasion. At least his magic remained calm and tucked under his skin, without anyone to irritate it.

Draco tapped the stone three times as instructed, then said, "Harry Potter," thinking of the way Potter's lips and mouth moved when he was saying it. He'd made enough casual studies of that mouth in the last day that he thought he had it almost word-perfect.

It was perfect enough for the block, at any rate. The stone revolved neatly, flipping back into the wall and revealing a hollow behind it.

An *empty* hollow.

Draco raised an eyebrow, then snorted. Well, as long as he took Potter to the solicitor he had in mind early enough, neither Potter's house nor the Black vault should suffer. Much. Of course, there could be people so eager to buy Potter's home that they would be at Blaise's house already, but the news of the divorce had been all over the *Daily Prophet* for days now. Most wizards and witches would at least question the Weasley bint's legal authority to sell the building.

"Malfoy. Fancy—"

"Seeing you here."

Draco went carefully still. He recognized the voices behind him as the Weasley twins'. There had been a chance they would run into them, of course, since they kept their joke shop in the Alley. For some reason, though, he hadn't thought it would happen without Potter beside him.

And he had thought Potter would be the one needing protection from them, not the other way around.

He turned, concealing the hollow behind the stone with a casual pose that also brought his hands and his wand in front of him. "Weasley. Weasley." He nodded to them both. "What brings you out today?"

"Oh, you know," said the one on the left. Both wore fine robes, cloaks, and boots now, the near opposite of their clothing when they'd been at Hogwarts, though not a patch on Draco's. Both still smirked at him in a distinctly dangerous manner, and both still looked absolutely indistinguishable from one another. "The usual. Buying new supplies—"

"Testing new products," said the one on the right.

"And killing vermin," they said together.

"Regrettably," Draco said, "my own business concerns none of those. I'm sorry I can't help you." He nodded again and made as if to take a step away from the wall.

As he expected, they both moved together, blocking his way out. Their smirks had become darker still.

"The Arguer—" said the one on the right.

"Who's got our little sister so upset?" said the one on the left. "I think you can help us—"

"Malfoy," finished the first one, and drew his wand. "After all, poor Ginny hasn't had a laugh in ages. Imagine what we could tell her if—"

"You agreed to help us." The one on the left inched closer, and he was also holding his wand now. "Better for the baby, that, than stress all the bloody time, the way you and our poor, misguided Harry—"

"Are doing to her."

Draco grimaced. They were drawing attention, but since the Weasleys could excuse whatever happened under the guise of "testing pranks," and they undoubtedly had a better reputation than he did, the crowd was likely to be on their side. And he knew relatively few defensive spells that weren't Dark. The last thing he wanted now was Aurors swooping down on him.

He *did*, however, know one particularly embarrassing spell that he had learned to perform nonverbally. And since it wasn't common, the little wand movement he made beforehand wouldn't tell the Weasleys what had happened.

"What will it be?" the one on the right pressed, with a wide, false smile. "Feel up to helping us—"

"Draco?" asked the second, and stepped forwards as if he would clasp his shoulder. A gleam of something metallic came from his left hand.

Draco thought, the word careful and clear in his mind, *Convomere.*

The Weasley reaching for his shoulder staggered. Draco stepped swiftly back. His twin reached to help him, but then bent over himself, trembling.

Draco shook his head. "I don't think I should," he said. "Not when you don't look well yourselves. Are you sure that last pair of sweets you tested for the shop agreed with you? You look—"

And then both twins began to vomit, with spectacular force and speed. Draco hid a smile even as he wrinkled his nose in fastidious disdain and backed away. The crowd cleared quickly; the vomit had a particularly strong smell, one that made Draco think they *had* been testing sweets for their shop by eating them themselves.

"Perhaps later," he said, with a slight shrug, and then walked back towards Gringotts, humming absently under his breath. Someone might try the countercurse on them, but probably not soon, with the rate at which they were vomiting, and it would be long minutes before the Weasleys could manage on their own.

"Malfoy?"

Draco glanced up into Potter's startled face as he stepped out of the bank. "Potter," he said, with a slight tilt of his head, and then turned to walk beside him. "Ready to visit the solicitor?"

"The key was gone?" Potter asked, sounding resigned.

Draco frowned. *He really should have more fire than that. How in the world can he win the case if he won't* fight? "Yes, it was. And I think that only makes it more urgent that you talk to my friend Benjamin. You'll need his help to make sure that your vault isn't taken from you as well as your house sold from under you."

"Yes, I should visit him." Potter shifted the documents he held from one arm to another as he pushed his hair out of his eyes in a genuinely distracting manner. "Malfoy? You have books on law at the Manor, don't you?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Why, yes, I do. Don't tell me you're thinking of imitating Blaise and becoming your own Arguer."

Potter rolled his eyes. "Of course not. I'm not that smart—"

"Stupid, I would have said."

Potter laughed, and though it wasn't much compared to the laugh he'd given over dinner last night, it still sounded good enough to quicken Draco's breathing. "That, too. But I meant I'm not smart enough to understand everything you deal with on a daily basis." He flicked his hand. "No, I'd rather look into other sorts of law. Understand what I can of this crisis I'm going through."

Draco nodded slowly. Perhaps Potter *did* have that fire Draco thought he lacked. A dedication to law was a good place to start.

"We don't want to go that way," he added, seeing Potter start to head towards Madam Malkin's. "Bit of a mess."

Potter turned to him with narrowed eyes. "What did you *do*, Malfoy?"

Draco might have resented the implication that he was at the heart of any mess, but he was too satisfied to see Potter looking at him as if he actually existed. "The Weasley twins came after me," he said casually. "Something about testing their new products. I used the Vomiting Hex on them. Nothing permanent, but it's rather long-lasting, and somehow I doubt they'd be too pleased to see us right now."

Potter stood still for so long that Draco wondered if he had gone deaf. Then he growled under his breath and shook his head. "I can't believe they'd do that," he muttered. "It's one thing when they go after me, but *you* didn't have anything to do with the divorce."

"I'm helping you win your case," said Draco, and permitted himself a sly smile when Potter looked at him. "Cases like this usually create enmity between whole families, have I mentioned that? And, often, close bonds between the Arguers and their clients." He dropped his voice and leaned nearer to Potter.

The git backed off again, simply saying, "I'll take your word for it," and then waiting for Draco to give directions to Benjamin's office.

Draco rolled his eyes and told him the Apparition coordinates. Really, he kept practically handing Potter signed invitations, and, though obviously intrigued, he kept refusing them. Draco would break that resistance eventually, he knew, but it was irritating to receive rebuffs when so many people would have slobbered on themselves for a chance to share his bed.

Benjamin Kapok was small enough to remind Harry of Professor Flitwick and had an enormous smile and a tireless voice. He assured Harry that the changing of the documents was a simple thing, and in two hours Ginny had no legal authority to sell the house in Hogsmeade or access the Black vault. The moment the Black key came into their possession, he reassured Harry, the goblins at Gringotts would send it back to him via owl.

Harry nodded, and mentioned casually that he'd appreciate understanding the jargon himself. Benjamin had brightened at once, and rattled off the titles of several books, all of which proved to be in the library of Malfoy Manor.

And, from there, Harry's plan had worked, seamlessly. Malfoy was pleased to see him "showing an interest," as he put it, and Harry was left largely in peace to study the books he'd picked out.

And his magic obeyed him, receding into his skin nearly every day, and staying there for hours

after he'd finished with the books. It wasn't the most fascinating reading in the world, but it demanded as much of Harry's concentration as Potions once had, and so he had no attention to spare for anger.

He still ate meals with Malfoy, but he brought a book to each of them, reminding himself of Hermione, and that proved an adequate defensive tactic. Even when he did hear the prat's flirting, he could pretend not to have heard it, or only make a distracted, "Hmmm," sound.

By the end of the six days until their next courtroom battle, Harry knew Malfoy was irritated himself—the narrowed eyes and set jaw proclaimed it—but it wasn't as though he could complain of Harry. Harry had kept everything professional, and had been a polite house-guest. He'd deferred to Malfoy in all legal matters, been kind to his mad mother, and not attempted to free any of the house-elves.

Best of all, some of his own helpless feeling over Ginny, and his damn attraction to Malfoy, had largely subsided.

Harry lay in bed on the eve of their next court date and smiled at the ceiling. Tomorrow was the first true test of Malfoy's Arguer skills, always assuming Zabini had managed to file the accusations correctly this time.

Harry had to admit he looked forward to standing around and admiring while Malfoy took down Zabini and his former wife.

But not in a gay way, he reassured himself, and shut his eyes.

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Eight—Arguing

"Ready?" Draco asked the instant he saw Potter stride into the middle of the dining room.

Potter grinned at him, and Draco wondered if it was a full night's sleep or the activities of the past week that had put him into a good mood. He *hoped* it wasn't the prospect of seeing his wife again. "The question is, are *you* ready, Malfoy?" He picked up a piece of toast from his plate and bit into it with what seemed to be deliberate bad manners, scattering crumbs in several directions. His eyes were steady and scornful, proud. "You're the one this case depends on, after all."

"Did you not know that Weasley and Blaise can call on you to speak?" Draco asked levelly, picking up a forkful of scrambled eggs. "If they do, then you have to answer truthfully and yet in a manner that will impress the judge and the rest of the wizarding world."

Potter kept on grinning. "Then I'll take truth," he said. "I'm a bad judge of what impresses people. Ask any one of my friends." He started eating in earnest.

"The friends who've abandoned you in the wake of this divorce?"

"Ron and Hermione are still on my side, as far as that goes," said Potter, with a shrug. It seemed Draco couldn't dent his cheer this morning. "And I was thinking more of my friends at Hogwarts. *Those* were the days I was happiest, you know, and felt as if I had people who really were on my side."

Draco put down his fork, frowning. "For God's sake, Potter. That was years ago."

"I know," said Potter, who had a wistful sheen in his eyes.

"You'd think you would have *lived* since then."

"Well, I haven't." Potter just shrugged at him amiably again and took a swallow of milk, not commenting on the texture and taste of it, though Draco was sure that it was better than anything he'd had in that hideously small house of his. He hadn't believed the document he read detailing the size of the house in Benjamin's office at first.

"*Why*, Potter?" Tempting Potter with sex hadn't worked, so Draco had decided to try pushing in a different way. Maybe he could afford this sort of blunt honesty in the safety of his own house, with no one around to hear him. "Why haven't you lived in the last five years?"

"The war—"

"I haven't seen a sign that the war affected you except for that curse and that limp you affect some of the time." Draco leaned forwards, not caring for once that his elbows were on the table; if his mother came in and was well enough to scold him for bad manners, she would be having one of her best days. "Tell me the truth."

"I don't *affect* that limp," Potter said mildly. "It happens when I'm tired." He ate a few more bites while Draco waited impatiently. Then he sighed, and his eyes lost a bit of their brightness for the first time.

"You spend five years trying to suppress every ounce of anger that escapes you," he said, "and every other strong emotion, too, because your magic can't tell the difference between extreme sorrow and rage. You don't work in a job because someone might say something that angers you. You stay away from most people because the ones who don't want to accost you for a photo and

a signature are the ones who want to take advantage of your fame to sell their own produces. You lose a baby, and believe that's bonded you to your spouse forever, and then you find out it hasn't." He shrugged a bit and looked across the table at Draco. "You do all that, and then tell me that you'll still be as brilliant and cutting as you are right now."

Draco tried to comprehend the idea, but he and Potter were just too different. Potter had bent to the world. What Draco had wanted, from the moment he understood that not everyone would give him what he desired just because he was his father's son, was for the world to bend to him.

"You have to change," he announced briskly. "You can't win this case like that."

Potter raised an eyebrow. "Really? And you think that nearly killing my wife in the middle of the courtroom counts as winning?"

"She'd just slapped you with a hex," Draco said incredulously. "You can't think that counted against you with Judge Witherbone."

"I think we've already discussed my ability to tell what impresses people," Potter said, giving him a tired smile. "Besides, it counted against me with *myself*, and that's the important person."

Draco leaned across the table and caught Potter's elbow. "I'm *serious*, Potter. A case like this takes a lot of passion. You can't walk in there like an Inferius and expect to win it."

"The passion is all yours, Malfoy," Potter said, and swirled one arm over his head as he made an elaborate bow. Then he left the room, presumably to put on the more formal robes he'd wear to the courtroom.

Draco sat back with a little hiss. The week's rest had done Potter good, but it seemed that it had given him an even keel long enough to get him a piece of his *former* self back. And it was the new self, the one who had grown upset over Blaise's attempt on his life and responded to Draco in the library that night, that Draco needed beside him now.

Then a small smile widened over his face. He could feel it growing bigger and bigger as he sat there.

Well. I suppose that I'll just have to make sure he puts his new self on display, then.

Harry strolled casually into the middle of the courtroom. He wasn't worried—nothing at all like the fear and anger he'd experienced a week ago. Malfoy would do most of the arguing, and work out the complicated legal terminology that Harry had no chance of understanding. He would sit on the other side of the room, and answer questions as he needed to, and bear Ginny's glare with equanimity.

He still wanted a quiet life. It seemed to him that he could have it. All it would cost him was money and time. Not a great price to pay for ensuring that he wouldn't get angry and *kill*

someone, or become involved in a feud that would cost him the only remaining family he had.

Malfoy had been giving him narrow looks ever since they arrived. Harry didn't care. He probably needed the practice in sneering.

He sat back in his chair and looked towards Ginny's side of the room. Still only two chairs there. Harry shook his head. It seemed that Zabini hadn't dug up enough money to hire an Arguer.

He *could* pity them, now, the way Ron probably had wanted him to when Harry last spoke with him. Not having enough money to bring up a child was a terrible thing. And Ginny…

Harry shifted uneasily in his chair. He still didn't *like* what she'd done. But he hadn't wanted to hurt her, either, and he could have done it, either the night she told him or here in the courtroom.

He didn't want to do that.

So maybe it was better to soften his own demands a little. After all, the solicitor had successfully helped him to change the documents in time, so that Ginny couldn't sell the house and she'd taken no money from the Black vault. She still had the key with her, apparently, as it had never reached Gringotts, but the moment she tried to take out any Galleons, they would know and send the key back to Harry, so that part of her attempt to secure funds for herself hadn't worked, either.

He could let them have *some* money, couldn't he? He would be a single man living on his own after this, and he didn't need *that* much. He certainly had more practice at living within his means than anyone ever needed, after his childhood with the Dursleys.

Maybe it wasn't *right*, but it was the way he was inclined to think right now.

Then he realized that, if he had changed his mind about this, it would definitely affect what Malfoy talked about in the next set of arguments. He shot a glance around the room. Still no sign of Zabini, Ginny, or the judge. Relaxing a bit, he tapped his fingers on the chair arm to catch Malfoy's attention.

When the Arguer looked up, he said, "I've changed my mind about how much money I want them to have. Maybe a number of Galleons, each, instead of nothing? That would soften things somewhat, wouldn't it? I…"

And then he trailed off, because not even Ginny had looked at him as angrily as Malfoy was right now. Harry wasn't sure that *Voldemort* could have matched his death glare. He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

Draco tried to remember the last time he'd been this furious. Maybe the Weatherby case, where his client had, in fact, *committed adultery* and then forgot to mention it to him. But, no, at least Weatherby had understood why changes to their initial claims were impossible to make at this period.

"Potter," he said. "I told you not to feel sorry for her. And now you're sitting there and *feeling sorry for her.* Aren't you." No need to make *that* a question.

Potter flushed and looked away. Humiliation poured off him like heat off a paving stone in the middle of summer. Draco didn't care. Potter seemed to roll over like a dog for everyone else, so why shouldn't he do the same for Draco?

"I just—I was just envisioning the amount of money I need to live on," Potter said evasively. "It's not much. And she'll need more for her child—"

"Who is *not yours.*" Draco hoped the sound of grinding rocks in his voice would put Potter off this course, but alas, Gryffindors were not that smart.

"Well, of course not. But I have more than I could ever need. I had enough to hire you, didn't I? And Zabini didn't have enough even for an Arguer, the most important person they could have right now." Potter gave his head a restless little shake. "And I don't want to lose the Weasleys over this."

Draco reached out and clamped his hand down on Potter's wrist, grinding until his face went white. When he looked at Draco, the first traces of anger were visible in the wrinkles around his eyes. *Good*. They would never win this case if Potter went through the trial a passionless, limp fish. And God forbid that the rest of the wizarding world ever hear that he was ready to forgive his wife.

"Listen to me," Draco said gently, "because I will say this only once."

Potter nodded, and tried unsubtly to yank his hand away. Draco only firmed his grasp on it, until he knew he must be pressing tendon to bone.

"We cannot change our demands now," Draco said, making sure his voice was as calm and clear as still water. "They've been filed. The bargaining process comes later, in the middle of the trial."

"Oh." Potter fidgeted a moment, then shrugged. "You could have *said*—"

"And meanwhile," Draco went on, and sweetened his voice and tightened his hold until it looked as if Potter might faint, "*you are the one who was wronged.* Repeat that to yourself. Hold it in your head until you get the sense of it. Your pretty, silly little wife is not the victim here. *You are.*"

Potter turned his head away.

"You don't want to think about that," Draco breathed. He had never been gladder for a judge being late to the courtroom. "Why not?"

"I'll get angry," Potter said.

"So *get angry.*" Draco leaned nearer, until he could smell the git's hair. Even that excited him, though he didn't know why. Not when he had to drop hints like anvils to make Potter even understand that he was interested in him. "With all the studying you've done this week, your magic shouldn't explode. And if it does, you can tame it in time. You've had five years of practice. I trust you, Potter."

"I don't trust myself."

"You'll have to." Draco raised his free hand and ran it along Potter's neck, letting the gentle touch contrast with the painful one on his wrist. "You need passion to win this. I *know* you have it. I knew you at Hogwarts, remember? I saw you on the Quidditch field and fighting back against the Slytherins—against me." He realized now that it was probably those memories that made Potter's change seem so unnatural to him. No matter the impetus, it was *wrong* for Potter to suppress the anger he carried around like a fire inside him. "Bring it *back.*"

"I could hurt—"

"Me? I don't think so. Judge Witherbone? You have no reason to." Draco released Potter's wrist and stroked his neck with both hands now, ignoring the idiot's gasp of relief that his arm had been freed. "Yourself? I'll prevent that from happening. Weasley and Blaise?" He bent down, bringing his lips within a few inches of Potter's ear. "*They deserve it.*"

"Malfoy—"

"*Hurt* them. I want you to."

Potter's hands spread out, flat and tense, on the arms of his chair. "I don't want to," he murmured.

Draco sat back with a laugh, and saw Potter blinking at him, dazed. "Well, maybe you won't have to," he conceded. He waved a hand at him. "But you have to be willing to defend yourself. This? This isn't willing. Regardless of how much money you need to live on, do you really want to have spent a thousand Galleons for nothing?"

"I—"

"Yes?" Draco had the feeling that it was best not to let Potter get too many words in edgewise, or have too much time to make up his mind.

"No, I don't want to have spent them for nothing," Potter said, his jaw firming in a motion Draco knew well. And there was a trace of that familiar fire in his eyes when he lifted them again, thank God. "But I thought *you* were the Arguer and the one who's supposed to win the case, Malfoy."

"I win them," Draco agreed, seeing no reason to lie. "But I have support from my clients, because they're the ones who answer questions, the ones who answer to the newspapers, and the ones whose conduct in the eyes of the wizarding world affects the outcome of the trial." He pressed a hand down on Potter's shoulder, making it a demand for attention. "Will I have that from you?"

It seemed to take Potter only a moment to decide. Then he looked up and nodded. "Yes."

Draco smiled slowly. He'd planned to cast small spells that would play with Potter's emotions, slinging them up and down until he came out of his grinning idiot shell, but this was better. When Potter said something with that look on his face, he meant it.

"Excellent," he said, and couldn't resist one more brush of his hand against Potter's neck as he moved away. He might have tried for a quick kiss, but Potter didn't look in the mood for it and Judge Witherbone had already entered by her door, Blaise and Weasley by theirs. Draco smiled at them all.

He still had some work to do that would include dragging Potter uphill, he knew, but at least he had a promise of cooperation now, too.

Harry licked his lips. He felt—different. Almost as though he'd been under icy water and the surface had cracked to let sunlight through.

I—I can be angry. Really, Malfoy's right. If the cure to the curse is to focus my attention elsewhere, I've made a good start.

And I—

Harry crossed his hands behind his head and flexed them there, so no one else would see how white his knuckles had turned.

He *wanted* to be angry at Ginny. But he'd done the same thing he always did with his fury now, and stuffed it underground so that it wouldn't inconvenience him, wouldn't catch him unawares.

Permission to be angry at her filled him with wonder, and now the tones of her voice when she'd proposed that "reconciliation" to him, and when she'd first told him the news about Zabini and the baby, filled his memory with roaring heat. Why *should* he give her money? he asked himself. Why *should* he do what she asked? Yes, he'd almost killed her, but then Zabini had done the same thing, and probably with Ginny's knowledge and help. His attempt had been accidental, at least. There was no way Zabini could claim the same thing about his assassination attempt.

He'd needed someone else to tell him it was all right. But now a torrent of anger poured through him, and it felt—

Healthy. Clean.

Good.

He lifted his head, and locked his eyes on Ginny, who had just come in and sat down in the chair across from his. She was looking at him with an expression he understood now was composed of resentment and frustration. Before, he had just thought it long-suffering, tinged with the same shadow of loss he'd suffered over their dead child.

He was not sure *exactly* what his face looked like, but he knew her eyes widened and she pressed back in her chair.

He waited, tensely, for something to happen—for one of the chairs to explode or shards of ice to tear Ginny's face open.

Nothing happened.

Harry closed his eyes. He knew he was breathing too deeply, in sharp, abrupt gasps, but he also knew Malfoy was on his feet and reciting words that kept the judge's attention on him, and he hoped that meant this was all right.

It was all right.

He couldn't describe how this felt. Malfoy was the first person in *years* who'd told him it didn't matter if he got angry. He couldn't have done more if he'd stripped off some blindfold from Harry's eyes that had kept him from seeing the real world.

Yes, that's it, Harry thought, while his mood improved, and grew fiercer and fiercer. *I feel free.*

Draco could feel his insides warming up with contempt even when it turned out that Blaise had filed the accusations correctly this time, and so the trial could proceed. Blaise looked far too smug over that minor triumph.

Arguing took more than that. It took patience, dedication, and predatory earnestness. A good Arguer planned as much as he could in advance, but also understood that things might shift and change at a moment's notice, and he had to be *ready* to see changes like that, mark them, and act on them. A combination of intricate plotting and a light tread—that was the way Draco worked.

That was why he was so successful.

Judge Witherbone nodded to him to set the stage, since Harry was the one who sought not to offer any of his money to his wife. They would have used a slightly different procedure if both had brought equal amounts of Galleons to the marriage, and a far different one if Weasley had been a rich wife.

Of course, that was laughable on the face of it; Weasleys were not meant to be rich. And Draco

intended to ensure that *this* Weasley wouldn't see anything of Potter's money.

"Judge Witherbone," he began, pacing up and down in front of the courtroom as if a much larger audience watched him than was actually the case, "the state of my client's life until a week and a half ago was a quiet, retired one. He had no need for extravagant expenses. He never took a holiday. He visited his friends, his wife's brother and *his* wife, and his wife's family, because they were the only ones he trusted." He glanced briefly at Witherbone. "I am sure that you are aware of the circumstances of Mr. Potter's life, and thus his critical need for people he could trust."

The judge nodded. Her eyes were warm and encouraging, which Draco knew to be a good sign.

"Ha!" said Weasley, from behind him.

Draco turned on one heel. He could feel glee rising up, flooding his mouth until it was hard to breathe. *She could not have made such an elementary mistake so soon. Could she have?*

Blaise, at least, realized it was a mistake. He was trying to grasp Weasley's arm, shaking his head the while. But she had risen to her feet and stood facing Draco, hands on her hips, face as red as her hair.

Draco only raised one eyebrow, as though inviting her, courteously, to continue. She, of course, sneered at him and then turned and looked up at the judge.

"Harry doesn't need people he can *trust*," she said, voice thick. "He's always had that. He doesn't deserve the friendship he's had, been *honored* with. What did he do to earn it? Nothing! Dragged my family and Hermione Granger, my brother's wife, into danger a few times, and in return won a few inconclusive victories. Then he fought and killed You-Know-Who." Weasley snorted and shook her hair back. "That might have been worthy of the admiration he's received—*if* he did something after that to earn the admiration. He's done *nothing.* He just stays home, as Malfoy informed you, because he's too *frightened* to do anything else. He doesn't take holidays because he has nothing to take a holiday *from.* And he's treated me—well, not the way the wife of someone like Harry Potter should be treated, that's for sure! I don't really see how you can reach any conclusion but that I deserve at least three-quarters of his vaults for the pain and trouble he's caused me."

Blaise finally grasped Weasley's arm and made her sit *down,* but not before she added, "He has two vaults, the Potter and the Black one, because his parents died and left him their money, and then his godfather died and left him *his* money. He did *nothing* to earn those but be born. How is that fair?"

The silence that followed Weasley's words very quickly turned freezing. Draco enjoyed seeing her face turn pale as Blaise whispered frantically in her ear, no doubt explaining the mistake.

The rules of the court dated from the days when wizarding families might still declare blood feuds and go after one another in the streets, down to the youngest relative one of the married

partners had. Thus the rules had been laid down to express as much courtesy as possible.

And Weasley had violated all but one or two of them by standing up and speaking before Draco was done.

After long enough to be sure the point was made, Witherbone turned to Draco and inclined her head. "You said that Mr. Potter needs people he could trust. What else does he need?"

Draco bowed his head to hide his smirk. He, himself, would probably have added something like, "I can see why," after the line about trust, but it was more cutting for the judge to ignore Weasley's existence completely.

"An uninterrupted existence, Madam Witherbone," he said. "This divorce has made an absolutely uninterrupted existence impossible, of course, but he should at least have *peace.* For a man who spent seventeen years of his life at war, it is the least we can do." He stepped up and held a parchment towards the judge on her high podium; she Summoned it with a silent charm. It was a copy of the first claims they'd decided to file, stated in clearer terms. "He invokes, and I, his Arguer, invoke on his behalf, residential claims, vault claims, nonmaterial claims, and freedom claims."

That simply meant that Weasley wasn't entitled to Potter's house or anything in it, anything in his vaults, any of his time and attention, or anything he might earn or make in the future. For a long moment, Judge Witherbone scanned down the list of items that Potter owned, nodding slowly.

Then she looked up. Draco braced himself for the first questions. Even with a judge strongly sympathetic to them, the spell she'd cast would tug her back in the direction of harshly asking them some things, because part of the wizarding world was, inevitably, against Potter.

"How can you ask for any nonmaterial claims?" Witherbone began, reasonably enough. "Mr. Potter is a celebrity in our world. To say that no one can seek his time or attention would be tantamount to claiming that the Minister of Magic should lead an absolutely private life."

Draco had been ready for this one. He matched her solemn expression with a smile. "Easily enough answered, Madam," he said. "Most of the celebrities in our world *seek* their celebrity. The Minister stands for election. Singers and Quidditch players try to make their names. Even Rita Skeeter puts her name at the top of every article she writes, instead of modestly passing the story to someone else. But Potter did not seek his fame." He nodded over his shoulder, to where Potter sat quietly watching everything they did. Draco was too far from him right now to make out whether the shine in his eyes was actually passionate or not. "He's most comparable to those who are the children of famous families in our worlds—such as the Blacks, who may suffer because of the deeds of glory-hungry ancestors when they have done nothing noteworthy themselves."

He was aware precisely how ironic it was for him to stand there speaking those words. He loved every moment of it.

"But even those who are children of famous families must simply suffer their celebrity," Witherbone argued.

"Not so." Draco bowed his head a little. "Statutes exist to protect them. Have you heard of the Mouth-Binding Laws, Madam?"

This time, her eyebrows went up and stayed there. Then she said, "The Mouth-Binding Laws have not been invoked in some time, Arguer Malfoy. Most of those in the wizarding world accept the freedom of the press and the common wizard or witch to say what they like, after all."

"I know that," said Draco. "But occasionally, when the pressure, the slander, and the libel become too much, the laws *have* been invoked. In this case, I am not trying to prevent someone like Rita Skeeter, who makes her living by her words, from writing about or to my client. I seek it solely as it applies to his former wife. The claims we make include the claim that Ginny Potter shall not write to my client again, nor approach him, not speak about him or write about him to anyone else. Anyone else is free to do as he pleases, of course."

Potter let out a huffing breath at that. Draco ignored that. This was a standard claim for his clients. It was not Draco's fault if Potter not had been paying attention.

Again Witherbone nodded. Then she said, "And if Mr. and Mrs. Potter should choose to reconcile? Your claims make no provision for that."

Draco gave a shark's smile. "Of course they do not. This divorce falls under the Impasse Decree of 1687, after all."

Witherbone leaned forwards, her hands folded on top of each other. "Remind me of the contents of that decree again, Arguer."

Draco nodded. "Gladly." Now that he wasn't pacing, the way he had done in their last courtroom session, he could feel all the energy he would have used building up in the center of his chest, and boiling out of his mouth to drive his words. He had to take many deep breaths to ensure the air got to its destination.

Nothing excited him like this—except sex with an excellent partner. *Nothing.*

"The Impasse Decree of 1687," he recited faultlessly, his smile and his gaze both burning into the judge, "states that no reconciliation is possible or desirable if one member of the married pair does something that doubly threatens legitimate continuation of the bloodline. For the man, this would include siring a bastard child and then trying to make it legitimate, or siring one and then preferring it in his will over his children with his legal wife. For a woman, it includes adultery producing a child *and* trying to convince her husband to pay for its upkeep."

"And has Mrs. Potter done such a thing?" Witherbone asked, her tone polished ivory concern.

Draco was sure the stare boring into the side of his head came from Mrs. Potter. Self-control long perfected kept him from turning and smiling at her. Just.

"She has," he replied, relaxing his stance a bit, as if he were sorrowful that such a thing had occurred. "I will grant that the original case, in which she was pregnant for several months while still playing the role of Mr. Potter's wife, is a bit sketchy. But she has since contacted my client and asked that he pay at least half his money for this child—*when* he knew it was a bastard."

"That is not on the list of claims."

"It is, actually, Madam," said Draco, in his most anxious and helpful tone. "On the last page, listed under 'Reasons for Divorce.'"

Witherbone flipped through the parchments for a moment, scanned the last page, then nodded. "Ah, yes, I see it." She leaned forwards and looked at Draco for another moment. Draco produced his most charming smile yet, a little sorry that he couldn't turn and use it on Potter.

"One more question," she said.

"Of course, Madam."

"How would you say that your client has treated his wife?"

Draco wondered briefly if Witherbone had decided to make up for every grievance against the Weasley clan he'd had in his life by handing him this opportunity to speak.

"Much better than she deserves," he said without hesitation. "You must understand—" he leaned forwards confidingly "—poor Ginevra Potter grew up in an environment nothing like the one she shared with my client. Her family was incredibly poor, with the earnings of a single parent split among seven children. Ginevra was the youngest, and the only girl. It's inevitable that she dreamed of marrying a rich husband and rising higher."

Weasley gave an outraged hiss behind him. Draco was actually relieved this time when Blaise managed to stifle her outburst. He would not have wanted anything to interrupt his speech.

"But she set her sights a bit too high." Draco sighed. "My client was never right for her. He has no celebrity he sought, as I said before. He did purely his duty in the war, and never more than that. During his time as a student at Hogwarts, he fought the Dark Lord because he *had* to, and because there was no one else. One of those adventures resulted in the rescue of the girl who became his wife. Undoubtedly this is one of the reasons she spun so many romantic fantasies about him."

Draco's voice hardened as he straightened again. "But she had many chances over the years to see that Mr. Potter was not *like* the prince she needed—or wanted. They dated for a time before

the war, and she was in the same House as he was, only a year younger. She should have learned his character, but she did not. Or perhaps she persuaded herself that she could change him, and thus succumbed to one of the delusions witches have yielded to from the beginning of time.

"Either way, by the time she married him, she must have known that he was not the conquering hero she had wanted. And then he remained with her, and loved her for what *she* was—or better than she was, because he never realized that her urgings for him to become a hero were selfish. He thought she wanted the best life possible for him, and they simply disagreed on what the best life possible was. He did not realize that she wanted to be the wife of a hero."

Draco tossed his head and made sure that he was looking up through soft strands of blond hair at Witherbone. "He treated her gently. He loved her. He bought her many gifts she does not deserve to take with her from the marriage. He was himself because he *had* to be, and he showed that self to her every day, with no attempt to conceal or disguise it. Meanwhile, he shared the grief of a child's loss with her, and assumed it would bring them closer. With any normal wife, that would have happened.

"Alas, it seems that Mr. Potter is not fated to have a normal life no matter what happens." Draco smiled for a moment, then let the smile drop and his voice grow hard. "But this time, it was not an evil madman who made the decision for him. It was a selfish, spoiled, vindictive little girl who dared to dream that her husband, if he was not a conquering hero, must be someone without a spine of his own—someone who would pay for her illegitimate children without blinking twice.

"How very wrong she was."

Draco took a few steps back from the podium, and bowed, speaking a little louder so he could hear his words over his own heartbeat. "Any more questions, Madam?"

Witherbone shook her head. Draco bowed once more and turned with a flourish to face Weasley and Blaise. It would be their turn to ask him questions now.

He did manage, in his turning, to catch a glimpse of Potter's face. He looked utterly transformed, as if hearing someone else speak the story of his life had revealed it anew to him. His eyes were pinned to Draco.

And there was admiration and respect in them.

That look healed old wounds in Draco, wounds from Hogwarts, he had not even realized he still carried. He knew that his smile as he faced his best friend and a woman he honestly hated now was poisonously confident.

He was sure he had felt this good before, but he couldn't remember when.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you for all the reviews! The response has been astonishing, and I'm very grateful.

Chapter Nine—The Rebuttal

Harry shook his head and blinked for a moment as he watched Malfoy move to confront Zabini and Ginny. He had never heard a speech that seemed to convey so much *truth*.

Then he reminded himself that, of course, he was thinking that because the speech applied to him and reflected what he most believed was true, and he would like anything that discredited Ginny right now. He couldn't really trust Malfoy's words. He had a purpose in producing them, and that purpose was one that Harry might or might not agree with.

But the mere fact that Malfoy could speak words like those was a sign of power.

Harry watched through half-lidded eyes as Malfoy inclined his head politely, probably in a sign for Zabini and Ginny to begin the questioning. He was grateful to Malfoy. Malfoy had handed him back permission to be angry, and he was extremely unlikely to lose this case.

It was only wise to be wary around Malfoy, of course.

For the first time, Harry felt that those things about Malfoy he should beware of were rather interesting.

Draco felt Blaise's eyes on him from the front and Potter's eyes on him from the back as he stood there and waited for the first round of questions. Weasley had turned her head into Blaise's shoulder, as if, by ignoring him, she could make him go away.
Draco was still trying to decide which man he liked having look at him more—Blaise's eyes held outraged indignation and deadly intent, Potter's respect and new calculation—when the questions began.

"You gave a very convincing speech on the merits of Mrs. Potter," said Blaise, in a tone whose sarcasm was not even subtle. Draco privately marked him down for it and nodded a bit. "What makes you think, however, that Potter didn't conspire just as much to destroy their marriage? What makes him the saint you claim him to be? We have only your word, after all, and his."

"You misunderstood me," said Draco, quietly. One of the most effective techniques he had discovered in the courtroom was to keep his voice soft while his opponent shouted or tried to intimidate him by raising his volume. His father had used that tactic too, in his prime, and so had Snape. "Potter isn't a saint. He's a man. That's what Mrs. Potter couldn't deal with. She wanted a

hero."

"It's still only your word against ours," Blaise insisted.

"There was a newspaper article printed last week in the *Daily Prophet* that would argue otherwise." Draco took a quick glance at Weasley, but she still hid her face. Draco wondered if she was crying. He hoped so. "Mrs. Potter has been planning her conquest of Mr. Potter for most of her life. Such a shame that that conquest didn't go the way she expected."

"What *proof* do you have?" Blaise asked.

Draco laughed. "More than you've provided," he said. "The article *plus* the claims that Potter made, and the information he gave me about his married life. Why don't you present your side of the case, Mr. Zabini? I welcome it. I am curious how Mrs. Potter views her conjugal bliss."

Blaise's mouth opened, and then snapped shut, and he glared furiously. Draco smiled at him, almost delighted that he'd seen through the trap. If Blaise had accepted the invitation to present his side of the case, he couldn't have asked Draco any further questions. He *had* read up on divorce law in the week since Draco had seen him last.

Not enough to defeat me, of course.

"I'll stick to questions for now, thank you," Blaise said, the steel behind his words shining openly. "Tell me, are you convinced, from what Potter's told you, that he was totally and completely faithful to his wife?"

"I am. He was too tired to have the energy for affairs."

Blaise put an arm around Weasley. "That's not what Ginny told me."

"Of course it's not." Draco yawned in his face. "But, again, you need to provide a bit more proof, Mr. Zabini. If all we have is our word, that is also all you have. Present me with some evidence, and I might believe you."

"I have photographs," said Blaise.

Draco nodded, wondering which photographer Blaise had visited to have the pictures altered. He did not believe for one moment they were real. Since Blaise must know that they couldn't hope to win against Draco within the realm of case law, their best course would be to work in the newspapers outside the courtroom. They would have published the photographs if they were real, and the wizarding world would have shrieked in glee as it turned against Harry Potter, again.

Draco was well-aware of how dangerous Potter's publicity could be. But he also knew the way Blaise's mind worked, and he would have pursued that course of action if it was at all feasible, which meant it wasn't.

Glaring harder than ever, as if he could make Draco reconsider his decision about which client to fight for, Blaise pulled out a thick envelope and tossed it to him. Draco slit it open with a quick charm and let the glossy pictures inside spill out into his hand.

One look and he rolled his eyes. Blaise had hoped to gain ground not with an obvious forgery but with obscurity. The pictures showed only a dark-haired wizard ducking into a doorway, and a mostly naked witch leaning out the window above the door and grinning in anticipation. The wizard roughly fit Potter's height and hair coloring, but so did a quarter of the young man their age in Britain. Draco looked up, only to shake his head when he found Blaise watching him.

"Shall I take these to Madam Witherbone?" he asked.

Blaise nodded and sat back with a slight smile. He knew he hadn't convinced Draco, but doubtless he hoped that the Judge was more susceptible of persuasion.

Draco carried the pictures ceremoniously to her, and she spent a long time examining them. While watching her with one eye, Draco caught sight of a motion in his peripheral vision, and looked that way to see Potter leaning forwards in his chair, visibly anxious.

Draco didn't have to turn his head again to know that Blaise would be watching Potter keenly, judging the effect of this revelation on him.

Idiot. Potter would have done better to ride this out in cool indifference, since *he* knew he hadn't cheated and therefore there was no possible way for Blaise to have real pictures of him doing so.

And in the thunderclap that always struck Draco when he figured out an opponent, he knew what the cornerstone of Blaise's strategy would be. He and Weasley would attack *Potter*, not Draco, rightly assuming Draco was immune to all but the most sophisticated manipulation. If they could make Potter weaken and crack, it would not really matter whether Draco and the judge believed them or not. Potter had never dealt well with public attention in the past and he wouldn't deal well with it now.

Draco blinked a bit. He would talk with Potter again this evening about composing himself in public and remembering that he was the aggrieved party in this trial, not his wife. It wouldn't cure the idiot's nerves, but it might help to settle them a bit.

"Insufficient evidence," said Judge Witherbone at last, looking up and tossing the pictures down to Draco. Her voice was bored. "Once again, Mrs. Potter claims that it was Mr. Potter entering this house, and of course Mr. Potter claims that he has not cheated, is that correct?" She looked towards their side of the courtroom.

At least Potter's nod was cool, sober, and controlled, Draco thought. He would have to remember to compliment him for that later.

"Insufficient evidence," Judge Witherbone repeated. "Do you have more questions, Mr. Zabini?"

Blaise shook his head. He looked more composed than he had a few moments ago, too, Draco thought. Doubtless he thought that since his first tactic had indeed shaken Potter, future ones would work just as well.

"Then you must present your rebuttal of Mr. Malfoy's claims," said Witherbone.

Draco hid a grin. She sounded bored. Of course, that could change in a moment, but it was an excellent sign both as an indicator of her own mood and what the wider wizarding world was feeling about the trial at this moment.

Oddly enough, Weasley rose to her feet alone to present the rebuttal. Her face was pale, but not as tear-streaked as Draco had imagined it would be. As he carried the pictures back to Blaise, he had the chance to study her closely. She gave him a look of controlled hatred.

They've had time to plan. And though they might not have enough power to win right now, they're planning to put that power to good use.

In fact, that was probably why Weasley was speaking first, Draco thought. She knew that she could more effectively target Potter than Blaise could.

Draco walked in a leisurely fashion back towards Potter, making sure to send as many warnings as he could with his eyes. Potter, of course, just looked confused. Draco rolled his eyes, sat down, and leaned quickly across to breathe into his ear, noting absently that the git shivered when he did so.

"Don't let her get to you."

"That might be impossible," said Potter, with a wry tone in his voice that Draco couldn't remember hearing from him before.

"Just do the best you can," he murmured, annoyed, and then turned to see what Weasley would do.

She stood alone in the middle of the courtroom for a moment, her head lifted, as if she were beautiful and knew it, and wanted to give a much vaster audience than one besotted person, one confused one, and two currently hostile ones a chance to admire her. Draco studied her as objectively as he could, and then shook his head. He didn't think she was beautiful. Maybe it was just the Weasley red hair, against which he had numerous prejudices, but he thought it was more likely the way she carried herself. She had the air of someone who would stand up in the face of everything that came her way, not bowing even when it could earn her more favor later or when the person facing her deserved her respect and gratitude. There was far too much of the spoiled child in her.

Of course, I should recognize that, Draco thought. Until sixth year in Hogwarts, there had still been far too much of the spoiled child in *him*.

Weasley turned so that she was gazing at Potter, and stayed gazing at him as she began to speak. That reassured Draco his guess had been right, at least. Blaise was someone whose mind could challenge Draco's own when he remembered to exercise it; Weasley wasn't subtle. If their strategy had been to influence the judge instead, she would have looked in that direction. If they had done the impossible and gone up against the fortress of calm that was Draco's own personality, she would have faced him and made her eyes even more doe-like.

"My life with Harry was never to my liking," Weasley said softly. "I thought it would be. I dreamed of it for so long. And sometimes there were flashes of the man I knew I was destined for. In my first year at Hogwarts when he rescued me, for example, or in my fifth year, when he made it clear that he loved me and wanted to keep me out of the battle only to keep me safe."

Draco resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. If Potter had really loved and trusted her, he would have taken Weasley into battle alongside him, and protected her *that* way. Their marriage had never been destined to work. That, Weasley was right about.

"And then he returned, and refused to do anything." Annoyance sharpened Weasley's voice, and Draco gave his head a tiny shake. If this was typical of the complaints she had given Potter over the years, Blaise was stupid to let her argue on her own. Potter would be inured to these by now. "He said he'd had enough of fighting in the war and was too wounded to play Quidditch.

"I knew those for what they were. Excuses.

"He'd received a curse from You-Know-Who—"

Draco felt Potter tense beside him, and guessed he was resisting the temptation to shout out that she should just *speak* the Dark Lord's name. He put a hand on the other man's arm, to ensure it remained a temptation. Potter shifted, his muscles rippling, and then let his breath out soundlessly.

"—that made him lose control of his magic when he got angry. He couldn't comprehend getting past that and trying to find work anyway, or trying to find work that wouldn't lose him his temper. He simply lay around the house all day. Is that any way for a hero to act?" Weasley paused dramatically. Then she finished with a flourish, "And he put my life in danger every time he became enraged."

Potter stiffened with shock beside him, and Draco guessed *that* was new. He pressed his hand down harder. Potter only glanced at him, nodded a little, and then looked back at Weasley.

She's trying to play on your guilt complex, Draco thought at him, as hard as he could. *Don't fall for it.*

"I never knew when a painting would hang from a single nail, or a vase would fly across the room, or the windows would slam open," Weasley continued, her voice swelling. "I woke up sometimes and was startled to find myself still alive, since I thought he might kill me in one of his nightmares. Too many times I had to keep myself calm and meek around him, suppressing my own desires and instincts, because he would hurt me otherwise."

Potter's breathing was fast and stifled. Draco touched a hand to the nape of his neck out of sight, hoping that would help calm him.

"If we'd had our child, I would have been constantly afraid for the baby's safety, too." Weasley put a hand on her belly, all the while looking steadily at Potter. "And that's the reason I didn't tell him that I had begun to fancy Blaise when I first did. He would have flown apart at me, and I was afraid.

"I want this divorce to be out of the house, to be safe from him. He's a failure, but I could have lived with that. I couldn't live with both the dissolution of my dreams about him *and* the dissolution of my hopes for a safe marriage if not a happy one all at once." She glanced at Judge Witherbone for the first time. "Do feel free to laugh at me as a little girl who dreamed of things she shouldn't have. But I think the constant fear in which I lived is punishment enough."

She bowed her head to indicate she'd finished.

Judge Witherbone looked at them, and Draco knew he could begin his rebuttal. He opened his mouth to ask a question.

Potter got there first.

"If you were that afraid, Gin," he said, his voice roughened, "why didn't you ever tell me? I would have tried even harder to find a cure for my magic."

Weasley sighed. "Can you ask, Harry?" She put out one hand as if she were about to clasp his, and then drew it back and laid it on her belly instead. "I was afraid that you would be angry that I was afraid."

"I would not have," Potter said.

"How could I know that, when you lost your temper over relatively minor things all the time?"

Potter opened his mouth again, and Draco tightened the hold on his arm once more. This time, Potter sat back and let Draco lean forwards. "If you were that afraid, Mrs. Potter," he asked, remembering her married name just in time, "why did you tell my client about your affair the way you did? You could easily have been killed when he found out you had cheated on him."

"Blaise had advised me to leave at once after I told him," said Weasley. "I wasn't in that much danger."

"But a letter would have accomplished the same mission," Draco said. "Why didn't you use that instead?"

"It had to be face-to-face." Weasley lowered her eyelashes in a gesture of false humility that was never going to work on Draco. "I had that much loyalty, as a wife speaking to her husband."

"If you were in fear for your life, and the life of your new child, and had already cheated on your husband for months?" Draco looked at her squarely and made his tone calm and patient. "I find that hard to believe."

Weasley's face flushed. "I chose to act as I did, Malfoy, for motivations that you cannot possibly comprehend. Romantic love and love of family, among others."

Draco smiled, reassured. If Potter was the weak point of his own case, Weasley was the weak chink in Blaise's armor. *He* was already clenching his hands now, as if he would like to prevent the continuation of the questioning but knew he couldn't.

Draco really had only one more question that he wanted to ask, however.

"No need to become personal, Mrs. Potter," he said. "I asked a rational question about your safety. I didn't insult you." He paused thoughtfully. "Tell me, do you think that keeping secrets from your husband, the way you did for most of your life together, qualifies your marriage as a healthy one?"

"It was never healthy, because of his temper," Weasley replied quickly.

"But did your secrets help?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "I am merely trying to find out how committed you were to making your marriage thrive. You have admitted that your husband disappointed and frightened you. And yet, you stayed with him for five years, and now you seek divorce from him, in a situation that will surely raise his temper and force his hand, instead of separating as quietly as possible. Does that sound like someone committed to a marriage to you? If you heard this story from a stranger, what would you think of it?"

"I do not need to answer that," said Weasley.

Draco just smiled at her, and then up at Judge Witherbone. "No more questions," he said.

"Then I dismiss you all until three days hence," said Witherbone, with a stoic expression on her face, and she rose and exited the courtroom.

Draco took Potter's arm and escorted him out of there. He could see Blaise doing the same thing with Weasley. His face was shadowed, and his eyes bored into Draco when they met.

Draco gave him a little smile and a bow. He was sure Blaise would focus on strengthening

Weasley for their next round as well as attacking Potter.

He, of course, would focus on Potter and try to weaken Weasley. But he had other tactics up his sleeve as well.

And he was sure he could do the task of strengthening better than Blaise. After all, he had superior materials to work with.

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Chapter: 10

Thanks again for the reviews!

Chapter Ten—If He Will Keep A Clear Head

Harry had many thoughts brewing in his head as he walked out of the courtroom, mostly concerning what Malfoy had done for him and whether it was a sign that he really *believed* what he said or just that he was a good Arguer. He had the chance to voice none of these ideas, however, since Ron was waiting for them outside.

"Harry!"

His voice could still make Harry turn automatically towards it, and he ignored Malfoy's soft growl. It wasn't Ron they had to fight with, after all, and Ginny and Zabini had already departed. "Ron!" he called back.

"Don't talk to him," Malfoy said stiffly.

Harry rolled his eyes at him. "You don't need to stay and listen. I'll Apparate back to the Manor when I'm done speaking with him." Ron had already started striding towards him, an anxious expression on his face. And Mr. Weasley was with him. Harry hadn't seen him since this began, even though Hermione had said that Mr. Weasley wanted to remain friends with both him and Ginny. Harry chewed his lip now when he realized how neutral the expression on the man's face was. He took a step forwards—

And was jerked back when he felt Malfoy's hand on his elbow. He hissed and turned towards him, doing his best not to panic when he felt a swirl of magic just above his skin, raising the hairs on his arms. "I know you don't like the Weasleys," he said. "You don't have to stay for the conversation, I said."

Draco spared a sneer for the Weasleys as they came level, but most of his attention stayed on

Potter. The other man had tossed his head back now, and his eyes flared with a complicated mix of emotions: anger, certainly, but also pride and frustration, as if he saw nothing wrong about being alone with two Weasleys and wished Draco would see that, too. *I seem to have awakened him more than I imagined.*

"You should not remain here on your own," he told Potter bluntly. "Your wife might find some other way to hurt you." He *did* savor the way those words made the two Weasel men tense up.

"Ginny wouldn't do that," Weasel the Younger said.

"Yes, she would, Ron," Potter said, which was encouraging, at least. But then he told Draco, "She wouldn't attack me in front of her brother and father. Go on, Malfoy. We won't say anything you want to hear."

"I'm your Arguer now," Draco pointed out, and tried to contain his irritation. He had wanted to see Potter grow a backbone, yes. He had not anticipated that the resulting strength would be turned against *him* so soon. "I should be present at every conversation about the case."

Potter just folded his arms and looked stubborn. The magic swirling around him began to move a little faster. Draco smirked. Whether he meant it to or not, Potter simply looked more attractive when he did that, and it added to the shine in his eyes and his aura and, it seemed, even his height.

"He doesn't want you here, Malfoy," Weasel the Younger sneered at him.

"Now, now, Ron." Weasel the Elder put his hand on his son's shoulder and looked mildly at Draco. Draco wasn't fooled. No matter what his expression might look like, this *was* the man who had assaulted his father in a bookshop. Not that Draco cared what happened to Lucius, but the man who had hit one Malfoy might well hit another. "We should, perhaps, obey the legal niceties." He smiled and looked at Potter. "Sad as we all are that such a thing is necessary."

Potter dipped his head a little, and the magic playing along his skin calmed. "Hermione did say that you felt you could make peace with both of us, Arthur."

Satisfied that no one else would order him away, Draco moved back a bit. That seemed to serve the purpose he wanted—making the two Weasleys and Potter forget his existence, so he could observe unopposed. He wanted to see what arguments these two used, and how Potter would respond.

So I can know how to persuade him out of it, of course.

"I do," Mr. Weasley said, and briefly reached out to grip his hand. Harry scolded himself for feeling a flash of distrust. No matter what Ginny might do, or even the twins, their father was still an honorable wizard. "And—I don't know what else to say other than that, Harry. I'm sorry."

Harry nodded. "So am I," he said quietly.

Ron spoke up. "You said you'd see me soon when you left your house, Harry, and you haven't even tried to contact me. Why?"

"I thought it might be a bit awkward for you." Harry glanced at his best friend, studying his face, trying to determine what he was feeling from the look in his eyes. "Since I obviously won't drop the case."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Come on, mate. You *have* to."

Harry experienced an odd revolution in his emotions: a moment's irritation, his automatic attempt to soothe the irritation, and then a remembrance of Malfoy's words to him.

He said I could be angry. He said I had the right.

Much as he hated taking just Malfoy's word for *anything*, Harry was inclined to trust him on this occasion. If he started hurting Ron, then he would drop the anger, but—Ginny had slept around on him. She was having a baby with someone else. How could Ron *defend* that? He might not like Harry fighting Ginny in court, but that was a long step from claiming that it was wrong to do so.

"Why?" he asked.

Ron blinked a moment, and then his mouth fell open. He shut it after a long scrutiny of Harry, though. Mr. Weasley looked anxiously back and forth between them, his brow furrowed. Harry had seen the same look on his face when Molly and Ginny got into a row.

He suppressed the emotions as ruthlessly as he could. He was extremely unlikely to be welcome in the Weasley family after this, and he would just have to get used to that.

"Because it's *Ginny!*" Ron exploded at last, in the same tone he might have used to say, "But it's *Dumbledore*." "You can't hate her. You can't want her to suffer like this."

"Do you know what she said about me in the courtroom today?" Harry demanded.

Cool fingers tightened their grip on his elbow again, and he started. He really had forgotten Malfoy was there. "Not the wisest course of action, perhaps, voicing that," he murmured into Harry's ear.

Harry nodded and focused on Ron again. "Why doesn't *she* drop the case?" he asked. "How can you come to ask me about this and not her?"

Ron exchanged a glance with his father, then leaned forwards and lowered his voice. "The Healers—well, they said that deep stress could make her lose this baby, Harry. They think it's

what happened to the last one."

To his own surprise, Harry laughed.

Draco felt a curl of attraction, approval, and amusement in his gut like warm wine. *Yes, Potter, now you have it.* He changed his clutch on Potter's elbow to a caress, but he didn't know if the other man noticed. He was too busy leaning forwards, crowding into Weasel the Younger's face exactly the way Draco would have liked to.

"Then why did she enter this case, when she *knows* that?" Potter said, and took a step, actually forcing his best friend to back away from him. "Why did she want to subject *herself* to stress, if she's so worried about the baby?" He took a deep breath, then snorted and shook his head. "You know, everyone keeps telling me it's *my* fault that certain things happened—the miscarriage, the divorce, Ginny's stress and strain—but that misses the fact that Ginny's a responsible adult who made all her own choices."

"This is killing her," the Weasel said in a low, intense voice. Draco had to give him credit for presentation. "You don't see the way she rips herself apart when she comes home at night, or the way she cries when Zabini tries to figure out some obscure bit of legal trivia. You love her. You don't want this to happen to her, do you?"

Potter stopped moving.

Oh, Draco thought, remembering the declaration he'd made in Draco's office the first day he visited him. *He really should not have said that.*

"I don't love her," Potter said. His voice was clear and resolute, just the way Draco had privately imagined it pronouncing the Dark Lord's death sentence. "I'm not sure what happened. Maybe her shrieking. Maybe her constant pressure to make me into something I'm not. But I'm sure I don't love her, Ron. If you planned to appeal to me based on that, change your tactics. I feel sorry for her, sure. I don't want to kill her, don't want to see her come to harm. But if this case drives her through emotional stress, into exhaustion—well." He took a step back and adopted what Draco thought of as a heroic pose, but which he probably didn't even realize he'd used. He had his head cocked to one side, his green eyes brilliantly vivid, and even his scar bared, when he usually spent too much time covering it, as if he were ashamed. "She was the one who chose to divorce me. I'll remember that, from now on."

Draco wanted to cheer. As it was, he preserved his dignity by smirking at both Weasleys. Mr. Weasley just looked sorrowful. Potter's best friend—whom Draco would not have liked even if he hadn't been Potter's best friend; he was too just too much of an idiot to breathe the same air as normal people—gaped like a witless idiot.

Then he wiped a hand across his forehead and said, in a weary tone, "Buggered if I know how I can spare you this, then."

And Potter just smiled, as if he could forgive it all, and clapped him on the shoulder. "You can't, Ron," he said gently. "I know I'll suffer strains and stresses of my own, as I go through this."

Much less than your wife. Draco felt his own eyes turning lazy as he gazed hard at Potter, seeing, beyond the magic, a man who could be very powerful if he would just keep a clear head. *I'll see to it.*

"But I intend to see it through to the end. And it's not my fault if Ginny suffers."

"Yes, it *is!*" Weasley the Younger just shook his head, and Draco recognized the rising temper in his tone. His face had flushed red, too, nearly enough to make his hair part of a continuum with it.

Oh, please say something that will make Potter hate and despise you forever, Draco thought hopefully.

Harry recognized the signs of dangerous anger in Ron's face, and decided it was time to step away from this argument. *Maybe* he would lose all the Weasleys forever, but he didn't want to.

And he recognized signs of growing doubt in himself, too. He'd taken Malfoy's permission to be angry, but that could lead to a great many things, not all of them good. Just because he had permission to be angry didn't mean he had permission to be an *arse.* Those were different things.

He'd had years of controlling himself, flinching from implications, trying to make himself something small and unnoticed. That couldn't change all at once.

"Go home and think about it, Ron," he said, in the tone he'd used since Hogwarts to break off confrontations between them when things got too heated. "Maybe you'll think, too, about how this can be my fault when she was the one who made divorce proceedings necessary."

Ron still looked as if he would say something unfortunate, so Harry just nodded to him, said, "Mr. Weasley," and looked at Malfoy. "Shall we?"

Apparently, though Harry certainly hadn't intended them to, his words somehow constituted an invitation for Malfoy to Side-Along Apparate him. Harry found himself pulled close to Malfoy's ribs, and then the scene before them blurred and Harry was standing in the Manor's library, which he knew one had to be keyed to the wards to arrive directly in.

Malfoy still held him, and his arm had shifted. Now it was slung around Harry's waist, and was drawing him nearer. Harry glanced up. "What—"

Malfoy kissed him.

He hadn't been able to resist, even though part of him thought it would be wiser to wait.

Potter's released anger, or regained calm—Draco didn't know which name would have been more appropriate, and he didn't care—really had made him more attractive. He no longer had to worry that Potter would act like a coward, he thought, and so the kiss made sense.

For a moment, the magic crept into his skin, more intensely than the last time, and Draco gasped and shivered. His mouth fell open, and he felt certain Potter would follow the invitation. Hadn't his hands risen to grip Draco's shoulders?

It turned out that they'd done that so Potter could shove him away. Draco staggered, blinking, and caught his elbow hard on a bookshelf. Pain cleared his head, and brought both incredulity and rage.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been rejected so violently, and he began, "Potter, what—"

"I'm not someone you can put your hands all over."

The voice sparked with anger. Draco straightened, and glared, and was met by another glare. Potter had his arms folded, and none of the half-panicked, half-guilty reaction Draco had seen in him the last time they'd kissed radiated from him now. There was just the slowly turning magic, and the fury on his face.

Somehow, Draco hadn't quite envisioned that the gifts he'd insisted Potter display might be used against him this way, either.

"Harry," he whispered.

"Don't," Potter said, sharply, repressively. "I think I might understand why you want to do this, if the way you looked at me just before you touched me is any indication." He rolled his eyes. "And it's just the strangeness and the intensity of the emotions at the trial. Control yourself, Malfoy."

The surge of irritation in his chest was the strongest he'd felt since Hogwarts. "Fuck you, Potter," he spat, and took a step forwards. "Do you think I offer this to all my clients? I've made it clear that I was interested for a week, and you still act as if this were some silly schoolboy crush."

"And I don't really care what it is," Potter snapped back. His fists clenched, and his skin was stained with a violent flush, and Draco's own hands continued to itch to touch him. "You can have longed for me for years or have had a different lover every night. I *don't care.* I need you to be my Arguer. That's all I want from you. Stop pushing me, stop acting like you own me, stop assuming—" He swept a hand in front of him, apparently too enraged to find the words. "Just stop," he said finally.

Draco eased back for a moment, his eyes narrowed, and studied Potter.

Perhaps he *had* pushed too fast. He didn't delude himself that Potter would just tumble into bed with him, but, on the other hand, he didn't think Potter completely lacked interest in him, either. There had been more than disinterested appreciation gleaming in his eyes in the courtroom.

And that's it. That's why we might suit. He admires me when he can see me as powerful, just as I admire him.

So let him see me as powerful, then. More of that, and he'll find it harder to resist—especially if I stop pushing and lead him *on a chase. Show him my best side.* Draco gave a tiny smile. *I can do that.*

"Forgive me, Potter," he said, and bowed. He could feel those green eyes sweeping over him, narrowing, and evaluating his intent. He didn't look up until the bow naturally brought his face level with Potter's again, and he reveled in seeing the anger there slowly became confusion. "I can accept that you have no interest in me, if you don't. I merely thought to test my luck." He shrugged and stood. "I meant what I said about finding you attractive—" *leave that door open, because damn, do I want to see more of what he did today* "—but you're right that it might disrupt the trial and seem unprofessional, and I have to concentrate on being your Arguer first." He nodded to the door of the library. "It's almost time for lunch. Shall we?"

Potter stared at him some more, but Draco remained still, waiting. Finally, Potter gave a snort and preceded him. Draco didn't mind that. It meant he could watch Potter's arse move.

And now that he thought about matters, he liked them better. Of course, if Potter had been willing to go to bed, Draco would certainly have taken him there. But a challenge would bring forth more and more of his best powers of persuasion, and thus display more and more of the skill Potter admired.

Draco enjoyed showing himself off, and he enjoyed fucking. And he enjoyed, more and more, the way Potter looked and reacted.

If he could win him this way, he could achieve all those pleasures at once.

He made sure to have only an innocent look on his face by the time Potter glanced back at him. Wouldn't do to frighten the prey off, after all.

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Chapter: 11

Thanks again for the reviews!

Chapter 11—Conflicting Opinions

"So what happens next?" Harry asked Malfoy when they met that morning at breakfast.

For long moments, it didn't seem as though Malfoy would bother with answering, as he sipped his tea and examined the front page of the *Daily Prophet.* Then he looked back up with a small smile. "Taking an interest in the trial to deprive your wife of the money she should never have claimed, Potter? How unusual."

Harry shrugged and ate a piece of bread with marmalade before he replied. If Malfoy could act arrogant and delay the discussion of important business with his own unimportant gestures, so could he. "We have three days until Judge Witherbone ordered us back in the courtroom. I just wondered how we would fill them."

"Striking back at Blaise and your wife, since they have decided to publish those pictures of you that they claim prove you committed adultery," Malfoy murmured, and pushed the paper across the table.

Harry steeled himself before he examined the photos. They really *weren't* very good, only showing someone who might, possibly, be him in a bad light and if the observer squinted, entering what was obviously another woman's house. Of course, some people would believe them. Some people would believe anything. But thanks to the spell that connected Judge Witherbone to the wizarding world, this amount of belief might determine the future quality of his life.

Then Harry snorted. *And the inane things that people believed about me before this didn't determine that? I was miserable at Hogwarts when everyone thought I was a Dark wizard because I'm a Parselmouth, and again in fourth year when they believed I'd cheated to put my name in the Goblet of Fire. This is a familiar tactic. I'll live.*

He handed the paper back to Malfoy, and said, "All right. What do you suggest for a strike at them?"

Malfoy spent some moments studying him. Perhaps he had expected a stronger reaction. Harry was determined not to give him one. He owed Malfoy a debt, but that was different from letting the ponce control his every action. He ate while he waited, never looking away from the gray eyes that wanted to pierce his.

Finally, Malfoy gave a little nod, as though Harry had passed some indefinable test, and said, "They're trying to undermine your reputation. It would work best if we could remind everyone of just what your reputation is. I can arrange a press conference; I know—" a light smile flitted across his face "—some of the more prominent journalists in our fair community. I want you to agree to speak there about your defeat of the Dark Lord."

Harry blinked. "You think *that'll* work? I've done that often enough since I killed him. It's old

news by now."

"Then speak about some things that you've never said before." Malfoy leaned across the table, intently. "Details about the final battle. Ones that will make people remember just what they owe you."

"Still." Harry waved a hand as he crunched through his toast, and watched Malfoy's lips tighten in enjoyment. *I don't have to keep up my table manners just for a prig like him.* "Not everyone you might know in the newspapers will be interested in covering that, I'm certain."

"It's old news to *you*, because you haven't tried to play it up," Malfoy snapped. "Trust me, Potter, five years is *not* enough to make everyone forget that you saved their skins. They can ignore it, but that will be difficult if you make it a story of humanity, courage, and heroism."

"You mean, the way I've always refused to do before now because I don't want to play up just my own involvement?" Harry put the toast on the table and regarded Malfoy evenly.

Oblivious to the danger in his voice, Malfoy nodded. "Yes, exactly."

"Just because I'm threshing this case out with Ginny doesn't mean I'm willing to abandon all my principles," said Harry, and tried to control his temper on instinct. Then he remembered that Malfoy had said he could get angry, and took a certain grim amusement in showing the git just what consequences his own advice had. He leaned forwards himself, until only a few inches separated them, and the air sparked and tingled, his magic building mild effects between them. "I *didn't* defeat him alone. And I *didn't* whore myself on cameras all over Britain when the battle was done, because I wanted people to remember that it took more than just my effort."

Malfoy snorted rudely. "Who's asking you to whore yourself on cameras? Speak the truth. That should be enough."

"I'm not the most eloquent speaker alive," Harry pointed out. "Why would it be enough?"

"In a press conference?" Malfoy produced a glittering smile. "It's a public venue that has certain advantages over a letter. It brings you face-to-face with the reporters. Some of them will be awed enough that they're meeting a hero, someone who can bring home his deeds to them. And others—well, that aura of magic you carry about you is useful in more than one way, Potter."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand."

"Powerful wizards can—inspire—others." Malfoy seemed to pick his words carefully. "Power is, literally, attractive. It's one reason that the Dark Lord made so many of his followers look past the insanity of his plans. With magic that strong, they still thought he might do something grand, and they could benefit. Dumbledore had something of the same effect, though he used his magic for the *greater good*, of course." Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Magic enthralls us, bedazzles us, if we aren't careful and if it's concentrated enough. I don't think anyone will be careful around you,

because they don't know that you have this kind of power in your pocket. So you bedazzle the reporters, and they'll write bedazzling things about you. That works well enough, I think."

Harry paused for a long moment. Some things made a lot of sense, now. He chuckled.

Malfoy frowned at him. "What?"

Harry waved a hand. "Nothing." He felt a kind of dizzy relief flowing through him, though. At least now he knew why Malfoy had pounced on him as if Harry had hung a sign saying *AVAILABLE TO GAY MEN* around his neck. The magic had attracted and confused him. Well, as they spent time together, he would probably become used to the effect and back off. Good. Harry didn't want to deal with Malfoy stalking him on top of everything else.

"It is, Potter," Malfoy said. "You looked at me and *smiled.* What is going through that head of yours?"

"Nothing, I said," Harry replied innocently, and changed the subject. "Where should we hold this press conference? And how long will it take you to arrange it?"

"About two days," Malfoy said, his eyes still narrow. "We'll hold it in Diagon Alley, where we can attract a crowd. And you'll speak about your experiences in the war? No holding back the way you've done in the past, out of fear of corrupting the poor innocents or stealing someone's glory?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "Since I plan to invite someone else to speak with me."

"Not one of the Weasleys."

"Hermione. She's only a Weasley by marriage, and she's the one who advised me to contact you in the first place."

Malfoy let out a little growl at that, though Harry wasn't sure if he felt insulted that a Muggleborn witch had recommended him, or about something else. "What will that accomplish? I know how she can talk. She'll steal the spotlight from you, and that's not what we want."

"No, she'll speak about her own experiences effectively," Harry said. "And this should show that I'm generous and compassionate in the eyes of the press, especially generous about sharing my victory. It will make it that much harder for Ginny and Zabini to imply that I'm just showing off because I like the attention."

"What makes you think that would be their next tactic?" Malfoy asked, though not as if he disagreed.

Harry chuckled, and tried not to let it sound bitter. "I've lived through this before, remember? Once courtesy of you." He cocked his head at him, remembering how the man had given Rita

Skeeter false information about him in their fourth year. "Of *course* they'll try to turn anything good I do to their own advantage, and the *Daily Prophet's* favorite accusation has always been that I'm an attention-seeker. They'll go back to it, I have no doubt. In the meantime, I might as well try to control what they do to me as much as I can, since I can't avoid the publicity."

"All right," Malfoy said. "Granger. But absolutely *no* one else."

Harry didn't bother to correct him about Hermione's last name. He just nodded, and stood to escape the table.

"Potter. A question."

Simple curiosity seemed to animate Malfoy's tone, so Harry turned back and waited for him to speak.

"Why haven't you used your power for anything?" Malfoy leaned forwards. "I'm not talking about anger, now, or why you didn't become an Auror. I'm talking about the sheer power that you carry around with you: your reputation, your magic, and your money. You could have done anything. Why haven't you done it?"

"What am I supposed to have done?" Harry asked back.

Malfoy blinked. Then he said, "*Anything.* You could have done *anything.* Run for high office in the Ministry, even the Minister himself in a few years. Established a business selling whatever you wanted to. Donated money to some cause and built up the cause into a political one. Punished your enemies and all the people who have annoyed you throughout your life."

Harry laughed in spite of himself. "I think you're thinking of what *you* would do with this power," he said. "I don't have your kind of ambition."

"But power wasn't just meant to sit around unused."

"Maybe not in your universe," Harry retorted, and left to go back to his legal books before they could get into an argument.

Draco was relieved to find that it didn't take even two days to get the journalists he knew to assemble for a conference. The notion that Harry Potter was going to speak about his war experience, something he hadn't done willingly since the days when the Ministry still forced him to attend public functions, brought them swarming like hungry sharks. If either Blaise or Weasley tried to owl in the next few days with more pictures of Potter supposedly doing illegal things, Draco thought, they would be lucky to catch anyone in an office.

They met in Diagon Alley, in front of Madam Malkin's; she was happy to accept it, since she knew increased business would spill into her shop afterwards. There were some people who were simply in the mood to buy anything, even new dress robes, after an exhibition like this.

Especially when it was *Harry Potter.*

Draco might have hated and resented the power of that name at school, but he had learned to appreciate it since—better than the owner of the name did himself, he felt certain. Potter was still a symbol, and one entirely of hope, now that he had brought down the Dark Lord. Vague but persistent rumors circulated that he was the most powerful wizard now living, or at least the most powerful wizard in Britain, and that the Ministry had engaged him to work on a number of secret projects next to which the Unspeakables were doing nothing special. There would be a crowd.

There was, nearly six hundred people. Draco could see the unnerved expression on Potter's face when they Apparated in behind the hastily constructed stage, which occupied the wall between Madam Malkin's and the shop next to it. Swaying curtains concealed their presence from the crowd, for the moment.

"This is insane," Potter breathed, one hand rising to rub at his forehead as if he might scrub off the scar that had brought all the attention.

"You have to do this right," said Draco, taking his arm and turning him around. "Will you do it or not?"

Potter looked faintly sick for a moment. Then he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and stood straighter.

"I always do what I have to do, Malfoy," he said, opening his eyes.

His magic emerged as if from hiding and danced around him. Draco smiled in spite of himself, and nodded towards the stage.

"I'm not the one you have to impress," he said.

Granger appeared before Potter could respond, and took Potter aside to fuss at him and hug him and probably talk about the divorce case. Draco didn't mind. He had done the work arranging the conference. He would loiter in the background, for now, and watch Potter pull it off—successfully, he hoped. He couldn't do *everything* for the git.

He was, however, looking forwards to what might happen.

"I'm glad I have a chance to talk to you, Harry." Hermione's hands clenched around his arm like steel bands. "Do you really want to do this, or is he forcing you to do it?"

"*Hermione.*" Harry glared at her and tried to tug free, but apparently she didn't agree that every person should have two arms. He sighed and shook his head. "He suggested the tactic, but I agreed to do it. I was the one who insisted on your being here, though. I think it's the best way to counter the accusations of attention-seeking that Ginny's sure to bring up next."

Hermione bit her lip and eyed him the way she had the day she told him about the distribution of the Weasley family members for and against him. "And you're committed to hurting her?" she asked.

"Not you, *too*," said Harry. "For God's sake, Ron accosts me twice, Ginny yells at me in the courtroom, the twins attack me with Dungbombs, and then attack Draco in the middle of the Alley—yes, I'm committed. I won't do what she wants, and that means that I have to do what she *doesn't* want."

Hermione bowed her head and nodded a little. Her cheeks flushed. Harry blinked, then grew suspicious.

"Hermione Weasley-Granger," he said. "That's what you look like when you're hiding a smile."

"I know this hasn't been easy for you," she said, lifting her head and letting the smile out. "But you look alive again, Harry. I just—I hated to see you look so despondent these past few years, as if you'd convinced yourself being dead was better than being angry." And she flung her arms around him with unexpected force.

Harry hugged her back tentatively. Even Ron had proven disappointing in his support for Ginny. He could barely believe he had support of any kind from Hermione.

But he did, and by the time she slipped out onto the stage to speak first, about the part she had played in the Horcrux hunt—without alluding directly to the Horcruxes, of course—he had finally begun to believe it. He suspected he had the stupidest smile on his face as he stared at the closed curtains, but Malfoy had joined the crowd in the front by then, and there was no one to tell him it was stupid.

Draco tested the strength of the wards around the crowd, and relaxed when a fat spark fell from his wand. *Good*. There was a real danger, during any large public event in Diagon Alley, that the Weasley twins would try to disrupt it. The wards Draco had set were keyed to keep anyone with blood ties to the Weasley family away.

He didn't *care* if some of them were friendly to Potter. When matters came down to the line, they would choose blood over friendship. It was the way nearly every pureblood family known to Draco functioned.

Granger spoke first, of course, and was a boor, with her constant references to applying knowledge and research in ways that no one else could understand. She gave a lecture on the importance of education that probably would have made even the most dedicated reporters drift away if it were more than seven minutes long. Luckily, she had agreed to a time limit, and she quickly bowed and got off the stage.

Potter stepped out from behind the curtains.

Draco snapped straight, and could feel dozens of others throughout the crowd echoing the motion. The pulse of Potter's magic was audible, visible, and tangible on the other senses even from here. He'd relaxed some of the strict control he kept himself under, Draco guessed, and the effect of that was to nail every eye to him.

Draco licked his lips. Yes, he was definitely attracted to the *power* in Potter.

For a moment, Potter stood still, surveying his audience, gauging their mood and making sure he had their attention. That was a move Draco had advised him to use, but it seemed so natural that Draco didn't recognize it until the moment Potter nodded and began his narration.

"I'm sure that most of you know about the original incident with the Killing Curse that frustrated Voldemort and drove him into hiding for ten years. With respect, then, I won't waste your time with that. You came to hear a new tale, one I've never told before.

"Here it is."

Draco raised one eyebrow, impressed. He would have added flourishes to the speech and used prettier words, but Potter didn't need to. His aura made every word he said seem important, and that suited his plain style best.

"I had to fight for nearly a year before I was ready to kill him," Potter said. "My friend Hermione Weasley-Granger told you something about that. And then we met in the midst of the final battle, which was held on Hogwarts' grounds."

A tingle gathered at the base of Draco's spine, causing him to feel as if he rode a phoenix. *I didn't know he would tell this one.*

The people around him were likewise making soft, interested noises. Potter had only told this tale in broad outline, not revealing it in detail to anyone except those who already knew it, by virtue of being with him.

"The battle lasted forty hours." Potter gave his hair a subtle toss, shifting it to the side so that his lightning bolt scar shone clear and unblemished. "Three of those were direct combat against *him*.

"I had—taken steps to render most of the more arcane protections he had useless. But that didn't lessen the effectiveness of his magic. He hit me so hard that the ground trembled, the grass turned to mud beneath my feet, and more than once I entered memories that weren't mine, but the dying ones of his victims. I know what it's like, now, to have my tongue torn out, my limbs removed one at a time to ease *his* anger at some minor offense, my blood turn to boiling lead in my veins."

No wonder he has nightmares.

Potter lowered his head a bit, as if he couldn't stand to look them in the eye while he spoke the next words, but his voice was still clear. "There's no answer for agony like that, except to do the best you can to combat the source of it. I fought through it because I had to. I had a clearly defined goal. Kill him, and his magic would have to stop. Kill him, and he couldn't hurt anyone else. I couldn't have thought beyond the end of the battle, or I would have gone mad.

"On and on. I was on the defensive most of the time, but I wore him down, and I kept his attention focused on me." Potter gave a faint smile. "He always *did* care too much about what I did. That was his greatest weakness, I think.

"Finally, I knew I had to move. If I waited, I would be too tired to do as I needed to do.

"I summoned all my strength, called it from every part of my body, so that if my strike failed, there was a good chance I would die with it. I could feel my heart slowing. I remember that my fingers and toes went numb, because heat was draining from them into my magical core.

"I let it all fly up the end of my wand, and into him.

"The light—it came out as light—reminded me of a star being born. I was just the conduit for this amazing pulse of energy. Now I think I know what lightning feels like when it hits the ground. Just like my hours of fighting him, of fighting through those memories, it went on and on. I couldn't think. My attempt to put words around it now—" Potter waved a vague hand. "They don't work. I literally thought nothing, the one time in my life that's been true."

Draco watched, entranced. He could see it clearly in his mind, he found, more clearly than he had when reading the newspaper stories about the final battle.

"When I opened my eyes, I was facedown in the mud. I thought he must be dead, because otherwise I wouldn't have been alive, but I didn't know for certain, and I had to know. I rolled over.

"And there he was." Potter's voice lowered and slowed. "Just this ordinary-looking figure in a black cloak. And—that was all. That was it. I was free."

A pause. Draco suspected the reporters wanted to ask questions, but they would need a moment to digest the fascination and frame their wonder into coherent words.

And suddenly Potter's voice soared. Draco whipped his head up to see Potter leaning forwards, the magic around him reaching out to his audience. The hair of everyone in sight lifted straight up. A high, keen, wild singing entered Draco's ears.

"I was free," Potter repeated. "But not everyone was. And Voldemort and the Death Eaters aren't the only evil in the world. And you can't get rid of every evil in the world by killing it.

"Remember that. Please. My work is done, the work some people say this scar on my head fated

me to do, but everyone else's work *isn't*. You have to keep pushing, and you have to live with and fight against evil you can't just pull a wand on." Potter gave them all a humorless smile. "In a way, I was lucky. My enemy had a name and a face. Most of yours won't.

"But we have to remember that our world needs everyone who will fight for it. They need everyone with the ability and the drive to make a difference—and if you have the drive, most of the time you'll find you have the ability already. If you take one thing from my story, I hope you take that."

"Thank you."

And Potter, very dramatically, Disapparated from the stage in the next moment.

Shouted questions immediately began to rise. Granger, probably by arrangement, stepped out from behind the curtains again and began to answer them. Draco had no fear she would say something wrong. She'd worked for an unpopular cause—trying to get greater rights for house-elves—for five years. She'd faced harder audiences than this.

He removed the wards he'd cast and then Apparated back to the Manor, because he knew Potter would have gone there, or as close as he could approach. His blood still carried that tingle, and his ears were filled with the last echoes of Potter's words.

He had a few things he needed to say to Harry bloody Potter.

Harry's hands were shaking.

He had actually called Seeky and asked for a glass of wine, and now he sat on the bed in the room Malfoy had given him, sipping it and staring at the far wall. The memories of what he'd said that morning didn't quite seem to belong to him. They'd come on him and passed through him like thunder, like—like the spell he'd cast to kill Voldemort.

Good, Harry thought darkly, and sipped again at the wine. *Then I don't have to take responsibility for them.*

Malfoy opened the door without knocking, as usual. Luckily, Harry half-expected him. He nodded. "Did it go well?"

"Of course it went well." Malfoy let the door fall shut behind him with an oddly solid bang. "You idiot."

Harry blinked. "What?"

Malfoy stalked a few steps closer. His eyes were narrow, his face intense—just as it had been, Harry thought with sudden unease, that night in the library. He stood and put the wineglass on the table next to the bed. He didn't know why, but he thought it might be a good idea to be free to

move and reach for his wand.

"You're an idiot," said Malfoy, savoring each word. "*I'm done*, you said, as if you really were. Do you really believe what you said there, Potter? Then you're a hypocrite as well as an idiot. What makes you think that *you're* excused all the work you talked so grandly about? What lets you retire from the world?"

Harry felt his anger surge up around him, and his magic promptly began to orbit his head lazily, in a net of light. "I did my part," he snapped. "I don't think anyone would say I wasn't entitled to a rest. And I can't be of any use now."

"Bollocks." Malfoy stalked several steps towards him, then stopped, rocking on the balls of his feet. "Of course you can have a rest. And if you think that you can't be of any more use, then you're deaf and *blind* to what you did this morning. That was just a little speech, conducted because of this divorce case. Imagine what you could do with months of planning and preparation, Potter, and your own money and power backing your reputation."

"I *told* you, I don't have that kind of ambition," Harry said between grinding teeth.

"But you *should*, if you believe in your little speech." More long steps; Malfoy was only about a foot away now. "The world needs anyone who can do good? Then it needs you to get off your arse and *do* something. Do good; don't do dirty politics if you don't want them. But I think it's a waste of something more than power for you to remain as you are."

Harry shook his head several times in quick succession. "My anger—"

"Is lessening now, or you could never have done what you did with that magic."

"No one needs—"

"Maybe they don't need you in the purest sense of the word. But they'd follow you."

"I don't want—"

"Oh, that's bollocks too, Potter. You come alive when you're angry. You've just never become enough of an adult to use your name for your own ends. But you have the ability. That makes you a *hypocrite*."

Harry picked up the wineglass, swung around, and launched it at Malfoy.

Malfoy didn't flinch. The glass sailed past him and splintered into several pieces on the wall near the door, spraying wine at the same time. Malfoy gave Harry a slow smile. His eyes burned with obvious excitement.

"Oh, yes, fight me," Malfoy said softly. "I *like* that." And he turned away and walked out the

door, ignoring both the broken glass and the squeaking house-elf who appeared just then to clean it up.

Harry collapsed back against the bed with a long hiss, his adrenaline pumping. He'd been a few heartbeats away from rushing Malfoy and tackling him to the floor, or at least slamming him into the wall.

This is getting out of hand.

Especially since it was likely only residual attraction from the magic at the press conference that had made Malfoy act the way he did.

Harry stood up with a little shake of his head. He had a new project for the day after tomorrow, when they went back to the courtroom: find a new place to live. He couldn't stay in Malfoy Manor anymore.

The immediate project was to take a shower, since his own body was no more interested in correct times to get aroused than Malfoy's was.

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Chapter: 12

Thanks for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—Ginny's Demands

"What will they do today?" Harry murmured to Malfoy when they entered the courtroom and found Ginny and Zabini waiting already. Zabini had a thick sheaf of parchments in one hand. His wife—his former wife, Harry supposed he should really think of her as—sat beside her new lover, staring at the podium, though Judge Witherbone hadn't yet appeared. Her face was carved with lines of suffering that once would have made Harry's heart constrict.

Now, he was a bit astonished to find that he didn't care. Maybe he'd just seen the expression too many times.

He became aware that Malfoy hadn't responded to his question, and turned to face him, one eyebrow rising. Malfoy snorted at him and shook his head. "Forgive me, Potter," he said. "I'm astonished that you chose to acknowledge my existence."

Harry shrugged. Yes, he'd spent the rest of yesterday, after his speech, and this morning not

speaking to Malfoy, but that was because every other word out of the idiot's mouth was innuendo or an attempt to make him angry and continue their argument. Harry had told himself that he had an advantage here, that he was more used to controlling his temper, and they had to present a united front. Perhaps, once Malfoy realized Harry only *did* want him as an Arguer, he would stop his stupid attempts to pick a quarrel.

"We're in the courtroom now," he said. "What will they do?"

Malfoy gave a long sigh. "We were able to present our own demands in the last court session," he said, as he sat down in his chair and pressed unnecessarily close to Harry's side, a warmth that made Harry's stomach churn with what had to be disgust. "They rebutted what we said—what *I* said, do pardon my inexactness—and now they will have the chance to present theirs."

Harry grunted, and studied Ginny more closely, looking for any sign of real stress behind her artificially strained face. Not a thing. Or had he just become that inexpert in reading her?

"When will you give this up?" Malfoy asked abruptly into his ear.

"This case?" Harry smiled, not taking his eyes from Ginny. "As I told Ron, never. Why, Malfoy, do you have some desire to receive the reward without doing the work? It wouldn't be the first time."

Draco hissed under his breath. He had taken the fight yesterday as a step forwards; Potter had responded to him, and finally started to lose some of the increasingly brittle control that he exercised over his actions. But now he was responding in such an irritating way that Draco's concentration in the courtroom might be affected. This was *not* the way this was supposed to happen.

"You're an idiot," he said.

"Yes, I'm aware you think so," Potter muttered back at him out of the corner of his mouth.

Draco put a hand on his shoulder and wrenched, hard. Though it must have hurt, Potter did nothing but look at him with a faint smirk, and perhaps an even fainter shadow darkening his eyes.

Draco clucked his tongue, this time with his irritation mainly directed at himself. He couldn't seem to keep to a consistent course of action when it came to Potter. He kissed him too fast, he stirred him out of his apathy only to find himself coolly shunted off to the side, and he tried to pick a fight only to have it degenerate into a meaningless spat.

No one else had ever affected him like this. Or, at least, no *client* had ever affected Draco like this. Lucius did have a more marked effect, just because of who he was.

"Listen, Potter," he said, keeping his voice calm, "I *meant*, when will you give up this pretense

that you don't need me and that you plan to disregard everything I say? I give you good advice; you refuse to consider it. We come into the courtroom, where I need my calm; you insult me. We're both adults. We can acknowledge each other as more than sparring partners. When do you plan to do so?"

For a long moment, Potter regarded him thoughtfully. Then he took a deep breath and cracked his knuckles.

"Perhaps you're right, Malfoy," he said, as if thinking deeply. "I *do* have an idea for something that might change things after today." He gave Draco a smile that he probably didn't even realize was charming. "For now, I'm sorry. Yes, you need your calm, and I'll try to be a good little client, keep quiet, and say nothing legal without your approval. All right?" He shook Draco's arm a little.

Draco eyed him mistrustfully. Quite apart from anything else, the flare of warmth he'd felt when Potter touched him was not something he could control or define, and he disliked things like that. But Potter looked back with a clear, earnest face, and he couldn't demand more reassurance, or *he* would look like the whinging, unreasonable one.

"All right," he said at last, still with a tone of resentment in back of his voice, because he wasn't superhuman.

Potter gave him another charming-in-spite-of-himself smile, and then looked up attentively as Judge Witherbone entered the room. Draco stared at his profile for a moment.

What did he *want*?

To see Potter in strength. To have the git give himself over willingly. To argue with him. To see Potter best his enemies, and do it for some other reason than because Draco was in danger and needed his help. To watch him learn how to sneer, so that he could direct it at his wife.

It was somewhat surprising, how many contradictory desires filled him, and certainly worrying.

But Potter's slut of a wife had stood now. Draco leaned back in his seat and directed his attention to her, because he had to.

Harry gazed steadily at Ginny. She had chosen to read her demands, and he knew that her staring at him and the brave little smiles she showed every now and then were meant to lure him into feeling sorry for her.

It wouldn't work. He *didn't* feel sorry for her. She had chosen to make this bed; now she had to lie in it.

"Access to half the money in the Black and Potter vaults," Ginny read smoothly. "The money will be used for raising our child. If we have more than one child, access to half of what remains

with each one, so that they may have a good life and an education worthy of them."

Harry folded his hands behind his head. She gave him a sidelong glance; she seemed to remember that he only did that when he was relaxed or bored, and probably she couldn't read his mood as well as he could read hers.

"The right to freedom from his owls when necessary, so that he cannot contact us to harass us. When a special owl comes to him, bearing an invitation to write, he can send us post, and only then. Contacting us otherwise, or writing us an insulting letter, would be grounds for a fine."

Harry was wondering what the Dursleys would have done if they had ever discovered that he had this much money. He could imagine Uncle Vernon's voice—no, probably it would be Aunt Petunia's, because his uncle's mouth would be too full of drool at the thought of the wealth they were about to acquire—reading out the same list of demands.

When had Ginny put herself on the level of the Dursleys?

"He will also need to make a public apology for the way he treated me." Ginny's eyes rose, and there was a satisfied gleam in the back of them, the first time she had broken her mask of victim in public.

Harry rolled his head to the side and gave a slight yawn.

Ginny's voice tightened as she spoke again, though Harry wasn't sure that anyone who hadn't lived with her as long as he had would hear the change. "He has treated me inexcusably, ignoring my pleas to better his life so that we could *both* live in comfort and respectability. I tried to support him, to make him realize what damage he was doing to his reputation, but I could not change him, and how far should a wife have to go in a duty like that?"

Apparently Malfoy thinks that's his duty, now, Harry thought with a small, amused smile. *All the more reason for me to leave Malfoy Manor as soon as possible.*

"He will also continue his investment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes," Ginny concluded, with a little nod. "I would not see my brothers hurt because Harry is dissatisfied with *me.*"

Harry gave a soft snort, then looked sideways at Malfoy. He thought that Ginny's finishing her uninspired recitation was a sign for Malfoy to stand up and play his part, and not be staring at him with his mouth slightly open like a prat.

He invested in the twins' joke shop? Is there no limit to his selflessness? Or his stupidity?

Of course, now that Draco thought of it, he should have seen something like this long since. The Weasleys were all poor, and it would have cost enormous money to open a shop in Diagon Alley and buy the ingredients for potions and pranks—more than two seventeen-year-old boys could have reasonably persuaded any prudent wizard to lend them. Potter, of course, was anything but

prudent.

He gave them what they needed to get started. And they still turned against him.

Shaking his head slightly in wonder at how stupid the Weasleys had been, Draco stood and looked at Judge Witherbone. She had a copy of Weasley's and Zabini's demands, but wasn't looking at them; her face showed how bored she was with the whole affair. Draco smiled and gave her a small bow. "May I respond to the demands, Madam?"

"If you feel the need to ask no questions, Arguer Malfoy, then yes, you may," said the judge, and waved a hand as she sat back in her seat. Her expression held a trace of petulance now, as if she did not really care who won the case at the moment; she simply wanted someone to entertain her.

Draco faced Weasley and Blaise. Weasley sat with her head leaning on Blaise's shoulder, her hands joined on her belly, where Blaise's hands also rested. Together, they rubbed in a slow, soothing motion.

Draco stared for a moment, then snorted. If they thought to make him feel sorry for them by presenting themselves as a family, they should have paid closer attention to his career. He hadn't been sensitive to enemies in his cases who had a dozen small children; once he chose his side, he defended it without stint, because that was what he had been paid for.

And, in this case, because it is a positive pleasure of its own.

"What Mrs. Potter asks is absolutely ridiculous," he said smoothly. "She tried, at first, to gain access to my client's money illegally, by threatening to sell his house, and by removing the key to the Black vault from the place where he'd hidden it." He saw Weasley shift a little at that, though she didn't lift her head from Blaise's shoulder, as if she didn't want to break the image of herself as a helpless female. "It has become clear that she never cared about her husband; all she wanted was Galleons, and what the Galleons could buy."

He spun to face Witherbone—and Potter, at least if he was looking out of the corner of his eye—and raised his voice. "Why should he live the rest of his life as a slave, contacting her only when she says he may, sending money whenever it is asked for, for children not his own? Why should he be required to give preference to his wife's biased version of events above his own? Why should he support his wife's *brothers*—two wizards doing quite well for themselves?" Draco spread his hands. "Why for any reason but extra Galleons?

"Money is all that matters to Mrs. Potter. And she does not even approach it in a wise manner. Otherwise, she would have ensured that Mr. Potter was kept happy and more likely to share his money with her. However, because she became pregnant, she realized that she could not keep the secret concealed from him much longer, and tried to shame him into a silent, amicable divorce." Weasley had sat up now, and was glaring at him. Draco could tell from the burn of her eyes on the side of his face. He bit his lip to ensure that a grin could not escape and warn her about what he would do in the next few moments. "He was just a bit too smart for that, however, and she

was content to face him in the courtroom—until she realized that her new lover did not have enough money to hire his own Arguer, and than even she and her child might be in danger of living poorly. They might *lose*. So she tried to reconcile with her former husband, and even now she targets him with her words, trying to throw him off balance and make him agree to simply surrender to her. All for money. Love has never mattered to her, nor Potter's reputation—I doubt she would have looked twice at him if he'd been born poor—nor the amount of effort he expended on caring for her." Draco spread his hands. "Does that sound like someone who *deserves* wealth? Or merely someone who will run through the coins as fast as she can when she has them, birthing enough children in the meantime to make her own ragged family look small?"

"*Malfoy!*"

The outraged shriek made him turn with artificially wide eyes, as if he had had no idea that he would enrage her. Weasley was on her feet, face red, hair bristling around her like a lion's mane—

And she had her wand in her hand.

Draco choked on his own laughter. Better and better! If Weasley actually hexed him, then Judge Witherbone's punishment would be much worse than if she had kept it to a simple interruption. She might let Potter and Draco have whichever of their demands they asked for, outright, without forcing them through the tedious process of negotiations that would otherwise come next.

Weasley lifted her wand slowly, as if she were having trouble deciding between debilitating hexes for him. Draco couldn't look to see whether Blaise was trying to hold her back; he had his eyes fixed on hers in utter fascination, wanting to see how far she would go.

Then her wand vanished.

Draco blinked for a moment. When the moment was done, he turned and looked at Potter, who had Weasley's wand in his hand.

"Pardon me, Madam," Potter said, addressing the judge as if she were the only person in the room who mattered. "I thought you might prefer that your courtroom not explode into a spell battle, so I took the precaution of Summoning Mrs. Potter's wand." He gave an apologetic little bow, waited for a small nod from Witherbone, and then carefully tossed the wand back towards Weasley. It skimmed past Draco's head and settled neatly into her palm again.

He didn't Summon it, Draco thought. *I was standing close enough to see it fly if he did. He Apparated it. Which is something that I didn't know you could do with an object you weren't touching, let alone without a wand and at a distance.*

And why did he do it? Weasley couldn't have seriously hurt me, not with my own magical defenses and not with Witherbone sitting so close by.

Could it have been that he was afraid I would get hurt?

He briefly turned his head to stare at Potter, but Potter was looking away, at Witherbone.

"Your magic is acceptable, in light of the circumstances," she said, and then faced Weasley and Blaise and shook her head again. "Your interruption was unwarranted, and threatening to use magic on an Arguer in the middle of a legitimate argument is more than unwarranted; it is actively illegal. I declare this court session over. We will meet again in four days' time, and Arguer Malfoy and Mr. Potter may choose whatever single demand they wish to have granted to them before then. When you enter the courtroom, I will expect you to specify that demand to me before we enter negotiations." She nodded to Draco, and then to Potter, with the ghost of a smile on her face, before she once again descended from her high seat and swept out of the room.

Draco let out a satisfied breath. As much as he had hoped that Potter would leave things to play themselves out, so that they might demand even more concessions from Blaise and Weasley, this was an acceptable conclusion. He gave Blaise, who looked almost ready to explode, a slight smile.

Then he sauntered across the room to Potter and, in the course of leaning over to collect his papers, let a hand brush across the side of his neck. "My hero," he murmured into his ear.

"Don't flatter yourself, Malfoy," Potter said as he stood. "She was interrupting the trial. Of course I couldn't take the chance that you would strike back and switch Witherbone's sympathy to Ginny."

Draco blinked. "I am in control of myself at all times," he said. "Do you think my hatred for Weasleys as deep as all that?"

"You've been acting damn uncontrolled lately," Potter muttered, and swept out of the courtroom as if he'd been watching Witherbone do so and wanted to practice on his own.

Draco followed, wondering if he were more upset because of Potter's lack of faith in him or because the idiot refused to let him have the last word.

Harry knew something was wrong the moment they landed on the outer edge of the Manor's wards. He had acquired something of a sensitivity to large concentrations of magic during the final battle with Voldemort; too many Dark wizards in too confined a space had burned the impression of it permanently into his brain. Now there was either a large group of wizards somewhere nearby, or else a single one with his magic leaking—the way it would have if he'd escaped from St. Mungo's. Cautiously, he shook his wand into his hand and looked around. The curving path that led up to the Manor was free of obstacles, but that didn't mean anything.

Malfoy popped into place beside him, sounding slightly out of breath. "We will *talk* about what you said to me," he began.

"Shut *up*," Harry said, glancing in irritation at his Arguer in the same moment that a very familiar green curse cut through the air from beyond his shoulder.

Harry didn't know whom their attacker was aiming at, and he didn't care. He dived, giving a brief thanks that he'd slept well last night and so his right leg hadn't cramped, shouldering Malfoy to the ground at the same time. The other man gave a cry of shocked surprise, but Harry ignored it; he knew from the tone that he wasn't hurt. He lay with his body stretched protectively over Malfoy's and looked sharply in the direction from which the Killing Curse had come. Who would risk casting that, when they would know it could send them to Azkaban?

He understood many things when someone began to laugh, in a hoarse, broken voice, and Lucius Malfoy stepped into view. The air beat around him with his magic; his face was carved with lines of madness and cunning, a dangerous combination, as Harry had learned viscerally when he faced Bellatrix Lestrange.

He moved so that he was kneeling between Malfoy and his father, his wand steady in his hand. He didn't *like* fighting, but he hadn't forgotten how to do it in five years, and now his magic circled around his head, purring restlessly with anticipation of further violence.

Let Lucius try something. Harry was ready.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—Not All Malfoys Are Reasonable

Draco forced himself to lie still, even though he really wanted to stand up and demand why Potter had shoved him flat like that. He couldn't fight Lucius. Potter was insane to think *he* could, at least when Lucius was in this mood. Draco concentrated on keeping his breathing light and working his hand into his robe pocket, where his wand rested. He had to catch Lucius's attention, and remind him who paid his expenses. It was Galleons that Lucius wanted, and not blood.

Of course, if he could get both, then he wouldn't be adverse to either.

So Draco just had to make sure that he didn't spill any of Potter's blood. If that happened, Lucius would become uncontrollable.

He nearly had his wand free when Lucius moved his wand in a downward, slashing motion, and

a shallow cut opened along Potter's arm, running red right before Draco's eyes.

Draco groaned, because what kind of sound he made right now wouldn't matter nearly as much it would have before. *That's torn it.*

Harry had been taken by surprise when Lucius used the Slashing Hex on him. He'd permitted it to go through instead of deflecting it, though—partially because it would cause only a minor wound, and partially because he wanted to see what spell Lucius might send in its wake. He only tilted his arm so that the blood would run onto the ground, instead of over his hand, which would make the grip on his wand slippery.

Lucius went mad.

He simply took a deep, ragged breath and moved forwards, but Harry had heard sounds like that before. He had heard one from Bellatrix when he faced her down the last time, and they were not to be trusted. He had barely escaped with his life from that battle, and he knew it.

He had no desire to have the same thing happen with Lucius. But the only thing that had stopped Bellatrix, finally, was Harry's entering a mindset where he did not care about killing her, and he doubted Draco would be pleased if he killed his father.

Better my life than his, he decided, and his mind fell into the cold, crystalline grip that he had used on the final battlefield as if he had never stopped fighting. Thanking Merlin that he had slept well last night and so his right leg was unlikely to give out beneath him due to weariness, he sprang forwards, just as Lucius sent the first serious curse from his wand at Harry.

Draco watched the battle with his mouth slightly open. At last he became aware that it *was* slightly open and attempted to shut it, but most of his attention was still fixed on the fight raging before him.

He had believed that Potter was only a match for his father with his magic uncontrolled and raging around him, and then, after hearing Potter's speech about facing the Dark Lord, he had been unsure the other man would ever be able to summon the heart to duel again.

Now he felt silly for doubting.

Harry Potter was deadly with a wand in his hand. He moved swiftly, never hesitating, turning every potentially uncertain movement into a feint, countering Lucius's spells without any sign of effort, seeming to know his opponent's moves before he made them. Curse after curse poured from Lucius's wand, and Potter avoided them, leaped them, deflected them, rolled aside from them. He let Lucius wear himself down, and grow more and more frustrated, while his temper seemed to have entirely deserted him. His face was calm and intent.

Draco knew he would remember this vision for later, when he was alone and had more time to attend to the inevitable consequences of it.

Lucius screamed in rage and pressed forwards, his mouth streaming out hexes the way his face streamed sweat. Potter leaped behind the nearest bush and then did some kind of impossible ducking maneuver, so that when Draco sucked in a sharp breath as Lucius blasted the plant apart, he had to let it go in a whoop, because Potter wasn't there, after all, to be subjected to torn earth and flying branches.

Something nagged at the back of his mind, though. *He could finish him. I know he could. Why is he holding back?*

And then Potter shot a swift glance at him, as if he were checking Draco's position and current level of danger, and Draco *knew*. The impossible idiot! He didn't want to kill or disable Lucius because Lucius was Draco's father.

"Kill him if you like!" he shouted.

Lucius whipped towards him. As always since he became mad, once his focus shifted, his whole world shifted. He seemed to have forgotten Potter existed. He leveled his wand at Draco and snarled through bared, foam-flecked teeth.

Potter hit him in the back.

Harry used the Flaying Knife, which opened Lucius's back across the shoulders, separating cloth and flesh into dangling strips. Lucius yelped, as if the sight and feel of his own blood were far from pleasant, and spun around again.

Harry stepped forwards to meet him, glad, just now, that Alastor Moody and not Albus Dumbledore had had the training of him in duels. Dumbledore would probably have chided Harry gently against "dishonorable" moves like this particular curse, or striking when his enemy faced away. Moody had been unimpressed with such things—that, or he didn't think Dark wizards deserved the same kind of courtesy that Light wizards did.

He moved to the attack.

And his body *remembered*. His muscles knew how to flex, and not merely to carry him out of the path of incoming curses. He called to his magic without fear for the first time since the last battle.

It rose and performed beautifully for him.

Harry felt a moment's bitterness that it seemed he could *kill*, even if he could not do anything productive, and then he went to work. Again the Flaying Knife, and then he used the Bone-Breaker, the Poison Drain, the Hurled Spear, *Sectumsempra*, the Dark Glass Curse. They came to his lips without thought, and he cast them while still maintaining his own defense against Lucius, giving the man no chance to hurt him.

Finally, he landed one of the hits he had been aiming for, and severed Lucius's wand arm.

Lucius tossed his head back and howled like a werewolf in the throes of the change. Then he stooped, picked up his arm and wand as though they were sticks, and touched something brilliant with magic on the front of his robes, which Harry could only sense now that spells weren't constantly flying at him. In instants, he was gone.

A Portkey. Harry shook his head slightly. *I suppose that's how he got here in the first place—and he might still survive, assuming he arrives somewhere they're willing to heal him.*

He was feeling too good to worry about it at the moment, however. He stretched his arms over his head, winced, muttered a slight healing charm at the cut Lucius had caused, and came over to extend a hand to Malfoy. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Malfoy caught his hand and pulled himself up, standing in front of Harry and staring at him. His eyes were—strange. Harry raised an inquiring eyebrow, only to wind up stiffening when Malfoy lifted a hand and slid it beneath his chin, tilting his head back and forth and moving it this way and that.

Malfoy made no effort to kiss him, however. His hand simply traveled, around Harry's jaw and up his left cheek, rising to tangle in his hair and stir it a bit as if Malfoy didn't like the way it curled, and then finally landing on his scar and covering it. Harry just barely resisted the urge to back away. The touch held—reverence. Or, well, something like it. Harry hated that. He already had enough people treating him as an icon, as a symbol.

Malfoy, at least, had never been one of them. That increased Harry's worry as to whether he were actually well; perhaps he had taken a wound Harry hadn't seen. He was about to repeat his question when Malfoy spoke, his words traveling in soft puffs of breath over Harry's cheeks.

"I am now."

Potter had been giving him skittish looks since they'd entered the house and checked the status of the wards, along with Narcissa. Draco had been too relieved to see that his mother still rested comfortably in a cushioned chair, a house-elf hovering over her, to notice Potter's nervousness at first, but now he did.

The man had faced down Lucius—a deadlier wizard than Draco had ever been, able to do murder as Draco was not—and come close to killing him if not done it, and still he looked as though he were afraid Draco would eat him.

It was rather funny. And it was other things, most of which made Draco's breath come faster and his groin twitch.

He did his best to subdue those feelings by leading Harry into his study, where the strongest

wards were and he didn't have to worry about anyone overhearing them: not elves, not Animagi, not someone under an Invisibility Cloak. They had to discuss where Lucius had come from, and this was the best place. The study was done in dark woods and stones, with both materials blending suddenly and unexpectedly into each other along the walls. The immense and equally dark furniture was part of Draco's attempt to keep his mind on serious subjects when he was in here.

It damped Potter's mood, at least. He accepted a glass of lemonade from Seeky, but nothing stronger, and took a seat as near the fire as he could, as though the dark room made him cold. Then he sipped at his drink and said quietly, "Lucius shouldn't have been able to do that, I take it."

"No," Draco said, and took the chair across from him. He entertained a fond fantasy, for just a moment, that he and Harry were spending their time here after a successful day of terrorizing lesser people, but then banished it. *Business. Professionalism. He saved your life, not offered to snog you silly.* "I have wards around the property that alert me when he's miles away, and even when he's left Sweden. I should have heard them ringing the moment we arrived. That I didn't hear them…" He let the words trail away as he sipped his own drink. "It's very disturbing. Either he's found some way around the wards, or someone else disabled them for him."

Potter started to speak, then hesitated.

Draco gave him a faint smile. "You don't have to worry about what I'll say this time, Potter. You received a rather sudden initiation into my family's troubles today, after all."

Potter gave a little nod. "What drove him mad? Azkaban? Or did Bellatrix—" He glanced in the direction of the room Narcissa rested in.

"It was Azkaban." Draco shrugged. "Of course, we've had *understandably* limited contact since my sixth year, so if it was something different, I doubt I could tell. But he found sanctuary in Sweden with an old friend, and the Swedish wizarding community is ridiculously tolerant; I know a number of other 'old friends' who've fled there. He did send me threatening letters, the first year. Eventually, we worked out a deal whereby I send him Galleons and he stays away from the Manor."

"That's why you need as much money as you make from your cases," Potter murmured, his face suddenly clear of a shadow Draco hadn't realized was there. "To keep him at bay as well as provide for your mother."

Draco wanted to retort that he used some of the money for that, but he also used it for his own comfort, and what was the problem with that? But he wanted Harry on his side in this particular argument, not aligned against him, and he reminded himself of that in time. He took a sharp breath and nodded. "That's part of it. And I sent him money recently. Why he returned, I don't know."

"That Killing Curse was aimed at you."

Draco leaned forwards, seeing an opportunity to integrate his more personal concerns with the business aspect. "And you saved my life. I owe you a life-debt for that, do you realize?"

Potter lifted one hand as though Draco's life-debt were a rather noxious dog he didn't want to slobber on his face. "Don't worry about it," he said quickly. "It's nothing."

"Nothing?" Draco let some heat slide into his eyes. "Malfoys take debts of all kinds seriously, Potter—more so since the war, when the number of people carrying two Knuts about us diminished rather sharply." He lowered his voice, since he already knew what kind of effect that had on his old rival. "Whatever you want in return, just name it, Potter. *Anything* you'd like."

He tilted his head to the side and tried to make himself look vulnerable, though he knew it wasn't something he did well. Potter's pupils dilated the smallest bit, but then he shook his head and obviously focused on the subject under discussion again.

Damn.

"So your father returned for a reason, the wards didn't alert you, and he wanted to kill you." Potter tapped his fingers against each other. "Does he get any money if you die?"

"Unlike *some* people," Draco murmured, sitting back in his chair, "I was not stupid enough to leave people who might have reason to kill me in my will." Potter had the good grace to look abashed. "No. All my money is slated to go to my mother, to provide for her protection and tending for the rest of her life. There's actually a rather complicated legal procedure I've had Benjamin set up, whereby the house-elves can administer the Manor and the vaults as if they were independent heirs. But they'd still be loyal to my family, of course, so my mother would receive the very best care possible."

Potter's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Don't tell Hermione that. The last thing she needs is new forms of enslavement to campaign against." He leaned forwards. "Then I think the most obvious conclusion is that this is part of the trial—that Zabini and Ginny were hoping you'd take a Killing Curse in the back and spare them the problem of dealing with you."

Draco opened his mouth to deny that for a moment, then closed it again. He felt very stupid for not thinking of this first, in fact.

Blaise had been his best friend for years. He knew where Lucius was living and that he was mad and obsessive—likely to fixate on an idea once he was introduced to it. He had visited the Manor often enough that he might know how to tweak the wards so that Lucius, who was still technically the Malfoy heir, could bypass them and not set them ringing in Draco's mind as alarms. Lucius wasn't sane enough to do it, most of the time, which was why Draco hadn't worried, but Blaise could have reminded him of the procedure. And he had always been talented in the creation of Portkeys.

"I should have seen that earlier," he said. "I'm a fool."

Potter laughed, and it was the laugh that made Draco have to curl his fingers into his palms to keep from jumping him. "You were understandably preoccupied," he said, his eyes glinting. Then he sobered. "It looks as though my plan won't work now," he said.

"Plan?" Draco was anxious to reassure him that any plan for sharing his bed would not only work, it would receive enthusiastic cooperation from Draco himself.

"I had planned to leave the Manor after this court session," Potter explained, standing and shaking his shoulders and head like a dog emerging from water. "It distracts you when I'm around, that much is clear, and we don't need to argue the way we did yesterday. But you need protection from your father. I can't trust that he's dead. And even if he is, Zabini might try something else. I had no idea that he hated you so much. I thought he just hated *me*." His voice was calm, the tone of someone used to half the world loathing him.

Draco had his pride, and he might ordinarily have protested against the idea of needing protection. But this time, he caught up with his own thoughts before he stupidly opened his mouth.

He *wanted* Harry to stay. Of course he did. The tension between them had deepened and sweetened when Harry saved his life; they had shared yet another significant experience. Sooner or later, Draco was certain, Harry's control would snap, and he would spin into and collide with Draco.

He smoothed his face and voice to utter sincerity, no other emotion showing, as he said, "I'd like that."

Potter spent a moment staring at him suspiciously, but Draco was better at hiding his emotions than Potter was at reading them. Finally, Potter nodded and said, "I'll be in my bedroom if you want me."

You don't have to be there for me to want you, Draco thought, his eyes trailing Potter as he loped from the room. *Anywhere is fine.*

He did remember to snap his fingers, call Seeky, and tell her to tend to the shallow wound on Potter's arm, which had received no treatment but Potter's inadequate healing charm. Then he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, replaying the scenes of the battle over in his mind.

Potter had strength and a fierce will, no matter what anyone said—just as his speech yesterday had proven that he had charisma, whatever he thought. If Weasley hadn't managed to encourage him to display those traits, there was something wrong with her, not her husband.

Draco thought that he could encourage more displays of the kind. Potter just couldn't *help*

reacting to him, while he had grown used to Weasley.

He would bring out the best in Potter, while Potter brought out the best in him.

Yes, that sounds like a good bargain.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen-Arranging His Life

Harry sat thoughtfully on his bed-well, the bed that Malfoy had given him-and stared at the ceiling. He had assumed so intensely that he would be leaving the Manor in a few days that he wondered what he should do with his time, now that he no longer had to spend it searching for a warded flat or trying to make do in a place Ginny might find him.

Well.

Lucius Malfoy's appearance today had reminded him of one thing. There were other people out there, other lives. The divorce case wouldn't last forever. Malfoy would go back to his life when it was done, tending to his mother, fighting or bribing his father (if he lived), and doubtless winning cases for other clients. Harry hoped he would still have his Galleons for company.

But what else would he do? What *was* there to do? Spending most of his time at home alone palled next to spending time at home with Ginny, and he might not be as welcome in Ron and Hermione's home after this, if the trial turned even more bitter.

He had to have a life for himself. He saw that now. It was urgent. What *wasn't* urgent was that he have a life exactly like the one other people wanted him to have. He would, and could, arrange things to his own satisfaction. He wouldn't become an Auror or Quidditch player the way Ginny had wanted (fun though it would have been in one way to spite her). He wouldn't enter into politics at the Ministry, the way Hermione had often encouraged him.

He didn't plan to give up all his friends, either. If Ron and Mr. Weasley could still tolerate his presence, he had at least them. Hermione had shown more support than anyone else so far.

Except Malfoy.

Harry rolled his eyes. He knew where Malfoy's "support" came from. Part of it was cold and

golden and weighed exactly as much as that thousand Galleons Harry had deposited into his vault. The other part was his attraction to Harry's magic, and that would surely lessen the moment Harry moved out of his house, even if it didn't fade before the case was over.

Granted, he might have the life debt now, but-

Harry shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He wouldn't build his future on faith and trust in Malfoy. He admired the other man's confidence and control in the courtroom, but, as Malfoy himself had said, he argued for whoever paid him. If Harry hadn't got to him first, he could just as easily have been Ginny's Arguer, and he would have attacked Harry himself as pitilessly as he had done to Ginny.

So. He would have a few friends when this was done, money, and free time.

What did he want to do?

Thoughtfully, he propped himself up on his elbows and stared at the pile of law books on his table. He'd picked his way through them slowly, concentrating and *forcing* the words to make sense by sheer strength of will the way he'd used to do with Potions recipes. It had often occurred to him that the legal terms and convoluted wording could be translated easily into ordinary English.

Could I do that? And perhaps offer to translate legal documents for wizards who might be confused and can't afford a solicitor?

His interest quickened. It was an odd thing for him to do, in that he doubted he could have seen himself doing it two weeks ago, but his life had changed a lot in two weeks. And it was an intellectual interest of the kind that Malfoy had recommended, so difficult for Harry that he had to devote all his time to it. His magic didn't have extreme emotions to react to, since his academic interest was of a far different kind than grief or rage.

Harry nodded, and sat up. It would do until he hit upon a better idea. So he would spend part of the afternoon studying.

The rest would be spent writing letters. He *had* to know where he stood with some of his friends. Whether he still had the right to call them by that name, for instance.

He called for Heeky, asked for parchment, and started writing.

Draco came down to breakfast rather annoyed. Potter hadn't bothered to appear at dinner at all last night. Draco knew he'd eaten because he'd consulted the house-elves, but it was all rather impolite and irregular. Even if it *had* given Draco time to spend with Narcissa and listen to her light, clear voice discussing many small things of importance and sane interest, he doubted Potter had stayed away for that reason.

He stopped short when he found Potter at the table already. An owl sat on his arm, and it *wasn't* Hedwig, the snowy owl he'd brought with him. Draco carefully walked around the table, waiting until the moment when his guest looked at him.

Potter never did. He studied the letter he'd taken from the owl's leg instead, and his expression was a mixture of fondness and exasperation. Draco experienced an odd stab of jealousy. He could wish *he* had inspired such an expression on Potter's face, simply because it often seemed as though the other man never thought of him at all when they weren't in the courtroom.

"Interesting news?" He couldn't keep the snide tone out of his voice as he sat down.

Potter looked up, blinking. Then he smiled. Draco picked irritably at the poached eggs that had appeared in front of him, and wished he weren't so affected by the git's expression.

"Yes," the git said. "That's the word for it. Interesting." He made a motion towards the letter he held, sending the owl fluttering in search of a safer perch, but he showed no sign of actually letting Draco read it. "Ron writes that he *might* forgive me if his mother can stop fussing at him about the damage the stress is causing Ginny's baby." Carefully, he laid the letter aside. "I haven't decided how I'll respond to him yet. I simply wrote to him to ask if he'd remain my friend when the case was done."

"Ah." Draco ate a few bites before he let himself succumb to his curiosity. "And what do you see yourself doing when this is done?"

Potter grinned at him. "I'm glad you asked. Those law books I've looked at are *confusing*. I can make them out, but only with concentrated study. I've started to think about poor wizards who might need a solicitor *now* but don't have the money or the time to find one. I could at least tell them what complicated legal documents mean, once I know the language. I wouldn't file or change them, just read them." He made a large, curving motion with one hand; for the life of him, Draco couldn't figure out what it was meant to be. "It'll combine the study I've done with the project that you told me I should do, the project that would benefit other wizards."

Draco stared at him for a moment. Then he said, "And you'd become a sort of-poor wizard's solicitor for no other reason than because it sounds like a good idea now?"

Potter snorted and leaned back, cracking his knuckles. He must have eaten already, since that movement revealed an empty plate in front of him. "Exactly what else would I do? I've already told you how few things I'm good at, and I have to do something. I was content in Ginny's company, and with Ron and Hermione to visit, but I don't have her anymore-" Draco watched carefully, but no true shadow of regret appeared in his eyes or voice "-and I might not be welcome at Ron and Hermione's for some time. This will keep me from going mad with loneliness or boredom."

"You could *wait*," Draco pointed out in exasperation. "Make up your mind on a career slowly. It's not as though you'll starve."

Potter shrugged. "It's the activity that's important, not the money." He brightened. "I might even offer my services for free."

Draco bit his tongue to keep himself from shrieking in exasperation. Sometimes he thought a maleficent god had designed Potter just to torment him. When he had control of his voice, he said, "I can provide the company you'll need, and surely you can discover a career that suits you better in the library. You'll have all the time you need to read there. Believe me," he added, with a look from under his eyelashes that surely not even a blind Augurey could have missed, "I'm more than willing to offer you everything you need."

Of all possible expressions, he was not prepared to see Potter's face assume one of pity.

Potter leaned forwards and spoke quietly and earnestly, as if Draco were an ill patient at St. Mungo's whom sharp words would put out of temper. "Listen, Malfoy. I'm staying here because the wards help me in the case, and you *do* need protection if your father appears again. But, at the same time, I feel uneasy about it. It's taking advantage of you, after all." He ended that strange speech with an equally strange intent look, as if he assumed Draco would know what he was talking about perfectly well.

Draco was not in the mood to work a puzzle, given that Potter had decided to be a puzzle all by himself. "Explain yourself right now, Potter."

"I know that you're only attracted to me because of my magic," Potter said softly. "It was what you said about wizards and witches being drawn to people with strong magic that gave me the clue. If the ones I spoke to in Diagon Alley were impressed by me, why wouldn't you be? Only with you it takes the form of physical attraction, for some reason." He winced a little, as though speaking the words aloud was distasteful to him. "So staying here winds you deeper in the spell, and also is somewhat akin to Legilimency without your permission, at the very *least.* I suppose your need of me right now is intense enough that I have to stay here, but-"

Draco had heard enough.

He slammed his hands down on the table in front of him hard enough to make every plate and cup in sight jump. Potter shut his mouth and looked at him with wide eyes, the more so when Draco leaped out of his seat and strode around the table towards him. When Draco got near him, he rose to his feet and edged back a little, uneasily, his mouth opening slightly.

"No," Draco said, with enough coldness in his tone that Potter shut his jaw, though a spark of rebellion blazed in his eyes. "No. You will *listen* for once in your fucking life, Potter."

He grabbed the front of Potter's shirt and swung him around so that the backs of his thighs pressed against the table. Then he leaned down and kissed Potter the way he'd wanted to since the end of the battle with Lucius yesterday.

The kiss went deep, and was hard enough that their teeth pressed against each other's and their lips split and a slight torrent of blood poured into Draco's mouth. He didn't care. In fact, he leaned further forwards, almost forcing Potter flat, never breaking the kiss.

He wanted Potter to understand every bit of his anger, his determination, his lust, his admiration, and his gratitude.

When he pulled back, licking his lips, he whispered the truth into Potter's ear, while pressing him flat so hard and leaning so close that Potter couldn't get the leverage to throw him off- though he tried anyway. Potter should have understood that kiss, but Draco would put it into words just so he couldn't miss it. Fuck subtlety, fuck an "innocent" chase; Potter would obviously close his eyes, stick his fingers in his ears, and ignore all the evidence of Draco's want for him as hard as he could until it hammered on his brain.

"I want you. It's not the magic. I've been under the influence of magic like that before, when I was near the Dark Lord, and I recognize the sensation. Then, I felt detached from myself and hardly able to remember what I'd done afterwards. With you, I'm awake and alive, and I know what I want. And that's you." Just to add another level of directness that a Gryffindor ought to appreciate to this, he snaked his hand down between Potter's legs and gripped his cock. It was flaccid, but Draco stroked it twice, holding the startled and half-terrified green gaze all the while. "Part of it may be your power. Or that may make it more intense.

"Want to know something interesting, Potter?

"I *don't care.*

"You saved my life yesterday. You've always been the one person who can make me most *irritated.* Not angry, no, but my anger is an emotion that consumes me and then passes. Irritation doesn't go away. It forever hangs about at the periphery of my vision waiting to be noticed. And I notice you to the point of distraction.

"Don't you dare talk about your life after this case without me in it, *Harry*, because as far as I'm concerned the real part of our lives together hasn't even begun."

He deposited one more kiss on his mouth, noting absently that it hurt, and then released Potter's shoulders and turned and walked out of the room. He would have Seeky send him the remains of his breakfast.

He preferred not to hear the idiotic objections that Potter would surely make if he remained.

Harry raised a hand to his lips and winced. Malfoy's teeth cut *deep* when he wanted them to.

Carefully, he turned around and sat down at the table again, absently rearranging the spilled sugar and a silver saltcellar that had twirled halfway down the cloth from its original position and now lay on its side. He ran his tongue over his lips and tried to assess the damage, without

thinking about what had caused it.

Impossible, of course.

Harry uttered a curse and buried his head in shaky hands.

It seemed he'd warped Malfoy's mind to the point that he couldn't even trust his own reactions and memories.

I mean, what else would make Malfoy want me? There's obvious reasons for me to want him. Harry had avoided thinking about his own responses to Malfoy as much as possible, but it was preferable to thinking about what had just happened. *He's cool, confident, practiced in the courtroom, fighting for me right now, compassionate about his mother, in trouble from his father, and handsome enough. But there is absolutely no reason for him to turn the other way and want me. No one wants someone who irritates the shit out of them.*

He paused for a moment as he thought of the way Ron and Hermione had carried on before they got married, but then shook his head. Ron and Hermione didn't want to *hurt* each other. They irritated each other, but they had something stronger than irritation underneath, a bond that carried them back together.

He and Malfoy had wanted to hurt each other in Hogwarts. And Malfoy had certainly kissed like he wanted to hurt him.

With a sigh, Harry decided he had another task now: discovering what had become of Lucius Malfoy as soon as possible. If he could stop Draco's father, he stopped Draco's most pressing problem, and then he could leave the Manor, and Draco would probably come back to himself in a little while.

He felt sick at the idea that he'd changed someone else's personality so drastically like that, but it was much less terrifying than some other possibilities.

That Malfoy was at all serious, for instance.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—On Tenterhooks

Harry had decided it would be best if he could simply avoid Malfoy's attention, and his presence, for the time being. He wrote a letter to Hermione, as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—he didn't even send the house-elves for ink or parchment—asking her what she knew about Lucius Malfoy's location in the years immediately following the war, and demanding old copies of the *Daily Prophet* if she could get them. She'd paid much more attention to that kind of thing than Harry had, caught up as he was in fighting for a life of his own between the heroic ceremonies and courting Ginny.

That done, he briefly considered prying into Malfoy's library to see if he *could* locate the old copies of the *Daily Prophet* on his own, or perhaps find an address Malfoy might have sent money to, but he rejected the idea. His simple, quiet room was enough for him right now. Besides, he didn't want—

He just preferred to be by himself, that was all. Maybe having some distance from him would let Draco escape the effects of his magic.

He curled up in his bed and dozed for a short time. Perhaps his problems would have the good grace to vanish before he woke up.

Draco was not quite sure what Potter thought he was doing, but knowing him, it was something stupid.

The tightened wards around the house had meant he caught Potter's owl the moment she tried to depart with his letter. He'd read it, and started at the mention of his father's name. Did Potter consider it his personal duty to rid the world of Lucius now?

Probably not. Probably he simply thinks that the sooner he reveals Lucius's location and whether the bastard has lived or died, the sooner he can leave, and the sooner he can be away from me.

In the end, Draco grumpily let the owl depart, but then he found himself with nothing to do. His preparations for the next step in the process of making Blaise sorry he'd been born would take some time to complete, and he'd set in motion as much as he could right now, until he heard back from the investigators he'd set on the trail of Blaise's past mistakes. He could always sit down with legal documents, perhaps read his correspondence and choose what client to take on when Potter's case was done, or visit with his mother, but neither choice appealed to him.

He set out down the hall, to wander the Manor the way he had when he was a boy. He found his footsteps leading him near Potter's room quite soon, and he scowled for a moment, then shrugged. What he'd said to Potter the other day—that he owned the house and everything in it—was only accurate. Why shouldn't he wander where he wanted? Why shouldn't he *do* what he wanted?

He opened Potter's door. There were locking spells on it, but since they'd been cast without Draco's permission, they dissolved the moment his hand touched the knob. Draco stepped inside, and ground his teeth when he found Potter curled in an innocently slumbering heap.

How *could* he? Why wasn't he humming with the aftereffect of hormones from that kiss this morning, the way Draco was?

His thoughts were so busy that he didn't realize, for long moments, that Potter had rolled over and aimed his wand at him. Then he realized it, and gave Potter the most unimpressed look he could muster.

Potter just looked weary, and not because he'd been asleep. He scrubbed his face with a hand for a long moment, then sighed and said, in a gentle voice as though talking to a house-elf on the verge of punishing itself, "Listen, Malfoy, I know you can't help it. I just wish you'd stay away from me so you'd heal faster, that's all."

Draco stared at him. "What are you talking about?" he asked at last.

"My magic." Potter sat up, his hair further mussed from the pillows, his green eyes shaded with sorrow and returning alertness. The power he was talking about idled and stirred around him like an eddy of wind or water, sharply increasing Draco's hunger. "What you said about wizards and witches being drawn to power told me the truth. The reason you're attracted to me is my magic. Once I leave the Manor, that will fade, but—"

Draco felt his control abruptly give way.

He just couldn't *take* this anymore. No matter what he did to show that his attraction was real, Potter made inane assumptions about it. He ignored his own obvious sexual tension with Draco to pretend that he was straight and nothing had changed. He tried to reason himself out of the most elementary conclusions that Draco induced him to come to. In other words, he acted as though the only relationship between them was the professional one.

When had that *ever* been true?

Draco strode forwards, thrust his hands out, captured Potter's cheeks between his palms, and bit his lips savagely. When Potter opened his mouth to gasp out a denial or another one of his self-righteous platitudes, Draco thrust his tongue in instead.

Then he climbed onto the bed and knocked Potter flat, straddling him. The blood roared in his ears, so that he couldn't hear any of Potter's complaints, and he felt a satisfaction as harsh and strong as the desire itself.

If Potter wouldn't listen—and by now it was absolutely clear that he *wouldn't*—then Draco would make him *feel* the truth.

Harry was a mass of blood.

He could taste the coppery tang gathering in his mouth, and feel the frantic pounding of his heart

as it drove blood through his veins at a great pace, and sense the hardening of his cock long before it actually began to be uncomfortable, trapped as it was between Malfoy's belly and his trousers. He thrashed and twisted, trying to throw Malfoy off, but the tongue and the hands and the hips holding him prisoner were not to be denied. He couldn't ignore this, couldn't pretend he wasn't a mass of blood, and couldn't ignore Malfoy's obvious desire, the way he rocked on top of Harry.

Harry groaned shakily. Longing was a physical presence as painful as his trapped erection. It had been so long, with *anyone*, and memories of the way Malfoy had looked at him in the library the first night he stayed in the Manor made his hips rise and hump back.

He told himself it was wrong. That it was no better than taking advantage of someone under a lust spell. That he *had* to calm down, *had* to ignore the sweet nausea in his belly, and remove himself from the bedroom for Malfoy's own good.

His body ignored *him*.

His traitor hands rose up and twined in Malfoy's hair, holding him to the kiss. The sensation of blood lessened, and pure pleasure took over its place. Kissing Ginny had never been a competition, a battle, like this. He twined his legs around Malfoy's and did his best to throw the bastard to the bed, with himself on top.

Malfoy resisted. Then he reared back, and Harry wondered for a terrified, dizzying moment if he would depart. That was what he *should* be hoping for, but he didn't want it to happen. He would start thinking then, and he would drop from lust into the shame that spiraled just under it, waiting for him.

But Malfoy merely spelled their clothes off, giving immediate and gratifying freedom to Harry's erection, and then dropped on top of him and started fighting him again.

Harry licked and gnawed at his lips, uncaring of the saliva that spilled everywhere. His voice might have called Malfoy Draco, might have begged him to fuck him. The memories tried to form, and then splintered apart under his desperate need and flew elsewhere. His legs opened wider, welcoming the full contact of Malfoy's body and reducing his own range of movement as he was pinned to the bed. God, so full, so welcomed, so necessary, *yes*.

Draco couldn't stop the heady surge of triumph that washed through him as he stared down at Potter's sprawled body. Finally, those clenched fists had spread into relaxed hands for him, and he no longer shut his mouth and turned away as if the very idea of receiving a kiss from Draco were distasteful. The sight of Potter—*Harry*—turned into someone who wanted nothing more than sex pleased Draco very much indeed.

He clamped him down, pinning Harry's wrists to the bed with his fingers and his hips with his, and set a brutal pace. He hadn't forgotten his anger, or his determination that Harry feel this instead of thinking or talking himself away from it, or around it, or out of it. He rocked and thrust

until he thought Harry would probably have bruises on his spine. He didn't care. Even the pleasure sliding through him whenever their cocks brushed together was secondary to him. Primary was *winning*. He had been *right*, and Harry would see—

He would see—

Draco's back arched, and abruptly the pleasure did take first place. He pushed his tongue into Harry's mouth and bit the insides of his cheeks and thrust his hips in forceful, uncontrolled motions.

All the intense emotions raced together, coiled in one small place, and then expanded and exploded. Draco came with the sound of his own smug cry ringing in his ears.

He drew back to look down at Harry. His eyes were tightly closed, his chest heaving, and the expression on his face was somewhere between pain and pleasure. Perhaps he was trying to hold back even now, some remnant sense of ethics destroying his passion.

Draco released Harry's hands, bent, and gave a swift lick to the head of his cock.

Harry wailed, a sound of surrender, and his head twisted wildly on the pillow as he gave in. Draco drew back just in time not to be splashed with the rush of Harry's orgasm. It looked to be an incredibly expressive and drawn-out process, and Harry relaxed with an exhausted little whimper when he was done. Draco waited, but he kept his eyes shut, though his breath came fast enough to show that he wasn't asleep. Probably he just didn't want to open his eyes and face the consequences of what he'd done.

"Wakey, wakey, Potter," Draco breathed to him, and ran a hand through his hair, admiring the sleek naked expanse of skin that he'd been in too much of a hurry to notice before. "We need to talk."

Harry was conscious now. He could feel Malfoy's presence behind him, and he knew exactly what he had done, and who he had done it with.

And now a new sense of awfulness had intruded on him.

Malfoy might or might not be under some sort of spell created by Harry's magic. If he said he wasn't, then Harry might have to trust him.

But the fact remained that Harry was still technically married to Ginny, and he'd just done the same thing she'd done.

"Wakey, wakey, Potter," Malfoy murmured, and then a hand was traveling through his hair, fingers massaging his scalp in a way that Harry had done his best to prevent Ginny from finding out he enjoyed, because the strength of his own reaction embarrassed him. As if by malicious magic, Malfoy found every spot that made him arch his back, and he responded, *again* before he

could stop it. Malfoy made a soft contented sound, like a child with a new toy. "We need to talk."

"Yes, we do," said Harry, and marshaled all the strength he could in his voice. "For one thing, this is never, ever happening again."

Malfoy bit the side of his neck, hard.

Harry cried out and slammed a hand up, instinctively aiming to hit Malfoy in the jaw, but the other man rolled fluidly away from him, and then tried to pin him to the bed. Harry, remembering the humiliating ease with which he'd done it last time, tried to kick and get away, but all that did was trap him in an awkward pose with his head half-hanging off the bed and his legs firmly caught beneath Malfoy's weight.

And they were both naked. Somehow, Harry had forgotten that, and now was a bad time to remember it. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling his skin flush with heat, and hoping that it didn't make any difference in the sensations Malfoy felt.

"This is the way things are," Malfoy said calmly. "We're both attracted to each other. Ignoring it doesn't work. So we'll be adults and acknowledge it, and sometimes ease it, so that it doesn't build up between us."

"Like *hell*, Malfoy." Harry counted to three beneath his breath, then bucked and twisted like an angled fish. That still didn't manage to throw Malfoy off, and the clamp of his hands down on Harry's hips might even have been a little contemptuous. Harry ground his teeth and tried not to cry with frustration. He could have done this easily enough in school. Had he really grown that flabby in five years? "The objections I raised the first time you proposed this still stand, even assuming that you really *aren't* being manipulated by my magic—"

"I'm not," Malfoy whispered into his ear. "I know what that feels like. It isn't happening this time."

Harry decided to keep his objections—that Malfoy couldn't possibly be sure, for one thing, and that his magic and Voldemort's might be different, for another—firmly to himself for right now. Malfoy would probably bite him again if he tried to protest. "It's not professional," he said. "It constitutes cheating on my wife. And I'm not gay."

"The lack of sex is making us act more unprofessional than having it does," Malfoy said, without hesitation. Harry felt a prickle of unease and more intense frustration slide up his spine as he realized that he was trying to argue with someone who made his *living* debating people who'd like nothing better than to win fights against him. "She cheated first, and soon enough she won't even be your wife. And either there are things you don't know about yourself, Harry, or your body knows what it wants more than you do, and gender doesn't really enter into its calculations, any more than it enters into mine." He ran a hand down Harry's hip. "Do you have anything else stupid to say now, or can I get on with telling you that you're rather handsome and asking about that scar on your right leg?"

"For fuck's *sake*," Harry hissed. "I don't want to do this. I'm not comfortable with it."

Malfoy laughed into his ear. Harry hated the way it made him shiver. "I would never have guessed either of those things from the way you responded to me just now."

"It's *wrong*," Harry repeated. He knew he was being stubborn, but surely stubbornness was in order for the sake of defending one's ethics, if not at any other time.

Malfoy was silent for a time, and Harry began to hope that he'd give up in sheer frustration. Then Malfoy pulled his shoulder, and Harry rolled over. Perhaps Malfoy would get off him and storm from the room now.

What he got instead was a kiss, deep and thorough and searching. This time, the brush of their tongues was less a battle and more a question, as though Malfoy had certain very specific answers he wanted.

Harry tried not to be aroused or exhilarated by it, but it was impossible. This was like *nothing* he'd done with Ginny, and that alone lessened the feeling of cheating. His hands twitched like crabs, and then crept up and into Malfoy's hair, exactly as they had before.

Malfoy pulled back the moment they did, and gazed at him from so close that Harry's eyes blurred trying to make out his features. His hand stroked Harry's cheek. The one thing he was sure of, now, was that Malfoy wasn't smiling.

"I don't think that whatever is meant to happen between us really cares about rules, or laws, or ethics, or your supposed sexual orientation," Malfoy whispered.

Harry licked his lips, and tried to restrain a moan at the way their closeness made his tongue scrape against Malfoy's mouth. The differences from Ginny were prominent if he concentrated on them—Malfoy's lips were rougher, for example, and not as curved—but that only intensified his excitement. "So it's just sex, then," he summed up.

"It's not 'just' anything." Malfoy kissed him again, this time on the neck, and Harry liked and tried not to like the way the tongue scraped the tendons of his throat. "When was the last time you had sex like that?"

Harry bit his lip. He would have dearly liked to say, "Last year," but even that answer was a bit pathetic. Besides, it wasn't true that his last sexual encounter with Ginny had been anything like that. He tried to turn his head away.

"Ah, ah, Harry." Malfoy's hand curved under his chin and turned his head back. "Really, even if it's 'just' passion, as you put it, I rather like it. I certainly wouldn't mind doing it again." His voice dipped and softened. "Would you?"

"My objections—"

"Obviously don't mean much," and Malfoy's voice was smug enough that Harry wanted to punch him, "since you did it anyway."

Harry closed his eyes and tried as best as he could to weigh his scruples when Malfoy had begun to rock back and forth, softly and temptingly, on top of him. Perhaps the fear that it would make them both unprofessional was weak, after all. There was no *proof* that Malfoy couldn't function in the courtroom like this. He must have had an active sex life at some points in the past during a case.

But was it ever with his client?

Harry opened his eyes and asked.

Malfoy chuckled. "No."

"Then how can you—"

"Because I have faith in myself." Malfoy rolled against his chest, tickling Harry's nipples with his hair and making him jump as little shocks of delight struck him. "Besides, sexual frustration has been making me more tense these last few days than sex with you will."

"We can't let Zabini and Ginny find out."

"Of course not." Malfoy looked at Harry upside-down, as if to ask whether he thought he was stupid.

"I *am* still married to Ginny—"

"Does she deserve *any* consideration from you?" Malfoy ran an absently admiring hand up Harry's flank, and really, Harry wished he wouldn't do that, because his treating this like meaningless sex would have convinced Harry he was not making a mistake more easily. "Who you share your body and your bed with is your business."

"She isn't the important person. My conscience is."

"And do you consider this really wrong?" Malfoy looked up at him upside-down again. "Or do you just *think* you should?" He persisted when Harry hesitated. "Come on, let's hear some of that Gryffindor honesty."

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "I can't answer that yet."

"Then why should it stand in the way?"

Harry couldn't answer that, either, so he slid onto the next objection. "And I'm not gay."

"Obviously not, since you once found *her* attractive." Malfoy shuddered lightly. "But you might be bisexual, which is the term that Pansy tends to apply to me. Or you might be someone like *I* consider myself, someone who finds people attractive instead of any single gender. Or maybe Weasley turned you gay." He snickered. "If you like the sex and you enjoy it, Potter, does it *matter*?"

And Harry couldn't answer that, either.

He was rather distressed to find all his rock-solid good reasons for rejecting a liaison with Malfoy melting into thin air.

He chewed his lip and lay thinking a moment longer. Maybe—maybe it *wouldn't* be so bad. He didn't intend to make a future with Malfoy. They could barely stand one another, and once they no longer had the case bonding them together, they'd go their separate ways. Perhaps it wasn't so wrong to indulge in a bit of sex that might, as Malfoy had said, ease their frustration with one another and improve their presence in the courtroom.

Maybe.

Just for a little while.

Because Harry did know what he wanted now, and while he didn't think he should want it, he couldn't really find any reason to reject it.

Draco could read the decision in Harry's eyes so easily. He had to restrain a fit of laughter. Of course, that was much better than restraining homicidal urges, the way he'd been before he rode Harry.

The great fool really thought that nothing would happen as a result of this, and they could part ways happily at the end. It was in the assessing gaze he gave Draco, as if he were measuring up a potential sex partner and not a potential lover. Draco had seen that look many times, in the eyes of Slytherins far more often than Gryffindors.

And if that was all this led to, a bit of fun, Draco didn't really mind. He got to relieve his frustrations, have great sex, and discover an excellent substitute for fighting with Harry all at once.

He didn't think it would stay that tame, though. The intensity between them was more than Draco had sometimes had even with people he'd fucked twenty times. No, things would deepen and probably whirl them both into a great bloody mess, because that was the way things *happened* between him and Harry.

Whichever one it led to, Draco could easily live with it.

Harry smiled then, or at least gave him a challenging grin. "All right," he said, and kissed Draco casually, as if this had been all his decision.

Draco laughed inwardly and rolled Potter back over, more than eager to go again.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Concerned Friends

Draco was talking quietly with his mother the next morning when Seeky brought him a familiar black owl with glittering amber eyes, riding on his fist as if it had been born to do something so silly and make it look dignified. Draco raised an eyebrow as he took the letter the owl had been carrying. He had expected one of these *eventually*, but quite apart from the fact that he and his friends usually didn't communicate when he was working on cases, Pansy and Theodore had been out of the country for a month.

"Who is that from, Draco?" Narcissa asked, with a soft edge in her voice that could easily become screams if she didn't like the answer.

Luckily, she had never shown any bad reaction to the sound of Pansy's name. "Pansy," he murmured, and opened the envelope. There was only a single sheet of parchment inside, which surprised him again. He would have thought Pansy would write him a long letter detailing all her adventures on their travels, as well as all the horrible hotel service in the backwards wizarding communities of unenlightened Europe.

The letter was very simple. It didn't even contain a salutation. Of course, Pansy could count on no one else in the Manor opening Draco's post.

You chose Potter over Blaise. Something interesting must have happened. I'll be visiting you at ten on the morning you receive this.

Pansy Parkinson-Nott.

It was half-past nine now. Draco narrowed his eyes and thought for a moment. It was useless to forbid Pansy from coming, of course; she would only appear anyway, all the more filled with ravening curiosity for being temporarily put off.

No, the main question was whether he should have her meet Harry at this time or not. The git was still sleeping, as though the elementary snogging and wanking he'd shared with Draco yesterday had exhausted him. If he showed up in front of Pansy, of *course* he couldn't keep it to himself. He'd probably start to blush the moment he saw her.

Draco didn't really think Pansy would betray the fact of their affair to Blaise.

Probably.

There was always the possibility that the identity of his lover would overrule her confidence that Draco himself knew what was best for him.

"I'd like to have fish for breakfast," Narcissa said decisively. "Arrange it, Draco."

Draco kissed her brow, stood, and nodded to Seeky. "See to it," he murmured as he walked out of the room. "Oh, and Seeky?" The house-elf gazed up at him solemnly, eyes shining like green jewels. "Make sure that Mr. Potter stays in his room for now, and away from Pansy. Arrange entertainment for him if you must."

"Seeky understands," Seeky said in a hushed voice, and vanished.

The elf really might, at that, Draco reflected as he quickened his strides towards the reception room and the Floo connection that Pansy always used. After all, the house-elves had been about that time Pansy thought Draco was using experimental potions to console himself for a temporary setback in a case. They'd all come to Draco's hoarse shout just as Pansy tried to cast a Body-Bind on him so she could take him to St. Mungo's. She was—well, just a bit overprotective where Draco's health and reputation were concerned.

And no matter how much good Harry might do for one of those things, there was no doubt that he would affect the other among Draco's social circles, and not *necessarily* in a positive way. Draco just had to persuade Pansy to see the good side.

Somehow.

Harry had already tried to leave his room, and found a squeaking, apologetic, but oddly determined house-elf in his way. He had shrugged and decided that he might as well read the bundle of papers that Hedwig had brought back from Hermione. Her letter chided him for using her for research, asked a few probing questions about Malfoy that Harry didn't even want to *think* of the answers to, and categorized the parchments she'd sent him in order by date, relevance, and size.

How can I help asking her for help with research, when she does it anyway, and so well? Harry wondered, as he sat back to eat, alternating reading with bites from the breakfast that Seeky had agreed to bring him.

The newspaper clips were at least illuminating. Lucius Malfoy had broken out of Azkaban due to weakened defenses and led the Aurors on a merry chase; they'd nearly cornered him once in Scotland, where he'd seemingly run to try and attack Hogwarts, but then he'd eluded them for a month altogether. When they finally caught up with news of his whereabouts again, he was firmly ensconced in Sweden.

Why Sweden? Harry wondered, but other newspaper articles gave him the answer. Apparently a few of the Death Eaters who had followed Voldemort in his first rising had been too old—or too wise—to help him directly in battle when he rose for the second time, but they'd aided him financially and at a distance, and established a small "sanctuary" in Sweden. The wizarding governments of Sweden and Britain had apparently had a large argument sometime in the last century, and in retaliation, Sweden had made the laws for retrieving British wizards who fled to its community as exiles or criminals particularly labyrinthine. Since no one really cared to have the obviously insane Lucius Malfoy back among them, no serious attempt had been made to extradite him.

And there solid information ended. The *Daily Prophet* had also printed interviews with various people who claimed to have seen Lucius on this day or that, torturing a small furry animal or threatening a family member, simply because they were the *Daily Prophet*, and thus the same people who regularly employed Rita Skeeter. But if he ever truly ventured back to Britain, there was no record of it.

No record on the true causes of Lucius Malfoy's madness, either, whether it was just Azkaban or something else, and therefore no founded speculation on how dangerous he was.

One article did give Harry a very small clue as to the probable whereabouts of the Death Eater sanctuary: in the mountains, near a sanctuary for magical creatures. One of the *Prophet's* interviewees had spoken about it, promising to give more concrete information the next day, and promptly been brutally murdered overnight. The Dark Mark had hovered above his house, the *Prophet* pronounced.

Here Harry had to pause in his reading, because, unusually, he heard the sound of raised voices beyond his door. He rose to his feet in concern. His first thought was that Lucius had returned, his second that perhaps Narcissa had gone into one of her bouts with madness and needed help.

But Seeky appeared in the next instant, with a stern glare. "Master Harry Potter must not go beyond the door!"

"All right," said Harry slowly, sitting down, and listening again. This time, he could make out Malfoy's voice shouting back, something he would definitely not have done at his mother, and probably not at his father, either, considering how he'd tried to make himself small and calm when Lucius appeared.

In fact, he sounded rather like—

Harry coughed, and hoped the house-elf would attach no significance to his blush. "Can you tell me who's here, at least?" he asked.

"Mistress Parkinson-Nott," the elf said, ears standing up straight now that Harry showed no sign of venturing near the door.

Harry winced, and the last traces of resentment that he'd been locked in here melted away. He hadn't really known what he wanted to say to Malfoy anyway, after yesterday; now he could imagine excellent reasons to keep away from any argument that echoed like this one.

I assume that Malfoy's told her about—us.

"I know you must have good reason for betraying one of your oldest friends. I just hope it wasn't a pair of pretty green eyes."

Draco knew he didn't choke, *knew* it. Pansy's beady little gaze could stop scrutinizing him at any moment now. "Of course not," he said coolly as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "Potter offered me more money. And I don't know where you got the impression that Blaise is one of my *oldest* friends. He only truly started paying attention to me in fifth year, remember? When he couldn't ignore me any longer."

Pansy laughed at that, but she still watched him with much too much knowledge as she took a seat in front of the fire in his reception room. "I'll have cognac," she said to the house-elf who appeared, and glanced back at Draco. "Do you have any idea of the *perfectly* dreadful stuff they try to serve you abroad? No, of course you don't, since you're always too busy working to take a proper holiday. Well, trust me, it's dreadful." Her gaze sharpened again. "And so this had nothing to do with the way that you practically devoured Potter with your eyes during your sixth year in Hogwarts?"

Draco relaxed slightly. Pansy wasn't prescient; he tended to give too much credit to her right guesses and ignore the numerous times she'd been wrong, a habit he promised to stop himself from indulging in in the future. For example, she still thought he'd been nursing some enormous crush on Harry in sixth year, even though Draco had spent most of the time worrying about his family's lives and his own. "Nothing at all," he replied, sitting down. "I never expected perfect little happily married Harry Potter to divorce his wife, after all. But, tell me the truth, Pansy: if *you* were an Arguer, would *you* have turned down this case?"

"I don't think so, no," Pansy said, leaning back in her chair and squinting thoughtfully at the ceiling. The house-elf brought her cognac, but she didn't bother even glancing at it before she drank. "Of course, *I* wouldn't refuse it because of the money and the prestige. *You* wouldn't refuse it because you've always been much too attracted to powerful wizards for your own good." She gave Draco a look from the corner of her eye that shouldn't have been that knowing, when most of her face was simply in profile. "And I've run into Potter a few times in Diagon Alley since the war. I know perfectly well what he's become, Draco."

Draco did have enough practice in controlling his emotions to roll his eyes and simply maintain a dignified silence.

"I've read the papers, of course," Pansy said, dipping two fingertips in the cognac and bringing them to her lips, then leaning back further as if she wanted to see the whole of the mural on the ceiling. Draco did have to admit it was rather fascinating, showing one of his ancestors fighting a dragon. "But they only tell me about the wizarding world's perception of the case, and we know it's likely to be wrong. Tell me, Draco, what do *you* think of it?"

Perhaps they were on slightly steadier ground now. Draco liked to think so, even though he was probably wrong. "It's been hard, of course, with Potter's celebrity and his congenital unwillingness to *take advantage* of powers any Slytherin would know instinctively how to use," he said in a tart voice. "But it's improving at last, thank God." He smirked a bit, thinking of the next strike he'd prepared against Blaise and his slut. "It should be even better in a few days."

Pansy tilted back down to face him so fast that she almost spilled her cognac. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?" Draco cocked his head and fluttered his eyelashes at her.

"Tell me what strategy you have that makes you smirk that way." Pansy impatiently tapped her fingers on her wrist. Her dress robes, a pale lavender that Draco could never convince her made her skin look pale and washed-out, rustled around her as she leaned forwards. "You *know* I won't betray you to Blaise, Draco. He made his own choice, taking up with a blood traitor like that."

"Well…" Draco drawled.

Pansy held her breath.

"No," Draco said, and gave her a sharp, sweet smile. "I think I'd prefer to leave this unspoken right now—unless Potter asks me, of course. I could hardly refuse him a little tidbit of knowledge like that."

Pansy abruptly stared at him. Draco glanced down at his robes and subtly picked at his teeth with his tongue, wondering if he'd somehow left a fragment of food where it shouldn't be from breakfast this morning.

"You'd never say something like that," Pansy said, her voice shaking a bit, "not unless—you wouldn't hide this plan from me and not *him*, unless—" Her eyes widened and her face paled to the point that Draco was frightened for her. Then she slammed to her feet and crossed the floorboards between them, staring hard into Draco's eyes all the while.

"You're shagging him," she hissed. "You idiot!"

"*Pansy!*" How the hell did she *do* that? Draco drew himself up and tilted his head with haughty, stubborn pride. "I have no idea where you *get* these vile ideas, but you were mistaken about any

infatuation I had with Potter in school, and you're mistaken about my attraction to powerful wizards, and you're mistaken about this, too—"

"I am *not!*" Pansy's eyes and cheeks were bright with fury. "Are you *insane,* Draco? If anything could jeopardize your case, *this* could! You know that the spell cast on the judge responds most strongly to members of the Wizengamot and other wizards and witches holding important positions, and *need I remind you* that seven current members of the Wizengamot rather despise any wizard who sleeps with another wizard?" Her voice soared, to the point that Draco was quite sure she would have awakened Potter if he weren't already awake. "This is the worst thing you could do, you *prat!*"

"I know everything you're saying, Pansy." Draco did not allow any sign of either fear or anger into his voice or eyes. He wouldn't admit he had made a mistake, the way she seemed to be waiting for him to do, because he *hadn't*. "What I do with Potter behind closed doors is my business, and no one will find out before the end of the trial—"

"You can't *know* that!" Pansy's voice dipped a bit, but only to become more venomous. "You utter and absolute *dunderhead.*"

"I've been careful—"

"It's a risk no Slytherin in his right mind would take." Pansy shook her head in disgust. "I would say that Potter must have tricked you into it, but the man couldn't trick a baby. No, it was the magic, wasn't it? You just saw Potter walk in clothed in that strength, and your tongue sagged out of your mouth and entangled your feet so that you fell and hit your head, and came back up convinced that fucking your very *male*, very *famous,* client is a good idea!"

Pansy was annoying to the point of meriting an Unforgivable Curse sometimes, Draco thought, but she did come up with some rather arresting images.

"It was nothing like that," he said tightly. "He was rather reluctant at first, in fact—"

"Who would have thought?" Pansy threw her hands up in a gesture of marveling. "Somewhere along the way, the consummate Gryffindor developed some sense!"

"It was nothing like that," Draco repeated. He had regained some of his calm, and raised an eyebrow at Pansy when she had the gall to actually stamp her foot at him. "It's simply play, just another element of the excitement this trial is currently bringing to my life. That is *all*, Pansy, and I'd thank you not to make more of it than it is."

Pansy started to lower her head, and Draco rather expected a melodramatic movement, such as clapping her forehead into her palm. But she stopped halfway there, and her eyes rose and moved over Draco's shoulder. Draco turned, expecting to see Potter there, but no one had appeared. He realized in a moment that Pansy had simply dropped into one of her trances, wherein she put pieces of a puzzle together in such a way that they made sense. At least, in such a way that they

made sense to a witch with occasional flashes of intelligence in between the exaggerated emotional reactions.

"Oh," Pansy said at last, and this time she did strike her brow with her palm, but she was shaking her head and there was a broad smile on her face. "Oh, yes, of course. I really should have realized this sooner. What an *idiot* I am."

"What?" Draco demanded.

Pansy gave him a bright smile, and then leaned forwards and kissed him on the cheek, cupping his chin at the same moment, a gesture she only gave him when she was feeling unexpectedly tender towards him. "Everything will work out for the best, you'll see, Draco!" she chirped gaily, and then sailed towards the fireplace.

"Pansy, for God's sake—" Draco chased her, trying to make it look as if that weren't what he was doing. "What do you *mean*?" he demanded of her back, as she cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames.

She smiled at him one more time, and her eyes were happier than he had seen them since the day when the Healers announced that she'd be able to have a baby after all, something that had been uncertain with some of the spell damage Theodore had taken during the war. "Nothing at all!" she said. "Do just as you're doing, Draco. I'm the one who made the mistake, not you, and now I'm going to repair it as best as I can." She winked at him, Summoned her cognac, and then vanished into the fire with a call of, "Nott's Corner!"

Draco was left to stare at the fireplace and shake his head. Then he went up to Harry's room, because he had to command Seeky to let him go, and because he was anxious enough to be in the mood for sex.

Harry sucked the tip of the quill, not least because Malfoy would say it was a disgusting habit, and contemplated the parchment in front of him. It had finally occurred to him that, with the exception of Hermione, he *hadn't* really tried to make any of his friends or surrogate family understand what had happened between him and Ginny. It was no wonder they believed Ginny, when they saw her every day and could see her tears and hear her sob story. His hiding out in Malfoy Manor hadn't helped, either. He'd sent letters to them, sure, but more in the nature of a demand that they tell him where *they* stood. It was time that he made his own standing clear, and tried to be a little more conciliatory—more active, in fact.

So he dried the quill on his sleeve, then dipped it into ink and began to compose a letter to Ron.

He made it as simple as he could, because, no matter what Malfoy said, Harry knew he wasn't good with words.

Dear Ron:

I know you might not want to read this letter, but I hope you will. This is my side of the story of what happened between me and Ginny:

I thought we were content. We hadn't spoken nearly as much or been nearly as happy since last year when she lost the baby, but Hermione told me she needed space, and I agreed. I had no idea she'd chosen to go to Zabini, or that she wanted another baby so badly she would sleep with someone else, or that she blamed me for her losing the first one. She's claimed she was afraid of me all along, but I saw no sign of that either. I knew she was disappointed that I didn't choose to be a Quidditch player or an Auror, just like you and Hermione were, but I thought she'd accepted my decision to live quietly. I just didn't know her very well, and that part of it is *my fault.*

I chose to get a divorce from her because she told me that she intended to bring a divorce case against me first. That was the only reason. I chose Malfoy because he's the best Arguer in Britain and Hermione recommended him. Those were the only reasons. I know that none of that changes the stress of the case on your family or that you hated Malfoy in school, but—well, I think we have to deal with what's happening now, not what happened in Hogwarts. I thought Ginny and I were just like we were in Hogwarts, and look how much trouble that *caused.*

I'm not in love with Ginny anymore.

Here he paused and stared at the far wall.

Finally, he had to write: *I don't know why I fell out of love with her. I'm still trying to figure that out. But, Ron, I'm not ever going to come back to her. That part of my life is over.*

I promise that I won't let Malfoy turn me against you. But I won't drop the case, and since Ginny is the one who wanted a divorce from me in the first place, then I consider it her fault we're in the courtroom now. I've started to regain control of my anger and my magic and have some ambition again. Those are things I do *owe Malfoy for, so try not to hate him, all right?*

Or me, mate. You're my best friend, Ron, my first friend. I really don't want you to hate me.

Love,

Harry.

Harry folded the letter with a sense of satisfaction, then opened the window of his room and concentrated. Hedwig fluttered up in a few minutes, following the call of his magic—a wandless, wordless spell that Harry had perfected during the war, when he sometimes needed to send a message to someone else without being able to Summon or find another owl. It helped that Hedwig was far more intelligent than the average bird.

He bound the letter to her leg, speaking soft words and petting her head. She nudged her beak against him, and he smiled. "Take this to Ron, girl," he said, and she fluttered her wings as though complaining about the lack of a harder task, but did it.

Harry had just closed the window when he heard the door open. He turned and glanced in surprise at Malfoy, leaning against it.

"Ah," Harry said. "I thought you'd decided to cage the dangerous beast up for a time."

"No," Malfoy said, and then he was stalking towards him with a predatory movement that Harry knew well. "I have no interest in locking any part of you up." His eyes dropped to Harry's groin in obvious allusion.

Harry felt the first stirrings of arousal, and decided that he might as well go along with them. Why not? He and Malfoy both seemed to enjoy this, it meant nothing lasting, and Harry was sick of conducting arguments with himself in which he had the support of neither his body or another human being.

It's rather comforting, that it all means nothing.

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Chapter: 17

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—What Friends Will Do

"We should discuss what claim we'll ask Judge Witherbone for."

Draco turned his head with a frown. He had planned to enjoy a quiet morning with Harry, since he couldn't plan the next strike in the war until word on some of Blaise's more *interesting* past exploits returned to him, and their next court date wasn't today. But Harry seemed to have decided that lounging in Draco's bedroom, larger and more comfortable than his, didn't appeal to him. He was on his feet and pacing back and forth in front of the large windows that dominated the northern wall. He hadn't even said a word about the scene they looked out on, apple trees crowded with blossom (it was an enchanted scene, of course, completely wrong for this season of the year, but that didn't mean it wasn't beautiful).

"Would it kill you to read a book, Potter?" Draco asked his back. "Or to think about something else for once?" He arched his neck helpfully and stretched out on the bed, to show Harry some appropriate subject matter for his brain.

"Witherbone said she would let us have whatever single demand we asked for." Harry tossed his head back and glanced at Draco over one shoulder. "I simply think it's bad policy not to speak

about this."

"I had planned to do it tomorrow," said Draco. "I want—"

"To snog, probably," Harry interrupted, boredom in his voice. "But we've been doing that for the past two days, and I'm beginning to wonder if *you* ever think about anything else." He snorted and shook his head again, restlessly as a dragon with some fool trying to tame it. "If I just wanted someone to grope and wank with, I really *would* have cheated on Ginny as soon as she stopped sleeping with me."

Draco sat up, but for some moments, his outrage was so great that he couldn't think of any words to speak. Yes, he knew Harry regarded what went on between them as nothing more than sex, but to *say* something like that-!

Before he could get a word out about it, soundless wings beat, and a post owl soared through the nearest window and landed on Draco's bed. It carried an edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Draco frowned—the morning one had come, and the evening one wasn't due for some time—but he knew that the paper sometimes printed special midmorning editions when something large had happened, like a Ministerial election. Besides, at the moment lavishing attention on the owl and taking its burden from it was more attractive than watching the pacing Potter or getting into another screaming match with him.

The headline made him swear. Potter pivoted around on one heel at once. "What is it?" he demanded. "Have Zabini and Ginny done something else?"

"No," Draco said, still hardly able to believe he'd read the headline he just had, even though it stood in front of him in letters an inch high—nearly as big as some of the headlines the *Prophet* had used for the divorce case. "But Pansy has."

The headline said:

WEASLEY PRODUCTS RELEASED IN DIAGON ALLEY!

Former Slytherin Believed to Be Responsible

The moving photograph on the front page showed wizards rolling on the ground, scratching frantically at their heads and robes, probably because of the small creatures like termites running all over them. Beneath that was another picture, this one of a woman who was unmistakably Pansy tossing Puffskeins out the windows of the Weasley twins' shop. She was laughing, and didn't seem to notice the figures who kept sticking out their wands behind her, trying to curse her—only to have the smoke roiling out from further inside the shop obscure their aim.

"What did she do?" Potter asked, and Draco shook himself and held out the paper so he could read. Then he remembered that Potter was being a git and Draco didn't feel charitable towards him at the moment, but by then Potter already had the paper and was studying the headline with

a gratifying expression of awe on his face.

"She never seemed that dangerous in school," he muttered, and then whirled around to face Draco. "*Why* did she do this? Does she have some reason to hate Zabini, too?"

"Distraction," Draco muttered, his mind working. He still didn't know everything about what Pansy had decided, but he could divine some of it now that he saw what the results were. "She knows that it could be dangerous for us if Blaise or your wife found out about our shagging—"

"We aren't *shagging*—"

"Excuse me," Draco said, and made sure his voice could cut glass. "*Using each other for something remarkably like sex,* then. Not only that, there are Wizengamot members who don't care for gay—or bisexual—wizards."

"Why do they care?" Potter looked bewildered, pushing his glasses further up his nose with one finger.

"Muggle-raised," Draco said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Or part of an older generation that saw it as disgraceful for a wizard or witch to prefer his or her own sex instead of having children to increase the numbers of pure-bloods." He gestured to the newspaper. "Pansy has just given them something else to think about. Believe me, a simple act of vandalism or stealing in the Weasleys' shop isn't all she's done. She's probably planted several things underground, other tricks that will only surface slowly."

"That might distract the Wizengamot," Potter admitted, with a slight frown. "Will it really make Zabini look the other way, too?"

Draco smiled grimly. "Yes. She knows him, and she could be dangerous to him, if she wanted to be. He'll assume she's chosen my side and that these distractions are larger cover-ups for something else—something aimed at him. He'll be so busy staring intently in her direction that he probably won't notice my next plan." He shook his head in admiration. God knew why Pansy made some of the decisions she did, and she could act like a spoiled rotten bitch when she wanted to, but Draco was glad to have her on his side.

"What *is* your next plan?" Potter asked. He'd been insistent about that, even when Draco told him that he wouldn't know the exact details himself until a few owls returned. But now, Draco thought, staring at him and thinking again of what Potter had implied with his words, he wouldn't have told him even if he knew.

"I fail to see why you would care," he murmured. "Since I'm only your Arguer and someone you snog occasionally."

"You're my Arguer, Malfoy," Potter said, in a voice that showed patience creaking at the seams. "That means that I *do* rely on you to win this case. What else did I pay you a thousand Galleons

for? And I expect to see results, soon."

Draco hissed and surged upright. Vague insults he might be able to let go; a direct challenge, never. "What crawled up your arse and died, Potter? You have been unconscionably rude to me all morning, and now *this*. You know as well as I do that you would have floundered in that courtroom on the first day without me. Blaise is a piss-poor Arguer, but at least he has some idea of where to look for legal information. *You* would have tried to fly on a combination of your reputation and Granger's research skills, and ended up living in rags on the *street*, after your wife took everything away from you."

Potter grimaced and closed his eyes, massaging his temple for a moment as if he had a headache. Then he nodded sharply once, and said, "I apologize, Malfoy. You have helped me so far. I think I'll take a nap until lunch."

And before Draco could insist he remain and stop feeding him a line of bollocks, Potter strode swiftly away from him, stepped through the door of the bedroom, and shut it softly.

Draco hissed through his teeth to relieve his feelings, and then called sharply for Seeky. He would eat his lunch in his rooms today, and he *hoped* Potter went down to the dining room table hoping for food later and found none.

The idiot. Did he think that I'd just nod and smile and put up with his moods the way those friends of his must have done, to encourage him to think they're acceptable this late in his life?

I won't be insulted. I won't be treated like one of his adoring fans. I wonder how long it will take him to notice his life becoming unpleasant, now that he no longer has my good will.

Harry knew the cause of his restlessness. At home, he would have handled it by donning a Disillusionment Charm and venturing outside, either to tend viciously to his garden or to fly. He would have come back in to Ginny's nagging about why he couldn't play Quidditch professionally if he could fly for fun, but at least he would have exercised out the worst of his boiling emotions before they could transform into anger.

Now, though, he had to stay safe behind the wards of Malfoy Manor like a good little boy, and even if he thought explaining the cause of his emotions to Malfoy a good idea, the git would laugh at him.

It had been two days since he'd sent that letter to Ron, and he'd heard nothing.

Perhaps it meant Ron was just busy, Harry told himself. Perhaps Ron was taking the time to consider his words carefully, since he had to make peace at once with his best friend and his little sister.

But Harry feared it meant something else, something worse, and the suspicion and the anticipation of bad news tore through him like claws.

Harry whirled around in the middle of his room and cast himself on the bed with a loud curse. He tried to lie still, muffle his harsh breathing in the blankets and pillows, and expel his worry through calm meditation.

Nothing doing. His heart still beat as if it wanted to crash its way out of his chest; he still wanted to climb the curtains or yell at Malfoy or pull his wand out and burn every piece of antique furniture in sight.

He rolled back over and stared at the ceiling for a moment. His attempt to cut his mind loose from what he suspected didn't work, though; the thoughts just redoubled themselves, and he came up with wilder and wilder reasons for why Ron hadn't written. Maybe he'd meant to, and then he'd heard about Parkinson-Nott's attack on his brothers' shop, and he'd decided that meant Harry didn't want to be his friend anymore, and—

Harry squeezed his eyes shut.

He had never realized how alone he was until now. Take away Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and he had no one to talk to.

Malfoy—

Harry shoved away the suggestion of his own damaged brain before it could even form into a sentence. Malfoy wasn't a friend. They didn't even properly shag, and just as Harry had suspected would happen, the beginning of their "deeper involvement" with each other was fucking everything up. Harry had insulted Malfoy unacceptably. A guest didn't insult a host that way, nor a client his Arguer.

Yet if he stayed in the house, and nothing changed, and Ron didn't write to him in the next few hours, he wasn't sure he could keep from doing it again.

I need to leave, he thought, and sat up. *Fuck the danger. At least I'll have the magic to meet it.* He could feel his power crackling like fire under his skin, just yearning for an excuse to be used.

He spent a moment reaching out, touching the edges of the wards woven around the Manor and considering the strength of their magic. They were thickest on the doors and windows, but Harry had felt wards like these before, mostly around Death Eater meeting places. They were meant to prevent anyone from entering with hostile intent, and anyone from leaving without the owner's knowledge.

Well, Malfoy can know I've left, Harry decided, lifting his chin defiantly. *I'm going to Apparate the moment I'm beyond the reach of the wards, anyway, and he won't be able to trace me.*

He prepared himself quickly, gathering up his Invisibility Cloak and shrinking his Firebolt. Now that he had a purpose, the wild energy that had driven him quieted, and he made it down the main

stairs and to the front doors of the Manor with a relaxed, easy stride. He saw no one but Narcissa, sitting in front of an old harp and fingering the strings gently, with a frown on her face, as though she knew she had once known how to play but couldn't remember now. She looked up at him and smiled, and Harry gave her a faint, gallant bow in return.

He stalked out through the wards, and felt the faint tingle that would warn Malfoy he'd left. He snorted. Let the git yell at him all he wanted; Harry's spirits were already lifting without the enclosure of four walls around him.

He'd just drawn his wand to Apparate when an owl landed on his shoulder, talons digging deep. Harry gave a little yelp and reached up to remove it, only to find it impatiently thrusting a letter at him.

His heart gave a small bound when he recognized Ron's handwriting on the envelope, and also the charm on it. The owl was forced to give the letter to no one but him. It must have been circling around outside the wards, waiting for him to appear.

A twinge of magic at his back reminded Harry Malfoy might appear at any moment. He hastily draped his Cloak over himself, shooed the owl away, and Apparated with his letter to a place only he knew about, where he might read it in peace.

Draco had nearly finished a cucumber sandwich, and had cooled down a bit, when the wards told him what Potter had done. He sat bolt upright, with a curse that would have made his mother turn on him with a scolding frown if she were present and sane, and reached for his wand, wondering what in the world the idiot thought was worth risking his life for.

Even as he started to draw up the wards, though, he felt the flickering leap of Apparition. Potter was gone.

Draco pushed his ruined lunch aside, jerking his head at it when Seeky popped up with an inquiring squeak. He spent a few moments sitting still with his hands clenched and his eyes half-closed.

Perhaps he should have planned the sexual encounters with Potter better. It was true that they didn't seem to be adding much to their interaction at the moment. Potter's arrogance had increased, and Draco felt more than a touch of frustration—an emotion he could have easily subdued if he and Potter were still circling around each other.

So. The answer is twofold. Either step away from the idiot, and apologize for my conduct, and stop trying to have this sort of relationship with him. That will let me put this on a professional basis again—just take his money, Argue for him, and walk away when the case is done.

Or press him for more than this—this casual *thing he seems to think we have, where we snog half the time and fight the rest of it. If what he had was nothing more than nerves or bad temper, he should have felt free to tell me. It was something else, and he was keeping it to himself, and*

Potter's bottling up his emotions is never good news for anyone.

Draco would have to think on it for a time, decide what he needed, and present Potter with the choice when he returned.

He knew which one he *wanted,* of course. But not which one would truly be best. He leaned back against his pillows and prepared to do some hard considering.

Harry gave his head a little shake, ignoring the way the sea-breeze swept through his hair. He hesitated, looking out over the waves, and then shoved Ron's letter into a pocket, took his Invisibility Cloak off, and removed his shrunken Firebolt. A quick spell returned it to normal size.

Then he had mounted up and was off.

He'd only flown over the sea once or twice before, and never in the presence of such a strong wind—it looked like there was a storm coming on—or in such cold air. His robes were plastered flat to his body, and beneath the broomstick, the waves whirled around each other and tossed up foam that touched him when he swooped low enough. The sea growled on the shore as if it would like nothing more than to drown the land. Harry knew it would drown him if he fell in just as eagerly.

He didn't care.

For the first time in far too long, he felt *free.* And for the first time since Malfoy had encouraged him to express his anger, he didn't feel as if his emotions were filling up too large a space inside his chest.

He twisted around and flew upside-down, his hair becoming soaked in moments. Salt coated his face. Harry laughed and let his hands dangle free, nearly upsetting his balance and sending himself plunging. When he pulled up again, with a twist that made the broom corkscrew as he flung his leg back around it, he plunged further, and welcomed it with a wild yell.

Up, down, around, sideways, high and then a dive from two hundred feet in the air that would have broken his neck if he hit the water. He didn't have to worry about searching for a Snitch; he didn't have to worry about flying fast enough to get out of the way of Bludgers. That was what none of the people who urged him to play professional Quidditch again ever understood. If he did, he couldn't concentrate just on the flying. He would have to do a myriad other things that could easily get him hurt or killed.

This way, if he got hurt or killed, it would simply be from his own daring.

He flew straight into the wind at last, a hard enough blast catching him to make his face flush red and tears sting from his eyes. But he didn't care. He pulled up and screamed, once, a loud, defiant sound that rang out over the ocean and then tumbled into it, swallowed by the endless grumble of

the water.

At last, spent and with a smug assurance that, yes, this had been the absolute best thing he could have done, Harry flew back to the shore and settled on a rock, kicking his boots idly in the sand a few times as he pulled out Ron's letter. He knew no one would disturb him here. This was the beach near the cave where Voldemort had once hidden the locket Horcrux. Harry had come here before when he absolutely had to think or be alone, and it had done him good.

Never as much good as this time, though, when he'd let his emotions play around him without fear of his magic damaging anything.

Feeling ready to face whatever was in the letter, good news or the ending of their friendship, Harry tore it open.

Harry, mate:

I considered what you had to say, and I think you're right. Nothing will ever be the same again, at least not in your and Ginny's marriage. And it'll be a long, long time before you can be in the same house without yelling at each other, I think.

But I want our friendship to survive. I just need reassurance that you're *the one making these decisions, not that bastard Malfoy.*

Listen. Ginny won't be in the Burrow at all for the next few days. Can you come over? I think we should talk about this face-to-face, and with Dad there, too. (Mum is with Ginny, picking out baby clothes and giving her tips about avoiding stress).

Ron.

Harry hesitated for a long moment when he'd finished reading the letter, and stroked the envelope, and stared, and thought.

Malfoy would be furious if Harry saw and talked to the Weasleys without his counsel.

On the other hand, Ron would be furious at the mere suggestion of bringing Malfoy along.

They *should* talk face-to-face.

On the other hand, Harry didn't want to do something to jeopardize the trial. Now that he'd got rid of his wildness, he was feeling more and more guilty about the way he'd treated Malfoy that morning.

He didn't *like* the git, and the sex—well, the sex had been a mistake, that was all, and it would have to stop, but he could still treat him like a human being. Harry liked to think he was *that* decent.

He stood, with a small, determined nod. He'd Apparate back to the Manor, convince Malfoy of the importance of this, and get him to agree to Harry going to the Burrow alone. A dignified apology would be the last thing he expected.

He gathered up his broom and Cloak, glanced around to make sure he'd left nothing, and then Apparated to the Manor again.

Draco felt the twinge of the wards announcing Potter's return much sooner than he'd expected, before he'd made up his mind about the best course of action. He flicked his wand and changed the enchanted windows so that they now overlooked the part of the lawn Potter had landed on; Draco knew he would want to see him return.

Potter was walking casually towards the front doors of the Manor, his black hair mussed by something wilder than his own hands, his broom over his shoulder, his face set with sharp determination. He looked far more in control of himself than he had when Draco saw him last, and more powerful and self-confident than he had even speaking to the crowd in Diagon Alley.

And Draco's indecision sharpened to a burning full of *want*, and made his choice for him.

He knew what he desired, and it wasn't just Potter's power, nor to have sex with a handsome man and a famous wizard. It was to share in whatever experiences they were that could make Potter look like that.

He called for Seeky, and, when the house-elf appeared, murmured, without taking his eyes from Potter, "Harry Potter has returned. Make sure you direct him to me the moment he enters the house."

"Master," Seeky said, and bowed—at least, Draco assumed he bowed. He still couldn't look away.

Yes. Time to up the stakes. Draco bared his teeth a bit, his own self-confidence returning in a rush. *And Argue in a different dimension.*

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Eighteen—The Conversation

Harry had followed the house-elf that appeared for him the moment he entered the door of the Manor without complaint. For one thing, it was guiding him towards Malfoy's bedroom, and that gave him a little more time to decide what he would say.

He wouldn't back down. On the other hand, Malfoy might persuade him in spite of himself. The git *was* brilliant with words, and he seemed to want to continue having sex. Harry would have to use unusual fluency to persuade him that this had been a mistake.

Then he lifted his head, and let a faint smile play around the corners of his mouth. Well. He had the tools to do such a thing at his disposal, didn't he? Malfoy had praised his speaking after the press conference when he told the story of killing Voldemort, and said that he *could* talk people into doing what he wanted.

He was just receiving a practical exam without much time to theorize about it.

And he had always been at his best when doing practical things, like Defense Against the Dark Arts or playing Quidditch.

Straightening his back, Harry knocked once on the door of Malfoy's bedroom before he stepped inside. He *could* be polite. He just had to show that he could.

And keep his head in the rush of eloquently constructed sentences that were sure to follow.

Draco stared for a moment when Potter stepped through the door. For one thing, his face was red and his hair a rat's nest, as though he'd gone for a jog in a storm. Of course, that was easily explained by the broom he carried over his shoulder, glanced around for a place for, and leaned against the wall after another moment.

Later, Draco was to blame the broom, and his surprise at the fact that Potter was still carrying it, for the fact that he let Potter get the first word in.

"Malfoy." His voice was calm and steady, much like his brilliant green eyes. Draco arched a brow. He could read determination in that gaze, but he couldn't immediately see what it was directed towards. He was even more surprised when a faint smile ran around the edge of Potter's mouth. "I should feel comfortable enough to call you ' Draco' now that we've had sex, but I don't, and that's part of the problem."

"Really," Draco said. He let enough sarcasm slip into his voice that it should have unsettled Potter, but the high color in his cheeks meant any signs of a blush were nonexistent, and Potter just snorted at him slightly before continuing.

"Yes. I've acted like an idiot, and I apologize. I should have told you what troubled me this morning, instead of storming off."

Draco blinked again. *Who the fuck is this man with Potter's looks but none of his stammer?*

And then he recognized him. He'd seen him stand on a stage in front of six hundred people and talk as though the worst memory of his life were nothing more than a source of inspiration for others. Draco felt a lazy hunger stretch its wings inside him like a dragon. His interest increased again.

"And I think we should stop any relationship but the professional one," Potter continued, undaunted in the face of Draco's silence. "Obviously, it unbalances me, and makes me act like a prat towards you. I'd be much more comfortable if we can work together well, of course, but even if we can't, you're a brilliant Arguer without me to distract you. You'll still win the case." He gave Draco a smile nearly as winning as the laugh that Draco had heard the first night he stayed in the Manor.

Draco smiled a little himself. Potter relaxed the stiff stance of his shoulders, obviously thinking he'd won the argument without even letting it start.

"Not a chance," Draco said pleasantly, and some of the familiar frustration and outrage crept back into Potter's eyes. He looked handsome without them, of course, but it was good to see them again.

In fact, Draco realized, he rather liked looking at Potter's face in *all* his many moods.

Harry would have hissed at Malfoy if there was a snake in the room he could have concentrated on. As it was, he drummed a hand sharply against his leg before he could stop himself.

Calm, dignified, and professional, remember? he reminded himself. *And you really should have known he wouldn't let you win with just one round. Draco Malfoy lives to be annoying. It's no wonder he became an Arguer, so that he could annoy many people as much as possible with a legitimate cause.*

He was aware that the mocking insult was not entirely accurate even as he voiced it to himself. He had meant it when he said Malfoy was a brilliant Arguer. He wasn't going to lie about what he did and didn't feel.

And why not?

Harry threw the growing debate with his conscience into the back of his mind. There were more important things to find out now, like what the fuck Malfoy thought he was thinking.

"You *have* to see that the sex was a mistake," he said. "Why wouldn't it be? We don't know how to act towards each other now, Arguer and client or people who shag once in a while."

Malfoy laughed. Harry blinked. When he really let his mirth go like that, tilted his head back and let the curve of his throat show—

Damn it, not now!

"People who shag once in a while," Malfoy repeated. "And is that really all you thought we were, Harry? And is that all you really thought we'd remain?" His voice deepened, and *why* did inconvenient parts of Harry's anatomy have to take an interest? "I thought of us as lovers, frankly."

"You said that it meant nothing!" Harry snapped defensively.

Malfoy heaved a sigh. "Honesty doesn't come easily to me, but I can see I'll have to use it, with you. Otherwise you'll assume all sorts of dumb things." And before Harry could protest that he was *not* dumb, Malfoy crossed the floor between them in three strides and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry tried to shrug it off, but it stayed put. Heat he hated focusing on radiated out from the palm.

"I'm attracted to you," Malfoy said bluntly. "No, I don't think it has anything to do with your magic. No, it doesn't make me worry for my sexuality or my sanity. Yes, I enjoy the sex very much, but I've decided I want more than that. So just acting like client and Arguer now is no longer an option, because I want more."

"You don't always deserve what you want," Harry retorted.

Another infuriating chuckle. "You could have thrown me off with your magic, even when I was pinning you to the bed, if you didn't want me to kiss you, hold you, touch your cock," Malfoy said, as if such things were *normal* to say. "I know you're attracted to me, Harry. Do me the courtesy of telling me why, and if I think the reasons are stupid, then perhaps I'll agree that this is a mistake."

Potter squinted angrily, but he'd been caught by the offer that Draco would agree with him if he told the truth. Draco increased the pressure of his palm on Potter's shoulder, and smiled charmingly. That was the true secret to dealing with Gryffindors, he thought: offer them what they wanted while ensuring they'd fulfill your desires at the same time.

"All right," Potter said at last. "I'm sure you'll agree the reasons are *monumentally* stupid. After all, I've been married for five years and I'm going through a divorce right now. What else could this attraction be but a low point in my intelligence?"

Draco arched his eyebrow again, but said nothing. It was his opinion that Potter had failed to factor in the years he'd spent without much other companionship, and the nine months without a satisfactory sexual relationship of any kind.

"I think you're—handsome," Potter said, as if he had debated various adjectives and then discarded them as insults to Draco's masculinity. "I have no idea why, but your voice affects me. You display intelligence in the courtroom. I can't help thinking that you know so much that I'll never know, but you won't mock me for that." Potter made a wry face, as though to say he knew

he was stupid for thinking that. Draco bit his lip and forced himself to hold still so he wouldn't be tempted to soothe the self-contempt away with a kiss. "You've changed from your Hogwarts days, and I never thought you could. You temper your determination to hurt people and your selfishness with a ruthlessness that is—quite affecting." Potter shifted to move out from under his touch; Draco prevented that with a soft little squeeze. "And you get angry at me, you push me in ways that my friends and family can't, and you're supporting me through this." Potter shrugged. "I suppose that I like a challenge. Ginny offered me all sorts of challenges, but I didn't want to accept them. With you, I do."

Draco felt a building excitement simmer in his belly. It was always pleasant to listen to oneself being praised, of course, but in this case, Potter's attraction went deeper than the physical. Until that moment, Draco was not entirely sure that it did.

He once again held himself back from kissing Potter, who now looked in the mood to fight—to strike back at anything intimate, in fact. Draco remained in position and made his voice as friendly as possible.

"And your attraction bothers you because you can't understand it," he said soothingly. "Well, I think you've tried to run your life on 'understandable' reasons and lack of emotions for too long. You repressed yourself around your wife because you had to, but she's gone now, and you can emerge from your shell."

Harry frowned at him and then said something entirely unexpected. "Well, and this bothers me because I don't understand your attraction to me either, Malfoy. I'll accept your word that it isn't my magic." *For now,* his tone said. "So I'm left to conclude that it's just physical passion or some stupidity at odds with your Arguer instincts. Either's bad for your performance in the courtroom, and we've already proved that our rows are destructive to progress on the case outside the courtroom. We didn't even agree on what claim we'll want settled before I stormed out of the room this morning."

Draco whistled under his breath. If he believed what he'd said to Harry—that he had repressed his own emotions and made himself into some sort of automaton that would stay calm and quiet—perhaps this shouldn't be such a surprise. Harry would consider an emotionless recluse unattractive. But he was so much more than that, especially since Draco had challenged him to act angry and made him wake up.

Draco felt another surge of smug satisfaction. *If he didn't want me interested in him, he shouldn't have reacted. It's his own fault.*

"Harry, Harry, Harry," he said, and lifted his hand to run his fingers through Harry's hair. "Do you really have no idea how compelling you are?"

"Malfoy." Harry's voice was high-pitched with stress, and he shook his head furiously. "Don't."

Draco held his hands out to the sides, but kept the intimate tone in his voice, which he knew was

Harry's major objection. Harry was uneasy with intimacy. Understandable, in light of what had happened to him, but stupid, and therefore it would change. "It's far more than your magic or your looks—though if you had normal eyes, you'd have noticed your own beauty by now, too." Harry's mouth sagged open slightly as he stared at him. "If I challenge you, you do the same to me. I never know what you'll say or do next. You'll fight to save my life from my father right after you made plans to leave the Manor. I tell you that it's all right to be angry, and you're making an awe-inspiring speech a few days later, as if you'd been doing it for years. You randomly decide to dedicate your life to reading legal documents for poor wizards. And you came in here and tried to act dignified in front of me. It was a foredoomed effort, of course. You belong in an angry mood. Or a passionate one. But I appreciate it."

"You're mad," Harry said softly. "When I settle into a routine again, this—this suddenness you like will be gone."

"No," Draco disagreed patiently. "It's your restricted life for the last five years that's been a lie, not the one you're living now. And it's not just the spontaneity. I want to share you."

"With who?" Harry demanded, as if he thought Draco would summon some hidden lover from a corner at any moment. To Draco's intense joy, there was a touch of jealousy in his voice.

"With yourself, you great idiot," Draco said. "You have no idea how much you excite me when you throw yourself willingly into something. I haven't seen you do it with fucking yet, but when I see that, then my longing to share your body will only increase."

Ha, he thought, as he watched Harry's eyes widen. *Let's see him try to deny that.*

Harry now had a problem.

Malfoy's attraction to him was *still* stupid, because he wasn't all those things that Malfoy thought he was; those were only on the surface. On the other hand, trying to convince him of it would only make him stubbornly insist that Harry just couldn't see himself the way other people did.

And maybe—

Harry cocked his head as he thought about it, ignoring the way Malfoy fumed in front of him. Harry would rather take some time, think about this, and say the right thing than become involved in another needless argument.

Maybe he could *think* of the reasons as real, as long as he remembered that they were true for Malfoy and no one else.

He nodded. Why not? He'd had to remember plenty of times that Hermione's pet political causes were important to her, even when Harry knew no one else who believed in them. He'd avoided arguments with her about them, and it hadn't substantially affected their friendship. Whatever Malfoy wanted to call their—*relationship*, he supposed one had to say—it didn't greatly affect

what they could get out of it.

"All right," he said slowly. "I reckon I can understand that." He ignored Malfoy's grin of triumph and subtle movement towards him. There were still three more things to be settled, all of which mattered more than Malfoy's intrusions into his personal space. "But I still don't want to have sex with you anymore, we should decide on what we'll demand from Ginny, and Ron invited me to the Burrow as long as I don't bring you."

Malfoy stopped moving, a baffled expression on his face. Then he chuckled, as if Harry's words had proven him right. Which they hadn't, Harry thought, frowning at him. This wasn't spontaneous or whatever other snobbish word Malfoy wanted to use for it; it all made sense with the thoughts inside Harry's head.

"You don't want to have sex?" Malfoy asked, his words deliberately gentle and coaxing. "When you *know* that we're attracted to each other, and part of that is physical attraction?" He edged nearer again, nostrils flaring as if Harry had some unique scent he wanted to sniff in. Harry eyed him cautiously. He was *not* incense.

"It makes me nervous," he said. Malfoy would mock him for that, too, though maybe not to his face. But he *had* to understand that Harry didn't take this as a subject for joking, whatever Malfoy felt. "I don't trust you enough to speak to you like a lover, and whatever you think about this—" he waved a hand vaguely between them "—meaning something deeper, it can't. I mean, it doesn't yet. Not to me."

Malfoy blinked a few times, apparently considering this. Then he nodded briskly and clapped his hands. "If you don't want to have sex until after the trial is done," he said, "then I can wait. It *does* rather require a risk, anyway, a risk that Pansy also warned me about, and which she exercised her powers to protect us from."

"Won't she be in trouble for that?" Harry asked, allowing himself to be sidetracked for a moment from his suspicions of why Malfoy had agreed so easily.

Malfoy laughed. "She has plenty of money, an awful lot of status, and a frankly frightening army of people on her side," he said. "And if it came to it, her husband would fight the Aurors himself to prevent her from going to Azkaban. She'll be tied up in legal matters for a long time, but she can handle it."

Harry nodded. And then his memory caught up with him, and he realized what Malfoy had actually said. "I didn't say anything about having sex when the trial is done, either," he said.

Malfoy gazed at him innocently. "But you did say that you thought sex had affected the way we approached the trial negatively. When it's done, why shouldn't we be lovers if we want to?"

There was an eagerness in his tone that Harry didn't understand. "Because I probably won't trust you, still?"

Malfoy's amused smile deepened.

Oh, Harry. Such *an innocent. Really.*

But it was still understandable. Harry appeared to think Draco would open his eyes one morning, sit up, and say, "I no longer want Harry Potter! Well, that's a relief!" and stride downstairs for breakfast. And though that attitude would have infuriated Draco a short time ago—

Just a few minutes—

Now all he really felt was affection. And a smug tolerance for his own mistakes in handling Harry, because now he saw where he'd gone wrong.

He'd assumed that he was dealing with the repressed Harry, easily ordered about and dominated, even with all the signs pointing to the contrary. But this was an awakened Harry who would fight him fiercely on having his way outside the courtroom, a Harry who remembered their Hogwarts days and saw no solid reason to trust him—a Harry who would insist on being his equal.

And if he wanted more than a fling with him, Draco *would* have to gain that trust. He would wait. He would show Harry that he had enough respect, patience, and affection to step back and give him some space—and, in the meantime, display all his other good traits that attracted Harry to advantage, now that he knew what those traits were.

Harry was at his best in short, immediate conflicts. He wouldn't even assume that Draco might plan towards a more permanent arrangement.

Yes, this first attempt at romance had been a mistake. That didn't mean the next one would be.

"We'll see," was all he said. "Now. I think we should ask for the order that will convince your *wife* to leave you alone."

Harry blinked and shifted tracks with an obviousness that only grinding noises could have increased. "I assumed you would want the vaults from her."

Draco shook his head. "Whatever amount of money she wins—if she wins any at all—she could still send owls to brag and gloat and harass and plead with you. But we may not win the fight to bind her mouth at all. So I think we should take that now, and make sure we have some peace for you no matter what else happens." *Some peace for us, say rather.*

Harry relaxed and smiled a bit. "Yes, well, that makes sense. You can be rational when you want to be."

"Good," Draco said, and preened inwardly at the look Harry cast at him. *He doesn't realize his admiration is written all over his face whenever he glances at me, or he would at least try to*

subdue it. "And about Weasley. I should go with you."

Harry bristled. *Of course*. "He asked me to come alone. And he wouldn't try to trap me."

"Not on purpose," Draco said soothingly, though he didn't really believe that. "But he might do it by accident. Or whatever means of watching the house Blaise and your wife have could warn them that you've left. You're risking your life when you go outside." He let a touch of anger slip into his voice. "I'd rather have you scream obscenities at me than just vanish like that."

Harry folded his arms. "I needed to be alone. And I needed to fly."

"Show me that you can be rational now," Draco said, in what was not quite a demand. "I'm happy to send a house-elf with you next time you want to fly. But a house-elf can't enter another pure-blood wizarding household without permission from the house's owners—and somehow I don't think Molly Weasley would give hers." That coaxed a reluctant smile from Harry. "Come on, Harry," he said, and his voice softened. "I can shield myself under a Disillusionment Charm if you'd like."

Harry half-lidded his eyes, with the expression that Draco knew meant he was thinking. He waited. That innate Gryffindor sense of fair play would probably come to his rescue soon.

Harry's conscience was nagging him.

Malfoy had given way on the sex thing, and been surprisingly calm once they eased past the initial discomfort. He'd settled the matter of their claim from Ginny in the same decisive way he would have used in the courtroom. Surely Harry could give way on this one thing, and let Malfoy accompany him to the Burrow?

It might not be fair to Ron if I did.

But…

I think I should worry more about being fair to Malfoy than being fair to Ron right now.

He took a deep breath, then looked into Malfoy's eyes, and said, "All right. You can come."

Malfoy nodded, smiling, and briefly clasped his shoulder again. Shudders of warmth spread through Harry's body, but he ignored them. They were not having sex now, after all.

Or ever again.

That caused a slight spasm of sadness in him, but Harry ignored that, too. He was just mourning the loss of the first sex partner he'd had since Ginny—the *only* one he'd ever had besides Ginny—not the loss of Malfoy specifically.

Li—

Harry strangled his conscience before it could speak further, and listened to Malfoy saying, "We can leave as soon as you've had something to eat and I've made sure my mother is settled with the house-elves."

Harry's stomach chose that moment to rumble, so he nodded and turned for the bedroom door. He couldn't help taking a moment to look back at Malfoy, who stood gazing towards the sunlight from the enchanted window.

And glowing in it.

He *did* shine. But Harry told himself sternly he had no right to notice. He had given up that right of his own free will.

Draco felt a slow thrill of delight creep through his gut when he looked at Harry out of the corner of his eye and noticed him staring. Of course, he pretended not to notice, and only smirked when Harry was out of the room.

He felt much better now than he had since hearing Harry speak to the crowd in Diagon Alley—sharper, more eager, more interested in life. The sexual tension was still there, but not overwhelming. Now that he stood a chance of coaxing Harry into more than the most elementary sex with a little waiting…

It will be wonderful.

He called both Heeky and Seeky then—the first to fetch a good lunch for Harry and then set a watch on Narcissa, the second to help him choose the dress robes that would make him look best on their visit.

Harry would spend a great deal of time staring, Draco had determined, but he would not know why.

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—The Burrow

"That's not a Disillusionment Charm."

"I never said that *my* knowledge of spells was limited to your plebian knowledge of magic, Potter," Malfoy's voice said from nowhere and everywhere. Harry stared intently at the patch of empty air into which he'd disappeared, and then jumped when a hand closed on his shoulder. He hadn't heard Malfoy move across the bedroom. Malfoy laughed, and again it echoed, making it hard to pinpoint him even by the noises he *did* make. "This is a rather advanced spell," he said, so smugly that Harry wanted to punch his teeth in—

Well, do something *with his mouth, anyway.*

"My voice is the only sound that disrupts its complete protection against being detected, and a direct touch from me is the only way someone else can feel me."

"Oh, shut up," Harry muttered, as he shook his head once and then stared for a moment into the mirror. Of course, he had no way of knowing if simple residence in Malfoy Manor had been enough to change him into someone who would look guilty or strange to Ron. With the way that Ginny had been talking of him, he might have to show up looking as merry as Dumbledore to make a favorable impression on them.

Stop it. Would he really have owled you and asked to see you if he hated you without compunction now?

"And why should I shut up?" Malfoy inquired haughtily.

"You sound like a Muggle advertisement," Harry snapped back, and turned towards the door of his bedroom. In one way and one way only, he thought, Malfoy's spell—almost surely Dark magic—was fortunate. If Harry couldn't see what he looked like, he couldn't stare at him with the admiration he had felt building towards obsession in those last moments in Malfoy's sunlit bedroom.

"There's nothing Muggle about me," Malfoy said, voice bouncing, as they walked down the stairs. "Do you know what other meanings Muggle has in the wizarding world, Harry, beyond someone who can't do magic?"

"Don't call me by my first name. That's nearly as bad as your speaking while we're inside the Burrow at all."

"It means *mundane*," Malfoy continued, apparently undaunted. "*Ordinary*. And I don't think even my worst enemy—who, until a few years ago, would have been *you*, Potter—could have claimed I was ordinary."

"You were, though," Harry muttered. He knew the house-elves had already set up a guard on Narcissa, but he paused to wave to her anyway when he saw her through a doorframe. She glanced up from a complicated-looking game of chess and gave him a sweet smile. "Just like every ordinary Muggle bully I went to school with before I came to Hogwarts."

"I was *not* a bully," said Malfoy, and, infuriatingly, he sounded amused instead of angry. "Only trying to make you remember that I existed, when you seemed quite content to forget that altogether."

"Why should I have acknowledged you?" Harry stepped out from the Manor onto the stone path stretching up to the doors, where he had battled Lucius a few days ago, and which he had walked up that morning determined to make Malfoy listen to him. He gave a soft shudder as he thought about it. He still wasn't entirely sure whether he had won or lost that argument, he realized suddenly.

"I was the son of one of the richest families in the wizarding world, Potter," Malfoy said at his shoulder—at least, Harry thought he stood at his shoulder. "And extremely good at making myself useful to my friends and annoying to my enemies. The wonder was that you could stand the company of the people you surrounded yourself with for six years."

"Meanwhile, I came from outside the wizarding world, and I chose my friends because they were nice to me," said Harry. He offered his arm to Malfoy, whom he would be bringing on a Side-Along Apparition to the Burrow. "You didn't fit that criterion."

Malfoy took his arm, his hand sliding warmly along to Harry's elbow, and he bent so that he could breathe into Harry's ear. "And what about since Hogwarts? Have I been nice enough for your taste since then?"

Harry would have flattened his ears if he could have. Why had the mere admission of his attraction to Malfoy made it suddenly so much harder to deal with small things, like the touch of the git's fingers and breath on him?

Now it's real. Now you can't pretend that you're simply responding to sex. Now you know part of the attraction comes from you.

Harry hated that, but, on the other hand, reversing time and taking back what he had said about Malfoy was not an option, so he would just have to live with it. Luckily, he wasn't required to respond to the blatant flirting just hidden under the surface of Malfoy's words.

"You've been *pleasant*," he said. "Never *nice*. I don't think you have it in you to be that."

And, letting Malfoy think about that for a moment, he Apparated.

Honestly, did Harry think he would be *insulted* by his words? "Nice" was for people who had no depth. "Nice" was for people who weren't Arguers, and people who lived in houses like the ones they landed in front of a moment later.

"Nice" was for the Weasleys.

Draco eyed the Burrow with a sneer. Not only was it less than a tenth of the size of the Manor, it had no aspirations. It crouched where it should have soared. It looked comfortable, where the Manor attained dignified even on days when the weather dulled the effect it had been built to look best in. And Harry was staring towards it with a look of longing so intense that Draco was forced to feel a kind of squirming jealousy in his guts.

He can come to like the Manor just as well, he reminded himself. *He gave me something to build on. I just have to remember that. I have little cause for jealousy. I can, however, make sure that Harry has some.*

He felt himself calm down as he considered that. It wasn't a plan he could put into action here, alas, as there was no one in the Weasley brood he would have felt even the *temptation* to try and make Harry jealous with. For now, he would simply observe and learn what Harry was like around his friends, in an environment that wasn't the Hogwarts classrooms.

Harry walked towards the Burrow with a springing, relaxed stride, and ran a hand absently just above his hair, not through it as usual. Draco considered him critically. No, frankly, he didn't look any different than he usually did. Just that ordinary appearance was enough to stir Draco's interest, of course, but if Harry thought he was improving it for the sake of his hosts, he was sadly mistaken.

Even the fact that he cares enough to make the effort says something, though, doesn't it? While, with me, all he really wanted to do was shag or talk or eat or whatever else was in front of him. He never saw a need to alter himself.

And with that, Draco was forced to acknowledge the true cause of his jealousy. It wasn't sexual at all; it was the same emotion that had filled him numerous times over the years in Hogwarts when he remembered that Harry had chosen to make Weasley his best friend. He wanted some of Harry's time and attention—not all of it, but some would have been pleasant—and Ron sat there, soaking it up instead.

I have the chance now. What I won't tolerate is Harry simply running back into the Weasleys' clutches without considering *what they've done to him. If he does that, he weakens our side of the case, after all.*

Draco gave a sharp shake as the door of the Burrow opened, and made sure to arrange himself so that he could slip into the house without touching anyone but Harry. His own emotions and thoughts disturbed him, and he was supposed to stand back, acting the cool observer, taking mental notes on Harry and putting them away in the back of his head.

Harry, of course, strode in as if he owned the place, since he wasn't sensible enough to feel nervous. Draco shook his head and followed him.

Harry kept his head up and his eyes almost flinty, so that no one in the room would be able to see how nervous he was. He swept the Burrow's kitchen with a narrow glance, first. No one but Mr.

Weasley sat there, as Ron had promised, and he rose to his feet with a quiet, melancholy smile and an extended hand now.

"Hello, Harry," he said. "I'm sorry that you don't feel able to come to the house when Molly and Ginny are here, but I certainly understand your hesitation."

Harry gave a small nod, and took Mr. Weasley's hand in his own. The older man looked just as anxious and tired as Ron did. He tried to imagine what it would have been like for them—the sudden strain of a divorce; the news of Ginny's pregnancy and the knowledge she'd lost the baby last time, perhaps due to stress or fear; the knowledge, too, that adultery was bringing them their first grandchild—and then his silence by owl. He winced. He couldn't blame them for thinking the worst.

That didn't mean he would let them tell him what to think, as he had done far too often with Ron and Ginny in the last few years.

"I wanted to avoid arguments," he said, and sat down in the chair on the far side of the table that was usually his when he visited. Ron walked around the table to stand next to his father, and watched Harry with his arms folded and his jaw clenched. Harry tried to ignore that less-than-promising beginning. *Ron was the one who owled you,* he continued to remind himself. "I hoped I could explain where I stood better to you and Ron than the whole family at once."

"That makes sense." Mr. Weasley nodded and leaned forwards earnestly. "Now—where *do* you stand, Harry?"

Here came the moment when his sympathy and his friendship struggled against the truths he'd learned about Ginny, and himself, in the past few weeks.

Harry was surprised to find that he was ready for the test.

"I haven't been living the life that I want for a long time now," he said. "And no, Ron, that doesn't mean I want to be a Quidditch player or an Auror and that you, Ginny, and Hermione were right all along," he added, when his friend began to open his mouth. Ron shut it again and gave him a disgruntled look. Harry ignored it. "I was confining my emotions so strongly that, when they finally started to emerge again, I had no idea what I was feeling. Now I know.

"I regret marrying Ginny. I don't think we were right for each other. She wanted—" Harry thought rapidly, discarding the first words that had risen to his lips. "More than I could give her. A romantic idyll that someone else might have managed, but I couldn't. And I wanted someone who would support me unconditionally, and never question my decisions." He smiled slightly. "Both our dreams were equally unrealistic.

"Losing the baby—" he clenched his hands together on the arms of the chair, and hoped no one noticed "—threw me badly. I retreated from Ginny, emotionally and physically, because I thought that would help her heal. Or, at least, that was what I told myself. In reality, I was trying

to protect myself, confine my emotions, and heal my hurts again.

"It's no wonder she found what she did with Zabini. She obviously needed someone who could comfort her."

A hand brushed his elbow impatiently. Harry could perfectly picture Malfoy's pursed lips and shaking head. Well, fuck him very much. Harry was saying what he really thought and felt, and he was about to follow it with a firm statement, so that the Weasleys would understand that this didn't mean he was backing down on the divorce case.

"But she went too far. Divorcing me when she'd fallen in love would be one thing. But she waited months, until she could throw her new love and her pregnancy in my face." Harry took a deep breath. "And that she depended on my money to support her baby just shows that she didn't plan this out very well. I would *never* have wanted our child to have anything but a happy life. She's at least going to be raising her baby on fewer Galleons than she expected. What she did was wrong—and I'm sorrier for her child than for her. I fell out of love with her several months ago, at least—"

"Why?" Ron burst out. His voice was thick, as if he'd been chewing his tongue and filled his mouth with blood. Harry shuddered as a private memory from the war tried to well up and take him over, but forced it away. He was listening to Ron right now, not crouching on a mud-streaked battlefield next to a dying Bellatrix Lestrange. "That's what I really don't understand, Harry. I'd be hurt if Hermione did something like that to me. Devastated." He leaned across the table and put his hands flat on the top, staring at Harry. "But you aren't. Why not?"

"I gave you the answer already, Ron," Harry said, patiently, quietly, refusing to give in and apologize, as he nearly always had when Ron used that tone. "We weren't what the other needed. Maybe she never *was* what I needed; I'm inclined to think that, now. But I never realized it until we lost the child that would have been a bond between us. And now I'm free of her, and that's why I won't drop the divorce case and won't give her what she wants. I can apologize to you for the disturbance that has caused in your lives, but I won't apologize to her."

Ron blinked in stunned astonishment. Harry blinked back for a moment, then realized he was on his feet, his head thrown back the way it had been when he made his declaration that he would search for the Ravenclaw Horcrux alone.

He swallowed. He hadn't showed so much passion in a fight with Ron in—years. Ever, since the war? Maybe not.

He'd always been too afraid of being angry. Or afraid that, if he did show passion about a subject Ron thought was stupid or pointless, he might lose his friendship.

How stupid I was, he thought in wonder. *Ron's been willing to give me another chance when I'm divorcing his sister. Why would he ignore me and declare that I'm not his friend anymore just because we had different opinions on the best Quidditch team on the league?*

Of course, he hadn't known that at the time they had the arguments during his marriage, because he'd so effectively isolated himself that the good-will of his friends and wife loomed much larger in his life than it should. He'd needed someone to appear from the outside and put things into perspective.

Yet another thing for which to thank Malfoy.

He focused on Ron, though, not wanting to think about the git just yet—who had been surprisingly silent, for a git—or the affection that had tinted his own thought, which he'd meant to come out as sarcastic.

Ron just studied him, his jaw still tensing and relaxing. Then he said, "I wish you loved her, Harry."

"Sometimes? So do I." Harry shrugged. *At least that would mean I probably wouldn't find blond pointy-nosed gits who live in Manors attractive.* "But pretending won't make it so, anymore than pretending that I could be calm these last few years chased the anger out of my blood. I'm choosing a career that I'm interested in, Ron, and new people to be around."

"You call Malfoy acceptable company?" Ron's face was flushing red again. Mr. Weasley watched them thoughtfully.

"For you? Maybe not. For me? Of course." Harry merrily ignored the way Ron stared at him as if he'd announced he were moving to the Muggle world, and placed his hand flat on the table, palm up. "This is the point where I tell you to take it or leave it, Ron. That's what I want to do. I want to retain your friendship, but not desperately enough to sacrifice everything I am and want to be for it." Harry took a deep breath and expelled his fear in one long exhalation. "So, it's your turn to make a choice now. What is it?"

He met his friend's eyes, and waited.

Well.

Draco blinked. He'd known Harry was better in short, quick confrontations that tested him than making plans across a long range of days, but he hadn't quite realized that Harry was good at engineering his own confrontations.

Harry stood looking at Weasley in a way that seemed to indicate he'd never known fear. What Weasley did was a matter of perfect indifference to him.

Draco felt a stirring of smugness, and tamped it down, along with his own bewilderment. Harry *did* keep surprising him. Well, since he valued the man's spontaneity, that shouldn't disconcert him as much.

Finally, Weasley leaned across the table and slowly, grudgingly, clasped Harry's hand.

Draco was glad that no one could hear his sigh of disappointment, or that they mistook it for the sound of Harry's heavy breath if they did.

"I understand," Weasley muttered, sounding resentful, but as if he meant what he said. "I don't like it—I still hope you'll change your mind, Harry—"

"I won't," Harry said, and nearly hissed the next words. "If that's the only reason you're holding my hand, you might as well let it go right now."

Weasley shook his head impatiently. "No. I'll still be your friend no matter what."

Harry gave a brilliant smile and drew his friend into a hug. Draco counted the seconds their arms stayed around each other, and suppressed the urge to cough when the number surpassed five.

"What Ron says goes for me as well," Mr. Weasley said gently. "It's a trying time, Harry, but I still think of you like a son, and you're as welcome in my heart as you are in Ron's." He stood up and clapped Harry briefly on the shoulder. "Thank you for making it clear that you still value us."

"I do," Harry said calmly, confidently, tilting his head back to smile at Mr. Weasley in turn. "No matter what Ginny's done, she can't make me hate the rest of her family."

Which is a pity, sometimes, Draco thought, but the thought had no bite to it. He was—

He stiffened, and was once again glad that no one could hear the tiny, disgusted sound he made , much less see the expression on his face.

He was feeling ridiculously sappy about Harry. He didn't just value his strength and want to share a life that seemed likely to be interesting with him; he wanted to have the Weasleys like Harry even if they didn't like him.

He didn't appreciate the feeling, but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it.

He sincerely hoped that the sappiness would take a long time for Harry to notice.

At least, tomorrow, we return to the courtroom, and to a place where I can dazzle Harry with what I say instead of standing in silence and thinking too much because of it, he finally remembered, and he was patient for the rest of the visit, which stretched absurdly long because Harry had to stay and eat a cake that Mrs. Weasley had baked the day before, and exchange Hogwarts reminiscences with his friend. Ron, of course, took particular delight in the ones that made Draco look like a prat.

He had figured out the truth by the second time such a memory crossed the Weasel's lips, of

course. Even if Harry made a declaration of undying affection, Weasley was still worried about Draco taking Harry away from him. He was jealous in the same way Draco was, but far more so.

It might never happen, but I can make him fear it, Draco thought, and then indulged himself in spending some time planning that instead of listening to their anecdotes—though he made sure he still remained aware enough to follow Harry through the door when he waved and departed. The idea of staying the night in the Burrow, unable to move for fear of inhaling Weasel stink, was not a pleasant one.

"So we go into the courtroom again tomorrow."

Draco took another look at Harry, who was leaning back in a chair in the library, his arms folded behind his head and his eyes closed. He didn't even need the wine at his elbow to look peaceful. Speaking with his friend, and being reassured that he *was* still his friend, had done him a world of good.

At least Weasley's accomplished something in his miserable tenure on this earth, Draco thought, as he answered. "Yes. And we'll ask for the concession that your wife's charming mouth be bound as soon as possible."

Harry's eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed. He opened them in the next moment, and nodded. "That sounds good." He hid a yawn inexpertly with the back of his hand, then rose. "I've felt more today than I have in five years. I'll go to sleep now, I think."

Draco nodded, and turned back to the book of obscure claims he was scanning. It wasn't beyond possibility that Blaise would ask for one of them in the next court session.

He was startled to feel Harry's hand descend on his right shoulder, squeezing. He looked up. Harry was smiling at him.

"Thanks," he whispered. "I do owe you, and I even have the feeling that I could come to like you. Mad, I know."

Draco managed to swallow, and then say, "Don't let the excitement overheat your brain, Potter."

Harry looked at him tolerantly. His hand lingered for a moment before he took it away.

It was not as good as a kiss, but Draco found himself with a faint smile on his face as he turned back to his reading again.

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Chapter: 20

Thank you for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty—Consider Her Ways

Harry slowed his steps and cocked an eyebrow as they approached the courtroom. Most unusually, considering that they'd arrived later every other time, Zabini and Ginny were waiting outside the building for them.

Malfoy's chin went up at once, Harry was amused to note, and his stride became stiffer, until a peacock in his pride couldn't have done better. Of course, he *was* facing the man and the woman who had turned his insane father loose on him and conspired to kill him for no better reason than because he'd taken Harry's case. He had every reason in the world to be cold.

The moment Harry and Malfoy came into sight, Zabini stepped away from Ginny. She came forwards, her head up and the red hair Harry had once found so lovely flowing down her back. Hell, if he was being honest with himself, he still found it lovely.

You're rather physically attracted to everyone, aren't you? his conscience accused him.

Harry shrugged. Perhaps it was a side-effect of the long years of suppressing most of his emotions, and then desire for the last eight months, since Ginny wouldn't have sex with him. So long as he didn't *act* on his feelings, he doubted they mattered.

"Harry." Ginny's voice was low, cold, and formal, but still more polite than it had been the last six or so times she spoke to him. She cast a narrow-eyed glance at Malfoy. "Can we speak in private for a moment?"

He didn't need Malfoy's wrinkled lip to tell him what an awful idea that was. "No," he said, returning the same level of coldness and formality that she showed him. "If you have something that pertains to the case, you should say it in front of Malfoy, anyway. He's the Arguer, and he's more likely to understand it than I am." He tried to adopt an expression of bovine innocence, a look that an exasperated Hermione had more than once told him he pulled off rather well.

He thought he caught an odd expression of gratitude on Malfoy's face, but decided he must have imagined it. Why in the world should the git care to hear Harry's praise of his skills? He *knew* he was good.

Ginny just sighed, though she let the breath out slowly, in measured exhalations, that told Harry how very exasperated she was. The sound would have made him wince and anticipate cold silence and sharply thrown dishes for a week once. Now he just watched her, and wondered when she would reach the point.

"This isn't about the case," Ginny said. "Not—strictly. I mean, it has nothing to do with laws and

stern, unfeeling strictures like that." She lowered her eyes, then looked up, and Harry was astonished to see tears standing in them. He wasn't Witherbone, after all, who might be persuaded to give her something she wanted by seeing them. She already knew he wouldn't back off from the case, so what she did she want?

"What's wrong, Ginny?" Harry asked, and his voice had softened, inevitably. The times she cried were nearly always times when she was in some awful pain and could conceal it no longer.

"*Harry*," Malfoy snarled into his ear.

"I'll tell you," said Ginny, and her hand smoothed over and over the mound of her belly. "But not here."

Harry watched her in thoughtful silence, ignoring the claw-like grasp of Malfoy's hand on his shoulder. If his decisions were going to matter, then he should be able to make them on his own.

Maybe he would have believed her, but he'd seen the look she exchanged with Zabini before she came over here. It simply smacked too much of planning to him. And he wasn't *obliged* to give her sympathy. The only tie between them was the legal one, now.

"No," he said after a few moments of consideration. "Sorry, Gin, but not this time."

Her face flickered and rippled like shadows dashing across a sunny meadow, and then she lifted her chin and swallowed. He recognized the expression she put on now, the brave face, the one she always used when something didn't go her way and she wanted him to understand how very upset she was that it hadn't.

"All right," she whispered. "I should have known better than to count on your sympathy, I suppose, since you can't grant such a simple request."

She turned and walked away from him, back towards Zabini. He put an arm around her, but gingerly, as if he imagined she would shatter under a harsher touch. And he gave Harry a scorching glare.

Malfoy's hand tightened for a moment, as if he thought Harry would run after her, and then slowly let him go when Harry showed no sign of doing such a thing. "What made you decide not to listen to her?" he asked.

"Your advice," Harry said, still studying Ginny's back and trying to determine from the line of it alone what she would have told him. But then she passed into the courtroom with Zabini and he lost sight of her. Harry shrugged and walked after them. "I can't be weak to win this case. And really—what claim does she have on me now? I could have spoken to her alone because I felt a grand compassion for her, I suppose, but I don't. And I don't trust her, either." He flicked his head back in Malfoy's direction. "I trust you a lot more."

Draco felt a sudden heat leap to life in his chest, like lust and yet not it. He blinked and shook his head, then studied Potter's face, which was bent slightly to study the step on which his shoe had just caught.

Potter meant—

Harry meant—

Sternly, Draco dismissed his smugness, and refocused his mind on Arguing. They hadn't won free yet. Today would begin a long and complicated process of negotiations which probably wouldn't culminate until he'd been able to persuade Blaise out of the most important things. They would leave and then come back again tomorrow, and the day after, and then the day after that, until Blaise admitted defeat. Draco wouldn't admit defeat, of course, because he never had.

But it still meant something to know that Harry trusted him.

He felt confident enough to sweep the courtroom with a commanding gaze when they arrived, and nodded when he saw that the chairs brought for them were more comfortable than usual. Of course, he probably wouldn't spend much time in his, as he preferred to be on his feet when he paced the room and stared his opposition down, but the house-elves couldn't have known that.

Blaise and the Weasley were already in place, of course, and Judge Witherbone was just settling into her chair.

"Arguer Malfoy," she said, with a nod. Her face had an expression of faint excitement on it. Draco smiled a bit. She reflected the mood of the wizarding world at the moment, and the wizarding world would be focused on Pansy's antics, wondering what they had to do with Draco's case, and eagerly anticipating whatever would happen next, since it had been nearly a week since the last public blow in the struggle.

"Judge Witherbone," he said, with a slight inclination of his head. "Before we begin, my client and I would like to ask for the single concession due us for Mrs. Potter's interruption last time." He did not look in Weasley's direction; it was easier to remember the proper name for her when he didn't.

"Of course," said Witherbone. "The vaults, I suppose?"

"Not at all." Draco cupped a hand beneath his chin and tilted his head slightly, knowing well how magisterial that made him look. "The enactment of the Mouth-Binding Laws. Mr. Potter would like some reassurance that his former wife cannot ever bother him again when this case is done."

"So sure that you'll win it?" Blaise muttered, but it was so stupid and undignified an interruption that Draco thought it best to ignore it, and Witherbone was peering at him in such surprise that she might well have missed the words.

"Mr. Potter is quite sure?" she asked slowly. "Such an opportunity to ask for a concession free of negotiations will not come again soon. Perhaps not ever," she added.

"We are both sure, Madam," said Draco, enjoying the way that his words were an answer to Blaise's comment as well, and turned to collect Harry's eyes. He'd been staring across the room at his wife, but he nodded and glanced back at once, smiling warmly enough that Draco felt a corresponding smile lift the corners of his lips.

"Very well." Witherbone tapped her wand on her podium twice, and then bent towards the piece of parchment that appeared before her with a flash of blue-silver light. "Be it marked and witnessed, then, that Arguer Malfoy and his client, Harry Potter, shall not be troubled by any owl from Ginny Potter, nee Weasley, after the conclusion of the trial."

The parchment glowed again, this time with a warm yellow radiance like candle-flame, and then settled. Draco stepped back, smirking, and faced Blaise.

"Given that we had the first concession of any," he said innocently, "I think Mr. Zabini should have the gift of presenting his arguments for the vaults first."

Blaise's eyes glowed as richly as the parchment had with anger. He *hated* being predictable, and probably hated having to ask for money, too. But he did indeed rise to his feet with a list of demands in his hand, and read the claim about the vaults off first.

"We demand half the Galleons in both the Potter and Black vaults," he said. "As well as half the equivalent value of any magical artifacts found therein, excepting only family heirlooms."

Draco snorted and tapped his fingers on his hip. The ransom would have been ridiculous if the Ministry had asked it of his family for war reparations—and they could legitimately have asked for money from him, Draco knew. They had been satisfied with a token amount, though. They seemed to feel that having two mad parents was enough punishment for any one person. "That's not acceptable," he said at once.

"Potter has to speak on this one, too." Blaise's fingers closed hard on the edge of the parchment he held, but otherwise he showed no sign of temper. He simply turned his head and focused on Potter, his eyes sharp and dark, like a crow's.

"Malfoy speaks for me," Harry said quietly. "He is, after all, my Arguer."

Draco lifted his head and gave Blaise a teeth-baring gesture that one might mistake for a smile if one were blind. "We will certainly contest this claim," he said. "And your next?"

"Potter's in possession of an Invisibility Cloak," Blaise said. "Ginny wants it."

"Why?" Draco asked, tilting his head and so putting his face into profile as far as Witherbone was concerned. He knew that he sometimes looked handsomer when seen from that angle, and

he would remind her of any little fact that might help them.

"To make sure that he doesn't sneak up on her after the trial and catch a glimpse of the child," said Blaise, and there was a faint malicious twitch at the corners of his mouth, which warned Draco that his words would be bad before he said them. "Potter wanted a baby so much. We're afraid that he might try to steal ours, even just in glimpses or photos, and we're not inclined to permit that."

Draco didn't dare turn and look at Harry, so he didn't know how much that shot had hurt. He said only, "Impossible. We're keeping the Cloak, too."

Blaise shifted his weight forwards onto his left foot. "You might as well yield, Draco," he hissed. "You know that we won't leave this courtroom until we have *some* of what we want, and this obstinacy won't do you any good."

Draco examined his fingernails. "Present some reasonable demands, Zabini, and perhaps we can argue about them."

Blaise growled. Draco smiled privately to himself, and listened as Blaise began to detail the buildings Potter owned—the small house where he'd lived with his wife, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and a few other shabby Black houses—with a keen ear. He would refuse all of the demands at first, of course. Blaise was right in that they would have to yield *some* things, but there was no law that those had to be things that Blaise and Weasley wanted.

Zabini was going on about houses now. Harry found it impossible to listen. His eyes had wandered back to Ginny again. He had thought she would be watching her new lover, her hand on her belly and love or pride in her eyes. Instead, she stared back at him, and her face held shadows of—

Regret and loss?

Harry shook his head and tried to look away, but his eyes wandered back a moment later. Zabini's voice had grown sharper. Surely that ought to attract Ginny's attention if anything could. She wouldn't want to think about losing her blood money, Harry thought, more than a little malicious.

She still looked at him, though. Her hand did move in a slow stroking motion over her womb, but nothing about her face was familiar. Harry hadn't actually seen her look *sorry* for anything in years, even when she made an apology.

She closed her eyes at last and leaned back in her seat. Harry started to turn away again—Zabini's voice had risen, and of course Malfoy was answering him in cool, implacable tones—but in that moment he saw her wand flick, just below the arm of her chair and so out of both Malfoy's line of sight and the judge's.

Something small, white, and winged left her and fluttered across the floor to him, keeping so low that it was hard to see it at all, and an observer would probably have mistaken it for a fluttering scrap of parchment otherwise. Harry tried not to stare. He wasn't sure if he should look at it, but he had to admit he was curious, and he wondered why Ginny would try any magic in the courtroom that wasn't offensive magic.

Finally, the small white thing settled near his foot, where he could stoop and pick it up without trouble. He found it was a flying horse made of paper, but sketches of ink shone from the inside of the parchment. There was writing on it.

Harry's hand clenched, nearly crumpling the thing. He found himself unable to look back at Ginny now, but he didn't want to look at Malfoy, either. He stared at a point on the floor midway between his chair and the judge's podium, his breath coming fast, his whole being concentrated on the paper in his fist.

At last, he lifted his hand to his mouth as though to conceal a cough, and opened it, and the parchment, there.

Ginny's handwriting was painfully familiar; there was a time when Harry had treasured even grocery lists from her, because he had been so in love with her that every word she wrote felt like an inscribed beat of her heart.

Harry:

We've found out that the baby will be born sick. Some rare ailment that runs in Blaise's family and has to do with the heart. She can survive, but she'll come early, which lessens her chances, and the mediwizards I've seen said that she'll need the best of care. She should really live somewhere warmer than Britain, for example.

Please. We need the money, for her. I know I've been a bitch to you, and I'm sorry for that. But please don't deny my daughter her health because of a grudge you have against me.

Ginny.

Harry's breath caught. The first emotion he felt was remorse, as warm and uncomfortable as losing control of his bladder, at the thought that Ginny *did* have a use for the money, and had probably held off on confessing to him about it because he would think that she was being manipulative—

The second was icy rage. How *dare* she try to manipulate him this way!

He raised his eyes and looked at her across the courtroom. She met his gaze, perhaps having guessed that he'd have read the parchment by now, and made an apologetic little gesture with one hand.

Her face didn't look sorry. It looked desperate.

Harry swallowed. He had no idea what was real and what wasn't—or what was a half-truth; after all, even if her baby was sick, Ginny might still take the chance to ask him for more money than she really needed.

Could he really keep his money away from a sick child? It wasn't as though he took any particular pride or pleasure in it.

Ginny's eyes watched him, steadily, warily. He had never been good at reading them, as his farce of a marriage had proven. He was no good at reading them now.

He was sure of one thing. He needed to wait and talk this over with Draco. Even if he *was* nearly certain of what Draco would say, there still be might be an angle to the situation he was missing, some means of proving what Ginny said that Harry had forgotten.

He bit his lip and looked away from her.

This time, when the parchment touched his hand, he started. He hadn't seen Ginny send it. But, as before, he reached down and scooped it up, and unfolded it when he'd checked that Malfoy was still involved in his conversation with Zabini.

And doing brilliantly, of course. He did everything brilliantly. Harry felt a sour worm of jealousy nibble at his heart, and couldn't have said whether it came from envy of Malfoy's skills or the thought of someone else sitting here after Harry's case was done, having their chance to admire him in just the same way.

He looked down at the parchment.

That was the last chance we could give you, Harry. If you won't give me the money, for Lily—that's what we've decided to name her—

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, because that had felt like an icy spike through the chest.

then certain things will happen which I don't approve, but which Blaise says need to happen. I'm sorry. If you will give me and Blaise and Lily the money, look up and wave your hand three times to me.

Harry kept his eyes on his hands, and didn't look up, and made sure not to even glance in Ginny's direction for the rest of the court session.

A stubborn refrain kept running through his head, even as he thought that he should be able to make his own decisions, since Ginny was his wife and the money was his money.

I need to talk to Draco about this.

Draco left the courtroom pleased with himself. No, nothing had yet been accomplished, because he hadn't made any concessions and neither had Blaise, but he had seen fear start to life in his old friend's eyes. At least Blaise no longer thought that he would back down. He would be warier when they met and Argued tomorrow, and Draco would show Blaise the depths of his skill, his knowledge of the laws, how well he could speak.

There was strength in his throat, sweetening the taste of the debates to come on his lips.

It was evident from the look on Harry's face that he had something to talk to him about, probably that ridiculously transparent deception of his wife's, but Draco deliberately Apparated to the Manor with him before he could say anything. He wanted to go through the inevitable reassurance out of earshot. There was no reason that Blaise and Weasley should have any idea of how close they were outside the job that Harry had hired Draco for.

Seeky was waiting for them beyond the wards. That was a bit unusual, but Draco supposed some guest had dropped by unannounced, and Seeky wanted to warn him. *Probably Pansy*, he thought, with a stifled sigh, as he smiled at the elf. "Yes, Seeky?"

For long moments, there was no answer, as Seeky wrung its ears with huge hands, and its eyes got wider and wider. Perhaps Pansy had brought those ill-mannered Continental friends of hers with her, Draco thought. It had taken the elves three days to clean the Manor after their last visit.

Seeky broke out in a sudden wail, so loud that it took Draco long moments to understand its words.

"Master Malfoy, Mistress Narcissa has been taken!"

And all the strength in his throat dried up.

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Chapter: 21

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-One—Immediate Consequences

Harry knew Malfoy might or might not require the support, but, at the moment, his face was as pale as salt, and Harry *wanted* to give it. He curled an arm around Malfoy's shoulders, pulling him in to his side hard enough that he stumbled slightly, and asked the house-elf, as calmly and clearly as he could, "What happened? How was she taken?"

Seeky might have refused to answer him without Malfoy's permission ordinarily, but at the moment, the little elf appeared upset and just glad of having someone to talk to. "Master Lucius came back," whispered the shrill voice, and Seeky looked as if he would tear his ears off his head. "He used the *old* Malfoy magic, the one that says the oldest Malfoy Master alive is the one we must obey. And he came through the wards, and he took Mistress Narcissa away with him."

Draco—Harry supposed he would have to call him that for as long as they were talking about multiple Malfoys—made a sound like a hissing teakettle, and started away from Harry. "Someone must have put that idea in his head," he said. "He would never have thought of that on his own. *Never.*"

"I think I know who," Harry said quietly, and when Draco whirled on him, hands clenched as if he would strike out, he handed over the notes that he had received from Ginny in the courtroom.

Draco read them without blinking. Then he drew his wand. Harry stepped out of the way, recognizing rage in the slow, deliberate movements.

Draco used a curse Harry didn't know, spoken so fast that he couldn't even be sure of the incantation, and a line of red light leaped from his wand and blasted a long, shallow groove in the dirt next to the stone drive leading up to the Manor. Harry relaxed. He had been sure for a moment that Malfoy would destroy the notes, and he wouldn't have blamed him, but they could be important evidence if they went to the Ministry.

Can we, though?

The more he thought about it, the more Harry doubted it. After all, the Ministry had shown no interest in Zabini's use of a Poisoned Missive, even though Hermione had told him once that they had wards in place that would alert Aurors to the use of them. Since this was part of the divorce case, essentially an armed duel between him and Ginny, and assassination attempts were allowed in such a situation…

Harry clenched his jaw. *We're on our own, I think.*

Which meant there was only one thing he could do.

"Draco," he said quietly.

Draco glanced at him. The look in his gray eyes wasn't anywhere close to human. Harry prudently retreated a step, but kept his voice calm and clear, the same tone he'd used with Seeky.

"I can't imagine Zabini and Ginny will wait long before they contact us. I'll meet her wherever she wishes and arrange the exchange of the vaults, of course. I just need to know what legal rules I'm invoking by—"

Draco crossed the ground between them so fast Harry never saw him coming, and the next moment he had Harry by the throat.

Draco imagined he knew what a victim of the Blood-Boiling Curse felt like now—someone who had his blood literally set on fire through a flick of the other person's wand. But it was not a spell but his rage which burned him now.

To know that Blaise and the Weasley had done this because he had taken Harry's case—

To know that Blaise had contacted Lucius, of all people, the maddest madman Draco knew, the one person who might be able to hurt Narcissa in ways that other people could not even *imagine*—

And then to hear Harry speaking as if they had no choice but to give in, to *honor* what had been done with a capitulation—

It was *maddening.*

Harry's skin felt smooth and very fragile under his hands. Harry choked, but Draco didn't care. At least, if he was choking, he wasn't saying those stupid words, those words Draco couldn't admit existed, those words that were *horrible*.

"No," he rasped. "No. You aren't going to do that. We'll get my mother back on our *own*, Potter, do you hear me? No surrender, nothing." Finally, a hand hammering into his arm let him know the strangling had gone far enough, and he stepped back, shaking his wrist to relieve his fingers of the pain of the grip, his stare intense. "No giving them what they want," he whispered.

"Look, Draco," Harry said, and his eyes were full of a compassion as green as spring leaves and very hard to face. "I don't mind giving up the money for your mother. A life is always worth more than money."

"You have no pride, then." Draco made the words cold and hard, to sting like a whiplash, and from the sudden flush in Harry's cheeks, they had done their work.

"Pride isn't important when lives are at stake," he insisted.

"And do you think they would really give me my mother back if they *once* saw that we were willing to back down?" Draco bared his teeth. "No. I think they planned this all along; they always held this tactic in reserve, because Blaise knew how much it would hurt me. And just like this plea on behalf of the *slut's* child, if you gave up part of your money, they'd demand more and more until they had everything. I won't have it said that I lost a case at all. Even if we retrieved my mother alive from Lucius—and I don't know that we can, Potter, you don't *know* what he's like—my reputation would be shot, and there's nothing I could do to provide a comfortable life for her after that. I have to keep up payments to the press so the papers won't discuss her, too, you know." He let out a breath that he hoped was ice-cold to anyone standing in the immediate

vicinity. "No negotiating with Blaise. He already has too much control over this."

"I don't know what you suggest we do, then." Harry raked a hand through his hair. "Since there's no one but us to track down Lucius and try to rescue your mum, and no one who will punish Zabini for this." He paused and glanced at Draco. "Is there?"

Draco felt a vicious sneer twist his lips. His heart was still galloping so hard that he believed he could have lifted his wand and killed Blaise or his father in that moment, if either one had been so obliging as to appear in front of him. "No. Worse things than this have happened in the past during divorce cases, Potter."

Harry nodded. His face had gone still and calm, with a kind of strength that Draco didn't think he'd seen before. Perhaps this was what he'd looked like during the war. "Then our first priority is to find out where Lucius and Narcissa went," he said. "I know that the research I did suggested the Death Eater haven is near a small magical creature sanctuary in the mountains of Sweden, but—"

Draco shook his head. "He won't have gone there," he said, his mind racing, clear and quick as light through a crystal, the way it always did when he was forced to consider something like this, against an implacable deadline. "Death Eaters are welcome there, but my mother never took the Dark Mark. If Lucius brings her there, he'd be in violation of the policies that protect him, and they'd cast him out."

"He's insane," Harry said, sounding skeptical. "Would he think of that?"

Draco laughed dryly. "Even if he didn't think of it, they'd cast him out when he tried to bring her back, so either way, he's not there."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Then they popped open. "Look, Malfoy," he said carefully. "There was—a technique—I used during the War, when Voldemort captured one of Ron's brothers for a time. It wasn't technically legal magic, so it never made it into the official story that I told the Ministry." He grinned, and Draco felt himself reassured by the dark edges of the expression. "Blood magic. It can track a wizard, though imperfectly, through someone who has the same family blood he does. Hermione and I performed the spell through Ron, and we were able to find Bill."

Draco surged forwards. "Well, then, what are you waiting for?" he demanded, and held out his arm.

Harry took it, but more as a means of support than anything, as Draco understood a moment later. His gaze was clear and calm, but he chewed his lips as he replied, "I don't remember the exact incantation. I would have to ask Hermione for help. And that means telling her about the kidnapping."

Draco's shoulders hunched. "The more people who know, the more dangerous it might be for

her," he whispered.

It was really hitting him, now, that his mother was gone. The woman who had been the only one to love him—or at least the only person whose love for him had endured—from his childhood. He'd tried so hard to repay her and keep her safe, and he'd failed.

Harry pulled him forwards, and stroked his back for a moment; Draco had no idea what his face looked like, but it must have been bad, for Harry to do *that.* He murmured into Draco's ear, "I know. But Hermione won't betray it to anyone—not even Ron, if I ask her not to."

"Why not?" Draco whispered, his fear surging back into bitterness at the thought of Granger's marriage. "She's a Weasley by wedding, he's a Weasley by blood, and that sister of both of theirs—"

"Because she's kept secrets like this for me once before," Harry whispered back. "I had to do something to—to destroy, well, one of the magical artifacts that Voldemort had created to sustain his life. Ron would have killed me just for suggesting it. But Hermione knew it was necessary, so she helped me do it, and nursed me back to health afterwards." His body was tense against Draco's, as if the mere memory of it were hurting him. The next moment, he relaxed and patted Draco's shoulder. "She'll do this, too. Really, I think Ron would help, but I know that he doesn't like Malfoys, so it's better not to even ask him to make the choice."

He hesitated, then added, "But, of course, you're the one who has to make the decision as to whether I go to Hermione or not."

It was no choice, and Draco knew it. They had to find Lucius and his mother, as soon as possible. "Talk to her," he said.

Harry nodded, and stepped back from him, drawing his wand. Draco saw him preparing to Apparate, and clamped a hand on his arm. Harry looked at him questioningly.

"Firecall her from the Manor," he said. "I don't think that either of us ought to go anywhere alone right now."

Harry thought he could see another reason in Draco's eyes, hear it in his voice. Draco didn't want Harry to leave.

But why should he begrudge him that, after all, even if he couldn't say it?

"All right," Harry said quietly. God knew he would do more than this for someone on the verge of losing a parent, but who might still have a chance to keep that parent alive. He didn't *want* Draco to know what it was like to live with the memory of a murdered mother. He let Draco guide him into the Manor, past the house-elves, and the edges of tattered magic that Harry was certain came from broken wards, though he wasn't tied into them and so couldn't say for sure how much damage had been done.

Draco took him to the library, of course. Harry cast a handful of Floo powder into the fire, and then hesitated for a moment. It was the middle of the afternoon, which meant Hermione wasn't likely to be home.

"Weasley-Granger office in the Ministry!" he shouted to the fire.

The flames danced and spun, then turned a radiant, poisonous green. Harry overcame his own shudder at the color—*that* roused memories of the war, too, and he'd already had enough of them for one day—and thrust his head through.

He could just see the front of Hermione's massive wooden desk, which was regularly covered with paperwork relating to house-elves. Portraits hung on the wall, but he could only make out one from here, a stern witch talking to a goblin. Both turned to stare at him in the moment before Hermione uttered an exclamation and came bustling around the desk towards him. She wore her dark purple working robes and a worried expression.

"Harry, are you all right?" she asked, stooping down in front of the fireplace.

"Not hardly," Harry said grimly. "Listen, Hermione. Ginny's done something unforgivable. She's arranged for Draco's mum to be kidnapped by his father. They're both mad, but his mother can't defend herself. I need to know the incantation for that blood-seeking spell we used to find Bill during the war."

For long moments, Hermione was still, even as her eyes filled with tears. But then she closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and swallowed noisily, as if condemning all the moisture to her stomach. When she looked at him again, she was steady. Harry smiled in spite of himself. Hermione had been like this in the war, too, able to shove away personal griefs no matter how heart-rending, and focus on the situation at hand.

"I still have the book," she said quietly. "I move it around regularly from the house to the office; I don't think it would be safe if anyone knew for certain where it was." She paused suddenly, whirled, and cast a locking spell in the door's general direction. Then she turned back towards him, her face sober. "I think I should come to you, though. You need two people to cast that spell."

"No, you don't," Harry said. Hermione had been the one to actually cast the spell. He had been there to calm Ron's hysterics and to make the cut in his arm that would provide the needed blood. He didn't think Draco would have any trouble giving up the blood. If anything, he was too calm.

"Harry—"

"It's Draco's decision," Harry said, and pulled his head out of the fire, which to him had always been an intense, dizzying sensation. He shook his head for a moment, then turned and faced Draco. "Do you—"

He'd evidently heard their conversation. His voice was a rasp, but he said, "No. Only you." His eyes glinted with a ferocity that told Harry he wasn't about to back down on this.

Harry sighed, and then turned back and faced Hermione again. "He only wants my help, Hermione. Hand the book to me, please." She'd used the temporary pause efficiently, of course, to fetch it. Harry eyed it warily. It didn't look like anything important, just an innocent tome in an unornamented brown leather cover, but he knew it contained several powerful Dark Arts spells.

Hermione sighed at him, and then held the book out, slowly. Harry took it, and said, staring into her eyes rather than at it, "Don't tell Ron."

"I won't," she whispered.

Harry took a moment longer to give a hard nod in her direction—she hadn't complained, hadn't said it would be best if they did something else, hadn't tried to boss him about, and he knew how hard that had been for her—and then pulled out and shut down the Floo connection. When he turned, however, Draco was holding up a letter. Harry shut his mouth fast.

"This was on top of some books on the highest shelf," Draco said, his voice eerily empty. "It started glowing a moment ago. I suppose a spell was set on it to draw attention to itself if we didn't find it within a certain period of time." He paused. "It's from Blaise."

Draco's fear and bitterness had both frozen into an ice-like casing. The rage went on burning outside it. It would not melt the ice, Draco knew. He was perfectly capable of feeling more than one emotion at once, and of putting aside the ones that were not useful until they were needed.

Harry started a bit, but immediately brushed soot from his robes and walked over to stand beside him. For a moment, his hand rested on Draco's shoulder, heavier than before. Then he flicked his wand at the letter, looking for curses and hexes.

Draco watched with interest, but was not surprised when the scan revealed nothing. Blaise wouldn't have wanted Draco to be stung from a simple letter. He hadn't kidnapped Narcissa just to torment Draco. He wanted a number of specific concessions, and a pained or dying Arguer wouldn't persuade Harry to agree to them.

On Harry's nod, he was able to open the letter and read it.

Draco:

Lucius left this for you. By now, you must know what we've done and why we did it, since Potter would have showed you Ginny's notes.

The only way for you to get your mother back is to meet us at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade at six-o'clock tonight. Bring Potter, but don't try any tricks, Draco. Pansy's antics or

not, this isn't something you can squirm your way out of.

Zabini.

Draco glanced up. Harry was watching him with shadowed eyes, and he nodded to the letter. "Do you think it's likely to be genuine?"

"Yes." Draco folded the parchment several times, along neat, straight creases. "They want to use her as a bargaining chip. What would sending us a false letter suffice? Blaise has always been a little nervous in the middle of grand plans, no matter how well they go for him. He'll want to end it as soon as possible."

"They could have set it up as an assassination attempt," Harry said quietly. "Maybe they hate us enough to want you or both of us dead."

Draco hadn't thought that, but, after a moment, he shook his head. "They have to know that your wife is gone from your will now, and killing you would just put a stop to the divorce case, without winning them anything," he said. "We're dealing with money-hungry, greedy *thieves*, not killers."

"Except for your father," Harry said.

Draco tilted his head. "Yes, except for him."

"And when we catch up with him—" Harry hesitated. Then he said, "Do you want me to kill him?"

The offer was one that Draco wouldn't have anticipated hearing just a few hours earlier. But then, he couldn't have guessed that Harry would offer to give up all the money in his vaults for Narcissa, either.

"Yes," he said.

Harry merely nodded, once, his mouth grim. Then he glanced at the book in his hand. "Should we perform the blood magic now?"

"Not yet," Draco said softly, and stood. "We don't have enough time between now and six to perform the ritual, likely. And if I knew where Lucius and my mother were, I would be tempted to skip the meeting so I could hunt them."

Harry licked his lips. "So, until then—"

"Until then," Draco said, and his voice was vicious but he didn't care, "I consider what I'm going to say to the whore and the son of a whore when we see them. And I need time alone to think of that. *Please.*"

Harry didn't react as he expected, backing out with one cautious eye on him. He just nodded again, and then let his hand brush briefly along Draco's arm in support.

"I'll study this," he said, with a glance at the book, and walked out of the library.

Draco let himself fall into a chair, but that was the only careless action he planned to take between now and the time they located Lucius. He closed his eyes and forced his mind to *work*, rising above the emotions crowding it to lay out a plan of action.

It had to be perfect. He had to convince Blaise that he was a broken, cowering thing, utterly unmanned by fear for his mother, and willing to give them whatever they wanted, even as he tried to pry secrets from *them*. And he had to use this meeting to set up a plan of revenge that would lacerate Blaise down to his soul.

The first plan he'd conceived, hunting up Blaise's past, had turned up nothing as yet, and it was taking too long to work. No.

He wanted something that would kill without killing, that would make Blaise consider suicide the better option.

He will suffer. I swear it.

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Chapter: 22

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Two—Draco's Performance

Harry studied the ritual described in the book, narrow-eyed. He had not known it was this complicated before, but then, Hermione had been the one to perform it last time, and she could make the hardest spell look effortless.

He would need Draco's blood, but he would also need some of his own. They would need to be mixed together in a pewter cup with a stirring rod of either veined glass or crystal for at least five minutes, and then Harry would pass his wand above the blood and speak the first incantation. Then Draco would join in with a supporting chant, and then Harry would cast the second incantation, and then he would have to manage the third incantation nonverbally while he moved his wand in a complicated fourfold pattern.

Other parts of the book explained the magical theory behind the spell. Harry didn't care to know that, however. He was sure that things made sense, and as long as only human error and not some distant metaphysical possibility could damage the spell, then he would trust to the magic working just as he trusted to the magic of his Firebolt when he flew.

He closed the book and set it aside after about an hour, gently massaging his temples with the tips of his fingers. A headache was growing behind his eyes, in the exact same place it had when Ron was wounded during the war, or when it hadn't seemed likely that Hermione would gain permission from the Ministry to open her office, war heroine or not, after six months of work.

He called it his "a friend is in trouble" headache. It was strange that he should be having it now, he knew, unless the thought of all the trouble Ginny had just incurred should make him wince.

But he knew better than that. It was for Malfoy.

He snorted to himself. As if it should be! He had said that he trusted him to Argue well in the courtroom, not to do anything else. He was sorry for him as someone who had lost his mother, but that was no reason to produce a headache like this.

And yet the pain was there behind his eyes, and he had not a qualm about following Draco into the meeting with Zabini and Ginny tonight, though he had no idea what the other wizard would do as yet.

It looked as though he would have to face the unpleasant possibility that his feelings for Malfoy ran deeper than he had suspected.

Yes, well, right now I'm just helping a friend in trouble, Harry decided firmly. *I said that anything else can wait, and it* can. *What kind of friend am I, anyway, to be debating about this when Draco's probably going out of his mind with plans to get his mother back?*

He firmly shook away any worries about himself—this was neither the time nor the place—and picked up the book again.

By the time five-thirty had arrived, Draco had made up his mind. He had a number of plans hovering in his thoughts, inchoate possibilities that required only the presence of a reality to make them spring into focus. Since he could not know exactly how Blaise would open the meeting, he could not know which one would be needed as yet, but once he did…

Then the rest of the evening is mine. I'll play you just like a chess-player playing his pawns, Blaise, and let's see you escape this one. Old friend.

The last thought was entirely sarcastic, of course. Draco had no intention of calling what he felt for Blaise friendship ever again.

He met Harry leaning on the wall outside the door of his bedroom. Harry straightened when he

saw Draco, and his eyes were alert and wary. He raised his brows, but didn't speak, as if any word from him would somehow break in on a sacred silence.

Draco was grateful to see that, after all, Harry Potter could take orders.

"Don't say a word," he said curtly, "unless I ask you to. No matter what the provocation, no matter what they imply about you, or me, or the both of us together." It had occurred to him that Blaise might well try to hint that he and Harry were lovers. Why not? He had seized on wilder weapons to defend himself before, when he was in the middle of one of these grandiose plans—the ones Draco had sometimes helped him with. "Can you do that?"

Harry nodded.

Practicing early, I see, Draco thought, and then murmured, "You know that we might have to kill one or both of them."

Harry's jaw tightened. He replied in the same clear, ringing tones that Draco had heard him use with Weasley. "If Zabini strikes, then yes, I'll kill him. But I won't kill Ginny."

Draco felt a bit of the ice coating and containing his emotions crack. He surged forwards a step. "Her death might save my mother's life."

"And she's pregnant." Harry came up off the wall like a coiling snake. "I won't destroy one innocent life to save another. Don't ask me to make that choice, because you'll lose my support if you do."

Draco narrowed his eyes, and told himself to think of this as practice for the no doubt nerve-wracking meeting with Blaise and Weasley coming up. "How strange," he said. "I assumed that, when you said you'd help me, you meant it."

"Yes, well, if one of my best friends asked for my help with murder, I sure as hell wouldn't just agree to it out of the blue." Harry's voice had roughened. He twisted his head to the side. "You can plan and plan, Malfoy, but you *can't* control everything, or your mum would never have been kidnapped. Will you please set aside your stupid pride and concentrate on what's actually *likely* to happen? I've told you what I'll do, and what I'm capable of doing. Don't press me beyond my capacity. It's not good sense." He paused a moment, then added quietly, "I'm not the one you want to bite just at this moment, am I?"

Damn Gryffindors for being perceptive when I don't want them to. Draco lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. "Very well. Since you consider yourself limited by conscience—"

"I do."

"—we'll work within those limits. Stand at my shoulder as silent strength. Don't speak." Draco waved his wand, and Harry winced but didn't say anything as a charm flattened his hair and

brightened his cheeks to a level of cleanliness he probably never achieved on his own. "If I need you to, strike hard and immediately. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

Draco found himself believing the burn in the Gryffindor's green eyes this time. "Good," he said, and stifled the temptation to reach for Harry's hand, or to lean on his shoulder and ask for comfort. That wouldn't get his mother back.

Time enough for that later.

For now, we fight.

The Three Broomsticks didn't appear to have changed much since Draco's student days. The exact same tables on which he had more than once carved his initials stood around the room. The same mirror gleamed from over the bar—though now he could recognize the subtle wards that hovered above the surface, protecting the glass from random hexes and flying spells. There were still booths where couples sat gazing into each other's eyes and a few students toasted each other with foaming mugs of butterbeer.

It was at one of those booths that Blaise and Weasley waited for them.

Blaise rose to his feet the moment he saw them, his eyes slightly narrowed and his head lifted as if he were some beast who could spring across the tables and attack them. Draco met his gaze for a flash of a second, and saw the same mixture of excitement and fear that he had expected to see, the same mixture that always shone there when Blaise was in the middle of one of his plans.

Someone else might not have found it so easy to see, but then, someone else would probably not have known Blaise this well.

Draco had already dropped into his own performance. The mask he had to maintain was fragile. It must appear to be the same cold and calm expression he usually wore in social situations, but a parody of itself, trembling and about to crack at the edges. His eyes had to reflect controlled desperation, snapping there or badly hidden. He had to remember to keep his movements too controlled one moment, sharp and abrupt the next.

Harry walked in silence at his shoulder. Draco could practically feel the little spasms of concern from him, and he knew Harry would be fighting the temptation to whisper, *Are you all right?* But so far he had kept his promise and remained quiet, whatever it cost him.

"Zabini," Draco said, and his voice did not quite crack halfway through the name. His nerves were taut and quivering, which, of course, had to be concealed under two facades—the one he showed to Blaise and the controlled one beneath which he had shown Harry earlier, to prove he knew what he was doing. He turned a murderous glance on Blaise, and then hesitated at the last moment and relaxed a bit, as if he had just remembered that they were in public and he didn't

want to betray anything so personal. "You said to be here at this time."

"I'm glad you're prompt, Malfoy," Blaise said, his words as soft as the sound of a snake's scales on dry stone. "Sit down, please." He gestured to the empty side of the booth, since Weasley shared the seat he'd risen from.

Draco swept Weasley with a contemptuous look as he slid into place, using the moment to collect real information about her. She had looked up once when they came in, and then stared steadfastly at her drink. Now her head slowly rose, as if her eyes were moving against her will, and she stared only at Harry. This close, Draco could hear the loud, restless sound of her breathing.

She doesn't like this. It seems her note to Harry was true after all, and she doesn't approve of Blaise's latest—diversion.

Not that Draco cared. She had been part of the reason that Blaise had done this, either for her sake or for the sake of getting his hands on Harry's money, and so Draco held her equally to blame.

Harry settled beside him. Draco would not have admitted it for a thousand more Galleons, but he found the other man's presence comforting. This close, Draco could sense both the warmth and the coiled tension in his body, and of course the magic that had settled back into his skin but still hummed. Harry was ready to whip out his wand and fire off a spell any time it was needed.

Draco leaned forwards across the table, his unborn plans spinning in his head. It remained to be seen what Blaise's first move would be. He struggled with himself for a moment, at least on the surface, and then spat, "Where is she?"

Blaise relaxed minutely, and a malicious spark entered his eyes. "All in good time, Malfoy," he said softly. "Why not have a drink and enjoy this social occasion? It'll be all over the *Prophet* tomorrow, you realize. Good publicity for the trial, and it'll modify the public opinion of all of us, to show that we're able to drink together without hexes flying."

Two of Draco's plans that had depended on Blaise being tenser than this died, and, one decision made, he began to exercise the rest. "A drink, then," he said, and this time exaggerated his movements as he leaned back against the wall and half-flipped his cloak over his shoulder. "To show the world that there's no ill-will between us." He audibly ground his teeth on the last words.

Blaise laughed, and signaled Madam Rosmerta. She brought two butterbeers in short order, staring at them from the corner of her eye. Draco flicked his wand beneath the table, nonverbally incanting a ward that would keep her from listening to the conversation at the table no matter how hard she might try. He was confident that no one else would notice it, unless Lucius was nearby. It was a ward specific to members of the Malfoy family.

Harry stiffened at his side. Draco welcomed the distraction, though he had to fight not to chuckle

out loud. *Potter, of course, may be an exception to the rules, if only because of his damn sensitivity to magic.*

Under the cover of the cloak, Draco delicately nudged Harry's ribs to tell him he had nothing to worry about, and then leaned forwards across the table. "I've only come for one reason, Zabini," he said, letting deadly iron purpose fill every word, "and you know what it is."

Blaise's face reflected—to someone who knew him, and he never should have forgotten that Draco did—the struggle between greed and cunning. Greed won. He leaned back in the booth with a casual move of his own, and Draco thought he would have cross his legs, save that the table was too low to permit the gesture. "Let's not be hasty," he said genially. "After all, some of us *are* here for more than one reason, and to increase the number of them if they can."

Another path of probability closed in Draco's thoughts; another opened. Blaise thought Draco fearful enough for his mother's life that he could ask for any concession and have it granted. That would cost him more than he could imagine, in the end.

"Name the reasons for which you've come," Draco said, and lowered his eyes to the table. Just a moment, but it was enough.

"Oh, thank you, Malfoy, your graciousness," Blaise murmured. "Well. For starters, the price has changed. It's three-quarters of both vaults now. And you'll tell Witherbone that you've come to this decision on your own, Potter," he added with a sudden harshness, spinning his head like an owl's to face Harry. "Giving us the whole and not leaving yourself enough money to live on would be suspicious, but this amount will both satisfy our needs and punish you sufficiently."

Draco cocked his head and turned to Harry. He had been afraid Harry's face would reflect mutinous outrage, but to his surprise, it was a mask, too, though in its own fashion. Harry showed absolutely nothing but calm determination—the way he had when he was battling Lucius. Draco supposed he wasn't the only one who had done what he needed to maintain control in this obnoxious meeting.

Now, Harry just raised his eyebrows and moved his chin in a little nod that could have meant everything or nothing. Blaise chuckled.

With each moment, Draco could feel the balance of fortune and caution tipping more and more. Blaise was growing more secure, feeling he could demand more, which already told Draco several things. First, Blaise had fallen for his ruse. Second, Weasley's visible discomfort with the situation and the fact that Blaise alone spoke for both of them might represent a crack in their unity, a weapon that could be exploited. Third, Blaise was likely to let his greed lead him too far and fall headlong into the abyss. Fourth, Blaise was confident that he could procure Narcissa at any moment; he either had some control over Lucius or no idea of how dangerous the man could be.

In fact, Draco knew, the truth probably lay somewhere between those two extremes. Blaise had

underestimated the danger from Lucius, but he was too much a Slytherin to simply seize on a weapon that would cut him. He had made a reckoning, then, and decided that the need for this particular threat outweighed the damage it might do him.

But not the damage Lucius might do to my mother.

Draco forced himself to think only of Blaise's smug expression as he faced him again, and what it might tell him.

"We also demand all houses Potter owns except Grimmauld Place," Blaise told Draco. "You're an expert Arguer. It's up to you to make this sound convincing." He smiled a bit, perhaps at something in Draco's expression, though Draco himself was perfectly aware of what was there and knew it was nothing that would give his former friend cause for amusement. "Tell them Potter decided to keep the house that matched his mood most of the time, if you want."

"And how will you convince the judge of *Potter's* change of heart?" Draco leaned further back in the booth, so that he could feel Harry's thigh warm against his. He didn't like how much better that made him feel, but it was better to take what he needed than argue with himself. "Witherbone knows I'll Argue what my client says; if he demands that we give up certain concessions, we'll give them up. But she also knows that Potter rather had his heart set on keeping the vaults and the houses." He introduced a slight tone of disgust into his voice, as if the mere thought of worldly wealth, and his own pride and reputation, meant nothing to him next to the threats to his mother, and a sneer welled in his heart when Blaise lapped it up.

"That's easy enough," said Blaise, waving a hand. "You can announce the baby's condition. That's enough excuse for a soft-hearted Gryffindor. You *know* that Witherbone will buy that, especially when the papers carry the news of his noble sacrifice and everyone else melts."

The baby's condition is apparently real, then. Draco filed the information away for remembrance, but not true consideration. Real or not, Blaise was using it as an excuse.

"And we want the Invisibility Cloak and the Firebolt," Blaise continued calmly. "For personal reasons, of course." He turned and flashed Harry another smile.

Because they're personal to him. Draco felt another layer of ice build on top of the ones already encasing his emotions. Even if he had been the kind of Arguer he described himself as—willing to bend to the client's will in all things—he would have argued against this. Harry shouldn't have to surrender treasures of sentimental value to him merely to gratify his shrew of a wife. Blaise was asking for petty concessions now.

Which meant he thought he'd won.

Draco let the realization fall slowly into his mind like a rock into the sea, mattering to him, but not altering every current of his behavior.

"If you must," he said, and then lifted his head. "None of this, of course, tells me when you'll have my father surrender my mother."

"We have another court date set tomorrow." Blaise stretched his arms easily over his head, but his eyes were alert and full of menace. "Let's hear you promise everything we demanded first, seal it before Witherbone with a blood oath, and, just to prove your good will, add one more concession, one more surrendered treasure or answer to a demand we've already made, that *you* choose." His smile widened. "After that, we'll contact you with instructions for getting her back."

Draco exhaled hard. That left them only an evening to find his mother. He knew that Harry, not because he trusted Blaise and Weasley but to save an innocent life, would sign away his properties in court tomorrow otherwise.

"How do I know we can trust you?" he asked.

Blaise shook his head a little. "What good would it do me to kill your mother?" he asked. "If she died, I wouldn't live long enough to spend my newly acquired wealth in any case." He met Draco's eyes, saying that he still understood *that* danger well enough.

Draco bared his teeth in an answering not-smile, the most honest gesture he had made all evening.

Beside him, Harry abruptly stiffened. Then he began to cough, wild, racking sounds that tore up from the middle of his chest. Draco stared at him. He was leaning sideways in the seat, his hand slammed to his mouth, his shoulders heaving. A moment later, he started gagging, the noisy sort of gagging that Draco recognized as a prelude to vomiting.

His first thought was that Weasley had arranged to poison Harry's drink, out of personal hatred. He shoved, and Harry slid over and continued down to the floor, convulsing. Draco crouched over him, snarling, "What did you do?" at Blaise, while in his chest a void opened at the thought of continuing this hunt for Narcissa without Harry's support.

"Nothing!" Blaise cried, and his expression was, if anything, more panicked than Draco's. "He *has* to live at least until the court session tomorrow!"

Harry gasped, drawing their attention back to him. His eyes rolling, his face a vivid shade of green, he whispered to Draco, "I think I'll be all right. L-loo now!"

Draco nodded and scooped him up from the floor, running a cold gaze over Blaise and Weasley. Blaise still looked panicked, and Weasley nothing more than uncomfortable.

"Be assured," Draco said coldly, "I *will* be testing for poison." And then he swept off to the loo in the back of the Three Broomsticks, hauling the limping, panting Harry along. People cleared a path for them at once, either because of Harry's fame or because they also knew the signs of imminent sickness.

Draco was not sure what was wrong, but he had never expected Harry to straighten and pull away from him the moment the loo's door closed behind them, aiming his wand and flicking it. Draco recognized the humming of powerful wards a moment later, silencing and locking wards, and then another spell laid over them, to prevent anyone on the other side from feeling the presence of the magic.

"Potter, what the fuck—" Draco hissed at him.

"Sorry, sorry," Harry said. "Look. I was passed a note from Ginny, I read it, and this was the only diversion I could think of to get you away from the table so I could show it to you." He turned and passed a tiny piece of crumpled parchment to Draco.

"How did you—" Draco began.

"Fingers down the throat," Harry said, and smiled faintly. "I was holding my hand so that it covered my mouth, and in any case, it's rather hard to concentrate on the position of a bloke's fingers when he's screaming and thrashing about like that, don't you think?"

Draco flicked him a curt nod, not sure if he was more irritated at Harry for making him worry or at himself for not figuring out the trick immediately, and then stared down at the note.

I know where Narcissa is. I want out.

He looked up so fast his neck hurt. "And you're *sure* Blaise didn't see this?" he demanded.

"He would have taken it from me if he had," said Harry without preamble, leaning on the wall and staring at him with a blazing intensity. "And she passed it to me while I was sitting down. I spent the entire time there figuring out how to open it under the table and read it without anyone noticing. Did *you* notice?"

Draco had to shake his head.

"Then I doubt he did," Harry finished.

That made sense, Draco admitted to himself, and he stared at the note again. "This could be a trap," he said slowly.

"Even if it *is*," Harry said, and now he leaned forwards and the fire had leaped up in his eyes as if they were about to go into battle, "we can turn it on them. Look, I *know* Ginny. Separate her from Zabini, and she'll tell the truth—as much of it as she knows. If she doesn't know anything, then at least we've got a bargaining chip of our own, or two chips, really. If she does know, we can hunt Lucius tonight."

Draco paused a long moment. Then he said, "You're thinking like a Slytherin, Harry. It scares

me, frankly."

Harry just shrugged off the praise, and said, "Do we capture Ginny and take her away from him or not?"

Draco licked his lips. Weasley was the weak chink in Blaise's armor. His cautious Slytherin instincts battled for a moment with his own logic, and then he bobbed his head once. He'd already learned as much from Blaise as he could, he thought, and this was a risk worth taking, given their sudden deadline.

"We do," he said.

"*Excellent*," said Harry, and his eyes flamed like a jaguar's, and Draco felt, for the first time since his mother had been taken, that they really might reach her in time after all.

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Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Three—Call It A Rescue

Harry carefully cracked the door of the loo and peered through the crack, attempting to stifle all the memories of the war where he had done the same thing on a Horcrux hunt, with Ron and Hermione at his back. This was not the same situation, even if it somewhat compared in seriousness and Harry's desire to succeed. Letting comparisons that meant nothing into his conscious thoughts would only dull his reflexes and thus his chances of success.

He had wanted to make sure that Zabini and Ginny had not moved, perhaps growing nervous with their long silence, but no, they were still in the same place. He could see Ginny's features from here, though not Zabini's, since he was leaning forwards and giving some order to Madam Rosmerta. Her face was still frozen. He had recognized the expression from the first—it was the one she had always worn when she wanted to hide something—but he had not known what she was hiding until now.

Yes, I think she's sincere. And that only makes it all the more important that we get her away from Zabini, since he might try to kill her when he knows she betrayed him.

Draco's hand clenched on his shoulder for a moment. "You realize we might have to use violent methods to—persuade—her?" he asked.

"That's your department," Harry said absently, his eyes estimating the number of tables between the loo and Zabini's booth. Who would move in the next few seconds? He thought he could be fairly certain, and as soon as Madam Rosmerta stepped away, he would have a fairly clear run. "Leave the rescue up to me."

"I wish you wouldn't call it that," Draco said, in a tone that managed to be harsh even though he was whispering. "Rescue is the last thing she deserves, after what she's done to you."

"How about you let me decide how much to resent that?" Harry said, and then Madam Rosmerta moved.

His body took over, and flung him forwards. He could feel his thoughts humming in his head, turning as fast as ingredients in Hermione's Muggle blender. He was half-thinking and half-acting.

Leave the complicated plotting and spinning of schemes within schemes up to Draco, he thought. He couldn't do that, and his Arguer could. But at effective, direct use of powerful magic, he was better, and he knew just what to do.

He couldn't allow Zabini enough time to realize he was coming, so he cast a glamour even as he moved—one that would blur his form and confuse and dazzle Zabini when he turned in their direction. It was targeted only to Zabini, so other people could still see through it, but their confused cries didn't include his name until the last moment, and so gave Harry precious time.

Then he was on top of Zabini, his wand whipping in a complicated pattern that trailed light, meant to distract the eyes of an opponent. It worked. Zabini snarled and lifted his own wand to aim straight at Harry, completely ignoring the way Ginny had leaned forwards next to him, her eyes bright and wide.

Harry twisted backwards, lying flat on the table as he snaked one arm around Ginny's waist. Zabini's spell flamed along above his stomach—just an inch or two above—and crashed into the far wall, rousing a cry from Madam Rosmerta. Harry heaved and twisted, and Ginny came out of her seat sideways, landed awkwardly on top of him, and then scrambled off him and onto the floor.

Zabini tried again, and though Harry was already moving, this time he was lucky. Harry hissed as he felt his robes rip along the side, and pain flare along his hip. Well, he didn't have time to attend to it now, so it would just have to wait. And now he was in the position he had wanted to be in all along—as much to indulge his own aggression, he had to admit, as because of his anger over Draco's predicament.

He kicked Zabini in the midsection, and then, as he bent, in the face. He distinctly heard the crack of cartilage that meant his nose was broken, and the snap and splinter of more than one tooth falling out of his head. Harry chuckled, hissed as the motion sent vibrations through his injury, and then whirled back to his feet and seized Ginny's arm, sweeping the room with one

glance.

Draco, he was pleased to see, had the sense he was born with, and had advanced from the loo to meet them, using a spell that cleared both tables and people sprawling from their path. He tilted his head at Harry, expression so intense that it was hard to tell what he was feeling, and then sped out the door.

Harry was right behind him, half-cradling and half-hauling Ginny. She found her own feet soon enough and ran in the same direction, luckily, or he never could have managed it. The motion tore his wound open further. Harry rolled his eyes to himself, imagining the lecture that Hermione would no doubt deliver if she were here, to scold him for being hurt on so relatively simple a maneuver.

They stopped outside the Three Broomsticks, and Harry whipped himself around. Zabini wasn't coming up behind them—yet. And if he had some means of summoning Lucius, he hadn't exercised it—yet.

Draco stepped up behind him, making Harry's muscles tense frantically in the moment before he realized it was a friend, and hissed into his ear, "I won't bring her inside the Manor's defenses, no matter what."

"No one's asking you to," Harry snapped back. His blood was up and buzzing. He already had a plan, and where it had come from, he didn't know. He wrapped his cloak around Ginny and told her, "Hold tightly to my arm." She did, after one look at his face. Harry extended his other arm to Draco.

"Come *on*," he insisted, when Draco just stared at him.

"Where are we going?" Draco demanded.

"Not the Manor." Harry winced as a fresh stab cut through his wound. Zabini had probably used one of the Expanding Curses, damn him; they created minor injuries at first, but remained and worked in the flesh, doing more damage the longer they went untreated. They'd been fairly common among the Death Eaters. "Place I know."

Draco raised his eyebrow, but finally, *finally* took his arm.

Harry closed his eyes, envisioned the beach outside the cave where Voldemort had hidden the locket Horcrux, and Apparated. He was aware of their breathing as he did: Draco's calm and cool and determined, Ginny's fast with fear.

The moment they landed, Draco turned and hauled Harry around with him, separating him from the close embrace of his wife. If she'd had some dagger in her hand or wanted to flick her wand and cast some spell at Harry's heart, she could have done it easily. The idiot hadn't considered that, of course.

Harry cried aloud at the movement, and then cursed. Draco glanced down and saw the darker stain of blood welling through his robes.

Another wave of transcendent rage passed across his mind. He tried to steady Harry on his feet, but he must accidentally have touched the injury, since Harry stamped and pulled away from him. "What happened?" Draco asked.

"A combination Cutting and Expanding Curse," Harry said back, voice strained. "Zabini got me when I was lying on the table. I'll take care of it." He pried his robes back with a single enormous wince—Draco never could have done the same thing without preparing himself, since the blood had stuck the cloth to the flesh—and aimed his wand at the revealed cut across his hip, which looked too much like a hungry mouth for Draco's taste. "*Integro!*"

The cut bubbled for a moment, but Harry repeated the spell in a strong voice, and the air burst with magic, and the bloody mouth narrowed to a thin, grim red line, like a pair of pursed lips. It must still have hurt, but Harry just nodded as if that satisfied him, and then turned and faced his wife.

Draco moved up behind him in a moment, bristling, and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders, wanting to show Weasley exactly what the configuration of alliances was here.

He thought he heard Harry stifle a sigh, but he didn't say anything to dispute Draco's positioning or try to make him less hostile—which was a good thing, Draco thought, because it wouldn't have worked. He leaned around Harry's head and addressed Weasley. "You said that you wanted out. We've provided you with a way out. You also said that you knew where my mother was. *Talk.*"

He put all his contempt and all his hatred into the one word, and it had the effect he had hoped for. Weasley went so pale that her freckles looked like spots of blood on parchment. She nodded, wordlessly, and then cleared her throat. "She's in a secure flat that Blaise chose," she croaked. "I'll give you the address as soon as you promise me enough protection that I know Blaise can't come after me."

The bitch. Every tendon and ligament in Draco's body seemed to stiffen. His voice was still under control when it emerged, however, because he was exercising the entirety of his will to making sure it stayed that way. "Keep the rest of your promise now," he said. "We've already done *more* than enough for you, considering that you were part of her kidnapping in the first place." He did not voice his other fear: that Blaise might even now have been racing to the flat, ready to move his mother someplace else. He would do nothing to give Weasley the impression that she had power here.

"I never approved of it!" Weasley snapped, her face flushing. She crossed her arms in front of her belly. "By the time I knew about it, he already had it all planned out. *He* was the one who contacted Lucius. He told me about it after your father had already left Sweden. Don't blame *me*,

it's not *my* fault. There are some lengths I won't go to, money or not—"

Harry was the one who interrupted, just moments before Draco would have unleashed the full force of his anger. "Ginny," he said, and there was something in his voice that silenced her immediately. "We need to know. *Where is Narcissa*?"

Weasley's mouth fell open, and she shivered. It occurred to Draco, for the first time, that perhaps her claim that she had been afraid of Harry was not all bollocks. She answered at once, in a tiny, obedient voice. "On 55 North Crescent Street, in the East End of Muggle London."

"Thank you," Harry said, and his voice was gentle but without warmth, a feat that Draco didn't know how he managed. He tossed his head at Draco. "Do you want to go and rescue her while I take Ginny somewhere safe?"

Draco clamped down his hands immediately, holding Harry in place and wringing a slight gasp out of him, perhaps from the pain in his shoulder blades. "Nothing doing, Potter," he hissed at him. "First of all, we won't split up. Second, we have no indication that she's telling the truth."

"We have to reach Narcissa as soon as possible," Harry said, sounding irritated. "But we also have to make sure—"

"No, we don't." Draco bared his teeth. The gesture was behind Harry's head, so he couldn't see it, but the terror filling Weasley's brown eyes showed she understood well enough. "We *do* have a means of making a guarantee of her words, however." He slipped one hand into his robe pocket, where he'd had the forethought to drop a vial of Veritaserum. He hadn't *really* thought he would have a chance to insert a few drops into Blaise's drink or Weasley's, but he had planned for all eventualities. And now he did have the chance.

Weasley backed away from them, her hands covering her belly. "I'll leave you," she breathed. "I'll Apparate—"

"And you can't go anywhere that Blaise won't look for you, eventually," Draco said without mercy. Fear was their only method of controlling her now. "Your parents' home? The first place he'll go. His house? The wards won't hold against him. The houses of any friends you still have? I imagine that *he* knows all about them, too, doesn't he? I would have made sure." Weasley hunched her shoulders, showing that blow had gone home. "That's why you had to appeal to us for protection in the first place." Draco rushed through the words, aware of time bounding and leaping away from them, but desperately needing to make sure this was done right the first time. The one thing that would torment him more than losing his mother was the knowledge that he had let the opportunity to save her slip through his fingers. "If you could save yourself, you could have left Blaise at any time."

Weasley swallowed, a loud noise. Harry echoed her. Draco didn't know what he was thinking, and had no time to ask. He just had to trust that Harry would back him up on his decisions, no matter what happened.

"I don't—" Weasley tightened her clutch on her belly, and edged away from him again, towards the dark mouth of a cave opening in the sandy rise near them. Her eyes were wide, her mouth nearly hanging open. Draco stepped back from Harry, and let her see that he held his wand along with the vial. She stopped moving. "Veritaserum will harm the baby," she said.

"Hardly." Draco stalked a few steps forwards, measuring the distance between them with his eyes. She was still too frightened to draw her wand. If he pressed her much more, however, she would probably think of it; Gryffindors in a corner often did. He must win this contest *now*. "It's been tested on pregnant women before, and had no ill effects." He raised his eyebrows mockingly. "If you tell us the same thing you already told us, why should you fear taking it? Unless you have something else to hide, of course."

Weasley uttered a frightened little whimper, and then turned as if she would run.

Harry went past Draco with the dark grace of a leaping nundu. His wound hardly seemed to slow his pace. He grabbed Weasley, twisted around, and then fell to the ground so that he was holding her securely but cradling her belly with his body. In a moment, he'd turned them so that she sat firmly in his lap, her wrists so firmly entwined with Harry's hands that she'd probably break them trying to draw them free.

"Now, Draco," Harry said, and when he looked up, his eyes were hard, as if he'd begun to suspect what Draco had. "Use the Veritaserum."

Draco took positive pleasure in approaching them both and tipping three drops of Veritaserum into his hand. Weasley tried to clench her jaw and turn away, but Harry lifted their joined hands and slammed her chest. As she opened her mouth to gasp in pain, Draco slipped the drops inside.

Her face went slack in seconds, and Draco demanded, "What is your name?"

"Ginevra Molly Potter," she whispered. Harry grimaced as if he'd tasted something bad.

"Who is the father of the child you carry?" Draco said.

"Blaise Zabini," she said in turn. Her eyes were rolling like a startled cow's, and it made Draco both glad and contemptuous to look at her.

"And where is my mother?" he said. He waited to hear the same address emerge from her lips.

"I don't know," Weasley whispered. Tears began to slip down her cheeks.

Harry's face twisted in disgust. Draco thought he would have flung her from him if not for the need to keep a firm hold on her so she wouldn't Apparate—and if not for the baby.

Breathing hoarsely, Draco clenched his hands together behind his back. He *wanted* to destroy

her. He thought she deserved, at the very least, to lose the child she was carrying. She had miscarried once, perhaps even deliberately; what would a second time hurt?

Harry would stop him from doing that, of course.

"You said that even if she didn't know, we would still have two bargaining chips," Draco said coolly, raising his eyes to Harry's. "Given that it was your idea, what do you suggest doing now?"

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment, and then said, in a low, commanding voice, "Kreacher. Come to me."

Draco blinked as a supremely dirty house-elf appeared with a sudden pop in front of Harry, spluttering. It saw him and stared for a moment, but Harry snapped, "Kreacher. Never mind about him. Take *her* —" he twitched his head at Weasley "—and keep her confined in Grimmauld Place."

"Kreacher is not liking to put blood traitors in the old mistress's house," the house-elf complained, and glared at Harry. "She would—"

"Do you remember what I told you after the war?" Harry asked.

The house-elf paused for a moment, and then whimpered and said softly, "Yes. Kreacher remembers. Kreacher cannot forget."

"Then confine *her* behind wards." Harry pushed Weasley towards the elf. "Don't harm her physically, but make the wards secure so she can't get out in any way, and tell her all the terrifying stories you like."

With a malicious smirk, the house-elf said, "Yes, *Master*," grabbed Weasley's hand, and vanished. Harry rose to his feet shaking his head and smearing at his robes, as if he had something dirtier than sand on them.

"What was that?" Draco asked.

"The house-elf that came with Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, the property I inherited from my godfather, Sirius Black." Harry's face was still twisted, caught, it seemed, between warring memories. "Sirius's ancestors made a habit of chopping off their house-elves' heads and keeping them on the wall there. I told Kreacher that I'd kill him and bury him far away from the house if he betrayed me. He's obeyed since." He gave Draco a faint smile. "Don't worry. He'll keep her—safe."

"Meanwhile, my mother is not," Draco said.

"Yes." Harry drew his wand. "We should go back to the Manor and perform the blood ritual. I

read it in enough detail that I think I could do it here, but we have to have a pewter cup and a crystal stirring rod."

Draco nodded once. It was no use regretting lost chances, or the fact that Weasley hadn't really known where his mother was. Better to move. At the least, it didn't give him much time to think. He reached out and gripped Harry's arm.

"And, Draco?"

He cocked his head at Harry, whose eyes had an odd shine to them.

"I almost wish I could bring myself to kill her for you," Harry whispered. "If not for the baby, I might."

Draco took a step closer to him, until he stood enfolded in warmth, and nodded, so close that his hair brushed Harry's face. "Thank you," he said.

Harry put his arms around him and Apparated them both back to the Manor.

Harry noticed that Draco didn't flinch when he took the blood from his arm, though the cut was a fairly good size. Harry made a small incision on his own finger; he'd thought about opening the wound on his hip again, but he didn't want that to slow him down when he faced Lucius, as he fully expected that he'd have to do.

He mixed their blood together in the cup, and began to stir it with the crystal rod, casting a *Tempus* charm so that he would know when the five minutes required by the ritual had passed. Meanwhile, he watched Draco's face, the changing emotions that sometimes flitted there like shadows on ice, and thought about his own fierce disappointment in Ginny.

It was no surprise that she hadn't approved of all of Blaise's tactics. She did have morals, after all, and Harry could easily imagine how it must have been: how her pride and resentment would have led her to approve everything her lover did at first, when it didn't seem quite real to her; how her uneasiness would have begun, and grown; and then how she would begin to react with deep dread as she realized the trial might both dash her hopes of wealth and truly harm her or her child. She would have wanted out of Blaise's plan. She would have wanted safety.

To pretend to know Narcissa's location when she did not, however…

That was the part Harry found it hardest to forgive her for. She could have asked him for simple safety for the baby's sake, and he would have given it. She hadn't needed to lie.

And he found it hard to forgive himself. He would have trusted her without the Veritaserum. And then he and Draco would have dashed off and spent a few fruitless hours searching for Narcissa, during which time Blaise would probably have managed to change everything about. At least there was the chance he wouldn't, now, since *he* would have known that Ginny didn't know

anything about Narcissa's location.

And if he had only agreed to an amiable divorce in the first place, or read Ginny better when he first married her, then Draco and his mum would never have had to be involved in this nightmare.

He lifted his head and studied Draco once more. Draco stared into his eyes. Harry couldn't read regret there, though, just fury and loathing and fierce determination.

Five minutes, flashed the charm. Harry drew back and cast the first spell above the blood. The liquid in the cup shimmered and turned golden. Draco came in with the supporting chant, his voice low and strong, like the sound of kobolds working underground.

The second incantation. Harry could feel the spell yanking magic from him now, as if it wanted to be out of his body and inside the worn Latin syllables tumbling over his lips. Good enough for him, really, whichever way he managed it.

Except that it couldn't be just "good enough." The spell had to be perfect, for the sake of Narcissa.

Harry settled back on his haunches and chanted the third incantation in his mind while flipping his wand through the fourfold pattern above the blood. He didn't allow himself any more time to slow down and doubt than he had in the Three Broomsticks. This had to be done, and well, so he did it, and well.

The pattern blazed golden when he was done with it, four interlocking wheels, glowing and dancing around one another for long moments. Then they dived into the blood, and the liquid itself shone like a rising sun.

In the sane moment, Draco gasped and sagged, grabbing his arm. Harry looked up, astonished, as a golden cord spilled from his wound and rolled along the floor, picking up speed as it hit the wall of the potions lab where they'd cast the spell. It vanished beyond, but Harry could see through the wall where it trailed, and could make out the cord rapidly racing beyond the Manor and into the distance. He blinked several times. He remembered nothing like that from when they'd tracked Bill. Presumably it was something only the actual caster could see.

"We can follow it," he said quietly, and turned to Draco. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Draco said, and stood as if he had never sagged at all. "Are you ready?"

Harry inclined his head once, then rose to his feet and gathered Draco with one arm. They would have to walk to the edge of the Manor's anti-Apparition wards before they began to jump, but from there on out, given the unnatural clarity of his sight where the golden thread ran, they would be able to Apparate again and again along its length, sooner or later arriving where Blaise held Narcissa.

And Lucius.

Harry's mind throbbed and turned clear. As carefully as he could, he began preparing himself to kill.

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Chapter: 24

Thank you again for the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Four—This Old House

Harry crouched behind a patch of gorse and peered at the house in uneasy fascination. He didn't know exactly where they were; he only knew that they'd hopped north from Malfoy Manor, and the countryside had grown increasingly bleak around them. The golden cord ended at last, though, leading directly into the building in front of them.

The house itself was no more a prize than its setting. Its walls were made of black stone, but the stones had partially come loose, and Harry could see what remained of the mortar clinging to them like scum on the surface of a pond. One arched doorway was filled with a tumble of rock. The windows were broken, or boarded with crazed shutters of torn and tilted wood. What must have been a graceful garden at one point was filled with creeping honeysuckle, and vines that Harry could imagine bearing thorns but not flowers.

"She's there?" Draco whispered beside him.

Harry nodded, but didn't pause in his study of the house. He had to find out where Zabini and Lucius were before they attacked. "I must admit I didn't expect them to be in a place like this," he muttered.

"It's probably one of the old manor houses that a pure-blood family couldn't afford to keep up after the war, and so sold," Draco said without interest. "Blaise's mother probably bought it."

"If she's that rich—" Harry said, taking his eyes off the house to glance at Draco for a moment. His companion concerned him. Draco's face was paler than it had been, and his lips were pursed to the point that it looked as if he might start chewing through them at any moment. Harry sympathized with his frustration, but he also knew it was necessary to hold still and be calm at this point in the game, or they could ruin everything.

"*She* is," Draco said shortly. "But the money in the family is hers, and Blaise can't use it unless

she dies soon." His flattened lips lifted into a smile for the briefest of moments. "I can't imagine why she doesn't make more generous provisions for him now."

Harry chuckled darkly, and then regarded the house again. The golden cord ran through a lower wall, turning it transparent to his sight, but then it continued on and up, towards the far side of the house, and he simply couldn't see the ending from here. The only thing he could be certain of was that it *did* end in the house, since it wasn't leading his eyes further on. "Stay here," he murmured to Draco, starting to stand. "I need to scout the other side."

Draco's hand closed on his arm, causing Harry to grit his teeth against the pain. "Not a chance, Potter," Draco said, his voice cracking like one of the windows under the strain. "We *aren't* separating."

"I need to do a reconnaissance of the other side, where Zabini and Lucius are," Harry said, striving for patience. "I understand that you want to help, but you don't know a thing about this, and *I* do."

Draco stared at him with narrowed eyes for a moment. "From experience in the war?"

"Yes." Harry regarded him with some suspicion in turn. Draco looked thoughtful, but that could be a *bad* thing.

"Hmm." Draco released him abruptly. "You have ten minutes from now, Harry. Cast a *Tempus* charm if you need to, but then I'm coming to find you."

"Thanks," Harry said, not without some sarcasm, and then began working his way around to the other side of the house. It would have been quicker to Apparate, but he thought they might feel it from this close. There were *some* sort of wards on the house, but, just like so many other things, he wouldn't be able to determine what kind they were until he got nearer.

Draco counted the minutes under his breath, glancing at the *Tempus* charm when he felt he needed to. It agreed with him, though. Harry had been gone eight minutes. Two more, and Draco would go to find him.
He could keep count in the meantime, though, and with perfect accuracy. His fear for his mother was not destroying his concentration, the way Harry seemed to think it would.

He blanked his mind of every speculation as to what could be happening to Narcissa, and instead numbered his heartbeats. Nine minutes had passed. He *knew* he shouldn't have let Harry go by himself, previous experience or not.

And then Harry was back, Apparating softly in beside him, and bending down with a grim smile. "No wards to detect Apparition," he whispered, his breath stirring the small hairs on Draco's ear. "No wards to prevent it, either. I suppose they want the chance to get away quickly themselves, if it comes to that." His mouth twitched away from the smile for a moment. "Remember that. They can escape."

Draco nodded, his gaze not moving from Harry's face. "And my mother? Did you see her?"

"Yes." Harry stared back at him with an expression at once both sympathetic and hard, as if he wanted to reassure Draco but understood it would be useless. Answering the unspoken question, he murmured, "She looks to have a broken arm and a large wound under her right—breast." He flushed for a moment, as if it had taken him a lot to say the word. Draco might have found it endearing if he didn't have other things to feel. "She isn't in danger of blood loss, though, since it's bandaged. They're all in a large room on the west side of the house. Ground floor. No obstacles; I think they want to be able to move quickly if they're engaged in a fight there. Zabini is standing guard over Narcissa. Your father…I'm not quite sure what he's doing, actually. Sitting in a corner and laughing to himself, and sometimes staring at his wand."

"That's normal behavior for him." Draco once again took Harry's arm. He felt as though he stood more chance of making the great idiot listen when he touched him. By the way Harry's muscles stiffened under the touch and his eyes flew to Draco's, the great idiot thought so, too. "Listen," Draco hissed, just in case. "When we go in, my first priority is saving my mother—"

"Of course," Harry said, sounding offended.

"—But the second is securing both of *them* so they can't escape." Draco's hand clamped down more firmly, and he tugged Harry closer to him. "Blaise is mine. No matter what happens, no matter what I do to him, leave him to me. You'll have to stop my father, since I've never won when I engaged with him wand-to-wand. Kill him, Harry. There's no other way to stop him, or even slow him down."

Harry tilted his head, and there was a cold, distant glitter in his eyes that Draco could have wished to see in the courtroom. "Yes," he said. "I understand."

"Take me, then." Draco stood and wrapped both arms around Harry's waist, leaning close as Harry drew his wand to Apparate them. Almost as an afterthought, Harry's left arm slipped around Draco's back.

I will be grateful when this is done and I can test how much it's changed him, was Draco's final thought in the moment before they vanished.

Zabini and Lucius hadn't substantially altered their positions when Harry peered through the window again, though Lucius was apparently talking to his wand instead of just staring at it. Harry forced himself to remember the older wizard's quickness and ferocity in their last battle. No matter how stupid he seemed, behind his Azkaban-induced madness he was still intelligent. All the madness had done was remove his instincts towards self-preservation.
Draco nudged him with an elbow, and pointed to Zabini, who had moved a bit away from Narcissa, as though he'd heard a sound at the door on the room's south side and wanted to investigate. Harry understood the silent message as though they shared a single brain. They wouldn't get a better chance to attack.

He had already planned out his first move. He drew his wand and Vanished the window. Satisfying as breaking it would have been, it would also have filled the room with flying splinters of glass that could have damaged Narcissa.

He jumped through the window a moment later, hearing Draco's thumping footsteps just behind him. He paused when he heard a sound that could have been Draco's elbow catching on the windowsill, but then the footsteps resumed, reassuring Harry that he was still on his feet.

He made straight for Narcissa, catching a glimpse of Zabini's face as he wheeled around gaping, and seeing Lucius rise to his feet, flipping his cloak away from his arm so that he could better draw his wand. Then he narrowed his gaze to Narcissa, and as he came nearer, it was easier. She was wounded. She needed his help. He had to be gentle, and he had to be quick.

He dug down into his magic and cast a spell of more complexity than any he'd dared in the last five years, excepting the blood magic ritual that he and Draco had used to track Lucius this far. The air in front of him shimmered and sparked, and then turned solid white. In moments, it formed into a bubble around Narcissa, made of flapping crystal that would bulge and move as necessary to let air in, but would instantly seal tight shut in the event of an attack.

Harry had only cast the spell once during the war, and hadn't been sure he would remember the incantation. He had, though. He allowed himself a moment's pride before he drew up his magic for the next attack.

And then Lucius crashed into him, and Harry screamed as enormous pain flared along the middle of his back.

Draco didn't allow himself to look around at Harry's scream. He had Blaise in front of him now, and his overwhelming purpose was to put the bastard down so that, when he did turn to help Harry, Blaise couldn't come up behind him and put a Killing Curse through him.
Blaise was dancing backwards, swinging his wand and casting curses that cracked like whips, forcing Draco to spend more time dodging and ducking than using his own spells. That was all right. Even as weirdly-colored beams of green and blue light traveled past him, he was sinking into a crystalline trance in the center of his mind, the kind he used for exceptionally difficult magic, and the kind that had finally produced his plan to connect the Vanishing Cabinets during sixth year.

Blaise finally had to pause for breath, and to favor an ankle that he seemed to have slightly twisted, and then Draco aimed his wand directly at him and cast. "*Suppressio infinitum*," he heard his own voice say, as drained of emotion as though he were merely using the incantation on a stranger to see what it did.

Blaise screamed. Draco doubted he had recognized the spell so quickly. Rather, he was probably feeling the first sensations as it whirled into the center of his brain, gripped his deepest fears, and yanked them front and center.

Slowly, Blaise sagged to his knees, holding his hands in front of his eyes. They shook. His gaze was focused past Draco, wide and unseeing, and then he began to scream, again and again, sounds that seemed to core out the center of his throat. Draco carefully cast a Body-Bind, and watched without emotion as his old friend's body turned and crashed to the floor. Blaise couldn't easily have caused trouble when all he saw were his own, unending nightmares, but he might have run wildly about the room, and that would have been inconvenient.

Draco spun on his heel. He saw the white bubble that protected his mother, and raised his eyebrows in grudging respect. He thought he knew what spell Harry had used, but he was not sure that he could have managed it.

Then he looked to the battle raging between Harry and Lucius.

And his mouth went utterly dry, nearly as dry as it had when he had heard that his mother was taken.

Lucius had used the Flaying Curse, Harry knew within seconds of the first agony, and had removed most of the skin from his back, all at one go.
He really should have expected it, he told himself, as he got his knees under him and whirled to the side so that he wouldn't slip in his own blood. Even with the need to keep Narcissa safe, he shouldn't have neglected his own defense for that long. He still had to win this battle, after all.

He couldn't roll, or he would only cause himself more pain. He had to keep turning, making the first curses that Lucius shot at him fly by harmlessly, and then spring to his feet. The wound on his hip twinged, and his right leg briefly sagged as if it would fly from beneath him, but luckily Nagini's bite only truly hurt him when he was tired. He was rested enough for this battle.

He had to be.

Harry surged up, and Lucius came straight at him, apparently disdaining lesser magic and reaching for the Killing Curse. Harry looked carefully into his opponent's eyes, the way Alastor Moody had taught him, and saw nothing sane there. He *had* to kill him.

All right, then.

The beam of green light came in low, at his knees, and Harry leaped over it. He whipped his wand sideways as he started down, shouting, "*Sectumsempra!*"

Lucius looked down in surprise at the bloody cuts on his chest, but he hardly seemed to feel them. That, Harry acknowledged as he landed with a grunt, and the strange angle and the pain in his back had probably reduced the effectiveness of the spell. Whatever the cause, Lucius looked up with a rictus of a grin a moment later and moved towards Harry once more.

He had obviously survived the maiming of his arm, Harry thought, and reattached it with his own

magic or that of some skilled surgeon. But the fact that it had been wounded at all gave him an idea.

It was Dark magic, what he was about to use, but so was Snape's curse. And Hermione wasn't here to scold him for it.

"*Volnero porro!*" he called, and forced all his will through the narrow core of his wand, directly at Lucius.

Lucius, mad, smiling, walked on. But Harry's spell hit him in a coruscating wave of blue light, and Harry, holding his breath, saw that it had worked. Bright bruises flowered over his pale skin first, racing across his arms and face, and then blood burst from his chest. The Old Wounds curse forced all the ancient injuries of one's opponent back to the surface, from the least serious to the most serous, making him suffer them all at once. Harry didn't think he had long to wait before the curse once again severed Lucius's arm.

But Lucius came on, mad, smiling. He moved his wand in a pattern Harry didn't recognize, and though he tried to bring up the Shield Charm, this was either a curse that couldn't be blocked by it, or he didn't manage in time.

His chest began to rip open. Harry could feel his internal organs also beginning to dance, and either they were trying to yank themselves free or they were simply rupturing themselves with the force. Pain like nothing he'd ever felt was suddenly his world, and he had to sag to his knees, and then further than that, sideways, down, until the floor was pressing against his cheek. He didn't know the counter to the spell, and he didn't think he would have been able to pronounce it even if he did, given his screaming.

But as he fell into pain, so he fell into rage. He picked up those emotions and held them near him, in some strange internal world where he had all the time that didn't exist in the external one. He called up the uncontrolled magic that had flourished around him for five years, and he told it he had a task for it. It danced in his head, hummed in his bones, and made him feel strong even as he began to die.

Kill Lucius, he told it, his mind flashing with the possibilities of Lucius not dying in time of the blood loss, Apparating away so that he could remain to trouble Draco and his mother, or somehow turning and forcing his way through the bubble that protected Narcissa. *I don't care what pain I have to suffer, but kill him, damn it.*

The magic shuddered, and then the same rippling, earthquake feeling went through him that Harry had felt when he killed Voldemort, as if he did not bear the lightning strike but rather *were* the lightning strike. He flung the power forwards, hurried out of him, and then managed to force his eyes open to see what would happen when it landed.

The magic hit Lucius like a burst of white-hot, liquid sunshine, and Harry found, incongruous though it was, the memory of Hermione once telling him that the sun was made of something

hotter than fire. It clung to Lucius, burning, and finally the madman screamed in pain. And then the white-hot glow contracted inwards, writhing like a snake struggling to get a huge meal down between distended jaws, and Harry vaguely smelled burning flesh, and then the whiteness folded up, and he knew Lucius Malfoy was dead, because no one could have survived that.

Of course, no one could have survived throwing it, either. Harry realized he was breathing his last breaths. He let his eyes fall closed with a faint smile. At least he was dying to save someone else's life. After the war had ended, he had thought there was never a chance of that.

Draco had to fling an arm across his eyes to shield himself from the blinding flash as Harry's magic ate his father, but he had already seen Harry's pitiful condition, made into scraps of flesh and streaming blood. And he didn't allow the flash to interrupt him as he cast the needed spell, any more than he would have allowed a scream from Longbottom to disrupt his concentration during Potions.
"*Stabilitas!*" he shouted, and the Stasis Spell settled around Harry and contained him, freezing him in his present condition, the way that it could preserve a volatile potion on the edge of exploding.

Draco turned and headed for the bubble that embraced his mother. He was not sure how to break it, but he *had* to break it. Narcissa was on her feet now, her good hand splayed along the white surface, her eyes wide and hopeful. Her mouth moved in some greeting to him that he couldn't hear.

Draco cast a Vanishing Spell, reasoning that that might help. If anything, the bubble simply clamped down tight, the sudden lack of any hold forcing his hand away. Draco nodded grimly. He could only hope that the Healers at St. Mungo's had seen something like this before, and so could counter it.

He cast a Levitation Charm on the bubble, making it bob gently into the air, and then renewed the Body-Bind on Blaise. He didn't want his old friend going anywhere before he had a chance to pay for his atrocities, but there truly were more important things right now.

Then he turned and cast *Mobilicorpus* at Harry. He shuddered to watch the way the Stasis Spell brought bobbing chains of blood along with him, suspended in the air as blobby drops that couldn't fall.

But he couldn't think about it right now. Harry needed help. He had nearly died to save Narcissa's life and Draco's, he had brought them peace that Draco hadn't ever expected to know by killing Lucius, and he *was* going to live so that they would have a chance to win this divorce case.

Draco gripped Harry's arm with one hand, laid the other on Narcissa's bubble, and Apparated to St. Mungo's.

He was not sure if the taste in his mouth was bitterness or triumph.

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Chapter: 25

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Five—Draco and Blaise

The Healers could move fast when they wanted to, Draco had to admit. He'd appeared outside the hospital, but it seemed that some alert must have sped ahead of him, because by the time he floated the bubble containing his mother and Harry's still body inside, they were waiting for him.

Two of them immediately stepped forwards and cast spells that dissipated the bubble. Narcissa whimpered and stretched her hand out as if she would cling to him and beg him to keep her safe from the strangers, but Draco hugged her, kissed her nose, and then maneuvered her gently into the arms of a strong, large woman. He turned to watch what they were doing with Harry.

The first pair of Healers to move to him had stepped back again, shaking their heads. Draco felt, for a moment, as if some clawed beast had taken up residence in his chest and was trying to get out as he thought of all the things that might mean. That Harry was gone, that Harry was dead—

But it probably only meant that the Healers didn't feel themselves qualified to handle a patient in such bad shape, because almost at once another one appeared, this one a man with gray hair and an interested, curious expression which reminded Draco irresistibly of Professor Flitwick. He looked at the floating strings of blood, nodded, and then flicked his wand several times. In moments, the blood had folded inwards, wrapping around Harry, and even the fluttering strings of flesh looked less alarming than they had been. The Healer tenderly laid a hand on Harry's forehead. If he noticed the scar, he didn't seem to care. He whispered a word to Harry, and then both he and Harry vanished.

"Where's he taken him?" Draco demanded of the nearest mediwitch, who was taking his arm and seemed to be trying to get him to sit down.

The woman blinked. "Why, the Spell Damage floor, of course," she said. "I assure you, he'll be fine." She smiled, perhaps assuming that Draco's nerves could be cured by conversation. "I assume that the Stasis Spell preserving his life was your work?"

Draco nodded shortly. "And my mother?" he asked, turning towards Narcissa. The Healers had persuaded her to trust them, at least, and were floating her on a pallet of air towards the stairs. "Even though her mind has been damaged, she's not—dangerous. She stays with me permanently. It's only the spell damage that she needs to be treated for."

"Then she'll see your friend at the Spell Damage floor," said the mediwitch firmly. Though she must have known by now who they were—the Malfoy blond hair, Draco thought, was unmistakable—she simply pressed him towards the nearest chair again, with firm and tender hands. "You should rest. One of the worst things for family of the patients is to dash about and try to accomplish that which they simply don't have the strength to do."

Draco would have liked nothing more than to sit down and worry only about what would happen to Harry and his mother, but he had another task. He shook off the mediwitch's hands and stood. "I have something else which *must* be done," he said. "Thank you for taking care of them." He hesitated, then took a ring from his finger, tapped it with his wand, and cast a complex charm. He handed it to the witch a moment later. "If you hold this and think about my mother or my friend, I can feel you thinking and will be able to respond. Please don't do it unless they're in danger."

"Mr. Malfoy, I—" The witch sounded overwhelmed, even as she curled her fingers around the ring.

Draco nodded at her and Apparated. He had to return to the Manor and retrieve a certain book if he were going to take the revenge that he dreamed of on Blaise.

The book was exactly where he had left it the last time he ever looked. Draco took a few minutes to stand and study it, leaning against one of the shelves in the library. It felt odd, to know that he was the only one who had a right to possess those shelves now, that his father was dead, and so he didn't have to worry about the Manor and his mother's safety suddenly being snatched from under him, the way he had always done before this.

Or, at least, if someone does possess the Manor with me, Draco thought, as he swatted dust from the book with one hand, *I'll decide who it should be.*

He used the next few minutes to practice the incantations of the spell he wanted to use, and then nodded and vanished, Apparating into the manor house where he had left Blaise. He ignored the large stain of blood spread on the other side of the room—he had the perhaps childish notion that, if he didn't look at it, he wouldn't guess how little blood must be left in Harry's body—and stood staring at Blaise in silence.

Blaise was still whimpering, still staring into the distance. He couldn't bring his hands up over his face anymore, since they were tied at his sides by the Body-Bind, but they twitched as if he would like to. His throat welled with a sudden scream, and the muscles in it jumped to the point that Draco curled his lip.

He and Blaise had been friends once, though, as he'd reminded Pansy, their friendship had begun later than his friendship with her, or with Theodore, and far later than the friendships with Vincent and Gregory. Blaise had taken until fifth year to decide that he couldn't ignore Draco any longer, and that it was better to cooperate with him and get some share of the spoils than to try to make allies with the younger students, who didn't have as much standing in Slytherin, or the older students, who would leave school before he would. He had never been *easy* in the alliance

with Draco; he had presumed too much, he had argued too much with orders, and he had sometimes objected to something Draco knew he enjoyed, like Gryffindor-baiting, merely because Draco was the one who had suggested it.

So their friendship had been uneasy, but it had remained, through the war and beyond, and Draco had thought it valuable for that reason. He had never imagined that Blaise could come to resent him for doing his job. Surely Blaise must have seen that, if he couldn't hire Draco, if Harry had hired him, and if he opposed Harry, he would have to oppose Draco, too?

Draco hadn't hated him then.

He did now. No matter what the laws said was legal and permissible in a divorce case, Draco had his own ideas about it, and none of them included kidnapping his helpless mother. Perhaps other people could have borne it. Draco had too much pride, and, since he was in a position to avenge the insult, he would do so.

He waved his wand, and banished Blaise's nightmare spell with a faint twinge of regret. If he had featured in Blaise's deepest fears, he could have left it, but Blaise was muttering about his mother and living in poverty all his life. It was time to *teach* Blaise to fear him, since he didn't have the sense to do it already.

Blaise gasped, and then opened his eyes and stared at him. Draco relaxed the Body-Bind just so that he could move his limbs into a more comfortable position, and watched Blaise's face glow with humiliation. He knew, as well as Draco did, what the loosening of the spell meant. Draco didn't fear him, and Blaise found that more embarrassing than even the knowledge of his own failure.

"What do you plan to do with me?" he asked softly.

"Well," Draco said. "I didn't know until I had listened to you talking about what you feared most. Now I do." He laid the book he carried down on the floor, and Blaise's eyes tracked it in a morbid fascination that would probably have served him for watching an Acromantula. "I plan to cast a spell that will tie your fortune to mine."

Blaise's eyes snapped back to him. "That doesn't sound so bad," he said cautiously, and then his spite overcame him. "Since you're rich and healthy and all."

"Ah, Blaise, you didn't fully listen to me," Draco said softly. He conjured a chair, and sat down in it, crossing his legs the way that Blaise had tried to do at the Three Broomsticks. His face felt very dry, as if he had been crying sandy tears. "It's a very great fault of yours, that you interrupt before someone else can say everything. Your fortune will be tied to mine—in reverse. As I grow richer, you will grow poorer. If I lose a divorce case, then you will become wealthier, but not by much. And you know that I have never yet lost a case. Not even," he added delicately, "when my opponent kidnaps my mother in an attempt to *make* me lose."

Blaise said nothing at all. His breath rustled and stirred the hair over his mouth for a moment, but his eyes were quiet and still, watching Draco. He knew, now, Draco thought. He knew, with Slytherin instincts, that something had changed irrevocably and he had lost the only chance he might have to pull back from it.

"And I suppose you might think you can get around this spell just by killing me, or urging one of my opponents to kill me," Draco said. "Don't worry. I'm going to cast another. If I die, you will die. Immediately, suddenly. The beat of your heart will be tied to mine directly, as your fortunes are tied to mine in reverse."

He leaned forwards. "And I know where your mind will go next, Blaise, what you'll think about and what you'll ask. The answer, in fact, is no. I do care enough about Harry to protect him from you. A third spell, Blaise, will make certain of that. If you make a move against Harry, even if it's just to whisper gossip about him or distribute information into the 'right' ears, you'll begin losing parts of your body. A finger for gossip. A hand for actively participating in trying to kill him. Or maybe it won't be as simple as that, or as fair. Maybe you'll lose your sight the moment you even *contemplate* making a move against him." Draco smiled. "I don't think you'll have much luck locating a copy of the grimoire to check the spell, since my father deliberately burned all the others."

Blaise's eyes were filled with terror. He had stopped trying to move against the Body-Bind at all, and most of his attention seemed to be consumed with licking his lips, so that he could get some moisture out of them. Draco waited, his hands clasped on his knees, his heart full of some emotion too savage to be called joy. He was sure that Blaise had questions, and he was eager to answer them.

"Why would you do this?" Blaise whispered at last. "It's cruel to do that, to control my life this way, and I never knew you to be cruel, Draco. Just greedy and selfish."

"I've learned lessons in cruelty since you knew me," Draco murmured. "You never *did* bother to correct your impressions of me from Hogwarts, Blaise. I learned cruelty from other Arguers and from opponents in divorce cases. And I learned cruelty from my father, and from what happened to my mother. The difference is that I learned to live with it, instead of crumbling beneath it. You won't, because with every move you make, you'll know that your life is under *my* control." He smiled, and hoped that he looked like his father in that moment. "You really shouldn't have inspired me, you know. You were my latest lesson in cruelty, my latest example to match."

The horror in his eyes…Draco had to fight against closing his own and uttering a deep sigh. It was so *sweet*, to know that he could cause that much terror and pain.

"Please, no," Blaise whispered. "I'm not sure what you want from me, Draco, but whatever it is, I'll give it to you. I'll promise to lose the case, if you want. Not appear in court, or withdraw from it. Spend a year at my mother's house. Tell everyone who asks that you were in the right, and that I should never have challenged you. Leave Potter alone for the rest of his natural life. Apologize to your mother. But not *this*."

Draco bent towards him. Blaise looked up at him with hope in his face, and yet also hatred that Draco knew was for himself, for letting his hope be visible.

"That is exactly why I want to do this to you," Draco whispered, his breath barely stirring Blaise's hair. "I want to make you suffer. I want you to remember, always, that you're not in control of your own fate, and never will be. I want you to pick up the newspapers with a mixture of dread and hope in the morning; you'd dread to hear of my death or my winning in court, but you would always be hoping for news of a loss, so that you could live a bit better. Your life *could* be sweet, Blaise. That will hurt more than if I'd simply cut off any possibility of escape. Won't it?"

"How long do the spells last?" Blaise hissed at him, muscles tense as if he thought the best course would be attempting to resist.

Draco leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrow. "Forever, of course. What, did you think I would use incantations that could end in a few years?"

"I *will* get you back," Blaise said, and his eyes shone with a ferocity that Draco had seen before in the eyes of his father, and sometimes in the mirror. "I don't care how long it takes me, or how indirectly I have to do it. I'll have my revenge."

"You are very welcome to try," Draco murmured, and raised his wand. "Why do you think I didn't choose a spell that would protect me from harm the same way I intend to protect Harry? I look forwards with interest to what you do, Blaise, since I am sure that I can resist any strike you make."

Blaise closed his eyes, but didn't bother responding as Draco cast the spells, chanting the Latin aloud, even though he could have made them nonverbal, so that Blaise could hear his doom. When the last spell, the one that would maim Blaise if he ever tried to hurt Harry, took hold, Blaise shivered and bucked in his Body-Bind.

"Now," Draco said, sitting down in his chair again. "I do need your decision about what you will do concerning the divorce case." Blaise stared at him incredulously, and Draco only deigned to smile. "Yes, of course I am still considering that. It is one way that I intend to add to my wealth, after all."

Blaise's eyes turned flat with loathing again, but he only said, "I don't know what I'll do. I need to have Ginny's decision on it."

"Did you know," Draco said, deciding that he could do worse than insert a knife into a crack in Blaise's confidence and bear down on it, "that your beloved mistress asked us to rescue her from you? She said that your attempt on my mother's life sickened her, and she couldn't bear it any longer. She passed a note to Potter, and he decided, do-gooder that he is, that he'd snatch her from your evil clutches."

"She's carrying my child—" Blaise began, and stopped.

"And I'm your friend," Draco said, twisting his neck like a swan, "but that didn't stop you from betraying me."

For long moments, Blaise just shut his eyes and lay there, breathing.

"Tell me," Draco asked in academic interest, "did you ever have any real interest in Weasley for *herself*, or did you just want Potter's money?"

"Both," Blaise whispered, and his eyes flared open. "Unlike *some* people, not everything in my life resolves to simplistic motives."

The insult was so pitiful that Draco couldn't do much more than roll his eyes. "I suppose that you'll need to talk it over with Weasley. After tomorrow, of course, since none of us will be attending the court session then."

"I could still go," said Blaise with stupid quickness. "And so could you. I don't know where Ginny is, and of course Potter's wounds will prevent him from attending, but—"

"You're going to be busy," said Draco, raising his wand. "And so am I."

He put Blaise into an enchanted sleep before he could protest further, and stood looking at him for a moment. The temptation to torment him physically, the way Harry had been tormented, was there, but Draco restrained himself. Among other things, if he tortured Blaise as much as he wanted to, then the more delicate, careful revenge he'd planned out wouldn't have a chance of taking effect.

He turned and Apparated back to St. Mungo's. He had to retrieve his ring from a certain mediwitch, and then look in on two important patients.

Narcissa would indeed be fine, the Healers had reassured Draco. The broken arm was a simple, clean snap, and they had repaired it with a few passes of their wands. The large wound under her breast had given them more trouble, but they'd identified the malicious magic that would have prevented it from healing cleanly after they realized the attacker might be a Death Eater—they'd seen the same spell several times during the war—and now it was closed to nothing more than a thin scar and she was resting. Draco had spent a few moments in silence cupping her cheek before he went to find Harry.

The Healers had done what they could for him, and then cast a modified Stasis Spell that would allow the magic to work but nothing else to influence him, not even the passage of time. They would need to get him further away from the edge of dying before their efforts would have any effect, as one of the mediwizards had put it to Draco.

Draco could hardly see Harry through the blur the Stasis Spell cast, but he could read the report that the Healers had left hooked over the end of the bed well enough. He was probably not supposed to read it. But a Confundus Charm cast on the trainee who was supposed to watch over this section of the fourth floor assured he would not be disturbed, and since Harry was, in so many important ways, *his*, he was hardly going to think that he didn't have the right to read it.

The Flaying Curse had destroyed most of the skin on his back; the only good thing about that was that the Healers expected it to heal without scars, since they would have to restore entirely new skin instead of trying to heal cuts. And then Lucius had evidently used a curse Draco had only ever heard him talk about, the Organ Dance. It should have killed Harry immediately, the Healers said in their writing, and it was the major reason they could only cast their spells one by one; it took enormous magical and physical strength to survive it, and they had to look up the two or three cases of such survivors in the past before they could proceed, to see how they had been treated.

But the Healer who concluded the report, a Mediwizard Goode, was confident Harry would live. If he had made it through the Organ Dance in the first place, his magical strength was obviously enough to bear the weaker shock of healing.

Draco put the report down and leaned back to make out a hazy glimpse of Harry's face again. His skin was pale, his eyes so tightly shut it looked as though they wouldn't open again, and his hair arranged in such a way that the lightning bolt scar stood out perfectly. Draco wondered idly if it had fallen like that naturally, or if one of the Healers had thought it prudent to remind the people tending him who he was.

Such thoughts were small, and didn't distract Draco from his main contemplation: that Harry had very nearly given up his life to save Draco and, what was more important to him, Narcissa. He could probably argue that Draco didn't owe him a life-debt, because Draco had cast the Stasis Spell that saved *his* life next, but there was still the one remaining from the time when Harry had pushed him to the ground under Lucius's Killing Curse.

And Draco didn't need a debt to make him feel that Harry's presence in his life was important.

He risked himself. For me. Whom he supposedly has no reason to like, for whom his attraction is supposedly small and stupid.

Draco smiled slightly. If Harry had been awake, he probably would have pulled back in terror from that smile.

It isn't just physical attraction. It isn't just debts owed. I want him to stay. And I will make sure he understands that when he wakes up—the great, bumbling, heroic idiot.

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Chapter: 26

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Six—Harry and Draco

Harry woke so slowly that it felt as if he were climbing some enormous staircase out of the darkness. He panted as he dragged himself up, and only realized the panting was literal when he could open his eyes and look about. His sight was fogged with blurry streams of white and silver sleep, but he thought that was only a problem of missing his glasses. When someone returned them to him, he could see again.

And then he realized, in wonder and confusion, *Wait. I don't think I'm supposed to be alive at all. How did I survive the fight with Lucius?*

"Harry," Draco's voice said off to the side.

Relief washed over Harry, even as he suspected that Draco was the answer to his question. He could not have been seriously hurt, or he would be in a bed of his own, not sitting beside Harry's. He turned his head, and a hand cupped his cheek and slipped his glasses over his face.

His eyes focused again. He could see Draco—Draco sitting much too close, his gaze keen, his head bowed, staring at him.

Harry blinked and tried to shift backwards. Something gripped his shoulders, though, and wouldn't let him. He tried to turn his head, and found the motion arrested, though he'd gone far enough to catch a glimpse of leather and metal.

"What is *this* thing?" he asked, tugging against it.

When he looked back, Draco had a faint smile on his lips, as if he thought it an essential component of who Harry was that he would dislike and resist the instruments in hospital. He reached out over Harry's head and apparently ran his fingers down it, though Harry couldn't feel anything. "This is keeping you alive right now," he murmured. "They cast several Stasis Spells over several days, so that they could gradually infuse you with healing magic. *This* is keeping you still so that your wounds don't tear open if you move suddenly."

Harry jerked in spite of Draco's warning glare. "Several *days*? Do you mean we've missed dates in the courtroom? Or have you gone yourself? I trust you to act for me, you know that. What's happened? Is your mother all right? Do you—"

"Hush, Harry." Draco restrained him effortlessly simply by putting one hand on his shoulder. "No one is in condition to reach the courtroom right now, since Weasley's still walled up in your

house, you've been hurt, and Blaise is—well." Dark mischief flamed in his smile for a moment. "Rather occupied. Witherbone has agreed to postpone the proceedings until everyone can attend again, or at least send her word that they aren't attending of their own free will. And yes, my mother is fine. That bubble you cast protected her from any further injuries, and the Healers were able to dissipate it when we arrived at St. Mungo's."

Harry relaxed, leaning back a little on the contraption behind his head, though it was uncomfortable even with pillows splayed over it. "And what happened to Lucius? I thought I saw him die, but—"

"He's gone, yes. Your magic consumed him." Draco's hand turned sideways and cupped his cheek once more. His eyes were too intense, and far too close. *He* didn't have something restraining his head, as Harry saw it, so he didn't need to be this close. Of course, the device that restrained *him* prevented Harry from pulling further away. "And you very nearly died."

"Well, I knew that." Harry tried to force bravado into his voice. It wasn't easy. "I think you must have saved my life. With a Stasis Spell, correct? I could *feel* myself dying, the magic draining out of me. I don't think a lesser spell could have saved me."

"A Stasis Spell, yes." Draco grimaced. "Mediwizard Goode tells me that I cast it a few moments ahead of the time you would have perished."

Harry relaxed. This seemed to put their relationship back on a more even footing. "Then I owe you a life-debt."

"Even if that were true," Draco said softly, "it would only cancel out the one I owe you, for saving my life when Lucius appeared outside the Manor." He leaned in again, until Harry could feel his breath on his lips. "And I do not intend to make this a matter of debts between us," he whispered. "It is more than that, Harry. Deny it now, and I will make you sorry."

Harry might have tried to laugh, but Draco wasn't smiling. He shifted uneasily, arching his shoulders and twisting his spine. That *hurt*, and he yelped as a flash of pain seemed to shoot down the middle of his back and take root in his feet.

"Lie still, for God's sake." Draco's hand pressed heavily on his shoulder for a moment, and his voice lifted in irritation, but that passed. And then he was back to the staring again. Harry closed his eyes, feeling his cheeks heat rapidly; there was no way he could match that stare.

"Harry," Draco continued, his voice slow and soft and hypnotic, like a snowfall. "What do you think your feelings are for me?"

Dread surged up inside Harry. He *hated* being the vulnerable one. And he knew that, even if their emotions seemed matched now, he would go on feeling deeply about Draco long after Draco returned to feeling casually about him. Why wouldn't it happen that way? His admiration had more of a basis. Draco's was based on the reflection of his own virtues that he might see in

Harry. Draco was something special, and he—wasn't.

Of course, saying that aloud would make him sound pathetic, and Harry knew full well that Draco's mockery could hurt him now. It was his own damn fault that it could; he should have held back, not jumped into bed and into—well, deep liking—with his Arguer. But he still didn't want to face it.

"Harry?" The hand on his cheek curved sideways, sliding so that the side of it rested near his lips. "I'm waiting."

Harry took a deep breath, and reminded himself that he could only suffer pain like this once. He would accept the mockery, and then it would be done. He didn't need to associate with Draco any longer once the divorce case was over. He could make his life elsewhere, and he would still have Ron and Hermione as friends—and as many of the rest of the Weasley family as he could persuade to listen to him.

Fear shouldn't stop you from doing what you know is right.

"They're deeper than they were," he said, his eyes half-slitted and looking straight ahead, so that he stood less chance of meeting Draco's gaze. "Seeing what you were willing to go through and suffer and *dare* to get your mother back—that completed it."

"Completed what?" Draco's breath traveled in soft puffs over his ear, and really, did he *have* to do that?

"Completed the process of liking you," Harry said reluctantly. "I wouldn't call it love yet," he added, since that might delay Draco's laughter a little. "But it's deeper than just wanting to have casual sex, and it's deeper than what I felt when this whole mess began. That's why the sex didn't work. Even then, I wanted something—else." *Something deeper* and *something more* both sounded too soppy to his mental ears. "And now I know you're not only powerful and clever and skilled in the courtroom, but you *can* want to keep other people safe, and you have compassion, and you have absolute ruthlessness in protecting your own. That's more than just a skilled automaton could ever be. I want *you* safe, and I want you happy, and I want you to have what you need and deserve." God, he thought his cheeks actually hurt now from the blush. "And I know that's ridiculous and stupid and not something I should feel, particularly so quickly and for a *man* when I've never even been attracted to men before, and I promise I won't trouble you with it after the trial is over, and God, Draco, do I have to talk any more? That's what you came to hear, isn't it?"

He shut his eyes tightly. Draco's hand nudged his cheek, but Harry refused to look. He'd done his duty, bared his heart like a fool just because Draco had asked, and the laughter was about to start any moment.

Draco understood things much better now.

No matter what Harry was feeling, deep attraction or casual attraction, he didn't think he was right to feel it. So he'd tried to mask it under things that *were* acceptable to him—first a simple desire for sex, then a client-Arguer relationship, and then what he would probably say was a duty he owed Draco because his mother had been kidnapped because of Draco taking Harry's case. And now he'd finally shown what he really did feel, and he expected to be punished for it.

Why wouldn't he be? Weasley punished him horribly both for showing honest anger and then in spite of what he felt for her.

No matter how he softly urged Harry with his hand, though, Harry wouldn't look at him. It would have to be words.

"Harry," he said again. "Why do you think—" he nearly said *Ginny*, but held himself back "—Ron and Hermione love you?"

Harry's eyes fluttered open then, but he was still squinting straight ahead, as if that would somehow make Draco vanish. His answer came from between tightly closed teeth.

"We've been friends for ages. We've saved each other's lives again and again. We don't need a reason to be loyal to each other by now, other than just our wanting to be that way." His hand, resting on the blankets, clenched briefly. "If you think that you're as dear a friend to me as Ron and Hermione—"

"Relax," Draco said, mildly amused, though the emotion felt far off under the intensity of the need to make Harry understand. "What I feel for you is rather different. For one thing, I don't think you've ever slept with them."

Harry gave a minute shake of his head and tried to close his eyes again. Draco moved a thumb to stroke his lips.

"It was the *experiences* that you shared with them which made you friends," Draco said. "Am I right?"

Green eyes shifted warily towards him. After a long moment, as though pondering whether it would be worth his while to answer, Harry nodded.

"Well," Draco said. "Why would you assume that the experiences we have shared are less special? Why would you assume that they couldn't forge a bond of the same depth between us, if not the same kind?" He leaned forwards until there was no chance of Harry missing a word he said, no matter how hard he concentrated to avoid it. "If you want me to be happy, why would you assume that you aren't necessary to my happiness?"

Harry exhaled sharply, his nostrils quivering. Then his jaw relaxed against Draco's hand for a moment as he let out a bitter chuckle.

"Harry?" Draco persisted.

"Because of what I *am*, Malfoy," Harry said. "And I'm not talking about the Hogwarts rivalry, either. I know we've both changed since then. I'm talking about the fact that I'm oblivious, don't react the way you want me to, put your life and your mother's life in danger, and have nothing to offer you beyond the opportunity to bask in powerful magic. You might think you need me to be happy now because I'm a novelty. The first client you've ever slept with, you said. But the newness will wear off, and what's left then?"

Draco had to fight to keep his fingers from tightening, because he knew that would hurt Harry. He turned his face towards him. Harry kept his eyes open this time, glaring defiantly, as if to say that Draco could hurt him but he would force himself to face it.

"You are an idiot," Draco said, keeping his voice hard in tone but soft in volume, so it came across as a rather sharp whisper. "It's not just your magic. I stopped being drunk on that after the first day in your presence. It's not just the chance to sleep with a client. The experience was rather unsatisfactory, and I'm glad you put a stop to it, since you weren't participating with your whole heart." Harry's eyes flashed with outrage, but Draco pushed ahead. "It's what we've *shared*. You saved my life, you fought with me, you made speeches I never thought to hear out of your mouth, you defended me to your friends, you said you trusted me, and you took enormous risks to save someone I love without even considering that you could have done something else. I want to go on sharing those kinds of experiences with you, Harry. I have no idea what you'll do next, and I *love* it. And I would rather like you to give me a fucking chance to share more of them, rather than dismiss my affection out of hand by saying you're nothing special. Malfoys *never* prefer something perfectly ordinary. You're insulting my taste and my bloodline all at one go by insisting I do."

Harry just stared at him for long moments. Then he had to close his eyes, this time to stop stupid *tears* from welling. He hoped—he hoped fervently—that they simply came from the fact that he was wounded, and therefore didn't have as much control of his emotions as he'd like.

He had been so sure that he would only ever fall in love once, and that was with Ginny; if he lost her, he didn't deserve another chance, and no one would give him one anyway, since he was just himself. What Draco's words opened to him wasn't so much love—Harry didn't know that he felt that yet, and Draco himself had avoided the word—as the *possibility* of more. It could happen. It might happen. That was no guarantee it would, but the chance was enough, opening parts of Harry's soul that he hadn't looked into in a long time, sweeping like a morning breeze through them.

"So," he whispered, turning one of his own hands so that it clasped the one with which Draco gripped his chin, "you're saying that, after the divorce case is settled, you'd quite like to try something more?"

"Harry." There was a wealth of smiles behind that word, though Harry couldn't open his eyes to see the one he was certain was on Draco's face yet. "*Yes*."

Harry tilted back his head, and this time, the kiss that fell on his lips was of surpassing sweetness. He felt nothing like the degrading passion he had when Draco last kissed him. This was different, this was promising, and it met and matched what he had to offer instead of disdaining it.

He had been so sure Draco would disdain it.

Maybe there were things he had to learn about Draco, yet.

He felt a great weariness come over him immediately after that, and Draco didn't help keep him awake, since he was easing him back against the pillows and whispering instructions to rest. Harry went down into a blackness that seemed spangled with stars and sparks, though they burned out when he looked directly at them.

What he felt might not be *right*, but he was sure now that it was what he *wanted.*

Draco let his hand linger on Harry's cheek for a long moment as he leaned back in his chair. He couldn't persuade himself to let go. It felt as if he had achieved a great victory, even though he had only convinced someone who should have known the truth long ago *of* that truth.

He had gained unusually from this divorce case, he mused. He had thought only of the Galleons, as the prize he would ever receive no matter what, but there was more to it than that. In the passage of a few weeks, his safety had increased, he had seen the defeat of a friend who might have betrayed him in the future without his looking for it, he had had a chance to humiliate the Weasleys, and—

And he had someone to spend a good portion of his life with.

Draco looked at Harry, and now, when Harry couldn't see, he permitted himself a long, lazy smile, and didn't care how predatory it looked.

He may finally have seen sense. Of course, not everyone will have. His friends will probably try to convince him to drop me. I wouldn't be entirely surprised if his wife even made a play to win him back, since she must know now that her future with Blaise doesn't look entirely bright.

It doesn't matter. We're with each other now, unless one of us gets tired—which I doubt he will, since Gryffindors give their hearts—and which he would have to cease to be himself to make me do.

For the moment, I am in want of nothing.

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Chapter: 27

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Seven—Harry and Ginny

"I don't think you should stand."

"We've been over this several times, Draco," Harry said. He tried not to shout, because what Draco had done for him really didn't deserve shouting, but it was hard. He carefully swung his legs out of bed, grimacing when his feet touched the floor for the first time in a week and a shock went through them, but bore down with his weight anyway. It wasn't his legs that had been injured, after all. And the mediwizards had tended him constantly, as much in the last two days as in the previous five, reassuring themselves that his internal organs were back in place and the skin on his back healing nicely.

"Ginny won't respect anything about me if she sees me lying down," Harry continued. He turned to face Draco, who had a stubborn expression and tightly pursed lips. He'd won most of the arguments they had in the last few days, but Harry was determined he wouldn't win this one. "I have to be on my feet and look perfectly healthy if I'm going to face her."

"I don't see why you should face her at all," Draco hissed. "We'll see her in the courtroom, won't we? And she lied to us, and she's been a perfect bitch to you right along." He stopped for a moment, as though considering whether he had insulted Ginny enough, then added, "And I don't think she'll be as welcoming as you seem to think she will be."

"I'm not looking for *welcoming*." Harry gave his head an impatient little shake and pushed away from the bed. He wobbled, but he was sure he could have gained his balance in a moment even if Draco *hadn't* caught his shoulder. "But she was the one who said she wanted to see me. She'll at least be pleasant in an attempt to get her point across."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Draco muttered.

Harry glanced back at him in puzzlement. "Why? You know you can outtalk her any day, Draco, and the beach should have proved you can outwit her."

Draco looked extraordinarily sulky for a moment. Then he turned his head loftily away and said, "Never mind."

Shaking his head—liking him hadn't cured all of Draco's bad habits, not by a long shot—Harry concentrated on taking the necessary steps towards his door, and not letting Draco see how heavy his breathing was. If he called Mediwizard Goode in here, Harry would find himself back in the bed before he knew what was happening. The older man had a twinkle in his eye that was like

Dumbledore's, and a similarly irresistible way of talking, so that Harry didn't see how much of what he said was stuff and nonsense until long after he'd left.

He made it to the door without trouble, and turned his head triumphantly back towards Draco, who had lingered, arms folded and lower lip stuck out childishly, behind him. "Do you see?" he asked, and carefully spaced his breath around the words. "I'll be all right."

"*I'm* doing the Apparating," Draco said, in a voice that brooked no argument, and marched past him.

Harry thought about arguing with that, too, but decided it was more politic just to follow along meekly.

Ginny had sent a message, through Kreacher, to say that she wanted to see Harry as soon as he could spare her some time. She had some things to say to him, was all the house-elf had related.

Harry thought he could guess what those things were.

Draco shivered as they stepped inside Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, then told himself not to be so stupid. This was only a house. It was, in fact, the house where his mother's ancestors had lived, back to a time ancient even by the standards of English pure-blood wizards. He should be walking at his ease, feeling he had come home for the first time. This house was older than Malfoy Manor.

But it felt less clean, and that wasn't even counting the accumulation of dirt and grime and doxie eggs on the walls. Draco shivered again and turned his attention to Harry, who was firmly, stubbornly, limping up the stairs in front of him.

Harry really had recovered well; his magic had traveled back into his body once he no longer needed it to defeat Lucius, and it had helped in the repair of the internal organs, as Mediwizard Goode had told Draco. He had his color back, save for a slight pallor in his cheeks, and his limp would slowly transform back into a clean step in time; he had not exaggerated the wound that he'd got from the Dark Lord's snake, but he *was* tired. He wasn't subject to sudden spasms of pain the way he had been in the first two days—that time spent entirely unconscious, with Draco at his side when he wasn't at Narcissa's.

He would be all right.

But he *could* have died, and even if his hindsight was fooling him with its clarity, Draco had just realized how gruesomely he might have passed. And at the hand of his own father, too.

Should you feel better about having your lover kill your father than the other way around?

Draco brushed the question aside impatiently. The fact was that he did, that he would have had a void in his life if Harry had died—even if it was to save him and his mother—and he still didn't

think the idiot realized that. Or even, from the cavalier way Harry treated mention of his own death and joked about it with the Healers, considered it at all important.

"Kreacher said he was holding her up here." Harry had halted in front of a massive dark wooden door, and he fumbled with a ring of keys. The weight made him sway on his feet, and Draco stepped smoothly up to take his elbow. Harry shot him a look compounded of both irritation and gratitude, and then found the right key and opened the door.

Ginny Weasley sat on the floor of the room beyond, on a tattered pile of bedding Kreacher had probably made for her, her head bowed in utter defeat. A stream of light from a dirty window revealed the tears shining on her cheeks. Draco hissed. *She chose to sit there, I'm certain, so she would look her best when he walked in.*

"Best" for persuading Harry was not necessarily beauty and self-confident poise, Draco knew; that attracted him, as he had ample proof of, but it might not convince him to help. If he saw tears and powerlessness, however, he seemed to assume he *had* to help. Perhaps he thought no one else would.

He knelt down in front of Ginny now, with only a slight gasp that Draco knew probably meant he'd jounced the new skin on his back, and said, with a tenderness that made Draco long to snatch him back, "Gin? Are you all right?"

Weasley's eyes opened as round and wide as moons. Then she said, "No, I'm not," and began to make a long series of little hiccoughing sobs, as though she were on the edge of losing her breath.

Draco leaned on the wall and waited for what he knew was coming. His breath did not rush. His firsts did not clench, though he had folded his arms loosely over his chest. He had to see if Harry was strong enough to stand up to this. He would rescue him if he needed it, but he would prefer that Harry use his own strength.

Harry couldn't remember feeling so sorry for someone in the last five years. Ginny had been suffering, he knew, and not just because of the dirty surroundings and poor food Kreacher had inflicted on her.

No, that I *inflicted on her. Did I have a right to do that to her, when I know that she's pregnant and her health might not be as good?*

Sternly, Harry told himself to stop it. There hadn't been a more secure place to hold her unless he wanted to put her in the Manor—which Draco would never allow—and dithering about to make sure Ginny was comfortable would have delayed them in casting the blood spell and finding Narcissa. He couldn't regret what he had done because that would be a betrayal of the good consequences of it.

But he could wish there'd been a different way.

"What hurts most?" he asked, forcing himself to put an arm around her shoulders. His conscience argued it should be a full embrace; his mind remembered what she'd done to him and wanted not to touch her at all. This was the best compromise he could think of.

"My heart," Ginny whispered.

Harry's insides squirmed with uncomfortable pity. He didn't know what to think about Ginny anymore. She'd been the strong one in their marriage for so long; *she* wasn't afraid of going to Diagon Alley in case cameras snapped, *she* didn't have a wound keeping her from a sport she loved, *she* could control her temper. And now he had to see her as a victim of Blaise's, but how much she was one was still unclear.

"In what way?" he asked her, trying to keep his voice low and soothing, but without a hint of personal affection. "Physically?"

"No. My heart. My conscience—" Ginny caught her breath, and then flung her arms around him. Harry sat stiffly in the embrace, unable to bring himself to return it, or do anything other than awkwardly pat her shoulder with the one hand he already had resting there. He heard Draco hiss behind him, and wondered if the sound was one of contempt or jealousy.

He tried to imagine what he would feel if Draco was sitting with his arms around someone else, and jealousy assaulted him in a nearly pure wave, making it hard to listen to Ginny's speech.

"It hurts so much," Ginny sobbed against his shoulder. "Knowing that what I did was *wrong*, and not knowing why I didn't stop earlier. I hurt you, and I never meant to do that. I'm *sorry*, Harry. Can you forgive me?" She paused for a moment, then added, "That's what hurts most of all, not knowing if you'll forgive me."

Harry swallowed and moved backwards, trying to extricate himself from her grasp. It was hard, especially when she noticed the withdrawal and her hands tightened on his arms. "Forgive me," she whispered. "Forgive me, *please*, and don't leave me alone here, and—" She caught her breath so sharply Harry imagined he must have hurt her, and stopped moving.

"I have an idea," Ginny said, and pulled back enough to look into his face. Her eyelids were puffy from crying, and at last Harry felt a familiar emotion: he'd never known what to do with his hands or his body when she started crying. "A beautiful, wonderful idea. But it will only work if you forgive me."

"Gin—" Harry started. He hadn't expected this. He had expected an apology, as well as a declaration that she wanted to stop the court case. But he didn't know what the gleam in her eyes meant, and it frightened him.

"Let's not divorce," she whispered. "Please, Harry? We'll be a family, a family for the baby. Blaise—I can't trust him anymore, I don't think I ever really could, but I *know* he won't make a

good father. Please, can we just come together and be a family again? I know Mum would accept you back, and so would Fred and George. And then we can have other children. We can be just like what we were, what we always should have been, now that you're more heroic and I'm more humble. *Please*?"

Draco felt as if every muscle in his body were strung with piano wire.

This was what he had thought would happen. The bitch could offer Harry one thing that he never could: a child who would be born into the family and could grow up around Harry from infancy. A child who might call him Father, and a wife he had once loved who could be its mother.

And knowing that the miscarriage last year had deeply upset Harry, Draco knew he might be tempted to take the chance.

If necessary, he would step forwards, remind Harry of everything Weasley had done to him and why accepting this second marriage proposal might not be such a good idea. But he'd done so much in the chase and the pursuit. He wanted to be chosen for himself; he wanted Harry to reject her on his own. So he waited, tensely.

And he saw Harry give a little shiver, as though he'd just heard a voice call his name, and then raise his hands, grip Weasley's arms, and gently push her away from him.

Draco clamped down control so he wouldn't move in. Perhaps Harry hadn't refused for him. And in any case, did he want to reveal to Weasley how close he and Harry were, when the trial still might continue? He pushed the practical considerations to the forefront of his mind, trying not to feel the intense joy running through him.

"No," Harry said quietly. His voice wavered for a moment, and Weasley opened her mouth as if to interrupt, but he kept speaking, and his tone had already grown stronger. "I can't—it's not that simple, Ginny. The last few weeks have changed the way I feel about you and what I think of you.

"I never thought you could do what you did. I know how it must have been: you went along with Blaise for a little while because you thought his tactics would work, and then discovered your conscience when he kidnapped Narcissa. But—" Harry shook his head violently, and stood. Draco caught his breath, but his balance didn't wobble. He was too involved in glaring at his wife. "How could you endorse sending Lucius to Malfoy Manor in the first place, to threaten and attack Draco, or steal my vault key, or accept Blaise trying to kill *me*?"

His voice had risen, cracked down the middle, and admitted the anger into it. Draco saw some of his hair lift in an invisible breeze, and guessed the anger had influenced his magic to emerge. This time, Harry wouldn't shut it down, didn't feel afraid of it, and was lashing out at his wife with words that must have been cooped up in him for a long time. Draco bit his lip so he wouldn't cheer.

"You made me miserable for five years. I'm only accepting *how* miserable I was just now. You kept telling me that, to be any good, I had to do 'something worthwhile' or 'something of note,' that I had to be an Auror or a Quidditch player, and instead of trying to help me overcome what was keeping me from those things if you wanted me to be them so badly, you just dismissed me as lazy when I wouldn't aspire to them. And then it turns out that you didn't even have the courage to come to me and say you were tired of me and in love with someone else—"

"I *wasn't* in love with Blaise!" Weasley said energetically, standing and folding her arms across her chest. "I just thought I was, but I see the truth now. I'm in love with you!"

Harry snorted, and Draco thought it made a fair bid for the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. "Oh, come off it, Ginny. You can't expect me to believe that, not when you separated from me, and got pregnant by him, and tried to take my money, and turned my surrogate family against me, and lied about the kidnapping of an innocent woman who had nothing to do with you! I don't trust you any more. I don't trust a single word that comes out of your mouth. 'Be a family for the baby,' you say. Well, sooner or later you'd find someone you like better, and I bet this would start all over again—except that you'd be a bit cleverer this time, because I certainly *hope* that this debacle taught you that much. And you know what?" Harry edged a few steps closer to her, his mouth pulled into a snarl from what Draco could see of his face. "If you're telling the truth and in love with me again, or still, then I'm disgusted. Because your love isn't worth having."

Yes! Draco's mind hissed.

Those were the words he'd been waiting for. Those were the words that told him beyond doubt that Harry had given himself into other hands, that he wouldn't fall back into Weasley's trap, either because it would make relations with the rest of the family easier or because he wanted a child. He had chosen, yes. And he had made the same choice Draco had.

Draco exerted all the control he'd honed in the courtroom to keep himself motionless again. He wanted to go forwards, put his hands on Harry's shoulders, and show Weasley that Harry's choice hadn't been her or no one; it had been her or him, and Harry had picked *him*. Let her wonder if she turned him gay. Let her wonder if their sexual life had been so unsatisfying not because Harry couldn't excite her but because she couldn't excite him.

His mouth watered with the urgency of doing it.

But he still thought their bond should remain secret until after the trial, if only for the sake of Harry's publicity. So. He stood still.

Weasley's face had flushed. Perhaps her cunning told her that the most effective technique would be reaching out instead of getting angry, though, because she didn't yell. Instead, she began to cry again, and spoke in a voice obscured by the tears, "And you'll leave me alone without a penny to my name, Harry? *Would* you, really?"

"Your family can support you," Harry said distantly, running a hand through his hair. "They're

not poor, Ginny, not any more. And if the baby's condition is real and Blaise won't help you—" He hesitated, and looked back at Draco then. "Where did you put Blaise?"

"He's in an enchanted sleep in the house where we rescued my mother." Draco shrugged. "I was planning to return him to *his* mother today. We can take Weasley to Mrs. Zabini's house as well, if you'd like."

Harry nodded, looking immensely relieved. "You'll have to talk to him," he told Weasley, whose tears had dried. "To decide whether you want to go on with the court case, or whether—"

Weasley hissed, such a venomous sound that Harry fell silent, staring. Then she turned her head away and rearranged her dirtied robes around her. Nothing could make her look appealing, of course, and Draco sniggered to tell her so. Weasley gave another hiss in his direction.

Then she faced Harry, lifted her head, and said, in a cool, even tone, "Of course we are going on with the court case. I may not love Blaise, but I would rather work with him to secure money for the both of us and our child than work with someone who refuses to part with petty material objects in recognition of the five years we shared together."

"Come off it, Gin," Harry said in a bored tone. "That won't work on me anymore." He looked back at Draco one more time, and Draco concealed his thrill at how it felt to have Harry depending on his advice by raising his eyebrows. "You're up to fighting the court case even though your mum is still at St. Mungo's?"

"Harry," Draco said, and let enough affection into his voice that Harry's eyes softened, "I would be up to fighting this court case if the world were falling apart around us."

Harry laughed aloud in delight, and faced Weasley again. "Then we'll see you in court," he said. "The day after tomorrow? That should give you enough time to discuss strategy with Zabini. What little strategy you can have left after this crushing a defeat, of course."

Weasley's face looked like nothing human. "I don't know what else to give you!" she whispered harshly. "If you don't want a child, what is it?"

"Nothing *you* can give me," Harry said, and put up his head, imperious, and strode from the room like a prince.

Draco took a moment to study the air around Weasley, then told her, "The wards are down. You can go to Mrs. Zabini's whenever you like. Blaise should join you in an hour." The professional, cool tone hurt her more than the worst sneer would have, he knew.

Then he went after Harry.

Harry had nearly expected the hand that closed on his elbow and the tingle of magic that Apparated them to Malfoy Manor, but he had *not* expected the sudden, obliterating pressure of

lips on his, a kiss that made him gasp and thrust forwards eagerly to meet it.

Draco pressed him against the library wall, so intense and insistent that Harry lost all thoughts of struggling almost immediately. And it felt *so good*—much better than the snogging they'd shared when it was Draco trying to master him or Harry trying to prove this was just about sex. What made it important and special wasn't the tongue sliding around in his mouth, dabbing expert licks at his cheeks and scraping his gums with elaborate patterns; it was who the tongue belonged to.

Draco pulled away at last, leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, and whispered, "We have to stop, or I'm liable to forget that you've only just healed and I've got to take Blaise to his mother's house."

Harry laughed shakily, and embraced him. "Any particular reason for that kiss?" he asked the nape of Draco's neck.

"You had a chance to go back to her," Draco said simply. "You refused." His arms tightened. "You're mine now."

Harry would have argued that one thing did not necessarily follow from the other, but he was too happy to do so.

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Chapter: 28

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Eight—A Ferocious and Ringing Argument

"And you're ready to face her again?" Draco's hands were gentle as he shuffled Harry's robes across his shoulders, his eyes in the mirror over Harry's shoulder anything but.

Harry snorted and glanced sideways at him. "After what I said to her the last time we met? Of course. Perhaps I should be asking you that question about Zabini." He did have to wonder if Draco would respond with more than sarcasm to the man who had abducted his mother *and* contacted his mad father to make it happen.

There was a long pause. Draco said nothing, and Harry, suspicious, watched the mirror. Draco's lips were slowly curling into a smile that would not have been out of place on a crocodile's face, Harry thought. "That's right," Draco said, or rather breathed, since Harry felt the shape of the words on the nape of his neck more than heard them. "You were unconscious when I did it. I forgot that you didn't know."

"Didn't know *what*?" Harry tensed to twist out of Draco's hold, but Draco's hands sank down too fast, holding him, gentling him, and Harry subsided in spite of himself.

"I already took my revenge on Blaise," Draco said simply. "I returned to the manor house after I brought you and Narcissa to St. Mungo's. I cast several curses on him. One will cause him to die if I do—"

"But not the other way around, right?" Harry interrupted. The mere notion of danger to Draco, just when he thought they might have most things settled and be ready to move onto a happier life, immediately accelerated his breathing.

"Harry, love," Draco asked his ear, "do you think I'm stupid? Of course not. The second will cause him to become poorer as I become richer—but also gives him the chance to improve his fortunes if I lose a case. And the third will maim him if he causes any harm to you."

"That third one—"

"Do not say that I should have left it out of his punishment, Harry," Draco said, and kissed the back of his neck, tugging at his hair until Harry had to remind himself that they *were* supposed to be at the courtroom in an hour. "In my thinking, it was the most necessary one of all. I admire you, but you are too noble. There is at least the possibility you would not defend yourself against him if he threatened you again. I couldn't let that happen."

"You've made his life miserable," Harry said, in growing understanding.

"He made mine miserable." Draco met his eyes in the mirror again, self-satisfied as a cat, and not seeming inclined to alter.

"But—Draco." Harry twisted urgently to face him. "Don't you think *three* spells like that is too much? He'll live the rest of his life in fear and frustration."

"Good." Draco cocked an eyebrow and stepped back, smoothing one more piece of lint or dust out of his robes that was entirely imaginary. "I want him to."

"And you think that's payment for a few hours of your feeling the same things?" Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Do keep talking, Harry," Draco said, draping his arms over the back of a chair that stood not far from the mirror. Harry tried to keep from imagining Draco sitting on that chair and fussily trying new robes on, and failed. "If you do, then you might convince me that the rest of his life is *indeed* too short a time, and I will look up the spells that pursue someone into the afterlife."

Harry hissed. "I simply wondered how sadistic you were."

"Not at all," Draco said cheerfully, "until someone tries to hurt someone I care for. And then *they* will hurt. It is simple revenge, a rule that any Slytherin ought to have understood by the time he was twelve years old. Is it my fault that Blaise did not learn it, and then thought that he could get around me on it? I do not see that it should be. I did not force him to kidnap my mother. I did not force him to continue this case when he realized I would be on the opposing side."

"No, but—" Harry stopped. He shouldn't *let* himself be convinced by Draco's arguments, and yet they continued to sound reasonable to him. Doggedly, he decided that he had to pursue this. "You've done so much to hurt him now," he said, softly. "You've *won*. Do you have to humiliate him in the courtroom?"

"Yes," Draco said, "so that he understands *how much* he lost. At the moment, he only knows he did not win."

He laughed at the expression on Harry's face, whatever it was, but it was not the mocking laughter Harry had feared since he told him how his feelings had changed. He leaned forwards and kissed the side of Harry's mouth. "I assure you," he said, "this is not my normal behavior. In most cases, I am as courteous and professional as even a Gryffindor could wish. But then, most of my opponents *did not kidnap my mother.*

"But, Harry." He tilted his head and rested one hand on Harry's shoulder. "This is what I am—or the other side of what I am, if you will. I am fierce when I feel myself disregarded, and I am willing to cause pain when someone else tries to cause pain to me. No compunctions. Or at least, fewer compunctions than a Gryffindor. I will not try again to control your behavior, but neither should you try to control mine."

Harry let out a gusty sigh, but, when he thought it over, there seemed to be nothing he *could* do. The curses were already cast. He didn't have the power over words that would persuade Draco to withdraw from his already staked position.

And part of him *did* want to know that Zabini wouldn't just hunt him down when the trial was over. Draco had prevented this.

It was the kind of protection Harry knew he could never have claimed from Ginny, since he was the one who was supposed to protect her. And yet he'd repaid it, since he'd also saved Narcissa's life and Draco's.

Just because we're equals doesn't mean we're the same.

"All right," he told Draco, less graciously than he knew he could have, and then plucked at the unfamiliar dress robes, trying to adjust them once more.

"Don't," Draco said mildly, and straightened the cloth where his hands had been. "You'll ruin them."

Draco was not sure what he expected when he strode into the courtroom. The morning he'd delivered Blaise to his mother, Mrs. Zabini had accepted him with a nod and a grim smile. She was a beautiful woman, and Blaise had inherited her looks, but none of the steel which shone in her eyes as she looked at Draco.

"You realize that he may choose, after all, to oppose you in court?" she asked. "Despite the danger that your spells on him represents?"

It hadn't surprised Draco that Mrs. Zabini had recognized the presence of Dark spells he'd used with just a glance. Had he not known that his father had destroyed every other copy of the books that contained those specific curses, he might even have been worried. He gave a small bow. "Yes, I know that," he said. "If he returns to the courtroom, then I am ready to oppose him. But since he kidnapped my mother and invited my mad father in to help him do it, I am less than inclined to give up now."

Mrs. Zabini had stood silent for a moment when she heard that. Though she had never been a Death Eater, she had kept up with news of the war, as any sensible wizard interested in politics would have done. She knew what had happened to Narcissa, and the reason that Draco kept her so protected in the Manor and away from the press.

The only words she spoke, when she next looked at Blaise, were, "I see." But Draco would have given much to hear the scolding that followed them. Mrs. Zabini would surely raze her son's self-confidence for choosing such a stupid method of vengeance. Never do something that would expose you to too much danger, never do something so likely to get you caught—rules that every Slytherin knew.

Except Blaise.

So Draco was curious to see who would await them in the courtroom this morning, beyond Judge Witherbone: both Weasley and Blaise, or just Weasley, because Blaise might not risk stepping into an environment where he would have the temptation to vengeance against Harry and Draco's third spell would take offense.

In the event, it was only Weasley who stood on the opposite side of the courtroom, looking through a sheaf of papers. She glanced up with a sneer when she saw them, and gave a sidelong glance at the high seat in front of the room, where the judge did not yet sit. Then she laid the papers down near the chairs, and marched towards them.

"Steady on," Draco murmured, reaching out to place a hand on Harry's elbow, when he realized the impossible woman was aiming for him.

"I know," Harry said irritably, and shook his hand away. " I can do *this* part by myself." And he stepped away from Draco and towards his wife.

Draco thought about objecting for a moment. And then he thought how profound a change it

represented, that Harry was going forwards with a frown on his face to confront Weasley, as if she were barely worth his time and attention, when before he hadn't managed to look at her without squirming in guilt or losing his temper.

I did that. That's my stamp he's carrying on his soul.

Draco folded his arms and made his face stern. It wouldn't do for someone else to see the dignified Arguer wriggling in delight like a schoolboy when his crush talked to him.

"What do you want, Ginny?" Harry asked directly as soon as they met. He knew Draco could probably still hear, and Judge Witherbone would be along at any moment, so he didn't see the point in keeping his voice down.

Ginny, of course, hushed him with a hiss and gave the Judge's seat a terrified glance before she stared him down. Or, rather, tried to stare him down. Harry stared dourly back, inwardly marveling that he'd ever been afraid of her. He could see the weakness running through her like lines in a pane now, just waiting for someone to hit the right note and shatter them.

"I want to offer you one more chance to escape this foolishness," she said. "I've already told my family my version of events. Even Ron is doubting you now, Harry. If you emerge from this trial triumphant, you're still going to be alone. And I know how much you hate that. I know how much you depend on us."

Harry resisted the temptation to glance towards Draco—Ginny was not to know about that yet—and instead settled for curling his lip in disgust. "You would use threats to convince me away from the course of what's right?" he asked. "No, Ginny. I've already made my decision, and I think that Ron, at least, will give me a fair hearing. And so will Hermione." He could not doubt the friendship of his oldest friends, though only last week he would have. "No family with you, no baby, no dropping the divorce case." He held her eyes and lowered his voice. "No giving you money for the sake of a heart condition that I don't believe in."

Ginny's face paled. "That part was true," she said.

"And the part about naming the baby Lily?"

Ginny dropped her eyes. "I was angry," she said softly. "I only said that because I was angry."

"And that's exactly why I can't trust you," Harry said, shaking his head. "Your words mingle truth and lies so much that there's no telling which is which. I've chosen my course, and I don't care how much you fight to exile me from your family, Ginny. I won't let you influence me anymore." He turned his back on her and strode towards Draco again.

Draco had a look on his face that made Harry want to kiss him. He settled for giving him one heated glance, since he knew that Draco, who faced Ginny, would be able to control his response to it, as Harry himself could not have. Draco's eyebrow crept up his face, which from him, in his

controlled moods, was as good as a shout of joy.

Harry settled back in his chair again, and waited. Draco had promised this as the day he would obliterate Ginny, if she came alone. Harry was curious to see him keep that promise.

Draco had known there were two major courses of action he could take: one if Blaise was there, one if he was not. He had not truly expected that Blaise would risk the betrayal of his own actions and impulses that might happen if he saw Harry, so he had prepared his attack on Weasley alone in more depth.

And now he would get to use it.

He rose from his chair and moved towards Weasley's side of the courtroom, keeping his gaze directly on her, the way a predator might watch its prey. Weasley tried to lift her head, but she was trembling, and she clutched the sheaf of papers in front of her like a shield.

Judge Witherbone had already given them permission to begin the negotiations again. She had accepted Weasley's weak explanation for Blaise's absence—that he no longer wished to "participate in such a negative experience"—with a lifted eyebrow, but she had not questioned it. After all, Draco had told no one else about Blaise's kidnapping his mother. He was saving that for the newspapers after the trial, and for the confrontation with the Weasley family he thought it sure that Harry would have to have.

For now, though, he wanted to batter Weasley so thoroughly that she would not think of continuing the negotiations past today. She had already rendered herself weak by having to rely on Blaise's notes instead of his presence. Of course, she had probably made some effort to understand them, but it would not be enough, particularly when she faced an experienced Arguer, instead of another innocent like Harry.

"We dispute each and every claim that Mrs. Potter and Mr. Zabini have made," Draco began, his eyes on Weasley's face. "We have heard from her own mouth how she feared her husband, and how he could never live up to the image that she had of him. And *I* have said, and not been denied by Mrs. Weasley with sufficient force, that the reason the image she had of him did not match the reality was that she exaggerated that image beyond what anyone could fulfill. She has similarly exaggerated the demands."

Weasley opened her mouth, no doubt prepared to butt in, but Draco smoothly overrode her objections. There were technically no rules against doing that; Arguers were supposed to speak together in this stage of the negotiations, and since Blaise was not here, Weasley was minus her Arguer.

"Mr. Zabini has even less right to Mr. Potter's money, considering that he is neither married to Mrs. Potter nor has shown any signs of intending to provide for his mistress and child by occupying himself after the trial. Whatever was given them would be quickly drained away and not replaced." Draco sneered a bit. "And I find myself doubtful about how much they intended to

use for the upkeep of the child. Why would they ask for the Invisibility Cloak and the Firebolt broom? Those are tools for an adult. And asking for multiple houses? A child can be quite happy with one home. No, this was always less about the baby in Mrs. Potter's womb and more about the fears and feelings of Mrs. Potter."

"How *dare* you—" Weasley began, in a voice that would quickly rise to a shriek if it had not attained it already.

"Be quiet," Judge Witherbone said, in a cold, implacable voice that made Weasley subside at once. Draco did not glance at the judge, but he knew she would be watching him with a fixed gaze. He felt as if he were radiating light, carried along on a rising wave of argument. It was hard for anyone to look away from him when he approached that stage.

He imagined, smugly, what Harry would be thinking and feeling just at this moment, and then dismissed the images. He had to throw himself back into the words.

"And I do not think we ought to indulge those feelings and fears any longer," he went on softly, staring into Weasley's eyes. "She waited months to leave her husband—years, even—after he had supposedly begun to frighten her. She seems to have waited until the point where she could not hide her pregnancy any longer, even in loose robes." He gave the bulge of Weasley's belly, which had grown noticeably since the case began, a pointed glance. "And, of course, she would have no chance of fooling Mr. Potter into thinking the baby was his, since they had not slept together in eight months by that time."

Weasley's face went paler still. Judge Witherbone gave a little cough. "Is such information appropriate to introduce into the courtroom, Arguer Malfoy?"

Harry's voice spoke up an instant later. "I gave Arguer Malfoy permission to do so, Madam Witherbone. My apologies if it was inappropriate."

Draco gave a narrow grin. They had had no such conversation, except back near the beginning of their acquaintance, when Harry had given him the information about his marriage. But it figured that Harry would know the perfect place to come in and lend his support to Draco. He had been doing it without effort during the whole of the rescue operation to secure Narcissa, after all.

That was what had convinced Draco, beyond all the other evidence, that he would be happy with Harry in his life. They traded back and forth, picking up the burden of the moment at different times. Draco had never encountered an equal partner before, but now he had one, and nothing would persuade him to give him up.

"Not inappropriate, if it was with your permission, Mr. Potter," Witherbone murmured, and then said, "Go on, Arguer."

"Thank you, Madam," Draco said, and returned to the attack. Weasley hadn't had much time to recover, but that wasn't the point. He didn't want her to have *any*. "The Potter marriage began to

die long before the moment when Ginny Potter declared her intention to enter wizarding divorce law. There were her fears of him—if they were ever real—and Mr. Potter's reclusiveness, which she did not like. She continually urged him to do something else, and was unable to accept his answer that he was resting from his travails in the war with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Ginny Potter sought comfort in another man's arms, and did not see fit to tell her husband that she had fallen out of love with him. And now she asks for more than he can reasonably give, and *even comes to the courtroom without an Arguer,* so sure is she that she can depend on his essential good nature to give her what she wants." Draco paused and snorted. "She has never thought that he might have tired of trying to resurrect this corpse of a marriage, and does not wish to breathe air into its lungs so that it can serve someone else, either. He has exhibited more effort in this divorce case than he did in the five years he was married to her."

He held Weasley's eyes, and aimed the words at the swirling emotions in them as he would aim a chisel at the weak point in a stone. And he saw her face waver, then crumple, and he knew she had *finally* believed him. Harry could tell her all he liked, and she would probably continue to believe that she had another chance, because Harry had given in to her so often before. But hearing the words uttered through *his* throat, and Harry not objecting…

He had broken her.

A rush of vicious pleasure overcame Draco, and he stepped away, with a slight bow of his head, and murmured, "That is why I believe that none of Mrs. Potter's demands should be granted, Madam Witherbone. She has no claim on him, not after what she has done."

"I see," said Judge Witherbone after a moment. "And your defense, Mrs. Potter? Prepared by your Arguer, Mr. Zabini, of course."

Weasley tried to stand up and read from the sheaf of papers she clutched, but her hands were shaking too badly. "We want—" she whispered, and then more loudly, she said, "We want—" But the words broke apart, and she began to cry, bringing her hands up to her face as if she could cover her tears.

Judge Witherbone let her go on for a sadistic amount of time, and then prompted, with only the slightest infusion of impatience in her tone, "Mrs. Potter?"

Weasley dealt the finishing blow herself. She stepped away from the chair in which she'd sat and said, loudly, "Harry! Is it really true that you don't *want* to give me what I need from you? That you'll see the child starve in the streets before you contribute a single Knut to her care? Harry?"

Draco followed her gaze. Harry had turned to face the judge's seat, his face set into a perfect expression of boredom.

"Madam Witherbone," he said, "I don't think this interruption is appropriate. If you would please ask Mrs. Potter to remain with the formalities?"

Weasley uttered another sob, dry this time. She turned to face the judge and said, "I must ask for a recess—"

"You were the one who asked for a full court session today," the judge reminded her. "You are the one who needs to deliver a prepared statement, Mrs. Potter. If we begin again tomorrow, Arguer Malfoy has the opportunity to speak first again, since it will be a repetition, intended to fulfill the purpose this session did not achieve."

Weasley turned to face him with a horrified expression. Draco permitted, for just a moment, his enjoyment to shine in his eyes.

Weasley turned away. Her shoulders were shaking. She clutched at the air, and then she turned and ran out of the room, probably too proud to break down in front of other people.

That pride had cost her, of course, as had every move she had made since the trial began. Draco turned and looked up at the judge's podium.

There was a faint, a very faint, smile on Witherbone's face as she picked up her wand and cast a sparkling shield of white light over the papers in front of her.

"Mrs. Potter entered the courtroom without an Arguer," she said, "and then refused to read the statement Mr. Zabini had prepared. She fled the courtroom before dismissal, without the excuse of acute physical sickness or a magical attack from her opposition, and did not set another date for a second meeting. She has violated the courtroom procedures unacceptably. Our indulgence might stretch to cover one such violation, but not four." She cocked her head and flicked her wand once more. "You have won the case as it stands, Arguer Malfoy. If Mrs. Weasley wishes to take it up again, she must begin the process of negotiations over again. Mr. Potter is required to surrender none of his belongings." She gave a nod, and then a real smile bloomed over her face, and Draco saw how the wizarding world beyond the courtroom must feel. Of course, Harry's stay in hospital would have helped that enormously, since rumors had already circulated that he'd been heroically wounded saving someone' else's life. "Congratulations," she said.

Draco nearly drowned in the sweetness of what he was feeling then, and in the richness of the look Harry cast him.

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Chapter: 29

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Nine—A Confrontation With the Weasleys

"Ah," Draco said, and stared at the bird on Harry's arm as if he could make it combust with the sheer force of his stare. This was Bill's owl Astraea, however, and therefore a calmer owl than Pigwidgeon had been. She ruffled her wings and stared back as Harry carefully took the letter from her leg. "I should have known a Weasley owl would arrive on the heels of their daughter's defeat."

"They did wait until the next morning," Harry said absently, and then shook the letter out with a quick motion of his hand. His mouth was sour with apprehension, not that he was about to tell Draco that. Of course, since Draco could probably see it on his face, there wasn't much *point* in telling him that.

Judge Witherbone had not yet declared him and Ginny divorced. If Ginny *did* want to begin the entire process of the trial all over again, she had three days in which to do so. Perhaps Zabini would yet persuade her to return to the courtroom. Draco didn't think so, but Harry didn't know that for certain.

And, in the meantime, the Weasleys could bring down pressure on him that they would not if he and Ginny were completely separated.

Sure enough, Bill's letter, though courteous, conveyed that.

Harry:

We'd like to speak to you before much longer, to talk about the process of settlements on Ginny and her daughter Lily. She feels inadequate to confront you alone, and I can understand her point. Therefore we are inviting you—and you alone—to the Burrow this afternoon, so that you can explain matters to us, and in particular why you decided the way you did regarding your possessions and vaults. Think of it as a reconciliation.

Please come at one.

Bill.

Harry sighed and stared down at the letter. He couldn't help thinking it was a bad sign that Arthur wasn't writing the letter. Of course, perhaps he had to work today, but Bill normally did, as well. If one of the Weasley men had taken a holiday from his work and the other had not…

Harry did not know who the "us" was, whether there would be a single friendly face there or not.

"Let me see," Draco said, in a demanding way, and Harry handed the letter to him across the table and started eating again, slowly forking bits of egg into his mouth as he considered what to do.

He couldn't decide, he realized abruptly. There was simply so much he didn't know. If Ginny

were there, he would have to say decidedly different things than if she weren't. He would have to be softer so that he didn't lose his adopted family over this. And he wanted to know if he would be required to face another display of tears like the ones that had marked the end of Ginny's court appearance yesterday.

"Of course you're not going," Draco said, tossing the letter aside as if it were so much rubbish. "Tell him so."

Harry narrowed his eyes. His uncertainty reared up and formed itself into a sturdy resolution quite suddenly in the face of Draco's opposition.

"I should be the one to make the decision on that," he said sharply.

Draco blinked at him for a moment, expression almost blank with, Harry supposed, sheer surprise. Then he frowned and sat back. "It's a legal matter, Harry," he said. "It must be, or they wouldn't try to get you alone and away from me. They want to intimidate you into backing down on the matter of giving nothing to your wife."

"That might be part of it," Harry said. "But I don't know that it's the whole of it. I'm going to owl Bill and ask him whether Ginny will be there, what they want me to explain, and a few other things." He nodded to Astraea, who had remained in the middle of the table to pick at a slice of bacon on his plate. "She's waiting for a reply. Bill must have known that I wouldn't agree just because he asked me to."

"Then I'll come with you."

Harry drew a deep breath, but releasing it wasn't as hard as thought it would be. "No."

"I am your Arguer—"

"And if I need you to moderate and separate me in all my confrontations with the Weasleys from now on," Harry cut in, "then I've essentially lost them forever. I want to show that I can *potentially* trust them, if they'll tell me a bit more about who should be present. I can't go everywhere under your protection, Draco."

Draco's lip curled. "And you've done *so well* when you face the Weasleys on your own in the past, haven't you?"

Harry planted his palms flat on the table. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I have. Ron and Arthur didn't know you were there in the Burrow, remember? It was *me* they reacted and responded to. And I faced Ginny on my own yesterday."

Draco curled one hand into a fist, and then drummed it sharply on his leg. Astraea turned to stare at him. "I don't like the thought of you on your own," he said, "without the ability to reach me if you *should* need me."

"I know you don't," said Harry, and managed to soften the harsh buzz in his voice. "But I'll be stirring needless conflict if I bring you with me. The Weasleys will think I don't trust them, and I'm sure Ron, at least, will assume that you influence my thinking and that I would say something different if he could just get me alone. And I *have* to be able to do this. I'm sorry if you don't trust me, Draco, or think I'm an expert in legal matters. I'm not. But I won't say anything legally binding."

"You don't *know* what's legally binding."

Harry laughed, thinking of Ginny's aborted performance in the courtroom yesterday. "And you think Ginny does?"

Draco set his jaw. "No. But she might have a brother who does."

Harry shook his head. "The only reason any of them would have to know legal terms would be the ones that relate to magical artifacts—or the twins, if they're taking Pansy to court over her attacks on their shop." He sat back in his chair and cocked his head at Draco. "*Will* you trust me to go by myself?" He hoped he didn't let those words ring as wistfully as they sounded in his head. He wanted to convey that he would go to the Burrow anyway, because he thought he needed to, but he still wanted Draco to trust him.

Draco stood up and came around the table. Harry sat back further to watch him, and wondered for a long moment which side of him would win. There was a struggle going on behind Draco's face.

But in the event, all he did was stoop down and kiss Harry's forehead.

"Be careful," he said quietly. "You just got out of hospital. I don't want to see what the headlines would look like should you go back in immediately. 'Potter Injured in Struggle With Prank-Playing Twins,' I'm sure Skeeter would say, or something else equally inane."

Harry grinned at him. "And do I have your permission to tell them about your mother being kidnapped?"

"Not unless Weasley brings it up first." Draco's eyes had gone flat. "I want to save that revelation for a few days hence."

"What happens in a few days?"

Draco smiled like a shark, and Harry nodded. He supposed that, if he could make plans of his own, Draco could certainly do the same. "All right." He turned to call Seeky to bring him ink and parchment, so that he could write a letter back to Bill. He wondered now how he had lived without the convenience of house-elves.

He would not, of course, tell Hermione that.

Harry appeared outside the Burrow, and squinted at it thoughtfully, slinging his cloak around his shoulders. Due to delays in owl post between the Burrow and the Manor, he had not arrived until four that afternoon, after Bill had confirmed that Ginny would be present, and so would most of the rest of the family.

Harry had to restrain himself from glancing over his shoulder, to the place that Draco would have stood last time they had come here. That was exactly what his problem had been for five years; he had allowed himself to become too dependent on Ginny, Ron, and Hermione. He couldn't replace that with another dependence, or every change he had tried to make in the past few weeks would have been for nothing.

He lifted his head and walked forwards, not allowing himself to tense even when he saw that Molly was waiting for him in the door of the Burrow. He simply stopped a few steps away and nodded to her.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," he said softly.

Molly sighed. She had red-rimmed eyes, he saw, as if she had spent most of the morning crying. "Oh, Harry," she whispered. "How *could* you break our hearts this way? I was sure that you and Ginny would be married forever, and now—" She shook her head sadly.

Harry gave her a thin smile. He'd be happy to reconcile with her and consider her his mum again, but he wouldn't just take whatever she wanted to say without objecting, as he'd done whenever she reminisced in the past about what a wonderful career he could have made as an Auror. She had understood the physical limitations that kept him from playing Quidditch, but she had never accepted that he couldn't really control his temper.

And of course I could have. But Ginny couldn't provide sufficient motivation on her own.

"I thought we would be, too, at one point," he said. "But I'm almost glad that this happened. I could have wished for less heartbreak to go along with it. But she hasn't been in love with me for a long time, and she deserves someone in her life who *will* make her happy and give her what she wants." He had to work not to spit as he spoke the words—and Draco, he knew, would have spat if he'd heard them—but they were what Molly needed to hear. "And I haven't been in love with her for a long time, either."

"Why *not*, Harry, dear?" Mrs. Weasley leaned forwards, as if she wanted to hug him but a gaping abyss separated them. "Ginny was perfect for you. You were always so *happy* together, and of course Ginny's dreamed of you since she was a child, and you always seemed so at home in our family—"

"But those aren't good reasons to stay married without love, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied. He found that his voice got quieter as he talked on, which was a relief, as he hadn't been sure how he

would avoid yelling at first. "And now I have found happiness outside my marriage. I can control my magic much better now, and I don't just sit at home anymore."

"Tell me why you weren't willing to do that for me," Ginny said, her face appearing suddenly behind her mother's shoulder. "Tell me that."

Harry met her gaze, and felt most of his resolve to be kind and intelligent and say nothing hurtful dying away. Ginny already knew the answers to those questions. Did she want him to say them again, in front of her family? Very well, he would.

"Because you weren't willing to support me in doing anything but what you *wanted* me to do," he said sharply. "And I had already told you how little interest being an Auror or a Quidditch player roused in me. I have different ambitions, Ginny."

Ginny snorted. "It certainly didn't *seem* like it when he'd spend an entire day talking to Ron and Hermione, and then come home and talk to me," she remarked to her mother, though she kept her eyes on Harry.

Harry shook his head. "I've told you and told you the truth. It's your fault if you want to ignore it." He looked over Ginny's shoulder into the house. "Is the rest of your family home? I'd rather talk to you in the open air, now that I think of it."

"Now he's insulting your housekeeping skills," Ginny told Mrs. Weasley.

"No," said Harry. "Frankly, I don't trust you not to attack me at such close quarters."

Ginny contrived to look hurt, but Bill's voice said from beyond her, "If he really wants us to come outside, we will. I don't think his explanation is going to sound a bit different depending on where he makes it."

Harry stepped backwards and waited. Ginny paraded out with one arm around her swollen belly, staring at him all the while. Harry didn't care. Draco had forbidden him to reveal Narcissa's kidnapping, and he doubted that Ginny would bring it up herself, but he could explain about other things that had happened during the divorce process, and see what the Weasleys thought of their "loving daughter" and her perfect marriage then.

Bill came out with Fleur at his side, followed by the twins, Ron, Hermione, and Mr. Weasley. Harry wasn't surprised that neither Percy nor Charlie was there. Percy wouldn't let his work at the Ministry be disrupted over something like this, and it was extremely likely that Charlie hadn't left Romania during the last month.

The Weasleys—and the Weasley-Grangers—ranged themselves in a half-circle, all facing him. Ginny had her arms folded. Mrs. Weasley was still sniffling slightly and dabbing at her eyes with an apron. Arthur put one arm around his wife's shoulder, looking torn between sympathetic sorrow and pity for her. Bill and Fleur stood side-by-side; Harry remembered Hermione telling

him that they felt any married couple should do something to work their problems out, rather than separating. The twins wore identical frowns. Ron and Hermione gazed at him with identical looks of concern.

"Here's the simple fact," said Harry. "I'm not going to take Ginny back. I'm not going to marry her again. I'm not going to give her extra money to care for the baby, which was conceived with another man. Her family is doing well, and can support her—the way you've done so well throughout the divorce." He met the twins' eyes, in particular. "I don't see why I should have to honor commitments to a woman who violated them first, and who has variously gone along with a man who tried to kill me—"

"What?" Mrs. Weasley asked, sounding faint.

"Blaise Zabini sent me a Poisoned Missive in the first days of the divorce trial." Harry made a dismissive gesture with one hand, secretly pleased at the looks of shock on most of their faces. Ginny *hadn't* told them, then. "It was the main reason I left the house and moved into Malfoy Manor. Stronger wards."

"Ginny," Molly said, turning towards her daughter.

"We needed money for the baby," said Ginny, but she had her head turned away.

"I learned that, if I had died while Ginny was still on my will, she would have received everything automatically." Harry shrugged. "That was the reason for the Poisoned Missive. She also stole the Black vault key—which she still hasn't returned to me—and the twins attacked Draco in the middle of Diagon Alley. Then Zabini contacted Lucius Malfoy, who was driven mad by his stay in Azkaban, and he appeared at the Manor and tried to kill Draco. I fought him, but didn't manage to kill him, since he Apparated away. Draco has paid large amounts of Galleons over the years to protect his mother, who was a victim of Bellatrix Lestrange, and to keep his father at bay. And Zabini simply invited him into the country, despite knowing he might kill Draco, because he wanted money. And Ginny approved of it."

The expressions on the twins' faces had changed. They looked uncomfortable now. Arthur was shaking his head again and again, and Molly had started crying. Ginny wouldn't look anyone in the face.

"And you never thought of meeting with Ginny to try and talk this out?" Bill asked. It was evidently his turn to frown. "Everything could have been avoided if you and Ginny had managed to come to a settlement out of court."

"And it could also have been avoided if Ginny had simply waited to enter Blaise Zabini's bed until after she divorced me," said Harry. "Who bears the greater part of the blame?"

"When couples fight," said Bill, in the voice of a man who had been married exactly one year longer than Harry had, "the fault lies equally on both sides."

"Forgive me if I consider it *slightly different* when my opponent is trying to kill me," Harry said dryly.

"But you could have talked," said Bill, with an expansive gesture of his arm. "Kept your head and spoken to her like an adult. You wouldn't even see her, though. She told me that she tried to send you a few owls, and they were all rebuffed by the wards around your house or Malfoy Manor."

Harry snarled, his anger and his magic both surging up, so that the grass under his feet sizzled slightly. "What do I have to do to *prove to you* that I had good reason not to trust her?" he asked. "Of *course* I didn't want to receive letters from her or Zabini when the last one nearly killed me! And of course I warded the house against her when she tried to sell it out from under me. The worst thing I did in return was a newspaper article full of gossip about Ginny—and that was, in any case, compiled by Draco. What did I *do* that I deserved my wife cheating on me and blaming me for the loss of our child, and then claiming the money and the broom and the Invisibility Cloak I inherited from my parents, and claiming she would name her baby Lily just to manipulate me?"

Bill blinked. Then he said, "I didn't know all that. But you could still have talked it out—"

"I spent the last five years talking to her," Harry said bitterly, "thinking I knew her. And it turned out I didn't even know when she was cheating." He shook his head. "No. As much as I still want to consider you as my friends and surrogate family, I can't if the price is listening to you preach at me about Ginny. I've made my decision. I *won't* change it. I don't trust any word that comes out of Ginny's mouth, and I don't trust Zabini as far as I can throw him. I can't say how much it hurt that most of you took her side at first, but I can forgive—*if* you can stop telling me that, yes, it was all my fault, and the one who cheated and conspired to kill me and stole my property and tried to manipulate me in court instead of Arguing honestly *was in the right.*"

He was panting by the time he stopped talking. He had not realized how much the Weasleys taking Ginny's side had bothered him. Draco was right; it was much better to speak honestly, to say what one really meant, instead of avoiding it the way he had with Ginny in the months after her miscarriage, for fear of saying something that would upset her.

Bill let out a sigh. "I still wish you could reconcile," he said. "But I see it's hopeless. You're still welcome at family gatherings as far as I'm concerned, Harry, as long as you don't insult Ginny."

Fleur gave a stiff shrug when Harry looked at her. Of course, he didn't really know her, and so her approval meant less to him. He turned and faced the twins. Ron and Hermione were already smiling in support, of course.

Fred scratched the back of his neck, coughed twice, and said, "I suppose, mate, we didn't really think—"

"How much we owe you for everything," George said. His voice was an embarrassed mumble, and he had acquired Ginny's need to avert his eyes, as if by osmosis. "After all, you gave us—"

"The money to start the shop," Fred finished, nodding. "And everything you told us *does* put—"

"A different spin on it," George muttered. "Malfoy was just trying to help you, I suppose, the way any Arguer would."

Harry bit his tongue to avoid saying *You don't know the half of it.*

"We're sorry," they finished together.

Harry nodded, and looked at Molly.

Her eyes were bright with tears. "But, Harry, dear," she choked out, "what will you *do*?"

"I've thought of something," Harry said. And he had; he just didn't know if Draco would agree to it, after the fuss he'd made about Harry being in hospital. "I'll tell you about it in a few days. I'll have a *lot* of news to tell in a few days." *When the divorce is finalized, they can learn about me and Draco, for one thing.*

"I wish—" Molly said.

"Don't say it," Harry murmured.

She sighed, and nodded. "Then come back and have tea with me in a few days," she said, still trying to smile. "There are some things I need to say that never did get said."

Harry nodded back, then turned to Ginny. She was meeting his gaze with open loathing, but she flinched when he extended his hand. He supposed he would never know how much of her blather about being afraid of him was true and how much lies.

"I'll need my vault key back now," he said.

Ginny gave a gusty sigh, as if the request were too troublesome for words, and dug in her pocket. She made sure to emphasize how much the motion inconvenienced her, with her pregnant belly, but Harry, who had seen more heavily pregnant witches in Diagon Alley carrying weighty purchases with them, was not sympathetic. In the end, she held out the silver key to the Black vault, and then tossed it to him as he reached to take it. Harry simply waved his wand and cast the Summoning Charm, letting the key settle gently into his palm.

He Apparated away, because he thought he had said everything he needed to, and he did not want to stay for the family confrontation that would follow when the Weasleys properly digested what they'd just learned about Ginny.

Draco felt Harry's sudden presence at the edge of the anti-Apparition wards around the Manor, and smiled, a faint twitch of his lips. "Seeky," he called, and the house-elf squeaked in acknowledgment. "Send Harry to me the moment he comes into the house."

The elf squeaked again, but Draco didn't pay attention to the exact wording of the response. He was far too busy gazing in delight at the pile of information in front of him, which he would send to Skeeter for a *Daily Prophet* article a few days hence.

His investigation into Blaise's past had finally paid off. And he would release the information about it on the same day that he released the news about his mother's kidnapping and how Harry had acted like a hero to save and defend her, and let the world know the more intimate news about him and Harry.

The wizarding world would explode into flames around them.

Draco imagined it in his mind's eye, and chuckled.

It would be so *beautiful.*

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Chapter: 30

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty—The World on Fire

Harry stared down at the information that Draco had assembled on Blaise. He licked his lips and said the first thing that came to mind. "Ginny can't have known about this."

"I don't really care whether she did or not," Draco said in a satisfied voice behind him. Harry didn't even have to look at him to know he was leaning against the wall of the room, his arms folded over his chest. "She *will* know about it, assuming he hasn't already told her as a precautionary measure, when Skeeter publishes this article."

Harry opened his mouth to ask if Skeeter would publish an article that so badly defamed the Zabini heir, and then shut it with a snap. Of *course* she would. Defaming people was Skeeter's livelihood.

"This will make life harder for Ginny and her baby," he murmured, tracing the papers with a finger.

Draco caught his shoulder and spun him around. "Why are you feeling sorry for *them*?" he whispered into Harry's ear, raising fine shivers among the hairs there. "That was the risk that Weasley took, not researching the past of the man she chose to take as her lover more closely. And even if she breaks away from him because of this, her family will support her." His thumb rubbed Harry's knuckles. "You shouldn't need to feel anything for her."

"I shouldn't *need* to, perhaps," Harry corrected coolly. If he hadn't known about the strength of Draco's feelings and his own, he would sometimes have despaired for the future of anything they shared. Their moral convictions were poles apart, and Harry anticipated many, many rows in the future. "But I do, nevertheless. Ginny thought she would win, if only because Blaise's tactics seemed designed to force you to your knees. And now she's losing everything. And it didn't even happen all at once, so she could be better-prepared for it." Harry shrugged. "I do feel sorry for her. And even sorrier for the baby, who will probably grow up with a snappish mother and never see her father."

"It's better if she doesn't," said Draco, and gestured to the pile of parchment again. "Would you want any niece of yours growing up around *him*?"

Harry shook his head and faced the articles again, letting a feeling of coldness wash over him. If not for Draco, he might not only have lost the court case, because Zabini would assuredly have found a better Arguer than he could, but he would never have known how close to danger Ginny had come.

Zabini had imitated his constantly marrying mother's habits in one thing: he frequently "fell in love" with the wives of rich and powerful men, seduced them away from their husbands, and then urged them to divorce said husbands. Draco's searchers had had so much trouble discovering what he was doing because he'd done it in other countries first, during and after the war with Voldemort—mostly Italy, Egypt, and Bulgaria, from what Harry had read. Perhaps he hadn't felt bold enough to risk venturing into Britain until he was sure that Voldemort was defeated and that no rumors had sprung up about his activities there.

And then he didn't just abandon the women. Harry assumed he would have thought that was an unacceptable risk, more likely to get him caught. Each of the witches he seduced died in a "tragic accident" not long after they received the settlement.

All that could have happened to Ginny if Harry hadn't found a good Arguer. And Blaise was so good at making his lovers' deaths look like accidents that it seemed he'd never been caught, prosecuted, or even suspected. That was another reason it had taken Draco's investigators days to piece the pattern together.

Yes, he was sorry for Ginny's humiliation. But there was no question but that they had to publish it. If nothing else, Blaise might try again once the scandal of *this* divorce died down. If people knew, however, there would always be an eye on him.

"Do you think Mrs. Zabini knows how well she taught her son?" he asked, leaning back against

Draco's shoulder.

"I don't know," Draco said softly, one hand running up his spine as if he wanted to touch Harry and be lost in consideration of the question at the same time. "I wouldn't be surprised if she's maintained distance from his activities on purpose. If they happen in other countries, she can ignore them, after all. And that helps her look more innocent when he's finally caught."

Harry shuddered. "I'm never going to understand the ways Slytherins think," he muttered.

"We're more than just Slytherins, people like Mrs. Zabini and I," Draco whispered into his ear. "We're practical, strong, and willing to take what satisfaction and use what compassion we can, in between the demands of our lives." He paused for a moment, and then Harry turned his head just enough to catch him in the act of shrugging. "Blaise isn't like that. I think he would have been caught eventually. Just his venturing back to Britain shows that he was growing overconfident. People know his mother's reputation here. He would have been watched more closely." For a moment, he met Harry's eyes. "And I think you would never have rested until you managed to uncover the real evidence behind Weasley's death, however long that took you."

Harry nodded once. Then he said, "I wanted to speak to you about—about what I want to do in the next little while."

Draco cocked his head. "You've changed your mind about sitting in a small room and translating complicated legal documents for free, then?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I realized that the times I've felt most alive in the past few weeks are those when I was defending you from some danger, or helping to rescue your mother. I thought better, I moved better, I had energy I thought was gone, and I could make plans without worrying that something would go wrong the moment I did. I used to worry about venturing *outside* to garden, never mind do anything more adventurous." He shook his head. "At the same time, I don't think the formal legalities of the Aurors would suit me at all. I don't like or understand Ministry politics, and they would try to find a way to exploit me for my name."

"I would not let that happen," Draco said, softly, ferociously, leaning forwards to nuzzle into his neck.

Harry tensed a moment, then leaned his head back and accepted the caress. He had become better at that ever since he and Draco had made what Harry couldn't help but think of as the declaration of their feelings in the room at St. Mungo's. "I know, but I'd rather not put you to the trouble in the first place."

"So what *will* you do?" Draco looped his arms about his waist. "I can't imagine that it won't involve some amount of trouble and risk, knowing you."

"It does," Harry murmured, leaning back against him. "And this is the point where you'll yell at me, I think."

Draco's arms tightened around him just the least little bit. "Oh?" He bit the word off.

"Yes." Gently, Harry freed himself from the clasp and turned around, putting his hands on Draco's shoulders. "I think I want to hire out as a bodyguard, a defender—of people, not places. I could help protect your clients during particularly dangerous cases. I could also help other Arguers—not the ones who would take cases opposite to yours, of course—and hire out for other things. Dueling lessons given in private, for example. I've had all this knowledge of spells and defense sitting in my head for too long. It should be *used* for something. And if I get bored of one job, such as bodyguarding, I can try something else. Perhaps even finding cursed artifacts in trapped locations." He chuckled a bit, thinking of the Horcruxes. "You could say I'm a bit of an expert in that, too."

"I don't like you risking your life." Draco made the statement almost expressionlessly, but his hands had tightened on Harry again in warning.

"I know." Harry nodded. "On the other hand, your own profession involves a certain amount of risk, too, doesn't it? You can never tell when one of your opponents thinks the best thing to do is threaten you, or try to assassinate your client. Or kidnap your mother," he added.

"I've never had all three happen at once," Draco said obstinately, lifting his chin, "and I enjoy a level of safety I never knew existed before, now that my father is dead."

"I know that." Oddly enough, Harry found himself growing calmer as the conversation proceeded. He had thought he would yell at Draco the moment their wills clashed, but he should have trusted his own affection more. Maybe, someday soon, he would be ready to do that. He trusted Draco more than he trusted himself, at this point.

He shoved the confusing thoughts aside and pressed on with his main point. "But it can still happen. And none of the spells you told me about prevents Blaise from trying for direct revenge on you, other than that he won't want to kill you. Please let me help protect you, Draco. I promise I don't end up in hospital every time I do it, either." He tried a smile.

"Just the majority of the time," Draco muttered. He had his arms folded, his body radiating tension.

Harry took a deep breath, gripped the charging bull by the horns, and stepped forwards to wrap his arms around Draco. Draco wavered for a moment, blinking, as if he simultaneously wanted to think Harry was just playing with him and remembered that Harry was unlikely to use physical affection to do that.

"I promise," Harry whispered, "I won't take unnecessary risks. But this is what I want to do, Draco. The first thing that sounds appealing, after *years* of nothing but staring into space and talking to three people almost exclusively. You've given me so much. I want to give back to you, too, but some things I need to take for myself. You're wonderful with words. This is what I'm

good at—and I can become better, since I'm sure that you have books in your library on Dark Arts and defensive spells."

Draco smiled, reluctantly. "Yes, I do," he said. "I just—I don't think your definition of unnecessary risk and mine match."

"Then we can talk it over," Harry said calmly. "Can't we?"

After a moment, Draco's hand started to smooth circles on his back. "I don't know," he said. "Can we? Are you ready to tell the Weasleys, let alone everyone else, that we're lovers?"

"Yes," Harry said. He leaned back and stared into Draco's face for a moment. "Were you worried that I wouldn't want to? Draco." He shook his head, amusement racing up his throat. He had a hard time preventing his laughter, but he did, lest Draco think he was laughing at his expense. "Who's the Gryffindor here?"

"As you said once," Draco murmured, combing his fingers through Harry's hair, "I know a lot about Gryffindors, but not much about you."

"That's changed." Harry caught his hand and turned to press a kiss to his palm. The more gestures he made without Draco rebuffing him, the more confidence he gained, and the further away memories of Ginny's sighs and sudden tension when he touched her faded. This wasn't a turn in his life he had chosen or would have predicted, but did that make it less valuable? "If you want to know something about me, ask it."

"You think it's absolutely necessary to your happiness to do this?" Draco asked.

"Not my happiness," Harry corrected. "My joy in life. Yes. This is what makes me feel most alive—other than being in your company. And of course, I can't sit at your side all day every day, though I'll be happy to attend any of your court sessions that you want me to. This is what I want, and you're who I want."

Finally, there was a spark of something like belief in Draco's eyes. Harry gave a small chuckle, amused at both of them, though mostly at himself. Finally, as well, he had caught a glimpse of how his hesitation to acknowledge his own feelings and believe in Draco's affection must have affected Draco.

Well, honesty comes more easily to me than him, anyway. So at least I have that ballast as we go forwards.

Draco had been surprised, but pleased, that Skeeter herself had insisted on waiting to launch the news of Blaise's past, Narcissa's kidnapping, and Harry and Draco's commitment to each other until the third day after the last court session, when Judge Witherbone declared Harry officially divorced. He had thought her greed would prevail over her desire to affect the wizarding world with the news, but it seemed he had an ally in wishing a large part of that world's assumptions to

burn to the ground.

An especially thick edition of the *Daily Prophet* therefore came out two mornings later. Draco opened to the front page with a high sense of anticipation, especially since Harry wasn't downstairs yet and thus not clamoring to see the headlines.

The first screamed the news in the most dramatic fashion that Draco could have hoped for.

BLAISE ZABINI: SEDUCER AND MURDERER!

Lover in Potter case has dark past

The second page carried a photograph of Narcissa which emphasized the fragility in her face and eyes, and the news of her kidnapping. Draco could almost feel Skeeter's satisfaction at finally being able to write about the Madwoman of Malfoy Manor leaking through the lines, and narrowed his eyes with a snort. *Enjoy it, bitch. It's the last time you ever will.*

The third page carried the news of Harry's divorce, and an interview with Judge Witherbone in which she explained that Ginny and Harry were obviously much better off divorced, since their goals in life were incompatible. Draco snickered to himself. *Is that what they're calling it these days?*

And the fourth page…

The fourth page carried a picture of him and Harry leaving the courtroom, one that Draco hadn't known for certain anyone had snapped, but which he had charged Skeeter to secure anyway. Of course the *Prophet* would have had photographers watching; it was only a matter of finding the right one.

This picture had Harry looking up at him, his face creased in a faint smile. Draco was bending towards him, hands flicking in animated motion, and the pictured Harry laughed and stepped smoothly closer. They did not kiss, of course, because no pictures of them like that existed yet, but Draco knew any fool with eyes could see the truth before looking at the headline that proclaimed it.

Potter and Malfoy: The Surprising Love Affair

Draco scanned the article quickly. To his satisfaction, it carried nothing about he and Harry becoming lovers before the end of the marriage—proof that Rita Skeeter did not know *everything*. There was only the statement that he'd sent her and Harry had approved, that the process of the divorce had brought them closer to each other and revealed they were physical and intellectual equals. The rest was pure Skeeter spin of the best variety: gushing speculation on how their mutual power had probably attracted them to each other, a reminder to *Prophet* readers on how Ginny Weasley had schemed to get her hands on Potter without bothering to know the man, a haughty comment on how Potter and his Weasley bride had married so quickly five years

ago and how quick marriages in the flush of victory rarely worked out, and a sparkling closing paragraph on how "This reporter, at least, is sure that Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy have found something in each other that no one else could have offered them."

Draco felt as if he were radiating smugness out the tips of his fingers as he laid the paper down and began to eat. He laughed aloud, however, when he flipped through the rest of the pages, and found they concerned Pansy's continuing trial and how the Weasley twins had issued a public apology to Harry in the form of sweets that painted WE'RE SORRY, HARRY in large flashing letters on the faces of everyone who ate them. They dominated the newspaper together.

Draco heard footsteps on the stairs just then, and sat back with a satisfied little sigh. He had already lowered the wards to permit every letter through that wasn't actually a Howler. He was somewhat surprised Harry had arrived before they had.

Harry trotted in yawning, his hair mussed, but saw the paper and Summoned it with a flick of his wand. He looked a bit queasy at the headline on the front page, and looked at Draco over the top of it. "Did you suggest that to her?"

"I might have had something to do with it, yes," Draco murmured, and spread marmalade on his toast.

Harry shook his head. "You do delight in smashing your enemies to small pieces, don't you?"

"It's the only way to be sure they won't stab you in the back," Draco said, and took a bite of toast, and beamed at Harry.

"Sometimes it seems unnecessarily cruel," Harry murmured, and sat down in front of his own plate just as his food appeared. Harry gave it a half-smile as he picked up his spoon and began to eat porridge, never looking away from Draco in the meantime. "But I suppose you would say that it's no more than he deserves."

"Far *less* than he deserves," Draco said, and felt another spasm of disgust at Blaise shake his stomach. How stupid must the man be, to believe he could continue murdering women indefinitely? He was lucky that he hadn't been caught for the three murders he'd committed before this, truly.

Of course, perhaps the wizarding government of Britain would arrange to send him back to one of the countries where he'd committed murder. Draco snickered into his toast, imagining the scene.

The first letter arrived then, an owl swooping directly to Harry and extending its leg with an impatient hoot. Draco recognized the bird as the one that had delivered the Weasley post the other day. He raised an eyebrow, though he didn't try to speak, since he had a rather full mouth at the moment.

Harry gingerly undid the envelope, and scanned the letter for a moment. Then his face relaxed, and he chuckled. Draco tilted his head; that was not a reaction that he would have imagined to Harry's first communication from his surrogate family in the wake of this news.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"It's Bill again," Harry said, and waved the letter in the air, shaking his head. "Talking self-righteously about marriage being a matter of honesty, and now he understands why I can't reconcile with Ginny, because I must be gay and the divorce process helped me realize it."

"And that doesn't upset you?" Draco asked delicately. It wasn't so long ago that Harry had been angry at the mere *thought* of being attracted to men, after all.

"Not really, no." Harry shrugged and laid Bill's letter down beside his plate. "Bill's opinion doesn't matter to me, not compared to the opinions of some members of his family." He looked up again as two owls came through the window, and the first bird hooted and hopped irritably out of the way. "No reply," Harry told her, even as he tried to clear his food out of the way so the other owls could land, and she gave him a disgruntled look, but unfurled her wings.

"And who are these from?" Draco asked, quietly amused as he watched Harry's face break into a relieved smile.

"Ron and Hermione," Harry answered, holding up the second letter. "Ron's ranting about you. Hermione takes over halfway through the letter and tells me that she's very happy I have 'someone special in my life,' and she really should have known it when we showed up together at the press conference—I'm not sure how in the world she's defining 'together'—but that I *must* let her know the truth as soon as possible, so that Ron's head doesn't explode.

"And this one's from Rita Skeeter." Harry shook his head. "Apparently, she hasn't learned from my refusing many interviews with her over the years. She just wants to know if I'll talk to her about how I found love." He rolled his eyes. "It's rather disgusting, the way she assumes that I'll forget everything she wrote about me in my fourth year at Hogwarts."

"Well, she knows that we like each other now," Draco said, delicately sniffing his morning ham so that he could be sure it was cooked all the way through, and secretly delighting in the open expression on Harry's face. "And I was the one who passed her the majority of that information. Perhaps she thinks that if you can forgive one person involved in that affair, you can forgive another."

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but two owls arrived for Draco before he could say anything. Draco recognized Pansy's bird, but the other was unfamiliar, a regal great horned owl that simply sat on the opposite side of the table and refused to approach until Draco had opened Pansy's letter.

Dear Draco, was all she said, *I knew you fancied Harry Potter. You will give me cognac freely*

for the rest of my life if you don't want me to tell him how early it began. And, of course, both of you will come on our next Continental holiday, because no one else can tell off the workers at bad hostels like you can.

Harry watched curiously, but Draco only said, "Pansy. She's pleased for us," and then held his hand out towards the great horned owl.

It hopped towards him as though it hoped to make him anxious with the sheer slowness of its movements. Not impressed, Draco simply rolled his eyes and tore the letter away from it. The owl retreated with an indignant hoot.

The letter was from Ginny Weasley. She had used an owl belonging to Mrs. Zabini, Draco guessed, which was why he hadn't recognized it.

Malfoy:

I thought I had reason to loathe you before this, but now I owe you for setting my family against me, an hour-long scolding from my mother with advice to keep away from Blaise, and turning my husband from me in addition to all the others.

I see the truth now. I have blamed the wrong man all along. You must have begun seducing Harry long before the divorce case commenced, or he would never have succumbed to your charms so quickly.

Draco couldn't keep himself from snorting. He covered his face with one hand, and just shook his head when Harry demanded to know what was funny. He couldn't, not yet. After a moment, when he thought he probably had himself under control, he opened one eye and peered cautiously at the letter again.

You made my husband think he's bent. That is worse than all the other insults. The letters and Howlers have already begun to come, many of them taunting me for thinking I could marry a gay man and change him. But Harry wasn't gay when I married him. That was all your doing, all your fault.

And I know, though he doesn't—because he is innocent and trusting, and gives his whole heart—that you will tire of him eventually, and move on to another lover, and laugh at him when he complains. And he can never find sex with a man as fulfilling as he found sex with me. The Prophet *will report your dramatic leaving of each other in a month's time, I know it.*

I will hunt you down as soon as Harry is safely away from your side. Fear me.

Ginny Potter.

"What?" Harry demanded, because Draco was laughing too hard to say anything by the letter's end.

Draco held it out to him then, and watched Harry read it, his eyes widening in incredulity as he went on. He finally laid it on the table, with a dazed shake of his head, and said, "She blamed you for making me bent and she assumes that I'll go back to sleeping with women in the same letter. She—she really doesn't want to admit she was wrong. Ever. I mean, I knew that she hated apologizing when we married, but this is beyond—anything I suspected, really."

"She may know the truth," Draco said cheerfully. "She probably does. But as long as she can *imagine* that someone else is at fault, she will. I think this letter is more about venting her emotions and trying to persuade and frighten me than anything else."

"You're probably right." Harry grinned then. "Hell, you're almost *always* right. And she's wrong." He leaned across the table to kiss Draco. Draco held still, tilting his head just a little to get all the advantage of it.

It was the first deep kiss Harry had initiated since their days of unsatisfactory sex. Draco could feel the passion behind it, trembling like water held back by a dam.

It wouldn't be much longer, now, before that passion won free, and Harry moved to take what they both wanted.

Draco would wait. He would rather enjoy not having to do all the work of chasing, for once.

And in the meantime, he would enjoy the fires that he had lit. Another letter was coming already. Draco returned the kiss for one more instant, and then drew away, eager to find out what praise or futile yapping he had earned now.

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Chapter: 31

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-One—Private Business

Harry sat back and looked around his bedroom—well, the room that Draco had given him—for a moment. He thought he had done most of what he *should* do for today. He had written a letter to Ron and Hermione that explained the truth behind his and Draco's relationship, as promised. He had owled Rita Skeeter to tell her she could have an interview with him only if she brought her regular quill and not the Quick-Quotes one. He had told Bill, as politely as he could, that his opinion on Harry's marriage really didn't matter to Harry, and he expected to receive no more post about it.

But there was one more thing that he *wanted* to do. He just wasn't sure that Draco would let him do it if he knew about it. He would probably insist that he didn't need any protection, and Harry was simply exaggerating the amount of danger he was in.

But the lines from Ginny's letter hovered, ringing like bells, in the back of Harry's mind. *I will hunt you down as soon as Harry is safely away from your side. Fear me.*

She probably could not hurt Draco. The wards on the Manor were thick, and Draco was an accomplished Dark wizard who would not hesitate to use a long list of curses which Ginny wouldn't even know. And there were always house-elves Draco could summon if he were truly in danger.

But, for all that, the words lingered and troubled him. Perhaps she meant that she expected Harry to get tired of Draco, leave him, and *then* she would strike; the rest of the letter stated that. She could also mean that she would seek to hurt Draco the moment Harry did something else than stick religiously by his side.

Harry remembered the lurch of sick feeling in his stomach when he realized Narcissa was gone, and why. He never wanted to feel that for Draco.

So he wanted to confront Ginny, and make her understand how much danger she would be in from *him* if she contemplated making a move against Draco. But to go beyond the wards would be to alert Draco that he was doing something like that, and Draco was likely to feel either irritated or insulted that Harry thought he needed protection.

Harry cursed under his breath, then sighed and strode for the door of the room. It seemed the best thing he could do on this occasion, as on so many others, was to go talk to Draco. If he *would* be insulted or irritated, then it would probably be best if Harry didn't contact Ginny at all.

He grinned self-deprecatingly to himself as he shut the bedroom door behind him. Honesty seemed more difficult for him than it should be. Of course, a large part of that was Ginny's influence.

Well, he wouldn't let it remain and separate him from the man he—

Well—

Felt a deep liking for, at the very least.

Draco glanced up with curiosity from his correspondence when someone knocked on the library door. The house-elves would simply appear instead of knocking, of course, and his mother was as likely to walk in and demand he pay attention to her as anything else. And Harry should feel comfortable enough not to need to request permission to enter. So it must be Narcissa in one of her formal moods.

"Come in, Mother," he called.

But Harry opened it, and Draco rolled his eyes a bit. Harry should understand that the Manor was *his* home, too. At least he hadn't made any move to head back to his small house in Hogsmeade, or Draco might have had to throw a tantrum.

"Yes, Harry?" he asked, laying aside the letter that begged him to take up a divorce case with adultery on *both* sides. The Potter case, and in particular the news that he had not let the kidnapping of his mother stop him from pursuing it, had been good for his professional reputation in many ways; it had brought him attention from those people who might have thought he wasn't strong enough to take on a particularly bitter case before. On the other hand, many of those bitter cases were bitter because *both* parties were blithering idiots, committed to hating each other beyond winning peace or money for themselves.

"I wanted to ask you a question." Harry grinned and sat down on the edge of the desk, carefully moving a parchment out of the way when it would have bent beneath him. "I couldn't make up my mind, and then I reminded myself that you've always been rather good at helping with that."

"I am," said Draco, pleased that Harry had recognized it. "What was the question?"

"I want to warn Ginny off from *ever* harming you the way she said she would try to in her letter yesterday," Harry stated bluntly. "But I thought that might insult you if I did. Would you be insulted?"

He cocked his head, and a beam of light from the lamp caught in his eyes, turning them an almost supernatural green. Draco caught his breath, but refrained from pulling him down for a kiss. Harry should be the one to initiate the next move between them, or Draco thought it likely that he would be stuck doing everything forever.

"I hadn't expected you to care quite so much about my opinion when you were planning one of your insane risks," he murmured.

Harry made a frustrated noise and sprang to his feet, pacing back and forth in front of the desk. Draco folded his arms and sat back. That fascination had sprung up in him again; he had no idea what Harry was about to say next, but he wanted to find out.

"I *meant* it when I said I would consider your perception of unnecessary risks." Harry spun on his heel and glared at him. "I know you don't trust me, still, because I took so long to come to a knowledge of what I wanted—"

Draco tried to interrupt. The problem was that he didn't trust Harry to speak up, which was rather different than the problem he was proposing. But Harry rambled straight on as if he hadn't noticed.

"But I *want* what's between us, and I'm *committed* to this, and I *won't* back out of it, and—" Harry waved his arms in the air, his magic crackling around his skin, as though he were seeking for words in a language he barely knew. Then he shook his head, violently enough that his own hair stung his cheeks, and glared at Draco with the same depth of ferocity Draco had seen in him when he confronted his wife.

"I care about you," he said. "If I haven't said I love you yet, it's because I don't want to lie, and I'm not sure. I can't do anything about how fumble-footed I am compared to you. You've had more lovers than I have, I know." The jealousy in his voice pleased Draco at a level he hadn't known existed. "You're more graceful in your manners, you know things about the wizarding world that I've only just begun learning, and you're strong in ways I can't match.

"But I shouldn't *have* to match them! Or at least I should have to match them with the opposite, those things you *don't* have. I shouldn't *have* to measure myself against you constantly, and find myself lacking, and know that I can't do anything about it because we're so fundamentally different."

"I never said that I found you lacking, Harry," Draco murmured.

"Yes, you did," Harry reminded him, and his eyes were glowing like a leopard's, the way Draco had seen them flame before he went after Blaise in the Three Broomsticks. "There was something about how I insulted you by assuming I was ordinary, and how the sex was unsatisfactory, and—" He exhaled sharply. "I simply feel that no matter what I do, it's not enough, and I'll be blamed because of what it lacks!"

Draco shrugged. "You are the one who feels that way," he said, "not me."

Harry lifted his head and stared at him again.

"Fine," he said, and Draco could hear undertones in his voice echoed by the leaping, sparking magic. "*Fine.* If I can't guess what will match your standards anyway, if I can't be honest enough with my words and my feelings to satisfy you, and if, no matter what I say, you still don't think I care about your opinion, then I'll *do* something. I'm better with actions than words, anyway."

Draco assumed he was about to leave the Manor and hunt down Weasley, and he opened his mouth, frowning, to protest—

But Harry *jumped* closer, leaned across the desk, cupped the back of his head with one hand, and kissed him.

Well, Draco thought for a moment before the physical sensations reared up and consumed him, *this is different.*

Harry didn't know what he was doing.

Draco had made all the introductory moves before, and until this moment, Harry had only ever made love to women—well, one woman. He was probably doing things all clumsy and all wrong; there was probably some kind of subtle and sophisticated art to kissing a man that he didn't know, and any moment Draco would spit his tongue out with disgust.

But Harry was tired of feeling second-rate because he couldn't make himself understood as well as Draco. He'd *told* Draco he'd talk to him about the risks of his profession, and now Draco confessed himself surprised that Harry would talk to him about the risk involved in going after Ginny. It *frustrated* Harry to no end.

And since he didn't know the subtle and sophisticated art involved in kissing a man anyway, he would just have to do his best, and hope it was enough. He could hardly pretend to expertise he didn't have.

He moved around the desk as soon as he could, so that Draco wouldn't have to strain his neck trying to reach him, and then pushed him against the back of the chair, because he liked to kiss better that way. Draco was gasping, and Harry eased back so he wouldn't run out of breath, but pressed impatiently forwards again a moment later.

The more he kissed, the more difficult it was to stop kissing, as if Draco's mouth exerted a magnetic pull he couldn't resist. He cupped Draco's jaw in his hand, and *that* wasn't so different from kissing Ginny, was it? He fluttered his fingers in light tickling touches down Draco's neck, remembering from the unsatisfactory sex that his throat was extraordinarily sensitive. Sure enough, he gasped some more in a way that didn't have anything to do with losing breath, and Harry briefly took his mouth away from Draco's to lave the pulse point.

So far, Draco hadn't said anything to encourage him, but he hadn't said anything to encourage him to *stop* either, and Harry decided to trust the gasps. Besides, if he did things properly, Draco would be wordless anyway.

He kept his mouth busy on Draco's neck while easing his arms around his shoulders, aware of his own growing excitement and also that the library's carpet, while comfortable enough on the feet, had wood or stone under it and wouldn't be so comfortable on a back. So he reached out, found the weaknesses in the internal wards that Draco had woven in for him, and Apparated them both to Draco's room; it had the larger bed.

The world shifted and blurred and dazzled around them, and then they'd arrived and were collapsing backwards onto the bed; Draco took his weight with a grunt. Harry felt a surge of glee. Ron had once argued that it was impossible to kiss someone during Apparition, because he'd tried it with Hermione and nearly Splinched himself. Harry had never persuaded Ginny to try it, but he had thought it was possible, and here was the proof.

Then he gave his full attention to Draco.

His shirt was an annoying distraction, but Harry's magic rushed helpfully in to take care of it, and

it was gone. Harry would have liked to stare and admire the muscles and pale skin and even the scars revealed then, but his impatience had coalesced into a driving force. He let his fingers and tongue trail over Draco's chest instead, noticing the ticklish places and lingering there especially, even when Draco squirmed. He only chuckled and moved lower when Draco was literally shoving at his head with his hands.

They had never gone this far or been this intimate in the unsatisfactory sex, but Harry had been quite good at satisfying Ginny with his mouth. And wherever this crazy new confidence had come from, spinning around inside him to complement all the other emotions, it made Harry think—perhaps falsely—that men and women might not be so different or subtle or sophisticated at this after all. Draco was certainly pushing eagerly enough, though he had to know Harry was inexperienced at giving a blowjob.

Harry paused and thought about the word, while his magic slit Draco's trousers down the sides and tossed them away, followed by his pants. It just made his mouth water as if he'd smelled mustard, instead of putting him off.

Maybe he *was* gay.

And maybe words didn't matter right now.

He licked his lips a few times to wet them, and then slid down a bit further, grateful that he'd thought to come here—the bed was much softer on his knees than the library floor would have been—and took Draco into his mouth.

Draco was caught somewhere between surprise and joy, and he had already remained in that state longer than he had thought a human being could.

When Harry decided to move, it seemed, he *moved*.

And if this was the consequence that came of rowing with him, then Draco would just have to do it more often, that was all.

He gasped when Harry began to suck him; it was true there was more saliva on his skin than there had been with most of Draco's other lovers, but Draco would not dream of asking him to stop. There was also more licking, as if Harry hated the thought of leaving his cock alone for more than a few seconds. There was sliding, as Harry figured out the comfortable depth for an erection to go down his throat. There was moving and teasing and playing from side to side, as if Harry wanted to figure out how flexible he was. And there was solid enthusiasm behind every swallow and every hum and the way Harry's fingers had risen and toyed with his navel, which to Draco was most important.

His hands had gone somewhere. He wasn't sure where. They might be pushing down on Harry's head or flopped bonelessly on the bed beside him; surely no one could have expected him to keep track of them at a time like this, anyway? His throat was nearly hoarse with his gasping,

when he would have expected Harry's throat to be the main affected party.

He knew his hips were thrusting, but he was utterly incapable of stopping them or apologizing. From the way Harry's head moved, he was compensating for that, anyway, since his mouth never left Draco's groin once.

Pleasure flew around his chest like a score of dragons, and Draco rode the sharpening and deepening of it with an excitement that was almost painful. Just as he had not known one person could hang between surprise and joy for so long, he had not known that he could desire to come so much and yet want to put it off, so that he could see just how keen the sensations would grow.

It came to an end, of course, but so suddenly that he had no time to warn Harry, either. Suddenly, his vision filled with dazzling white-gold spots, as if he'd looked too long into the sun and acquired afterimages, and his body jerked and bucked and knifed in most unflattering and embarrassing ways, and then his throat loosed one final shout.

And all the world was pleasure.

Harry swallowed thoughtfully. He supposed that semen tasted no worse than female lubrication fluid, really.

He leaned back from Draco and waited for him to recover. It took long moments, which just made Harry feel all the more smug. The smugness dissipated, however, when he realized that the mounting pressure on his cock had returned. He'd been able to ignore it as long as he had a distraction, but now…

"You *prat.*"

Harry glanced up, his self-doubt returning in a rush, wondering if he'd hurt Draco in some way. But Draco was glaring at him with eyes so bright that nothing he did could make the expression forbidding.

"You're still *dressed*," Draco insisted, and then pulled at his shirt.

The confidence returned, and Harry hoped he hadn't let the doubt show on his face. So they would tease each other in bed. He should have expected that, really, and he'd even started it by teasing Draco on the way down his body.

"Of course I am," he said, and leaned back, arching and not missing the way Draco's hungry eyes trailed down his chest, even as he began to unbutton his shirt. "I had to complete my conquest, didn't I?"

"Shut *up*, and get those *off*," Draco said, who had evidently decided that today was the day to emphasize his prepositions. He yanked again at Harry's shirt, flinging it impatiently to the side before Harry could even discard it, so that it caught on his left elbow and hung ridiculously off

him. Harry laughed at him and then managed to shake it off completely.

Draco just went on watching, so Harry stripped his trousers and pants off more slowly. He ignored the small, impatient growls that came from Draco. If he had wanted Harry to go faster, he could have *asked*, after all.

He turned around and knelt in front of Draco when he was naked, gathering his own cock up in one hand and squeezing sharply at the base. Now that the cloth constricting it was gone, his body felt more sensitive than ever. Harry didn't *quite* want to come at his own touch, though it would have illustrated how excited he felt over just sucking Draco off.

"I want to make love to you," he said, choosing his words carefully.

"You're already doing that," Draco said, his face soft for a moment.

See what happens when you choose your words carefully? Harry's brain scolded him. *Just say it straight out, then. If nothing else, his expression ought to be fun to watch.*

"I want to bugger you," he said, and grinned, because Draco's eyebrows and jaw had respectively gone north and south at the same time. "Fuck you. Stick my—"

"I understand, Potter, I think," Draco said sharply, and swallowed. "I just—I didn't think you would dare do that, so *fast.*"

"It can wait, of course," Harry said, and sat back, changing his light touches on himself to light strokes. If Draco didn't want to let a virgin near his arse, Harry couldn't exactly blame him—and the rejection that he would have felt a half-hour ago was nowhere in his soul now. How could it be, when Draco's eyes shone with absolutely unconfined lust? "Perhaps you'd rather watch me bring myself off. Judging by the look in your eyes, you're quite a fan—"

"Damn it," Draco said, and lunged across the bed, and slammed their mouths together. Harry wrestled him to his back at once, of course, because Draco was still somewhat lax from his orgasm, and Harry was physically stronger anyway. He grinned to himself. So he hadn't got flabby after all; what had given Draco the strength in their former contests was his eagerness for the prospect.

Beneath him, Draco gasped and arched his hips to rub his groin against Harry, and things ceased to be amusing. Harry moaned and arched back, pressing downwards. For a moment, he remembered how brilliant it had felt to rub off against Draco when they'd done something like this before, and how brilliant it would feel now, when he desired honestly and was sure that he was honestly desired—

And Draco whispered, "Oh, yes, use whatever word you like for it, but *do* it."

Harry managed a grin as he tilted his head. "Great," he whispered. "What do you have?"

Draco shook his head. It seemed hard to call words to fill his mouth, instead of saliva. That was all Harry's fault, of course. The bastard was still coherent because he hadn't come yet.

That would change when he got inside Draco, of course, Draco was interested in seeing how fast.

"I use a spell," he said.

Harry nodded seriously, and then rolled off the bed to fetch his wand from his trousers. That gave Draco a chance to admire his arse, which he did, especially since Harry had to bend over and spend a moment searching his pockets. Next time, *he'd* be inside *there*, and the thought was enough to make him twitch, though sadly enough he couldn't get excited this soon.

Harry came back with the wand and carefully aimed it at Draco. "The incantation?" he asked.

Draco gave it to him. It was a more thorough one than he usually used, but then, usually he was with a more experienced partner. He wanted to enjoy this, not be confined to a deeply padded chair for the next week.

From the look Harry gave him as he recited the lengthier incantation, he might suspect that, but he didn't appear to resent it. Draco doubted that his partner's comfort was unimportant to him.

Draco gave a deep groan when he felt the spell, traveling up his lower body like a wave of warm water. It relaxed him more than he would ordinarily have liked, but he *did* trust Harry, whatever the prat thought, and so he wouldn't need to spring up from the bed in a hurry. Besides, in addition to the relaxation, the spell increased the languor in his muscles, sharpening his pleasure. He laid his head back on the pillow and smiled as Harry gently eased his fingers down and into him.

Harry had his head cocked and his lip between his teeth as he felt about. Draco grinned up at him, and noticed that he flushed when he did that. Did the sight of his smile affect Harry *that* much, then? What a pleasant thing to discover, and what a pleasant way to find it out.

He shuddered when Harry finally bumped when he was looking for, and arched his back, squirming desperately on the blankets. "Yes, that's it," he said. Whenever he bottomed, his body had a slightly embarrassing tendency to decide that it needed something larger filling it immediately—at least once his pleasure was extreme enough. "You can—go ahead."

But Harry, maddeningly, didn't seem reassured, and used another finger or maybe two—Draco was rather more occupied with how his body felt than maths—before he finally nodded and sat back on his heels. Then he carefully lifted Draco's legs, leveraged them in place on either side of his collarbone, and pushed slowly forwards.

He gasped, and the look of absolute contentment on his face was everything Draco could have hoped for. For long moments, he rested there, his breath heaving, as if that much of pleasure was

going to conquer him, and then he moved again. Draco grinned at him, and lifted his arse encouragingly, until he couldn't tell who had done the more work to get Harry comfortably seated.

"Ah," Harry said, that disturbing eloquence having deserted him at last. His hands slid away from Draco's legs, though they remained balanced, and dropped to the bed with a heavy *smack*. He was breathing so hard that Draco would have been concerned if he hadn't recognized half the heaviness in the gasps and moans as pure and overwhelmed ecstasy.

"This is *so good*," Harry said finally, his voice thick with rapture. "It was never—it's never been—like this—ah—" His hips twitched a bit, and Draco pushed himself backwards in invitation.

Harry didn't wait for a signed letter, the way he might have just a short time ago. He pushed back in response, and then he lifted his hands to Draco's legs again and was pushing steadily, rocking in a slower rhythm than Draco had thought his desperation would drive him to, because he just always had to do what Draco didn't expect, it seemed, even in this. He was half-sobbing, but never with enough breath behind it to make it sound like he was in distress; his head was thrown back, and Draco wished there was some way he could stretch up to lick the tendons in his throat.

Even though he was feeling arousal slowly whirl through him, Draco knew he wouldn't come before Harry did. It just meant that he would be excited and ready while Harry was, in turn, sleepy and relaxed from his orgasm. And then it would be his turn, and then perhaps it would be Harry's turn again.

Draco had to wonder how long they might be able to keep this going.

Harry had reached some breaking point, or tipping point. He suddenly stiffened, his eyes flying open, and then he began to pump his hips in earnest, his moans flaying his throat from the sudden passage up it, his hand—

His right hand had left Draco's leg and was creeping around his cock, tugging gently on it, smearing aside the come that still clung there.

Draco yelped, even though it felt good, and he wasn't oversensitive. "What are you doing?" he managed to demand.

Harry slitted one eye open. "Making you—come—before me," he managed to pant.

"Oh, no," Draco said. "You can't—" That would just be too much, given that this was Harry's first time with a man.

Harry gave him a shark's grin and then began to stroke and push at the same time, so that Draco was finding pleasure in more directions than he knew existed. It was not *fair*, but given that Harry had once managed to coordinate searching for the Snitch and dodging an enchanted

Bludger, Draco supposed it shouldn't have been surprising.

But it was still unfair, and Draco gritted his teeth, fighting the pleasure as much as he could, *determined* to win this competition. When he could remember to, in the maze of distractions he was currently encountering, he clenched his inner muscles down, and that made Harry gasp most wonderfully. Just a few more times, Draco was certain, and he would win—

"You realize," Harry breathed, "that we're fighting while I have my cock up your arse?" And then he bent down towards Draco's chest, as close as he could come in this position, and breathed out a blast of warm, gentle air.

Draco cried out in surprise and felt climax seize him and drag him into a blind white fall just seconds before Harry gasped and followed. For long moments, he felt too good to realize he'd lost, and then he was too weary to do anything but flop over next to Harry and pinch his back in retaliation. Harry just grunted, which Draco did not feel was a sufficient response to his anger.

Because he was. Very angry, obviously. How dare Harry care that much, show that much dedication to overcoming his formers fears and…and having sex with him…

Draco yawned. Sleep had taken pleasure's place in most of his body, and he knew he was falling down. Probably faster than Harry, too, since that seemed to be the order of the day.

But he was certain that he would have a grand plan of revenge when he woke up. Perhaps he would dream about it, and then Harry would feel what it was like to melt.

Just as soon as Draco woke up.

Harry stroked Draco's shoulder in the last few moments of consciousness left to him, his eyelids drooping and a much better feeling than even the height of the orgasm he'd just experienced coiling inside his chest.

So *that* was what it felt like, full-on lovemaking with a partner you cared about and desired.

Harry had never known.

He yawned and let his head fall somewhere between Draco's shoulder and his flank. No need to worry about awkwardness right now, or not being good enough. This, Harry thought, had been *more* than satisfactory.

He did shift, before he fell fully asleep, to put his arms completely around Draco. It felt right.

And if he had a silly grin on his face when Draco snuggled closer in response, well, *someone* was not awake to taunt him about it right now.

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Chapter: 32

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Two—A Whirlwind of Consequences

Harry straightened himself and eyed the narrow dark house before him nervously. Then he shrugged and moved forwards.

He had had to come to Mrs. Zabini's house to see Ginny, since he had learned from Molly that she had fled the sanctuary of the Burrow the same day the article about Blaise's past appeared. Dithering about outside the house wouldn't lessen the unpleasantness of his task.

After this, hopefully, he would never have to see Ginny again. But even one more close contact made his skin crawl with disgust.

His feelings towards his wife had altered so violently that he nearly wondered how he could have married her at all. But he knew the answer. He had been a very different person five years ago: flushed with victory from the war and yet wanting to forget all of it, to run away from the memory of the magic that had possessed him when he killed Voldemort. Marrying Ginny seemed a way to do that. She was safe, familiar, a connection with his Hogwarts days, the period in his life when he had been happiest. And she had wanted to marry him, but she had manifested a wonderful discouragement of the idea at the same time, forcing him to chase and court and seduce her. That had made him think that she wasn't impressed by his fame and money, which made her different from nearly everyone in his life but Hermione and the other Weasleys.

She had been, it turned out. But she had done a better job of hiding it.

Harry shook his head as he carefully conjured an invisible hand and used it to rap the griffin-shaped knocker against the front door. Spells spat and hissed around the hand, and Harry was glad he'd taken the precaution.

What would his life have been like if Ginny hadn't lost the baby? Would they have stayed together, loved together, raised their child?

Then a horrible vision came to him: Ginny taking the baby with her when she found another lover, and using him or her to leverage far more money out of him, just so that he could stay in contact with his child from time to time. He shuddered.

"Come, Mr. Potter. Surely I am not so terrible as all that?"

Harry looked up, blinking. It had not been Ginny who had opened the door, though he had imagined for some reason that it would be. It was Mrs. Zabini, whom he had sometimes seen shopping in Diagon Alley at the same time as he or attending the same Ministry function, but never at close quarters before. Though he knew she must have been at least in her fifties, her face was still easily the most beautiful woman's face he had ever seen. And the beauty was hard to define; it wasn't the soft sheen of her dark skin, or the curve of her cheekbones, or the shape of her eyes, but something that flowed from all of them.

"Your pardon, Ma'am," he said, and bowed. "I was contemplating an unpleasant possibility, but your presence has entirely dispelled it."

She laughed in delight, and held out a hand to him. Harry studied it carefully for a moment, looking for some trace of poison, then reminded himself the house-elf would intervene if he was in any danger. Draco had agreed to let him come alone to confront Ginny, but had sent Seeky with him, invisibly, as protection, the same bargain they had agreed to to let Harry go flying. It seemed reasonable to Harry.

Lightly, he took her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

"How charming, Mr. Potter," Mrs. Zabini murmured, and then stepped out of the way so that he could come into the house. Harry did, trying not to feel like the fly who had stepped into the spider's parlor. He caught only a glimpse of dark walls and dark woods with tapestries of dragons on them before he turned back to face her, thinking he needed to keep this dangerous witch in his line of sight. "If I had known how charming you were, I would have joined my son in the endeavor of divorce, I think." She smiled at him. "You could have become my tenth husband."

Harry shivered. He was not sure what was worse: the thought of that happening, or the realization that he thought there were probably worse things. He really *had* to stop finding people who could casually say things like that attractive.

"I will fetch your wife for you," said Mrs. Zabini, and shook her head sadly. "She broke the Mouth-Binding Law, did she not? Contacting your Arguer with a letter."

"She did," Harry acknowledged. "I'm here to collect the fine, and also to talk to her about something she said in the letter."

"The young have all the luck," Mrs. Zabini sighed, and then clapped her hands. A house-elf arrayed in a petite white dress appeared and bowed. Harry stared, but Mrs. Zabini evidently found nothing odd about the sight of a house-elf wearing clothing, because she simply said, "Fetch my daughter-in-law down the stairs, if you would, Alette?"

"Mistress," said Alette, in a clear voice, and bowed once more, and vanished.

Mrs. Zabini turned, saw Harry eyeing her askance, and nodded, a slight smile on her lips. "Yes, my house-elves serve out of love, and so I give them clothes to make them more sightly. I do so

love beauty." She let her voice and her smile linger as she looked at him, and Harry wondered if he would finally stop flushing when he got out of the woman's house. "And yes, your former wife is in fact my daughter-in-law. She and Blaise married last night."

Harry blinked in turn. "And you—forgive me, ma'am, but you want her in your family? After what she did?"

"Well." Mrs. Zabini laughed a bit, a sound that reminded Harry of Nagini. "Her stupidity is rather overshadowed by my son's. And there is nothing that says she must remain in the family forever. Just until she has borne my grandchild."

Harry glared hard at her. "Ma'am—"

"I am not threatening to kill her, never fear," said Mrs. Zabini, with a languid wave of her arm. "There are far too many of her brothers to deal with, for one thing. But the terms of—parting—may be otherwise arranged."

Harry winced. He could see Ginny's future now, or thought he could, and it was bleak. After having her baby, she would be parted from her as soon as possible, and Mrs. Zabini would probably raise the child herself. As if she had told him, Harry could feel her ambition to produce a descendant who would not practice the same stupidities Blaise had.

I really have spent too much time around Slytherins, if I know them this well.

Another part of Harry answered stoutly that it wanted to spend the rest of its life around one Slytherin in particular. But before he could pursue that thought further, he heard footsteps behind him, and turned around.

Ginny's eyes were wide, and shimmering with tears in the same way they'd been in Grimmauld Place. She wore a fragile dress, of fine cloth, that did not conceal her pregnant belly or her defenselessness. She paused at the foot of the handsome spiral staircase, and sniffed when she saw him.

Harry stamped out the worm of pity squirming in his heart—this was the woman who had threatened his lover—and nodded. "Ginny," he said.

"I shall leave you two blackbirds alone, then," Mrs. Zabini said, deep amusement in her voice, and stepped out of the entrance hall into a side room which Harry just saw, from the corner of his eye, as an explosion of deep red. Then he shook his head and faced Ginny again, as she stuttered a few steps forwards.

"Have you come to rescue me then, Harry?" she whispered. "I had no idea what it's like here. It's *horrible*."

"Is it?" Harry asked neutrally.

Ginny nodded earnestly, and came another step closer. Harry's hair rose at the thought of her touching him, and he managed to move, he thought, casually backwards, while making it seem as if he did no such thing. How had he shared a bed with her? It seemed impossible now.

"Mrs. Zabini is a tyrant in ways that Mother never imaged," Ginny whispered. "And she—she keeps speaking of the baby as if it was *her* child, and my body as if it were her body that she wanted exercised and taken care of. It's truly creepy, Harry. Please. I want free of this."

"Which is why you married Blaise," said Harry, frustration creeping up his throat.

She halted and stared at him.

"Ginny, did you really think I wouldn't find out?" Harry shook his head and folded his arms. "And all this is beside the point. I didn't come here to find out how comfortable you were. I came to tell you that if you threaten Draco again, I will hunt you down and use curses that will make the ones Draco put on your husband seem small."

Ginny transformed in moments, throwing off the pitiable mask so completely that Harry was half-convinced it really *had* been just a mask, and that she'd never felt that sorry for herself. "He stole my husband!" she hissed. "Did you really think I would let that go without a murmur, Harry? Of *course* not. How can you defend him?"

"I'm sleeping with him," Harry said. "That's how."

"And it's a pretty, sordid affair, isn't it?" Ginny stamped one small foot, making her belly bob. "Compared to me, you don't love him at all. You just wanted another body in your bed, someone else to stick your cock in—"

"You have no fucking idea what you're talking about," said Harry, and one of the tapestries on the wall started to smolder as his magic unfurled around him. "You have no idea what Draco's really like, and *I meant it, Ginny.* I will *hurt* you if you contact him again, let alone if you touch him. I'm falling in love with him—"

Well, all right, that was as much news to him as it was to her, but she didn't need to know that.

"And he's far more than just a body. You can think that you turned me gay, if you like, but the truth is that I finally found someone *really* attractive to me."

Ginny just stared at him, mouth slightly open, breathing hard. Harry folded his arms and glared her down. At least he had managed to make the flames stop climbing the tapestry.

"I know that's not true," Ginny whispered. "Maybe—"

Harry narrowed his eyes further, and she leaped and yelped as fire stung her foot instead. She

came down hopping, and looked at him as if she had never seen him before. Harry thought she might be seeing the real Harry Potter for the first time.

"It is," he said. "And you violated the Mouth-Binding concessions set by the court in contacting Draco. You'll give me ten Galleons as a working fine right now, and I'll take them back to Draco and ask if he wants more."

"There's no amount like that set—"

"In fact, there is," said Harry, who had checked before he came to the house. "And the amount set by the court is considerably higher. This is just a working fine, as I said." He put his hand out.

Ginny stared at him, breath rushing. Harry raised one brow and focused on her hair this time. It started to creep down her face and twine around her throat.

She stumbled away from him, a thin wail breaking free of her. Harry stood where he was, a strange, giddy exaltation rushing through him.

Was this the way Draco felt when he got revenge on an enemy? Harry had never seen what was so attractive about the process before—he might have started out wanting to kill Voldemort from revenge, but he had overcome that as the war progressed—but now he discovered some sympathy in himself after all.

"I'll get it," Ginny whispered, and started to scuttle away.

"And your promise to leave Draco alone?" Harry asked.

"I promise," she said, back turned to him.

"A Wizard's Oath."

"My Wizard's Oath to leave Draco Malfoy alone," she said, voice dead, and then passed from the room.

Considering what must have changed for her in the time he had to wait before Ginny came back with the ten Galleons, Harry realized that perhaps her faith in him never to hurt her, the stubborn hope she had maintained that he was still in love with her, had burned out at last.

He craned his neck and resisted the urge to whoop. He felt as if he had been released from heavy iron chains.

Draco had gone shopping in Diagon Alley that morning on purpose. He wanted to see what the reactions of others would be, now that the entire wizarding world knew he was sleeping with Harry Potter.

The shopkeepers, oddly enough, tended to look at him with more respect. After the first interaction, Draco figured out that they probably thought he had access to the Potter vault, now, along with his own.

I might as well, he thought smugly, adjusting the fall of a new robe against his body in Madam Malkin's, and carefully considering the line in the mirror. *Considering that I have a Gryffindor lover who will give me any of his money should I ever require it, because he's like that.*

He did earn some glares and hisses from the common shoppers as he passed them, but that was only to be expected. They thought he had stolen and corrupted their Golden Boy, after all. Draco had even seen a few of the gossip newspapers, trashier than the *Prophet*, discussing the "fact" that he and Harry had been lovers since the end of the War, or before that, and that Harry had strung his poor wife on with the hope that he might really love her someday, until he found the perfect excuse to divorce her in her seeking physical satisfaction for herself.

Draco didn't intend to let the bad publicity trouble him. He was rather used to it, after the notoriety that had surrounded the name of Malfoy.

And the thought of Harry's easy smile around him now, the way Harry oriented on him the moment he entered a room without noticing what he was doing, and the way he'd curled trustingly along Draco's flank yesterday…

Draco felt a shiver of arousal at the mere thought, and put it aside as conveniently as he could. He had a secondary purpose to his journey this morning (of course he did, or he wouldn't have been a Slytherin). He was hunting for the right trappings to prepare a very special dinner for Harry. He could have had the house-elves find the ingredients he wanted, but then he wouldn't have seen the stares and rude gestures for himself.

He spent a long moment considering the glamour spellbooks in Flourish and Blotts, before he settled on the perfect one and made his way to the front of the shop. On the way, he bumped into a large witch with a sneer on her face and dark hair piled high on her head, or rather, she bumped into him. Draco recovered from the collision and smiled at her courteously, feeling a surge of excitement pass through him when her sneer deepened.

"So is it true?" she asked, loud enough for everyone in the shop to hear. Heads turned. Draco preened a bit, feeling the attention settle across his shoulders like a heavy cloak.

"That I won the case and got the money?" he asked. "Of course it's true. You must have read about the result of the trial in the papers."

"No, no." The witch scowled and leaned closer to him, her fingers wringing around each other as if she wished she could clutch his neck and strangle it instead. "No, I meant your love affair with Harry Potter."

"Yes," said Draco. "But I can't tell you anything he might have whispered as pillow talk. The

better part of valor and all that." He winked and made to step past her.

The witch restrained him with a hand on his shoulder this time. Draco nearly laughed aloud. He hadn't thought it would come to plebeians *touching* him. He looked down at her fingers with a little moue, which made her appear to gain even more confidence. He wondered why. Did she think he would have any trouble calling the Aurors, purely to complain about a groping in Diagon Alley?

Or perhaps she thought they'd believe her instead, if they did come. Draco supposed that was the case. There were still some people in the Ministry who hated the very name of Malfoy, and some of them, simply because the percentage was so large, must be among the Aurors.

"You corrupted him," the witch asserted. "You enchanted him. You made him *think* that he didn't really love his wife, but I saw them when they went on a tour of Britain after they married. You never saw a happier couple."

Draco snorted. He had missed Harry's wedding tour entirely, involved as he was in studying to become an Arguer, but he knew that must have been Weasley's idea entirely; Harry would have hated it. "And things can't change in five years?" he asked calmly, standing still under her grasp.

Her hands tightened. "Not that much," she said. "Heroes doesn't turn up *gay* that often, after all."

"But common people do?" Draco cocked his head and painted a look of understanding across his face. "Oh, I see why you stopped me now. Well, I still can't tell you what Harry says in bed, since it's rather private, but I can direct you to the proper section of this grand bookshop, should you wish to explore your own sexuality."

The witch's face purpled. Draco stood there and enjoyed the sensation, wondering if someone would pull a wand next.

And then Harry's voice, unexpectedly but wonderfully, said, "Is there trouble here, Draco?"

The black-haired witch loosed him and stumbled away. Draco stepped forwards and offered his hand to Harry, grinning when Harry took it possessively and pulled Draco back against him. *Jealous that someone was touching me, even though he must know I'd have no interest in someone who looks like that. Nearly everything I could want in a lover.*

"Trouble?" the witch asked, her voice shrill. "Of course! He's corrupted you—*you*, the Savior of the Wizarding World!"

Draco turned his head back and met Harry's glare of disgust for the title. Then he looked down at Draco, and his face softened so suddenly that Draco would have suspected him of playing for the crowd if he hadn't already had experience of how abruptly Harry's moods could change. "He didn't corrupt me," Harry said, softly but clearly enough for everyone in the crowd to hear. "He only showed me what should have been obvious already. And then he fought for me where no

one else would have, and overcame old prejudices to give me a chance, and allowed me to fight for him. The only thing you really need to know about all that, though, is that I'm very happy in his company."

He curled a hand around Draco's face and kissed him, softly and gently and chastely, but he didn't try to protest when Draco made it something more, deeper. Draco grinned to hear gasps from the people watching. Some of them were sounds of pre-retching, but not all of them.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Harry breathed into his mouth, drawing back a bit.

"You have *no* idea," Draco said, and licked Harry's lips, chasing his tongue back into his mouth. When that ended, he added, "How'd you find me?"

"Asked Heeky where you'd gone," Harry said, "and then searched until I saw you. But I wanted to wait until—oh, *God*, Draco—" He arched his back suddenly, since Draco had taken the opportunity to attack his neck, and Draco heard his groan with deep satisfaction.

It was also as much as he felt comfortable showing in public, and he needed more time if he were to plan his seduction for tonight, so he put his arms around Harry, and Apparated them home. He stepped away from him when he got there, laughing a little at the confusion in his eyes.

"Later," he said, and had the satisfaction of seeing Harry touch his mouth for a moment, a soft smile forming there, before he slipped away.

"Harry! Come here. I want to look at you."

Harry turned obediently to the side. Draco had told him to come down to a small, intimate study for dinner, but he doubted that he would mind if Harry delayed to visit Narcissa.

She had completely recovered in St. Mungo's, with the Healers managing even to soothe her nightmares, and she looked as pale and lovely as she ever had, dressed in a set of long white robes. But she also looked stronger than usual as she stood up from her harp to meet him, and beckoned him forwards sharply, the way a sane woman might. Suddenly aware that he was facing Draco's mother, whose disapproval Draco would take seriously, Harry approached her with some caution.

Narcissa spent long moments gazing at him. Harry knew, now, where Draco had got his stern face that he used to hide his true emotions in court. Lucius could look colder, but Narcissa's expression was a *lack* of expression, making the watcher try to guess, frantically, what was going on behind it.

"Hmmm," she said, which could have meant anything, and then walked around him once. Harry stood still, though it took some effort, and tried to clench his fingers into his palms, rather than wipe his hands on his robes, which would leave sweat stains.

Narcissa came to a stop in front of him. She continued to stare into his face. Harry stared back, and realized for the first time that, rather than the gray eyes of her husband and son, her eyes were actually a very pale ice-blue, sometimes appearing translucent depending on the light.

And then she smiled at him, and stepped forwards, and kissed him on the brow—her lips were soft and cold, like melting snow—and said, "You will make him happy, I think, Harry. I approve."

Then she stepped decisively away from him, sat down, and began to play her harp as if he had ceased to exist.

Harry blinked a bit, but blew her a kiss, which caused a faint smile on the side of her face and gave the lie to her ignoring him, and then slipped down the stairs.

He tried to tell himself the warm glow in his chest was embarrassment, but he knew better.

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Chapter: 33

Thank you again for all the reviews!

This is the last chapter of *Building With Worn-Out Tools*. I haven't entirely ruled out the possibility of side-stories or sequels, since this story seems to lend itself to them better than *A Year's Temptation*, but I definitely won't be posting anything new before the DH release, and after it I have a half-dozen plots waiting for me to get back to them, so we'll have to see. Thank you again for reviewing and for the support that helped me feel good about such an odd little story.

Chapter Thirty-Three—Together

Harry hesitated on the threshold of the room Draco had directed him to come to. It was warmer than usual—had he lit a fire?—but it also seemed gloomier, with no trace of light leaking from where Harry knew the hearth to be. He recognized the use of glamours and charms; he just didn't know what use Draco had put them to.

A week ago, or perhaps a week and a half, he would have shivered in distrust, imagining the kinds of traps Draco might want to conceal under those spells. Now his shiver was born mostly of anticipation.

"Harry."

He turned. Draco had emerged from a shadow just behind him, which slid back like a silk curtain to reveal more and more about the room. A round wooden table, small enough that they would practically be bumping elbows if they sat at it, occupied the carpet near the fireplace. Two chairs stood next to the table, but only one large plate on it, bearing steaming bowls of soup. The smell made Harry's mouth water. The color of the room beyond the opened-up scene, which rather reminded Harry of an isolated set in a play, remained soft and red and dark, the color of an inner chamber of the heart.

"Draco," he said, and oh God, did his voice have to go *breathy* just then? What was *wrong* with him? He made an effort to cough and master himself, but it wasn't very successful. "What's all this?"

"What I wanted to do," Draco said quietly. His voice didn't help lessen the shivers coursing up and down Harry's spine. "To give you—well. My equivalent of your sudden seduction." He smiled suddenly, dazzlingly, and reached out a hand to hook a curl of Harry's hair behind his ear. Harry found he couldn't move as that hand touched him, and he didn't want to; the odd melting sensation that it spread through the bones of his face was delicious. "Only, being Slytherin, I prefer to move slowly."

He leaned forwards and kissed Harry in a leisurely fashion, the motions of his tongue and lips as slow as the drawing of the shadow that had revealed the table and the fire, but there was nothing patient about the fire it lit in Harry's groin. He tried to step forwards, but Draco laid a hand in the center of his chest and shook his head.

"I'll ask you to trust me," he said.

"Of course I do." Harry made one more effort to close the distance between them, and again found himself restrained. He hissed in frustration. "Would I want to go to bed with you if I didn't trust you?"

"I mean, trust me to arrange things as I like." Draco stepped away and moved towards the table, languid and slow as serpents reluctant to stir themselves from a sun-warmed stone. "A nice meal first, and afterwards—well. Afterwards is afterwards, and does not need to be discussed at dinner." He turned his head and winked, then gave Harry a smile with definite edges to it.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. The first frantic heat of his arousal had cooled, leaving him still longing but not desperate. Another coil was added to it as he watched Draco gracefully sit down, though, and he decided that he knew what desire was like for the first time.

"I'll try," he said. "But it's your fault if I explode in the meantime, you know."

"I would not wish to spend my evening picking up bits of exploded Gryffindor from my carpet," said Draco, and his voice was soft, with a hint of laughter. Harry had never known he could speak that way; even when he whispered in the courtroom, he conveyed strength, not gentleness. But here, there was—Harry sought for a word that would identify it. *Ease*, maybe. Relaxation.

Draco trusted him enough to lower his guard around him.

Harry felt honored and humbled, both at once.

"I suspect you'd make your house-elves do it," he retorted, sitting down on the opposite side of the table. He glanced again at the large plate and the bowls of soup, and this time identified a charm he couldn't remember seeing before on the spoons. He blinked and looked more closely. "What's this magic?"

Draco only picked up a spoon and began to eat, leaving Harry to sigh and follow suit

Draco tried not to let the heady surge of perfect confidence soaring through him throw his balance off. Yes, he felt good enough to drag Harry down on the carpet and have him right now—and Harry would probably let him. But that would be succumbing to the same impatience that had ruled them the last time they were together. Draco did want to hesitate, take his time, and assert the slower methods of seduction that were his specialty.

It had been Harry's turn last time. Now it was his.

He watched as Harry took his first swallow of the soup, closing his eyes in bliss at the taste. Draco casually took a second sip, and Harry choked, his eyes flying wide, though by some miracle he didn't spit soup everywhere.

"Draco?" he whispered.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Draco admonished, turning his words slow like honey. "It's rude." He took another sip, and this time Harry let his eyes drift shut and just sighed.

The spell on the spoons let a person feel the second spoon inside his mouth, at least as long as his dinner companion was eating at the same time, and also taste what he tasted. Thus the thick, redolent taste of the soup, meat scattered with spices that Draco didn't know half the names of—why would he, when he had house-elves to do all the cooking?—and flavored with a touch of sweetness not unlike flowers, was redoubled. And if Draco moved the spoon a certain way against his tongue…

"You are a bastard sometimes," Harry said. He made sure to enunciate clearly, since this time he had been polite and swallowed it all.

"So comforting to have one's essential nature recognized," Draco said, and then reached out and captured Harry's chin, briefly kissing him. It was much less than either of them wanted, since Harry sought his mouth the moment he drew back and Draco sheered off on an edge of pure yearning that made his stomach feel as warm as the soup. But he sat back and smiled when Harry tried to crawl over the table and into his lap. "The difference between dinner and afterwards, remember?" he asked.

Harry would probably give some dignified name to his own expression if he could see it right now, Draco thought, amused. A manly sulk, perhaps. He didn't care. To him, it was a pout, and pouts were inherently amusing.

Then Harry had the bright idea to use his spoon in certain ways that were both intriguing to watch and made the inside of Draco's mouth tingle and spark. He simply smiled, though, and refused to be rushed. The *true* art of any Slytherin, as his mother had once taught him in saner days, was to convince one's prey that he wanted to walk into the serpent's lair of his own free will.

Harry, of course, was practically *panting* for it, but that wasn't good enough. Draco wanted him incoherent with need by the time the meal was over.

Harry was sure that Draco had designed every move he made during dinner to be another nail in the coffin of torture.

The way he ate was sinful. The way he moved his arms was sinuous. His replies to every question Harry asked him—which weren't many, since he was concentrating on his meal *and* the sensations in his mouth and groin *and* his plan to try and overwhelm Draco—were sibilant. It was when Harry found himself staring fixedly at the way Draco had turned his head, though, and the way the firelight flickered soft reds along his skin as if it were translucent, that he realized something.

Either Draco had used many more charms than Harry thought he had, and so subtly that he couldn't sense them—

Or he was just helplessly fascinated with everything the bastard did because he was *Draco.*

From the way his arousal flared again, he thought it was the last. He had filled his belly with as much soup as he could, and now he set aside the bowl and the spoon, hands shaking. It wasn't food he wanted, and the growing hunger he felt now both frightened and humbled him. He hadn't *known* he could feel like this. Draco turned a smile on him, and he actually whimpered. The smile promised much and gave little, but that didn't matter; it filled Harry's head with the thoughts of all he could receive, and the muscles in his groin tightened until he was almost in physical pain.

"Oh, please," he whispered, and leaned across the table for another kiss.

As before, Draco caught his head gently, with a grip so light it said that Harry could break away at any time. He was here of his own free choice, not because Draco had coerced him. And Harry tried to use his lips to say he *knew* that, Draco had proved his bloody point, could they get *on* with it?

But Draco still did not get on with it.

Instead, he combed his fingers through Harry's hair, his touch sure and searching. Harry realized he must have remembered how Harry reacted to caresses of that kind when they were having unsatisfactory sex, and then—

Then his back arched, and he moaned as Draco found a place. His magic purred in approval in his ear, and Harry opened one eye to see them both surrounded by a cascade of moving blue-purple sparks. That had never happened with Ginny, either.

But Draco's fingers were destroying his ability to concentrate. One hand moved through his hair, the other over his jaw, and *fuck*, even that felt good, a light and ordinary touch, as though his face had become an erogenous zone in turn. And all the while, his lips were stroked, now and again, by Draco's darting and retreating mouth.

"Please," he said, or thought he said. It might have been rather hard to understand the moan spilling from his lips just then. "Please, Draco." He shifted in his seat, only restrained from moving closer for fear that he would upset the table and the bowls. "I'm ready. I'm *ready.*"

God, Harry was magnificent.

Draco could feel a series of small, pleasant shocks where Harry's magic fluttered and crossed over him. The restrained strength in it excited him further. Harry could break free at any time, if he decided he wanted to; all it would take was a slight push from manifested magic that powerful, and Draco would go flying across the room. He would never be helpless, at least not against an opponent concentrating on him. Draco knew that one could take his heart and twist it by putting someone else in danger.

But here he was, strength surrendered, muscles practically quivering against Draco's hands not with the need to break free but with the need to lie down, rendered incoherent—yes, incoherent, because he was trying to speak now and couldn't—by a few touches.

And he wouldn't be like this for just anyone, Draco thought, the smugness a solid thing his mouth, like a warm biscuit he could taste. *He's this way because I'm touching him, and he desires me so much.*

He had planned another diversion after the meal, a massage, but that had assumed Harry wouldn't react as well to the meal as he had. He was gone now, but he could only be pushed so far, and Draco didn't want the evening upended because Harry had got impatient.

Or, worse, cut short. From the small squirming motions Harry was making in his chair and the way his hand had started to edge down his leg, he might do something to satisfy his intense need before Draco could stop him.

He dropped his hand from Harry's jaw to take his wrist, turned his hand upright, and planted a kiss in the middle of the palm, provoking another moan. Then he turned his head and whispered

into Harry's ear, even as he made the gesture with his shoulder that Seeky and Heeky knew meant he wanted the table taken away. "Lie down."

Harry did not so much obey as sink to the floor with his arms around Draco and in Draco's arms. Draco decided, as he dropped down chest-to-chest with Harry and let his face roll against his neck, every motion bringing up a stinging sensitivity along his skin, that he approved of this interpretation of his instructions.

Harry was nearly giddy. For a moment, he had veered dangerously close to a premature release, but now he was back in a softened, sense-heightened world, made better by the knowledge that Draco would take care of him.

And wasn't *that* a wonderful thing to know? Harry didn't think he'd trusted someone like this, ever. There had been occasions during Hogwarts and the war when his very existence depended on what Ron and Hermione did, and he had trusted them to do it without hesitation, but that was a matter of life and death. Faith in his friends was a necessity there. Here, it was a luxury. He could have changed his mind, could have backed away, or could have refused to play this game and tried to have sex with Draco exactly the way they'd last done it.

He didn't want to, though. The range of possible options was there, and that was enough. For right now, he wanted to let Draco do as he liked.

Draco carefully straightened his limbs away from his body, motions that felt as slow and heavy as if they were in a dream. Harry opened his eyes at one point and surprised an expression of intense, tender concentration on Draco's face, as if he were Arguing the case of someone he dearly loved. He was not smiling, but his mouth was slightly parted, and he didn't even notice Harry's gaze. Harry arched his head back and let his eyes fall shut again, because he could.

Draco murmured a charm, and his clothes vanished. Harry wondered idly for a moment if Draco would leave him naked and himself clothed, to reverse what Harry had done the other day, but he repeated the charm a second time, and then lay down on top of him, skin to skin.

Warmth flared everywhere, and Harry's magic responded like lightning called to a lightning rod, looping and spiraling out of his body in gleaming chains that, when he opened his eyes again, competed with the firelight. The sparks had changed to a complete purple, the color of tropical seas at twilight, and they rocked and swayed and surged slowly, now gathering, now fading.

Draco stretched his limbs along Harry's, and laid his face against Harry's cheek. For long moments, Harry was content to feel that, and more than content; a soaring, muted joy filled him, and any comparison he might have made to lovemaking with Ginny was burned to ashes.

Then Draco sat back on his heels. Harry watched him with hazy eyes, saw his hair and skin catch an edge of rose in the firelight, and felt his desire ascend one more point when Draco whispered a spell he had reason to recognize.

Draco was trembling.

He did not want to be trembling. It made it inconvenient to pick up his wand, for one thing, and whisper the spell, for another. And it was silly, anyway, to know that he was trembling because of a lover. He'd taken plenty of people to bed, plenty of times, and some of them after a build-up as slow and careful as the one he'd arranged with Harry.

But none of them had *been* Harry.

His own playfulness had come back to haunt him. He was at least as desperate now, and had to fight the temptation simply to reach down, take himself in hand, and stroke to completion just so he could concentrate, which had never, ever happened before. His mouth watered, and he concentrated for a long moment before he spoke the spell, because, damn it, Malfoys *did not* drool.

And then he saw the expression on Harry's face when he felt the spell wash through him, relaxing any muscles that might have managed to remain tense, and he knew he had been right to wait. He couldn't have appreciated this, otherwise.

He reached out, threaded his fingers through Harry's hair, and tugged, tilting his head to one side to bare his throat. He didn't know why he needed to make the gesture, just that he needed to, and he wasn't about to question his impulses right now.

Harry gave him a glorious smile before letting his head fall limply to the side, relaxed, trusting.

Draco stooped down and licked the side of his throat before he began to ease his fingers into Harry. And with every finger, he watched the expression on his face change.

One finger, and Harry caught his breath and furrowed his brow, as if he'd just had an idea that had never occurred to him before. Draco used the hand in his hair to soothe him before stroking with the finger, and Harry relaxed. The purple chains of sparks encircling them, which had frozen for a moment, went back to swirling around him and Draco in dancing rings of light, and Draco knew for the first time that pleased magic felt like a hand in the middle of his back, warmer than the fire.

Two fingers, and Harry made a soft "hmmm" sound, and lines that Draco hadn't even noticed around his mouth relaxed. He wriggled a bit and pressed backwards, and Draco surprised himself by chuckling.

"Soon enough," he promised, and Harry's eyes opened. The pleasure in them was not merely physical, but delight in his company, and Draco felt a smile of simple, giddy happiness break across his face.

"I know," Harry answered, and Draco maneuvered himself down so that he could kiss Harry, carefully, before he returned to his previous position.

Three fingers, and Harry gasped and turned his head to kiss along Draco's arm, his lips spilling small murmurs of excitement. His face had flushed more deeply again, and his green eyes shimmered with the black of arousal. The spark-chains danced up and down like restless snakes. Draco thought it was a good thing that he didn't find serpents intimidating.

Four fingers, and Harry said, through gritted teeth, "I know you wanted to do this your way, but you found my prostate a minute ago, and I think we've both had enough foreplay, don't you?" And his glaring eyes pierced Draco like a stake.

Draco said, "If you insist," and waited until Harry nodded. Then he carefully cast one more spell, this time to smear his own erection, and tossed the wand to the side so they wouldn't roll on it.

Then he eased inside his lover for the first time—

And it was heaven, and that was no hyperbole.

If anyone had asked Harry a month ago if he would be eager to have someone else stick his cock up his arse, he would have stared at them, before laughing and saying no. Or perhaps he would have hexed them, and then *yelled* no.

But oh God, now, it was all he wanted, and he wondered dazedly through the filling-up how Draco had managed to wait so long—either just now, or in the bedroom the other day when *Harry* had made him wait and wait and wait before he entered him.

This was a more intense variation of the same feeling Harry had had since Draco had laid him down: that Draco was taking intimacies Harry *allowed* him, that he would have stopped if Harry had said he should stop, that this was not something it was necessary to add every time they made love—

But when it *was* added—

It was wonderful.

There was some pain, of course, but Harry let the reminder that it was *Draco* doing these things, making him feel these things, drown the pain, and then the fingers curled in his hair tugged again, and he gasped something about moving, and Draco began, finally, to act a bit impatient himself as he did.

Harry's fingers scrambled and clawed across the carpet. Every move inside made him more and more aware of what he'd given up and taken in, and the fact that Draco was holding his trust carefully and returning it full measure. And every single thrust built the arousal until it felt as if it were bleeding out his pores.

Or perhaps that was just his magic—Harry could see it dissipating into the rest of the room in a

blue-purple haze when he forced his eyes open—or his happiness.

He felt happy at the sensation of Draco pushing into him, doing nothing he had not invited. He felt happy at the sight of Draco, his eyes gone more than unguarded; they were completely defenseless, as he gasped and sweat dripped down his forehead and his cheeks flushed and his shoulders flexed. He felt happy at the sounds they were making—he was making?—wet skin and broken groans and half-choked sobs.

He shifted his hips up to meet Draco's then, and changed the rhythm with a single clench of his muscles. Draco shuddered and began to move faster, and again there was pain that the pleasure swept away. Harry wondered for a moment just who *was* stronger here, who was winning.

We both are.

He let out a laugh Draco couldn't have possibly mistaken for a jeer, and then reached down his body to capture his erection. His desire found a new direction now, and he matched his pulls to Draco's strokes, and then a *third* element was added as Draco's hand came down, rested on top of, and joined his, and perhaps a fourth, as Harry thought the dance of his flooding magic might be timed to their lovemaking, too.

Oh, God, he felt on top of the world. Free from Ginny, free from the depression that had kept him motionless at home for so long, free from the uncertainty that had troubled his future.

And all of that, Draco had given him.

He looked up through eyes sheened with adoration at Draco's face sheened with heat, and hoped his declaration wouldn't be taken any less seriously for the time at which he said it.

"I love you," he mouthed, and then his back bowed.

He came with a cry of pure joy.

For such a great orgasm, Draco had almost no memory of it. He knew he'd come, knew it had been tremendous, but his mind was filled with the shapes of lips moving and the look in Harry's eyes.

You're being a sap, stop it, his mind scolded him, but there were things more important right now than listening to that part of his mind.

"You meant it?" he whispered to Harry, as Harry lay exhausted on the carpet in front of the fire and Draco lay exhausted on top of him.

Harry turned his head and caught his lips in answer, and, just as he had said, he was better with actions than with words. Draco knew.

"I—I love you too," he whispered back. His voice was nerveless, because it was one thing to use words to defend another person in the courtroom, and another entirely to admit something he could use to shatter you.

"I know how hard that was for you to say," Harry murmured into his ear, drawing back. "Thank you."

No questions about whether he meant it. Harry's trust was gained.

Draco let his head fall against Harry's shoulder, still shuddering with small quivers that were not the aftershocks of orgasm. Harry rolled over so he could wrap his arms around him, and his magic formed a cocoon of power on top of that which cradled them both.

Never would he have suspected that an ordinary divorce case could bring him so much.

Draco lay still until the shivers subsided entirely. Then he said, because he *was* good with words, "I think there's no use in talking about an ending of this bond any time soon, then?"

Harry's hand, stroking his spine, never paused. "Not only no time soon," he said. "Never, if I have anything to say about it."

Draco snaked an arm around his shoulders, pulled him close, and held him tightly. The firelight softened Draco's senses; he closed his eyes and basked in the warmth of the hearth and their mingled body heat.

Equal, then. Each feeling and doing as much as the other does, at last.

Together.

The end.