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Name: The Mark of the Fox
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Chapter 1 to 3

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Chapter: 1

Title: The Mark of the Fox

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Pairings: Harry/Draco preslash

Rating: R

Wordcount: ~28,000

Warnings: Violence, profanity, Dark!Draco, not epilogue-compliant.

Summary: After making a horrible mistake that has ruined his career as an Auror, Harry is "persuaded" to take a holiday in a small town deep in a hidden valley. He thinks it will be relaxing. Until, that is, he meets the Dark wizards who run the town—and the wizard in charge of them.

Author's Notes: This is the first fic in a series of four. It's very much a Jaded!Harry and Bastard!Draco story, so beware if that's not your cup of tea. Thanks very much to songquake for the beta and myfluffcanfly for offering. While this fic is complete, it's being posted in parts as I get it edited and updated.

The Mark of the Fox

"You know that you really don't deserve a second chance."

Harry stared at his hands, clasped in his lap. He had the impression that Robards would have liked more of a reaction from him, but he couldn't give one. None of the horrible things that the

Head Auror could say to him were a patch on the horrible things that he had already said to himself.

They could have lived, and they were innocent, and you killed them.

If he closed his eyes, he could still smell the flames. How was he supposed to forgive himself after that? How could anyone try?

He wouldn't have bothered fighting for his job, except that he was so good at being an Auror he feared he couldn't be anything else. But if he couldn't imagine a future outside the Department, a future inside it, when no one could trust him not to make a stupid mistake again, seemed equally impossible. So, in the end, he had come to Robards and explained what he was thinking and left his fate in the man's hands. Either way, the man would make a decision, and Harry's tormenting, wavering uncertainty would stop.

"However..."

Harry tensed. He knew that tone. It meant that Robards was reconsidering, and that he could hardly dare to hope. He swallowed and managed to look up, fighting against the pressure of gravity and guilt all the way.

Robards leaned back behind his desk and looked at him with small, distant eyes. The way his fingers tapped on the desk made Harry blink. That was always a sign that the Head Auror was nervous.

So he really doesn't want to give me this chance at all. Someone pressured him into doing it, someone higher up the chain of command.

Harry felt the first faint stirring of interest since he had appeared outside the fire, instead of inside it, as was his place. He leaned forwards and said, "However, sir?"

"Certain—people—have kept your record in mind," Robards said. It sounded as if it would have been easier to get blood from a stone than to get those words to emerge from his mouth. "People I trust, people who are ready to throw their weight behind you and prove they have confidence in you. People who have suggested that you take a holiday, in a place known for improving the mood and morale of those who stay there." He reached down, pulled out a file folder that had been hiding under a pile of other folders, and shoved it across to Harry so violently that the papers sprayed out in a neat fan.

Harry picked up the first paper and scanned it with eyes that were used to reading reports and picking out the important details from thousands of unnecessary words. *Fox Valley…secluded houses…Muggle-Repelling Charms…reasonable prices…companionship of many or none, as requested…*

"What is this, sir?" Harry worked hard to keep any distaste out of his words. He knew what it

looked like, one of the privileges of a select number of pure-blood individuals. He'd joined the effort to eliminate those privileges once he realized how much money and land it let them control. But Robards wanted him to go to this place for some reason, or at least the Department of Magical Law Enforcement did, and he would do his best to prove that he deserved this second chance.

Even though you don't deserve it.

The smell of smoke and burning flesh filled his nostrils again.

"Fox Valley? It's a refuge that works wonders to heal the heart and soul." Harry had never heard Robards' voice sound so dry. "You wouldn't be offered the use of it at all, except that *certain Aurors* think your heart and soul need healing." He leaned so close that Harry's vision was filled with his small and staring eyes. "Understand this, Potter. It is in the Ministry's best interest to keep you employed. So you will stay for a month in Fox Valley, and you will bloody well get better, and then return to us cleansed of past injuries. Do you understand?"

He might as well have said "cleansed of your past." Harry's fingers tightened briefly on the folder, bending glossy photographs of people waving from a brilliant meadow dotted with crystal-blue ponds. They scuttled for cover to the edges of the pictures and frowned up at him.

Then Harry remembered that he had no right to feel angry. He nodded and stood, gathering all the important papers back into the folder with a practiced sweep of one hand. "Yes, sir."

"Get out of my sight," Robards said, whirling his chair away. "And remember who had to die for you to be here today."

Harry nodded, but he doubted it did much good, since Robards had his back turned.

That didn't matter, because it wasn't Robards to whom Harry made that promise. It was to himself, and the dead.

I promise, no one else will pay with their lives as you did.

It was a normal, calm, lazy day in his office. Sunlight poured through the window, which was enchanted but in this case couldn't display a scene more beautiful than what lay outside it. Small birds, the size of hummingbirds but more brightly-colored and tuneful, clung to the vines that grew up his walls and sang among their heart-shaped purple blossoms. Their voices mingled with the sound of the fountain splashing in the next room.

All those attractions for the eye and the ear, and still Draco could do nothing but stare at the name on the parchment in front of him, hear nothing but his heartbeat thudding in his ears.

"Harry Potter," he murmured aloud at last, to hear how the name fit with the birdsongs and the water. It cut across them, sharp as the buzz of a bee, and Draco nodded. He had thought that

would happen.

But the note came from a source in the Ministry who had never yet disappointed him; they had a working relationship begun in enmity but nourished by necessity. Draco folded the parchment and put it carefully on the desk next to him. Then he faced the door, sent a stinging thought into flight, and waited.

The sound of footsteps pattering up the stairs on the outside of the house was clearly audible. Draco had designed the stairs for that, chosen the stone and then "tuned" it by careful use of magic, and it fit the purpose admirably. Lisa came inside a moment later, brushing flower petals from her clipped dark hair that clearly showed she'd been arranging the large bouquets near the entrance of the neighboring house. It was tourist season in Fox Valley, after all.

"Yes, Lord?" she asked, a bit breathlessly, halting before him and bowing her head.

Draco rolled his eyes but let it pass. Lisa was one of those he had Marked unwillingly, and she seemed to live better with the relationship if she could call him Lord and pretend that he was someone like Voldemort instead of what Draco knew he was: a very good criminal. In general, Lisa didn't try to make trouble or secret plans to rebel, both of which Draco didn't tolerate in his organization, and she didn't press for unusual rewards, either. She wasn't ambitious. Draco hated to think of what would have happened to her if he hadn't come along. She would probably be wasting all her gifts in some isolated little cottage.

"We're going to have Harry Potter as a guest in a few short days," he said, and then waited. Of all of those he'd given his Mark to, Lisa's natural reactions were the most useful.

Lisa's eyes widened, and she stood so still that Draco thought he could have fooled some of his less observant guests into thinking she was a statue. Then she turned and looked out the window towards the head of the valley, her lips thinning. "I reckon there's a fear that he might try to investigate?" she asked at last.

"On my behalf and that of my contact at the Ministry," Draco said, with a sharp tap of his finger on the note, "yes."

Lisa glanced back at him, her eyebrow rising skeptically. "I've never trusted Arthur, my Lord."

Draco took a moment to smile, as he often did, over the irony of his contact choosing a name that belonged to one of the wizards on the side of "goodness" and "light" and "not making money." He did not have Arthur Weasley under his thumb, more the pity. On the other hand, they could never have achieved the amicable relationship that Draco and *his* Arthur had. No, his contact had chosen the name as a play on his own and to remain unobtrusive. "I know that, but his information has always been good. Now, how would you go about preparing the Valley for the visit of an Auror who's reputed to be the best they have ever trained, both in suspecting a crime and finding it?"

Lisa chewed her lip for a moment, eyes narrowed. Then she said, "I'd try to make sure that he never suspected anything in the first place, Lord. Put him in the house with the most lenses and keep him safe and sleepy most of the time he's here."

Draco nodded, since her thoughts accorded with his own perfectly, but, just to be difficult, said, "We hardly want him addicted to the Valley and dying to return."

Lisa flicked him the tiniest glance of contempt. Such things were allowable. "No, my Lord. Of course not. But the lenses alone, without the temptation to buy our merchandise or to see the beautiful places in the Valley, should be enough to lull him to sleep without addicting him. And if we use that many lenses, it's not a *total* waste." She looked with great emphasis at the magical birds that flickered through the flowering vines on Draco's walls.

Draco nodded. "See that it's so, Lisa."

She bowed and departed from the room with a slight spring. Draco chuckled to himself as he watched her go. She could have struck out on her own and made a lot of money long ago, and then he would have respected her as an equal partner and worked with her instead of Marking her. But she hadn't, and Draco considered that people who didn't take advantage of their considerable opportunities deserved what they got.

His gaze went back to the parchment, and he wondered if any of his followers would find his contempt disturbing. Draco rarely showed contempt. It was bad for business.

There's another one who didn't take advantage of the world that threw itself at his feet. Draining his magic will be a positive pleasure.

center*/center

Harry hadn't known what to expect of Fox Valley, but when he stepped out of the cave that the Portkey had transported him into, he hadn't expected the perfect stillness, perfect green, and perfect quiet.

The ground in front of him sloped steeply down into a valley gleaming with white buildings, ponds so round and blue Harry had to rub his eyes, and plenty of trees and bushes in a positively unnatural shade of green. The white snow on the mountains around it, in combination with their pure black stone, made it a study in contrasts. An artist's study in contrasts, Harry thought. He didn't think any place was this pretty naturally.

He waited a moment, listening for the sound of someone coming to welcome him. The breeze brought the splashing of water, the sound of clacking pebbles as a large animal trotted through the undergrowth, and the tentative sounds of birds as they built back up to a concert that Harry's appearance had stopped. Harry heard nothing else, no matter how hard he concentrated.

Maybe this really is as secluded as Robards promised, Harry thought, and began to walk

downhill. He hadn't been out of his house much in the last few days, as he first awaited investigation and sentence, and then packed for his journey—Robards had ordered him to take a least a fortnight's holiday—and it was pure pleasure to feel the way his legs stretched as he mastered the slope.

For a moment.

The scent of burned flesh returned to his nostrils, and Harry closed his eyes in pain, wondering how he could have allowed himself to forget it.

I don't deserve to treat this like a holiday. What I need is to clear my head of all the clutter and all the stupidity that caused me to make that mistake in the first place. Then I can go back to my job and actually do it properly.

With his eyes closed, it shouldn't have come as a surprise that he stumbled, but he nevertheless gasped and his eyes flew open, his hand reaching for a support that wasn't there.

He fell down part of the slope in a clatter of scree and twigs and branches, his arms flailing, before he managed to grab a tree-trunk and stop himself. For a minute, he leaned against it, panting. Then he patted his pocket, realized his shrunken trunk was gone, and turned around with a curse to look for it.

A woman stood behind him, holding it. There was a slight, unnerving smile on her face as she regarded him. Harry stared back, not smiling himself. There was something about her dark eyes and straight-cut dark hair, ordinary as they were, that unnerved him. Or was it those things combined with the still intensity of her face?

"That's what you get for concentrating on the past and not the future," she said. "I have the feeling you were very far away when you didn't notice that you'd put that first foot wrong." She tossed his trunk to him with a casual motion, and Harry caught it, glad for the Seeker reflexes that meant he could do it without taking his eyes off her. That seemed to amuse the woman, and she laughed, a deep sound that purled up from the middle of her throat. "Did I surprise you? I'm sorry. I should have realized that someone who was thinking his own thoughts that deeply wouldn't hear me approach." She gave him a neat and oddly formal bow from the waist, a bow that Harry realized, as she flowed back upright, gave her the best possible economy of motion. "My name is Lisa Baines."

She's balanced, Harry thought, with a slight shock of recognition. It was the kind of posture that he fell into himself when he confronted someone he knew was a dangerous criminal.

The kind of stance he was using now, as a matter of fact. He cleared his throat and stood straighter. "Yeah, sorry," he said. "My name's—"

"I know it already," Baines interrupted, and then paused and studied him. "Oh, dear, you don't like that, do you?" She laughed again, this time a softer and higher sound. "I just thought there

was no point in pretending I didn't recognize that scar, or those eyes." She examined his face for a moment, then shrugged and turned away.

Harry's unease was rapidly mounting. He couldn't understand what it was about the woman that made him feel so, other than the way she moved or the way she'd managed to approach him in silence on such a treacherous slope, but he knew to listen to his instincts when they stood up and screamed at him.

"Right," he said. "Um. The pamphlets promised that I could have a bed? And a private room?"

"Oh, a private *house*." Baines waved an airy hand as she started to move downhill again, and Harry followed her because there seemed to be nothing else to do. "We don't skimp on the conveniences here, Mr. Potter." She studied him this time with her head turned backwards over her shoulder. Harry noted with mild envy that she must know the terrain well; no falling when she didn't look at her feet for *her*. "Or do you prefer Auror Potter? Forgive me for being flustered. I've simply never met someone who has so much fame, and I assumed I never would."

I would wager you'd never been flustered in your life, Harry thought dryly. Aloud, he said, "Mr. Potter is fine. After all, I'm not chasing down criminals right now."

For some reason, that brought a smile as vivid as lightning up on Baines's face. "Very true," she said. "Well, as I said, we don't skimp on the conveniences. You can eat your meals privately as well, and I'll introduce you to the bathing pools, the walking trails, the Quidditch pitch—I assure you, you can rent one of our excellent brooms if you forgot to bring your own—and the winged horse stable. There are plenty of other things that you can do, of course, but those are our most popular attractions."

Harry blinked. It was bizarre trying to reconcile the voice that babbled on like one of the pamphlets Robards had given him come to life with the body he was becoming more and more sure was that of a trained fighter.

"Er, right," he said. "Can someone go up with me if I ride one of the winged horses? I've never done that before."

"I wouldn't see why not," Baines said, as she hopped over a projecting stone and rounded a tree that looked as though winds had pounded it flat the moment it tried to raise its head. "After all, we like people to know their limitations. But I should also mention that your house will be deeply comfortable, and many of our visitors prefer simply to rest. If you were to spend most of your mornings sleeping in the bed—the best pillows anywhere come to Fox Valley, stuffed with phoenix feathers—then I can't imagine that anyone would object."

Harry just nodded, instead of objecting or agreeing; it was useless to argue with someone who expected him to believe that they actually used phoenix feathers in their pillows. Baines's voice had faltered on those last words as it had not on others. She expected him to sleep a lot.

Why?

They were soon in the middle of Fox Valley, and walking between the white stone houses, which were all neat and trim cottages—at least on the outside. Harry looked through the windows they passed, and saw rooms filled with polished wooden furniture, mirrors, and indoor fountains that seemed much too big for cottages to contain. Wizardspace, then.

And why shouldn't they use it, if they like? Harry shook his head. *You're getting suspicious about what looks like a nice place to spend a holiday on the outside, and probably isn't any different from that on the inside. You're probably making up some of the danger and imagining the rest. You've already proven that you can't exactly trust your Auror instincts.*

That chastened him as much as even Robards could have wished. Harry lowered his eyes and nodded or grunted in response to Baines's chatter about the size of the houses and how each contained a private field of wards that would allow him to screen out the existence of his neighbors if he wished, as well as enchanted windows that would allow him to see totally empty streets.

"I can't imagine that someone like you gets privacy very often," Baines added, with an oblique look sideways.

"I think I should have chosen somewhere else if I wanted privacy," Harry said, watching the couples who strolled along arm-in-arm, or the solitary witches and wizards who sat on their balconies in the sun. No one seemed very active, despite the list of activities he'd heard from both the pamphlets and Baines herself. "Fox Valley looks well-populated."

"With people here to enjoy themselves, and with people, like me, who are here to serve you." Baines gave him another deep bow that Harry didn't believe for a second. It was too neat. "But even our presence can be blocked by the wards. Some people enjoy the sensation of invisible servants, I'm told."

"I don't enjoy the presence of servants of any kind," Harry said. He knew he'd been too abrupt when Baines smiled at him, another lightning-smile.

"Then I assume that you prefer to hunt down your food and eat it raw?" She paused in front of a house that backed into the cliff on the right side of the valley. Harry studied their surroundings with small darts of his eyes and decided they were more or less in the center of Fox Valley. The cottage was three floors, one of the larger ones, and of course it had a pleasant little garden and roses growing around the door. What Harry noticed more than anything else was how many neighbors it had, and how the street in front of it was broad and flat, rather than bending into hidden corners as it sometimes did in other parts of the valley.

Not an easy place to escape from without being seen, if you wanted to.

Baines paused and looked at him, head cocked, and Harry realized she was waiting for an answer

to her question. He shook his head. "But I do prefer making my own food and cooking it to my taste," he said.

Baines laughed gently. "Forgive me, Mr. Potter, but I think you've had too much of that lately."

"Too much cooking?" Harry knew he must look stupid as he gaped at her, but he didn't have the slightest idea what she meant.

"Too much *work*." Baines took his hands, a gesture so unusual that Harry blinked at her and didn't try to draw them away. "I think you have been spoiled by doing so much for yourself. I understand self-reliance, but at certain points it becomes pathological. Perhaps you should relax. Perhaps you should cheer yourself with the thought of doing almost nothing but resting and waking in the morning to the delightful certainty that you need do nothing more."

"Do you give that speech to all your customers?" Harry asked, twisting the words as he would not twist his smile.

Baines stepped away from him, eyes narrowed and shoulders tensing as though she would give him one of the strikes Harry thought her well-prepared to give. Then she bowed her head and nodded at the same time. "Very well," she said. "I cannot tell you how to enjoy your holiday. But I will say that Fox Valley is a unique place, and you would be a fool to give up the chance to enjoy it. You have spent the rest of your life working, struggling, conquering. Why not have a taste of peace?"

She turned away and walked up the valley. Harry tracked her with his eyes, but only for a second. He was confident that he knew enough about her to satisfy him for the moment, and he did not want her, or anyone else watching, to think his interest was excessive.

With nothing else to do, he turned around and entered the house.

Draco stood in front of the lens in his office adapted for observation rather than draining and watched Potter with some fascination as he stumbled through his house, gaping at everything around him.

The poor sod looked like a complete innocent. He touched the tapestries as if he couldn't believe they were real. He bounced on the bed, actually *bounced* on it, and stood up without a trace of shame. He tapped the roses in the vases with his wand and looked astonished when they didn't vanish. He measured the dimensions of the shower and stepped back from it distrustfully.

But Draco had Potter's full record from his contact in the Ministry. Potter was no innocent.

He had solved more cases in the last five years than any other three Aurors combined. He could fight in a bewildering variety of styles, and his repertoire of curses was unknown; his contact had hinted darkly that he believed Potter used many more than he ever showed in combat in front of his mates. He had grown harder, colder, grimmer since his friends Weasley and Granger had

moved to Australia two years ago. He had many acquaintances, many temporary partners with whom he worked smoothly, but no one, it seemed, who wanted to permanently take up the burden of his company.

Draco knew that, yes, but he had never believed that he could learn as much from reading reports as he could from personal observation, or at second-best through the eyes of a trusted subordinate like Lisa. Since Lisa had yet to return to report on Potter, Draco was watching.

Potter finally stopped looking at things and tapping on them. He sat down in the middle of the bedroom, on the floor and leaning against one of the enormous glass windows, and gazed wearily out of it as though he was in the midst of enemies and expected to find no reprieve.

Draco felt his mouth move in a quick smile. *That is true, of course, but I doubt that he could know it as yet.*

Potter sighed and shook his head. Then he rose to his feet and untied his cloak, dropping it on the floor. Draco rolled his eyes. It seemed that some of Potter's habits hadn't changed since he was a student.

Potter dragged his shirt over his head and tossed it in the general direction of the bed. Draco saw it fall, but he couldn't roll his eyes at that particular failure; he was too busy being unable to tear them away from Potter's back.

He was more finely muscled than Draco would have expected, though it had been obvious from his form that he was no brute like Crabbe and Goyle had been in school. But Draco had somehow gained the impression that he was gawky, perhaps because of the weary way he walked or the careless way his clothes hung on him. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Slender sheaths of muscle worked beneath skin that Draco thought would be soft enough to the touch.

Despite the scars that covered it.

From a simple glance, Draco could identify the scars of whip, sword, several spectacular Slicing Curses, and a variety of Dark spells that he would have been hard-pressed to duplicate in half an hour's time, casting them one immediately after each other. Potter turned around, and most of the scars continued on his chest, as did the muscle and the softness of the skin. He rubbed his eyes and left his hand there for a moment, which Draco didn't mind. With his arms up and extended like that, it made his view all the more unimpeded.

Potter was a fighter. It was in the way he moved, in the way his head tilted, and in the scars. No matter how tired he got or how much he seemed to hate his life—Draco *knew* that particular flat, dull shine in someone's eyes—that would always be true.

Draco nibbled his lip. It seemed a shame to simply take Potter's magic and strength and use it for the project of making Fox Valley more irresistible and increasing his personal fortune. Of course,

he had never scrupled to use others like that, but those others had only magic to offer. Potter might have more, just as Draco had known Lisa had when he first found her.

Perhaps.

What Draco didn't think he could contend with was that irritating commitment to righteousness that all Gryffindors had and which he doubted would have lessened in Potter in the years since Hogwarts, given that he spent all his time in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

In the end, he shook his head regretfully. No, it was better not to try to recruit Potter. He would be a lovely addition among Draco's Marked ones, but the risks outweighed the benefits. And Draco was no longer a schoolboy to be controlled by ancient grudges.

Potter shucked his trousers then, and Draco saw that the scars also marked his legs, including one spectacular one that curled around his left hip and then spiraled down and around the thigh and calf in a regular corkscrew pattern like a unicorn's horn. Draco stared. It was the first case he had seen in years in which he could not even conjecture which curse might have left such a scar.

Suddenly, Potter's head jerked up. His eyes narrowed at the far wall. Draco looked at the wall in perplexity. Had one of his people disobeyed his order to leave Potter's house strictly alone for now?

No. Potter strode across the bedroom with fierce steps and spent some time staring at the wall. Draco felt his eyes widen and his breathing quicken. A lens was buried beneath that wall, but surely Potter could not have sensed—

Potter pulled his wand from what might as well have been thin air and cast a spell Draco couldn't see, since his head was turned away from the mirror enough to hide his lips. The spell was visible as a cone of white light that zipped into the wall, and a moment later bounced out in radiating rays.

A bright ringing sound invaded Draco's head, and then the wards in his office shrilled.

And the observing lens went dark.

Draco leaned back in his seat and stared at the ceiling. Somehow, without knowing exactly what they were, Potter had sensed the presence of the lenses and then broken every single one in the house. Or so the alarms said.

And he had, for the moment, placed himself beyond the reach of direct observation, though Draco could quickly fix that.

In spite of the ringing wards and the fists pounding on the door, Draco licked his lips and felt a chill sweetness invade his mouth, as if he were eating ice cream.

It might be worth the risk.

What were *those things?*

Harry cocked his head warily from side to side, studying the wall where the thing had been. It had looked like an enchanted mirror to him, though a mirror smothered under a layer of the wall itself. He didn't know what it was meant to do, but he knew that he had never agreed to be spied upon.

He had long since mastered spells that would let him destroy all things of the same kind in one house or room in a single instant. He was glad that he knew it now. He had not noticed the outline of the mirror at first, and who knew how long it might have been before he found every last one of them?

I was right. Something is wrong.

Harry narrowed his eyes and began scooping up his clothes again. He had wanted to shower and then sleep, but fuck that. There was no way he was staying in Fox Valley when so many strange things were happening around him.

Someone knocked on the front door just as he pulled his shirt over his head. Harry snatched up his cloak, made sure his wand and trunk were secure, and then moved silently in the direction of the bathroom. Part of his Auror training had included learning many quick escape routes out of a building with anti-Apparition wards on it, and one of the things he had noted was that almost every window was enchanted and not a safe route. The bathroom window, however, was real.

He flung open the window, hearing Lisa Baines's voice calling, "Mr. Potter? Are you all right?"

There was no staircase beneath the window, but Harry had done more difficult descents. He cast two quick charms on himself, a Lightening Charm and a Bone-Strengthening one that would allow his bones to bear considerable stress without breaking, and then flung himself out the window.

He landed with the usual unpleasant jolt that that combination of spells always produced, as if his body couldn't decide whether to be light or heavy, and grimaced. But the most important thing was to get out of sight, and he did, flattening into a crouch and running towards the side of the mountain behind his house.

"Mr. Potter?"

Baines's voice sounded closer this time. Harry hissed between his teeth as he considered the options. There were a few trees on the mountainside, but most of it was bare stone, and he had seen how well Baines moved in this landscape. She probably knew every trail that was convenient to use, every cave that he could conveniently hide in.

When in doubt, improvise, he thought, and dropped into a sitting position at the foot of a tree that he could maintain without effort for some hours. Then he held up his wand over his head and moved it in a slow line forwards, outlining his extended legs.

"*Admisceo cum arbore*," he whispered.

The air about him shimmered and trembled, then exploded into a series of tiny sparks that landed on the stone and rare dirt and straggling grass about him. Where they landed, they created an elaborate illusion and extension of the tree, making its trunk appear bigger, its roots longer, its branches heavier. Harry would shelter in plain sight, and hope that Baines's knowledge was not good enough to make her notice that one of the trees didn't look exactly the way it should have.

The illusion had barely settled when Baines sprinted around the corner of the house. Harry watched the way she traveled—low to the ground, like him—and noticed the way that she wasted no motion, and grinned.

I was right. And why should she panic so much, when for all she knows I'm lying in the house, stunned senseless by that unfortunate explosion?

"Mr. Potter," Baines called quietly, in the sort of soothing voice Harry had learned to keep jumpy suspects from panicking. "No one wants to harm you. I only want to explain some things."

Yes, of course you do, Harry thought, holding still. Even if he moved, the illusion should hold firm—it was more like a tent than most glamours were—but he didn't want to risk it yet. Sometimes the magic emitted an unfortunate flicker, and with his luck lately, that would be the moment when Baines chose to look around.

"We do have mirrors in our houses to let us look in on our guests during an emergency," Baines said, her eyes going back and forth so rapidly that Harry wondered how she managed to fool anyone. Then again, most of the people she probably had to fool weren't trained Aurors. "We did that because we had certain elderly guests who had heart conditions or trouble getting up and down stairs by themselves, and we needed a swift way to let us know if they had injured themselves. I am sorry if you misunderstood the mirrors. They were never meant to spy on a guest's privacy." She gave a quick smile. "I know you must have had more than your share of that."

She's very good, Harry thought. Her statements were reasonable, especially since Harry was sure it had been mirrors he'd smashed. She even had the right combination of sympathy and friendliness and gentle chiding.

He might have been tempted to believe her, if she had once stopped looking around as though she was hunting an escaped prisoner.

"Hundreds of our guests have stayed in this house," Baines said, moving a step closer to the tree, but in a slight, dancing way which told Harry that she didn't yet suspect what spell he had cast.

"All of them have understood the mirrors. We can move you to another one if you're uncomfortable. Will you let us do that?"

Harry froze.

Shit. The other guests.

Instincts, his own and an Auror's, raced to the forefront of his mind. He couldn't simply leave Fox Valley if other people were trapped here, people who might be the victims of whatever scheme required enchanted mirrors in every room and trained fighters to act as servants.

A darker voice whispered and laughed in the back of his mind. *You would have left them behind without even thinking about it, as you left others behind.* And the smell of smoke filled his nostrils.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry could have embraced Baines in that moment. She brought him back when he would have sunken into darkness and lost everything to the memory that smoked and steamed in his nostrils. But he was more than that; he had to get past this, or he would never be an Auror again.

Perhaps you don't deserve to be.

Questions of justice could wait. Right now, there was a question of danger. Harry got one knee beneath him and waited, hunched forwards slightly, ready to leap in any direction if Baines showed a sign of discovering his hiding place.

Baines frowned and paced a few steps on either side of him, once coming close enough to touch. Harry held his breath, and then reminded himself that that was ridiculous. If the glamour worked the way it was supposed to, she would feel only bark even if she brushed against his skin.

If it works the way it's supposed to. Nothing in Harry's life recently fit that category.

Baines shook her head and pulled back the sleeve from her left arm. Harry almost leaped to his feet, so much did he expect to see a Dark Mark there.

Instead, there was a light, stylized shape. Harry could make out long legs and an equally long muzzle when he squinted. A crocodile? It could be. The long jaws looked like it, until Baines bent her arm in his direction.

He understood then, as much from the pale red color of the mark as anything else. It was a fox.

Baines touched the mark and whispered, "He's gone, my Lord. I don't know where." She paused and then said, her voice snappish, "No, there are no traces. Did you think there would be? Trained Aurors can cover their tracks."

Shit. This goes deeper than I suspected. Harry tried to mold himself invisibly to the trunk of the tree. Even if Baines couldn't sense him, her "Lord" might be able to. *This is like Voldemort all over again. I have to figure out what's going on and stop it.*

Abruptly, Baines cried out and bent at the waist, clutching her arm as though someone had broken it. Harry stared, but couldn't make out any trace of an injury or a spell. He would have cast one of the Auror charms that let him detect magic, but it would have been a bad idea to do anything that might break the glamour.

"Yes, my lord," Baines said, when she recovered. She spoke through panting breaths, but Harry could hear only buried resentment in her tone. *She probably doesn't dare show anything else.* "Yes, of course he shall be found. I'm sorry for questioning you." She rose to her feet and walked back around the house. Harry heard her speaking to someone else a moment later.

This is bad. Harry stood up, but kept his back to the tree, and looked around for more observers. *This is worse than I thought. If someone has discovered the art of marking people against their wills and forcing them to obey him through the marks, then I might even have to rescue people like Baines who serve him.*

Of course, there was the question of how he was going to stay hidden in the meantime and keep the Fox Lord's servants from capturing him. And to do that, he needed a better idea of the layout of the valley.

Harry wrapped a Disillusionment Charm around himself and, keeping the mountain at his back so that he could cast a stationary glamour against it in a moment if he needed to, he crept off to explore.

Potter rattles the best of them, Draco thought, shaking his head. His head still stung from the unexpected displeasure of punishing Lisa through her mark. He couldn't remember the last time she had defied him.

All the more reason to hunt Potter myself.

He stood up, stretched his arms above his head, and then began gathering what he thought he would need. A coil of rope, an enchanted dagger, and the secondary wand that he had picked up from Ollivander's at the point when he thought his hawthorn wand lost to him forever. He paused as he stood before the glass case on the far side of the office, and then smiled.

Why not? Whims have paid off for me before.

He opened the case and slipped out the fox statue, its shape that of a running animal with muzzle projecting forwards, made of golden wood. The simplest dolt touching it could have felt the thrum of magic running through the wood. Draco stroked it once, then slipped it into the pouch that clung to his waist. Embedded with wizardspace, the pouch could hold an infinity of things,

as far as Draco knew; he'd never found the bottom of it.

He summoned another of his guards with a thought, and waited until he came panting into the room. Victor Albero was a slim man with dark hair and eyes whose hands were deadlier than knives. Draco nodded to him.

"Keep watch over the office," he said. "I have an errand to run."

Victor knew him better than anyone except Lisa, which was the reason he was third-in-command. His eyes widened. "Lord," he said. "Alone?"

Draco gave him a gentle smile, and Victor shuddered and looked down at the floor. "Certainly," Draco said. "I know him best, and remember that he is not the only skilled fighter I have faced in my time."

And reduced to slavery, the words were that hung unseen between them, because Draco had marked Victor, like Lisa, against his will.

Victor nodded and leaned against Draco's desk, looking resigned. Draco stepped out onto the second-floor porch that ran all around his house and stood gazing towards the eastern end of the Valley, where Potter's house was.

The house he hardly got any use out of, Draco thought a moment later, with a wry shake of his head. He loped to the edge of the porch and swung up on the slender railing that surrounded it. The porch was made of white wood, carved with running foxes that Draco trailed a hand over in greeting. *He learned quickly what was going on, where I had hoped he wouldn't learn at all.*

But then, Draco thought as he flipped backwards and made his way to the ground in a series of somersaults, Potter had never done anything but disoblige Draco. He could hardly be expected to begin a different tradition now.

Draco jogged easily along the street that ran the length of the valley, pausing to nod to some of his guests, to wave his hand and call names he learned as easily as the names of people he intended to Mark. They answered, but their voices were sleepy, their eyes hardly able to focus on him. Draco smiled. The draining of magic had side-effects that were beneficial beyond the power it gave him and the attachment that it created to Fox Valley. Most of his guests felt as if they had undergone a blissful sleep, or a series of them, and longed to return to Fox Valley after they left. Many of them managed it. Thus, Draco's business sustained itself, and grew when his guests told their friends.

He stroked the bracelets that gripped his wrists. One was silver, set with pearls, and the other platinum, set with topazes. There was no particular reason they had to be, but Draco admired that combination of metal and gems.

Has Potter ever faced anything like me? Draco thought as he slipped behind the proper house

and began to hunt in the dirt for traces. He was the most skilled tracker in his coterie, and soon he saw the place Potter had leaned with his back against a tree, the distinctive scuff-mark of boots and the trailing line of a cloak carried over the arm rather than worn. Draco smiled as he began to run. *I doubt it.*

Damn it, there is no place to hide in this bloody valley.

Of course, Harry would hardly have expected someone who wanted to spy on clients and use a variant of the Dark Mark to leave good hiding places, but he had counted on overlooked corners and small abandoned areas that no one wanted for anything. You got those places in the best and most tightly-controlled villages or strongholds or old manor houses, and Harry had been trained to hide in them.

But whoever had created Fox Valley had a fiendishly clever eye for finding those sorts of things and eliminating them. Each niche contained a bench, and the line of one of those enchanted mirrors Harry soon learned to recognize, planted in a bush or hovering behind the bark of a tree. Each small area off the path was the lawn of a house, or the site of a pool where people sat staring dreamily into the water, or a campground with a pit of stones for the fire. Harry shuddered and hurried past those particular places when he saw them.

Everything was open except the sides of the hill and the places where the street bent. The bends were under observation from windows and from more mirrors. Harry saw places in which caves and fissures in the sides of the mountain must have existed, but they had been carefully filled, most of the time with fallen stone.

Harry paused, still Disillusioned but now out of breath, next to one of the tiny clearings. A fountain splashed here. A young witch in a long white robe sat on the bench in front of it, swaying dreamily to the splashing of the water.

Can I make an ally out of someone? Tell them what's going on and request help? Much of Harry's careful training had taught him never to involve civilians in Auror business, but the most fundamental point of all was that he survive and carry the information back to his superiors. If talking to someone would let him do that, then he should.

This woman was the first person he'd seen alone. Harry took a deep breath and approached her, retaining the charm for the moment. It would be best if he could get an idea of what she was like before he revealed himself.

She was singing softly, he realized when he stood beside her. He hadn't heard her from a few feet away. He didn't recognize the tune, and the words wandered back and forth between a song about a mouse and a song about walking into woods. Harry felt the hair rise on the back of his neck as he realized that she had a large, dreamy smile on her face that made her look as if she were drugged.

"Madam?" he asked quietly.

Her singing stopped, but she didn't look up, or jump and try to find the source of the strange voice. She kept trailing her hand through the water instead, and her voice wandered and stumbled and faltered over itself, muttering words now. Harry winced. It was painful to watch her.

"Ma'am?" he tried again, wishing she worked at Fox Valley. There was the chance that she might wear a torque or ring with her name on it then, a custom some wizarding establishments had picked up lately.

But the woman stared into the water and contemplated it. Harry tried speaking louder, and then yelling right in her ear. Nothing happened. The woman might have been deaf for all she could hear him.

Harry slipped to the side and dropped into a crouch so he could see her face better. It was oddly motionless, he realized after a few minutes' study, even for someone drugged. Her eyes blinked too slowly. Her smile didn't waver, as if the muscles that controlled the smile never grew tired. She breathed in a way that Harry would have expected from a comatose person.

Something is wrong.

Harry hesitated, glancing over his shoulder. He kept expecting that someone would come to hunt him along the quiet Fox Valley street any moment, but he couldn't ignore someone who needed his help. That wasn't what Aurors were trained to do. He leaned his wand against her face and murmured a basic diagnostic charm that would reveal the presence of illness, injury, or a foreign potion in her body. At least he could tell the nature of what she suffered and whether it was likely to affect anyone else in the valley.

The charm bounced into her body—

And nothing came back. It was as if Harry had cast his spell into a chamber enchanted to deaden sound.

Harry rocked back on his heels, eyes narrow. Diagnostic charms relied on the magic of the patient; they picked up disturbances to that magic on its deepest level and sorted them into different kinds. The only time Harry had ever heard of the charms having *this* effect was if they were cast on Muggles, or Squibs.

Someone with no magic of their own, or very little.

Could whoever owns the Valley be preying on Muggles? But Harry saw the wand in the woman's sleeve, and had to dismiss that idea. Besides, she was wearing robes.

Harry stood up and reached out to put a hand on the witch's shoulder, wondering what the fuck he should do. Guide her to a house, where she would probably be taken advantage of more? Try

to get her out of the valley, when there might be other victims here who could use his help? Try to rouse her and make her defend herself, when she showed no inclination to look at the world outside her own head?

A footstep crunched in the dust behind him.

Harry whirled around, and realized too late that the Disillusionment Charm, meant for slower movement, would show ripples like a heat haze to anyone looking for them. And the man strolling casually up the center of the street was, pausing to shade his eyes theatrically with one hand.

Draco Malfoy.

The pale face, the pale hair, and the arrogant smirk couldn't belong to anyone else. But Harry had never thought about Malfoy doing something like this. To be fair, he hadn't thought of Malfoy at all in the last six years. He simply hadn't been important from the moment Harry had sent the hawthorn wand out the window with a post owl.

Now, though…

Roaring hatred burst like a flame through Harry's chest. He clutched his wand and fastened his training around his impulses in iron jaws. He had to be careful. He had to control what he did. He had to remember that what he did could affect other people, innocents who relied on him, and could also affect the reputation of the Ministry.

"I know you're here, Potter," Malfoy said softly. Jeweled bracelets flashed on his arms as he took out his wand. "We might as well duel, so that I can show you your place in the scheme of things."

Harry wanted to laugh. Malfoy duel *him*? It didn't matter what Malfoy had done in the past few years. He was never going to be as good as someone even the Aurors who had trained him admitted was a natural fighter.

Harry began to stalk stiff-legged in a circle. He retained the Disillusionment. It didn't provide as much advantage as it would have if he were standing still, but any possible confusion for Malfoy was always good.

Malfoy held his wand up in front of his face and whispered two words. Harry felt the Disillusionment shimmer and vanish, blowing away from him like mist.

His shock made him falter. That didn't *happen*. The Disillusionment Charm was part of a class of magic that could only be dispelled with great difficulty—

As he was reeling, Malfoy struck.

Draco grinned as he felt the stored magic flow from the bracelet on his right arm up to his wand and then out towards Potter. He became visible again, and stumbled, which was better than Draco had hoped for.

Draco sprang forwards—no point in letting the enemy recover—and unleashed a Blasting Curse. A simple enough spell, but the extra power behind his own let him strike with twice the normal force. Potter, who clearly wasn't expecting anything that Draco could do, especially this, caught the full brunt of it.

He soared across the small plaza and crumpled into a heap at the base of the fountain. Draco shook his head and sighed. He did have to wonder a bit at the quality of the talent the Ministry was getting if one of their best recruits reacted like this.

He waited, but Potter didn't move. Draco used a simple detection charm and nodded in satisfaction to find that he was still breathing. It would have been a waste to kill him.

Think of the power that I can harvest from him. Draco had learned to sense the strength of his enemies or possible servants from the aura any spells they cast spread around them. Potter was tempting. Attractive.

Draco's mind overlaid the limp image of a robed Potter with the image of the mostly naked one. He blinked and shook his head. He might wank to that image, but he couldn't let it get in the way of business.

Potter rolled over and cast a spell that took Draco from his feet.

Draco hit the ground hard, but he was rolling before his conscious mind caught up with his legs. One thing he had learned the hard way in the last few years was never to let an enemy have control of the battle. He popped back up and looked swiftly around for Potter, thinking he would have taken the opportunity to move, or perhaps to Disillusion himself again, while Draco couldn't see.

No, he was straight ahead, in the spot that Draco had temporarily made a blind one. He cast a charm with several quick bobs of his wand, and Draco felt invisible fleas begin to creep across his skin.

He had to pause and deal with it now, before the sensation could get worse, and Potter wasn't idle while he did it. By the time Draco could glance up again, Potter had created a regular Fortress Shield around himself, a literal building of stone and wood with walls so thick that someone could shelter in it while three people attacked.

Three *normal* people, at any rate. Draco smiled thinly and aimed his wand at it, willing the magic in the bracelet on his left arm to cross over and down through his body.

The gates of the fortress blasted inwards, and with that breach in the integrity of the spell, the

entirety of it began to dissolve. Draco listened to the rumble of falling stone and wood sides with great satisfaction, and looked up. Potter would probably be on one of the battlements the spell had created, and he would have to move quickly and without grace as his defenses crumbled, leaving Draco a chance to choose the spell he used. He had learned his lesson. Potter was swift and strong and much more dangerous than he looked. He would—

Potter still clung to one of the battlements, and as Draco looked up, his countercurse struck him right on the forehead.

Draco staggered. All Potter had done (probably all he could do, given some of the defenses that Draco's rings provided him) was to open a shallow cut on his forehead. Unfortunately, that cut was just above Draco's eyes, and head wounds tended to bleed like mad. Draco couldn't see with the blood running into his eyes, but he knew it would be even worse to ignore it right now and strike out blindly in the hope of hitting Potter with a lucky spell.

The ground under him flapped like a cloth that someone was tugging off a table. Draco went down again. He tried to use some of the stored magic to absorb the impact, but either his arm wasn't at the right angle or one bracelet was drained already and he didn't call on the right one. He hit fully and lay there, gasping, for a breathless moment unable to concentrate on anything but the pain in his ribs and head.

Nothing else hit him, strangely. Draco understood when he finally had the air for the incantation and could heal the cut on his head and sit up again.

Potter was nowhere to be seen. There was a long skid in the dirt at the base of his fallen fortress where he had hit the ground, but though Draco studied the ground carefully, he didn't see blood.

A pity.

Draco stood there with eyes narrowed, panting, and working hard to master the overwhelming rage that told him to go after Potter this minute. That would do no good. Potter had already proven that he could handle Draco, stored magic or not, and had done so even when he couldn't trick Draco into thinking he was unconscious.

He was a powerful opponent, and Draco gave a tiny bow to the heaped stone and wood in homage.

Though vengeance would be his in the end, since he was simply more powerful here than Potter was, Draco turned away for now. He would have to send different hunters, and watch the hunt. If Potter could handle Draco even when he fought with stored magic, there was no point in trying again himself. Draco liked his revenge, but he liked his life even more.

He sent thoughts flying to two of his Marked ones, who spent most of their time sleeping in one of the houses at the far end of the valley. He felt them stir, and smiled.

Potter was used to fighting wizards crazed by the use of Dark magic, and perhaps that was why he had outfought Draco so easily. But he had never faced the likes of Draco's Twin Brothers. Nor would he return from facing them.

A pity, Draco thought, but this time the words in his mind were mingled with respect. Potter had acted better than the reports from the Ministry had described him as acting. Draco had expected someone who would be helpless when cut adrift from his job, particularly after the mistake that the report described him as making in his last case.

And then he paused, his eyes narrowed.

Yes, the report did describe him that way.

But Arthur did not make the level of his power clear.

He started at a lope back to the office, sending mental orders ahead for Victor to look among the files on his desk for the relevant one.

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Chapter: 2

Harry had reached the section of the valley he had come in by before he finally felt safe enough to stop running. Even then, it was more a decision that his body made than one his mind did. He couldn't go any further.

He sagged to the ground, bracing his palms in front of him, trying to assess his injuries while his blood flowed with adrenaline and his mind flew faster than it had been forced to in years. A lump on the back of his head from where Malfoy had cast him into the fountain. Aches along his ribs from where he had fallen from the battlements, but nothing broken. Harry had had broken ribs before. He knew what they felt like. This was flaring pain that would almost certainly leave him with enormous explosions of purple and black along his sides, but that was manageable.

And a far greater respect for Malfoy than he had ever thought he would possess.

Harry shook his head and tried to keep a smile off his lips. A smile was irresponsible. He had fought someone who was apparently draining magic from people, someone who was much more powerful than Harry had thought he was and had defeated some of his best spells. He would have to get news to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement immediately. Harry was right in the center of the Department's politics, and he would have known if anyone had suspected this of Malfoy. So far as he knew, not one rumor about this had migrated out of Fox Valley.

The smile insisted on staying anyway.

Malfoy could *fight*.

And does fighting like that allow you to escape the thought of your responsibility for the lives you have destroyed, the people you let die on your watch, and the children you failed to save?

Harry felt his smile freeze and then crack off his face like delicate pieces of frost, the way it should. He drew a painful breath and relished the pain for a moment, because it would keep him away from thoughts like that, both the good and the stupid. He rose to his feet, glancing over his shoulder out of habit, but no one was hunting him. Yet.

A message to the Ministry. That had to come first. Harry might have gone back himself, but he'd understood, from some of the silences Robards had left between his words, that he'd been sent on this holiday to get him away from the bad press that surrounded the Ministry in the wake of that last case as much as to give him a rest. Coming back too soon would defeat the purpose. Besides, Merlin knew what would happen to the poor people here while he was gone.

Besides, it's not as if anyone there will be particularly worrying about me.

Harry huffed softly. Two years since Ron and Hermione had left for Australia. He still talked to them by Floo regularly, and sometimes by albatross when they wanted to pay for the expense of sending a message or package that distance. He still had dinner with the Weasley family on occasion and answered their questions about his life and asked them about theirs.

But there was a wall between them nonetheless. He didn't know the details of Ron and Hermione's daily activities anymore. They didn't know about most of his cases, since Harry was under orders not to discuss them. The Weasleys were moving on, getting over the war and Fred's death, and the next child to be born into the family or the latest song by Celestina Warbeck was more important to them than details of the Dark Lord who might have taken over Britain if Harry and the other Aurors hadn't stopped him in time. And that was the way it should be, Harry admitted to himself. They were the ones who had normal lives. He was the one who had gone from one kind of fighting to another, living his life back to front, putting the worst struggles first.

Those thoughts didn't matter. He had to stop thinking about himself, because he wasn't what mattered here. Malfoy's innocent victims were. Harry reached into his pocket and drew out ink and quill and parchment, which he always carried with him thanks to Hermione's long-ago nagging. He scribbled a succinct description of what was happening in Fox Valley and glanced around. There was a pebble on the path beside him that would do nicely.

He made the pebble into a Portkey using a spell that he wasn't supposed to know, which took him more concentration than would have been wise to use earlier, and then cast it into the air. It spun and vanished, heading for Robards's office. Harry relaxed. He was glad to know that the spells on the valley didn't prevent the making of Portkeys.

On the other hand, they probably detected them. It wasn't safe to stay here any longer. Harry got ready to move.

And then he heard the baying.

Draco leaned forwards, smiling into the restored lens in his office. He had lenses all over the valley so that the subtle draining of magic could continue all the time, and so that his guests couldn't escape observation or get to one place and wonder why they suddenly felt so much more energetic. That meant he could watch the battle between Potter and his Twin Brothers no matter where it happened.

It was happening near the cave where Potter had first landed when Draco had thought it would be an ordinary day, and he'd obviously just sent off a Portkey. That didn't matter. Draco trusted his contact in the Ministry to intercept any message Potter sent and keep the secret from emerging. After all, his neck would be on the line, along with everyone else's, if it did.

Potter had heard the baying by now, and he backed up so that his shoulders touched the mountain. There was wariness and confusion in his eyes. Draco was pleased to see that. Potter must already know that the voices, though similar, were not the cries of hounds.

Draco touched the lens with the wooden fox, and the scene shifted in a whirlwind of color, landing on the stretch of street that curved around a rocky spur of the mountain and headed for the cave. The Twin Brothers moved swiftly. Draco doubted that he would have been able to fully understand what he was seeing, no matter how magnificent the view, if this were the first time his eyes had tried to absorb the vision.

They were huge, and looked like wolves the size of ponies on first glimpse: their coats gleaming grey, their jaws lined with fangs the size and length of paring knives, their paws hitting the ground with such force that they bounced off it. Their cries were constant, never stopping or slowing down, no matter how much they panted or slavered. They bounded and floated around the obstacles in their path, trees and boulders alike.

And yet, if one looked more closely, one could see that there was something off about them. Their fur was too smooth, their fangs so large that they couldn't close their mouths. Their paws were hand-shaped, and their legs crooked in such a way that one could see the bends of knees and elbows in them. And Draco knew, even if no other observer would, that on the left foreleg/forearm of each Brother was the stylized mark of a fox in flight.

When Draco had heard about two werewolves who had been trapped in one of their transformations back from beast to human, and who retained their human intellect while also carrying the crippling fury of the beast, he had known that he had to possess them.

There was no way that Potter could resist them, stop them, or slow them down.

Farewell, Harry Potter, Draco thought, giving a little salute to the lens as he sent the vision

reeling back to the original one of Potter by means of the wooden fox. *I shall wank to your image. You deserve that tribute.*

Harry saw the creatures round the last curve that separated him from them, and he began to shiver, wondering what in the world they were and how he could defeat them.

But to begin with, he had to use the knowledge he had. They looked like werewolves, and so he would fight them that way until he knew otherwise. He lifted his wand and murmured, "*Pluvialis argentums.*"

The air between his wand and the leaping werewolves—great Merlin, the first one was almost on him already—darkened and growled. Then the silver rain he'd called, each drop a pure dollop of molten metal, hurtled away from him and in the direction of the beasts.

The rain hit one of the werewolves, the one on the left. The other one had already leaped over it, turned a somersault that Harry bitterly felt was meant to mock him with its grace and speed, and landed in front of him. It lashed out with one paw even as the other beast stumbled and howled, but kept coming on anyway.

One thing learned, Harry thought as he ducked beneath the sweep of the gigantic claws, and, a moment later, the snapping fangs. *A weapon that drops an ordinary werewolf in its tracks is no use against them.*

He really ought to have known that, Harry admitted as he dodged right, dodged left, leaped backwards, and then tried a somersault of his own. Ordinary werewolves wouldn't be out in daylight a fortnight before the full moon. It only made sense that things would be different—

The one he'd struck with the rain recovered and leaped at him. Harry spun aside from most of its weight, and noted with satisfaction the ragged, smoking holes that his silver rain had ripped along the sides of its jaw and through its muzzle so that the killing teeth showed.

But the great paw had brushed him.

Harry staggered to his knees, belly full of dizzying, nauseating pain. He *knew* the werewolf hadn't scratched him; he wasn't bleeding. But the mere touch of that silvery fur seemed to be enough. He leaned forwards on all fours and began to throw up as if his intestines would come through his mouth.

Ironically, this saved his life, since the one on the left had crept close and then launched a hard strike that was probably meant to snatch his head from his shoulders. But it went above his head, only whiffling his hair, as he dropped.

Harry vomited again, but he was thinking clearly now, instincts reacting where ordinary thought couldn't. He plunged a hand into his own mess and lit it on fire with a wandless spell. Then he cast another spell with a nonverbal incantation, one that not many people knew anymore but

which he'd perfected ever since learning it from the Dark wizard called the Corer, and flung the stinking, burning, dripping handful at the werewolf on the right.

The beast sprang to catch it, jaws snapping gleefully at it. It swallowed the thing in mid-flight, and its twin hung back with what sounded like a chuckle while the first one licked its lips and flattened itself to the ground to creep nearer.

Oh, even better, Harry thought, spitting out bile. Satisfaction overrode the ache in his stomach and chest and along his ribs. *You're going to be sorry you did that.*

The werewolf's staring red eyes crossed suddenly. It raised one leg and began to scratch frantically at its side. The other one backed up and snarled, looking from its twin to Harry as if it couldn't decide whether to attack him or stay and see what happened.

The first werewolf exploded, cored from the inside out like an apple, falling apart into sharply divided pieces. It was the way that the Corer had liked to dispose of his victims. Of course, living beings made a lot more mess than an apple did, given all the guts and flesh and intestines that that produced.

Good-bye, Harry thought, and scrambled to his feet to face the other.

The second werewolf sniffed frantically at the nearest section of the first, and then tilted its head back and gave a long, wobbling howl Harry could only assume was meant as mourning. Then it turned around, every hackle on end, with a snarl so deep Harry could feel it in the ground beneath his feet, and began to stalk him.

Harry circled, careful not to take his eyes from the thing. He wouldn't get so lucky the next time, and no matter how mad those red eyes were, there was intelligence there. It knew to take him seriously now.

But not seriously enough.

His stomach was empty, his skin still buzzed and ached from the tingling brush of the first werewolf's fur, and his ribs were doing something more than aching. He thought he could also feel a trickle of blood from the lump on the back of his head.

But the pain and the shock had also cleared his mind. He could feel himself smiling, a smile that Ron would have recognized and backed away from.

The wolf didn't have the sense, or maybe just the experience with Harry, to be cautious. It came closer still, moving in smaller steps than Harry would have thought such an enormous beast could, and then hurtled forwards with a howl that Harry suspected was meant to chill his soul.

It didn't chill his hands or his head, though, and those were the more relevant things to helping him defeat this creature. He lifted his wand and sketched a quick cross pattern in front of him,

while intoning, "*Casses infragiles*."

The air solidified just as the werewolf started to leave the ground to spring on him. Then it turned silvery and crisscrossed with black lines. The net that resulted fell on the werewolf from above, but it was already reaching down to the ground on either side of the colossal legs, locking itself into place with massive pins that bored into the stone as though it had turned soft.

The werewolf rocked to a stop, snared. It struggled furiously, but the Latin incantation meant "unbreakable net" for a reason. Harry suspected whatever remnant of a human mind the wolf still possessed was enough of one to consider that eventually, so he moved while he still had the advantage.

"*Ferrum argentus*," he said, and the air shimmered next to his left hand. The silver sword he held was as long as the Sword of Gryffindor, with a hard, cold hilt that Harry's sweaty palm slipped on. His head buzzed a warning song. He didn't have the strength to keep up the weight of the blade for long.

That didn't matter.

He stepped up to the side of the net. The werewolf tried to turn to face him, but the net had already wound around its jaws, and it could only snap in useless confinement. Its eyes rolled wildly as Harry picked his spot and stabbed between the meshes into the werewolf's flank.

The howl threw Harry from his feet. He let go of the sword, and popped back up on his feet a safe distance from the thrashing beast. Maybe the silver by itself would take care of it, he thought hopefully.

Then he remembered how the silver rain incantation hadn't worked as well as it was supposed to, and shook his head, holding his wand towards the sword. "*Defende contra malis*," he murmured.

The sword glowed and started wriggling fiercely, driving its way into the werewolf of its own free will. The wolf rolled on its back and tried to use that neat position to leverage the sword out of its side. Nothing happened. It had already dug too deep, chewing through the wolf's vital organs, slicing muscles apart from each other, making it fall into neat halves along a distinct line.

If I cored the other one like an apple, I'll cut this one like a loaf of bread, Harry thought crazily.

Then he blinked as sweat ran into his eyes, and realized how much he hurt. When he glanced back towards the Valley, he couldn't see any pursuers, but that had meant nothing the first time, and would mean less than nothing now.

He had to get out of sight, away from those bloody mirrors if he could. And since he was near one now, he would have to move, instead of crawling into the cave he'd come from, even though he didn't think it had any mirrors.

He began to limp away up to the head of the valley, leaving the howls of the werewolf to fade behind him. It made sense that the further he went from the center of the valley, the smaller Malfoy's influence would become. He should be able to find a hiding place up here, and food. He could, as long as he had something solid and small, Transfigure it into food. It would be tasteless, and he couldn't survive on it for long, but he shouldn't need long.

And then I'll see about settling Malfoy, he thought, baring his teeth and almost hoping that the bastard could see him.

Draco gaped at the lens for long moments after Potter had vanished up into the hills and the glass had shown the last convulsions of the dying Twin Brother, because he hadn't ordered the vision to move and follow Potter.

Then he made a grunting sound he knew was undignified and dug into his trousers with one hand, which clawed at his thighs as he rooted into his pants and seized his cock. It had started swelling painfully when he saw the first Twin Brother fall apart into cored sections, and now he *had* to do something about it or fall over from lust.

He tilted his head back as he yanked at himself, his motions so fast and rough that he abraded the skin, his eyes shutting so that he could watch the images of the battle flash through his mind again with fewer distractions. The way Potter had moved, his black hair flying behind him like a banner. The way he had chosen spells that would handle not just werewolves but most opponents.

He hadn't hesitated when it came to Dark Arts, the way Draco knew most of the people at the Ministry did, including the one he'd Marked. He had wielded his power with skill and grace, and made the right decisions with very limited time to do so. He'd had luck, but he'd *used* the luck instead of trusting to that to save his arse. He was fully worthy of that beautiful body.

Draco uttered a garbled cry as he came over his hand, and slumped against the desk, breathing harshly. He hadn't come that fast since he'd masturbated in this office the day after Fox Valley was completed and the lenses perfected.

He shook his head and reveled in the satisfaction buzzing through his body for long moments before he stood upright. He knew the course that he wanted to pursue now. None of his people would be of any use against Potter in a direct one-on-one confrontation, that was clear now. *He* would used his Marked ones to chase him, wear him down again, and finally tame him through exhaustion.

And then he would have him.

Draco was as disinclined to kill Potter, now that he knew what he was capable of, as he would have been to let the Twin Brothers go free.

Besides, he owes me for taking away a few of my best monsters, Draco thought as he sent a

mental call to Lisa.

Harry tried not to gulp the sandwich he'd Transfigured from a pebble. It was tasteless, the bread crunching like sand and the cheese papery, but that didn't matter. It would keep him going for a short time, and a short time was all he asked for. Besides, he was hungry enough, after the werewolf had made him vomit, to eat a slice of the cake that Robards had offered everyone when he turned fifty-five.

Then Harry paused and thought carefully about that.

Maybe not that hungry.

Sandwich finished, he pulled his shirt and looked down at his ribs. Yes, purple sunbursts of bruises, just as expected. Harry shook his head and laid his wand next to them, murmuring basic healing spells. Some of the ache left, and he could breathe more easily. It would have to do. He had never been proficient at healing spells deeper than that. Some Aurors were, and could combine the two skills, but several of the other Aurors who could sense magic better than Harry could had told him his magic had a flashy, aggressive edge. It wasn't suited for magic like healing, passive magic that wasn't an attack against anyone or anything, or a defense against an attack.

Harry had tried for a while to *think* of healing magic like that, because how the magic behaved was influenced by the way that someone chose to put its image together in his mind. But it didn't work. In the end, he'd given up and gone on to hone those talents that he was better at.

And it worked, didn't it? he thought as he piled his head on another Transfigured stone behind him, this one made into a pillow, and shut his eyes. *That's the reason you survived that attack, and Malfoy's attack, where someone else wouldn't.*

Malfoy…

Harry shivered and opened his eyes to look up at the massive overhang that sheltered him again. He didn't want to think about the way Malfoy had fought. It was like a shot of wine for his mind, clearing it, shocking it, making him go over every movement and acknowledge the truth: for the first time since he had entered the Aurors, he had found someone who could match him in battle.

But he strove to forget about the revelation, because it didn't matter. Malfoy was on the opposite side of everything Harry stood for, he had hurt innocent people, and he would never agree to become a recruit for the Aurors, which Harry had thought was the natural fate for anyone who was his equal.

Besides, he had more important things to think about, such as his rest. Harry tapped into that mental discipline that he had learned along with other skills during Auror training, and forced himself into sleep.

Draco let his gaze pass slowly along the line of Marked ones assembled in front of him. It included Lisa; Victor; Thalia Desander, who looked back at him with patient, bored blue eyes; Oliver Hurston, with his slightly breathless look, as though he'd just blown in on a random wind; and Mina Johnson, his Potions master. Mina still looked more than a little irritated at having been pulled out of her lab.

Draco didn't have time for her irritation. In fact, he had time for little except the warning he was about to deliver and his instructions. Every minute he paused was one that Potter could be resting up, regaining his mental and physical footing. Draco had no illusions about what would happen to them if he allowed Potter to recover fully.

"I wish to chase Potter," he said. "To force him to keep moving from one place to another. He doesn't know the ground around the valley, and he won't leave the area because he's sure that he needs to rescue our visitors. Those are to our advantage, and so is the fact that he doesn't know about your various gifts." Thalia smiled tightly at that; the others only nodded. "Those are our *only* advantages. Potter killed the Twin Brothers."

He hadn't told anyone that yet. Lisa shut her eyes. Victor spread his hands and said helplessly, "My Lord, if that's the case, how *can* we face him?"

"That is the second part of your instructions," Draco said. "Don't face him for long, and never let him hit you directly. I want him cornered in the end, but I'll decide when he's weakened enough for me to face him. In the meantime, strike him with little bites out of his flanks. Weary him enough, and he'll be no more dangerous than any other wizard."

"I doubt that," Lisa said, in the special whisper that only Draco could hear.

Draco tilted his head at her, and faced Mina. "In particular," he said, "I don't want you to use any of your explosive potions. They might come too close to hurting him. Use the ones that will be likely to trap him instead."

Mina sulked. She was a tall woman with long black hair and the only natural violet eyes Draco had ever seen, which made the sulking quite a sight. Draco had sometimes been attracted to her, but he looked at her now, and the thought of Potter's power flashed through his head, and he knew that was at an end. "Why are you so intent on taking him alive, Lord?" she asked. "Dead, he would be much less of a threat."

"He owes me," Draco said simply. He knew better than to talk about Potter's beauty in battle. They would see danger in that, not least to their own positions, and not the fierce draw Draco contemplated.

That was enough for Lisa and Victor, even Oliver, who bowed to him. Thalia looked at him thoughtfully. "And his death would not be enough payment?" she asked.

"It would not," Draco answered, fixing his eyes on hers and sending a pulse of pain through her

Mark. Thalia closed her eyes and swayed on her feet, but refused to show any other response. That was her way. Draco was not unappreciative of it, when it wasn't leading her to challenge him on matters that she really ought to have left well enough alone.

"Oh, very *well*," Mina said. "I have potions that I can use."

"Everyone is grateful for that, Mina," Draco said dryly, making the others laugh. He nodded to them, and they scattered out onto the streets. Draco waited until he was sure they were gone and would not double back to ask questions before he turned to the observation lens again.

He needed to tend to some of the business of Fox Valley, and did not have time to watch most of the hunt after Potter unless his people ran into trouble—which he both expected and did not expect. His mental balancing of their strengths and Potter's was so delicate, it was hard to tell who would win.

But he did allow himself one glimpse of Potter resting on a Transfigured pillow, his eyes shut, his breaths deep and heavy. Draco shook his head, his smile far gentler than he would have allowed any of his followers to see. He knew that some Aurors could train themselves to sleep on command, but few actually used the skill, because they would want to be alert all the time, anxious to finish the job as soon as possible. Based on a description of Harry Potter and previous knowledge of him during their Hogwarts days, Draco would have said that he was one of those.

No, as Draco could see now. He was practical enough to appreciate the value of a good sleep.

Draco reached out and let his fingers delicately skim above the surface of the lens. It was as close as he could come to a caress without changing the vision.

Enjoy your last rest in freedom, Potter.

Harry jerked and opened his eyes. His brain felt as if spiderwebs were scattered through it, and he had to swallow several times before he could remember what he was doing. He hadn't had nearly enough sleep, but that didn't matter. His senses warned him that someone was nearby. He dug an elbow beneath him and listened.

Then he saw the woman standing beyond the overhang, watching him with a bored expression on her face, and wondered why he hadn't seen her earlier.

"Don't come any closer," he said in a quiet tone, holding up his wand so that she could see it.

"Look," the woman said in a bored, rapid voice, "I always prefer the reasonable option, so I'll offer it to you on the slim chance that you'll take it. Our Lord wants you to pay for killing his werewolves. He's decided to take you in payment. I don't know why. Maybe because you're a good fighter, or because your fame impresses him." She snorted and folded her arms. "I think he likes that, sometimes, to Mark famous people or powerful ones and have them work for him. Will you surrender and come with me? That way, you avoid a lot of wounds and I avoid a lot of

trouble."

While she was speaking, Harry studied her. He didn't see the muscles or trained movements of a fighter that he'd noted in Lisa Baines. In fact, she looked far too slender and doll-like for Malfoy to be interested in employing her. She was pretty, though. Maybe he sent her to people he assumed would fall for her charms and react using their pricks instead of their brains.

"That's not a choice," he said. "I don't want to be Marked. And you were probably enslaved against your will, weren't you…" He paused temptingly. "What was your name, ma'am?"

"Thalia." She smiled at him. "But I do wish that you wouldn't call me ma'am. It's been a long time since I thought I deserved that title."

Harry put that interesting comment away for later, and said carefully, "You don't want to be Marked? If you helped me, then perhaps we could defeat Malfoy and earn your freedom."

Thalia shook her head. "He designed the Marks to last even if he's dead. And he's nearly invulnerable." She stroked her left arm, and Harry wondered if Malfoy had done something to her to ensure that she wouldn't speak about his powers in more detail. "No surrender, then?"

Harry shook his head and began to stand.

"Well, the hard way it is, then," Thalia said. "Honestly, some of the people he wants me to hunt are so *boring*." Her body blurred and flowed.

Harry backed up a step when he saw her Animagus form. It was a heavy-set cat, but that didn't matter, not with the golden fur patterned with black and the jaws that could crush skulls. He knew a jaguar when he saw one.

Thalia prowled a pace nearer. Her growl was low and inquiring. Harry tensed further as he watched her. He didn't know why she wasn't attacking immediately.

On the other hand, her not doing so provided him with the perfect chance to launch the first blow. He aimed his wand at her paws and began to incant a spell that would send the stone beneath her flying and throw her into the air.

She leaped before he could, and bore him to the ground with a speed and power that left Harry literally breathless. He thrashed, but she batted his wand out of the air with a swift paw. Harry ducked its cut as it came back, cursing under his breath. He had never fought an Animagus that was in an actually dangerous form before. He was learning now how much power a predator's body could have when paired with a human mind.

Then he felt Thalia's jaws slip around his skull. Specifically, he felt the pressure of the great front teeth pressing against his forehead.

Harry closed his eyes and went very still. His only hope at the moment was that Thalia would let her guard down and he could do something while she was occupied with demonstrating her power over him.

Thalia didn't press down, but held him there, rumbling all the while in what might have been either a growl or a purr; Harry wasn't particularly interested in identifying it. He swallowed and began slowly to call his power. Maybe Thalia was only supposed to hold him here until Malfoy or someone else could arrive. Maybe she didn't mean to kill him.

And if that was the case…

Wandless magic surged and bubbled in the center of Harry's chest. He knew it was dangerous to clutch it for too long, lest it consume him. But he ought to be able to let it fly soon, at least if Thalia really was a trap and not the major hunter.

Thalia shifted backwards, as if trying to find a more comfortable spot on his body so that she could continue to hold him. In doing so, she put one paw down on his sternum and made him bear her weight.

It was what Harry had been waiting, or hoping, for.

He released the magic in an uncontrolled blast that made his bones and skin glow from the inside out and filled the air with the sound of madly ringing bells. The golden fountain of power, or what Harry could see of it from behind mostly-shut eyelids, caught up Thalia and tossed her into the air and over the side of the mountain. The last he heard of her was her despairing, disappearing yowl.

Harry, gasping harshly, stood and felt his chest. New bruises, and he felt a sharp twinge of pain from his sternum that might indicate Thalia had broken it.

No time, though, because he was certain someone else was drawing near. He snatched up his wand and ran, heading up the mountain and away from Fox Valley, further from the center of Malfoy's power.

Draco checked the reports a final time and leaned back, satisfied. Yes, all was going exactly as it should be. The lenses had pulled magic from all the guests currently in Fox Valley, enough to render them dreamy and lethargic but not hurt them. Draco knew exactly what would happen to his business, and his chances of gaining further power, if someone died in his resort.

Draco was rather proud of the lenses. They were his creation, worked with spells that Draco had learned when he left England after the war and wandered across the Continent in search of a driving purpose now that he had seen how much tinsel and rubbish his family's pride had been. Magic worked on mirrors was ancient, but that which absorbed the power of wizards had been born when Draco placed a potion of his own invention before a mirror and lit it on fire, letting the wavering smoke be drawn to, and into, its reflection.

Wizards, unlike many other magical creatures Draco had experimented with, could regenerate their power over time, even overnight if little enough was taken. Thus Draco had his lenses operate on a strict schedule, never drawing from someone who had been drawn on the day before, and never letting the drain happen for more than an hour at a time. He gave people what they came to Fox Valley for: a feeling of lovely, sleepy relaxation, which they missed and yearned for when they returned home, ensuring they came back.

And in return, he had the magic he gathered, which he could use to create still more enchanting and addictive places to gather more magic, as well as store in certain artifacts that enhanced his own power.

Draco glanced at the bracelets that he had worn when he dueled Potter and smiled.

Then another thought ran across his mind like blood down a lens, and he closed his eyes. There *had* been something off about that duel. Draco had completely emptied one bracelet in the fight. He had never faced an enemy so powerful.

In and of itself, that was not surprising. However ready he might be to disclaim the title, Potter remained the Boy-Who-Lived, and the best Auror in the Department. If Draco was going to use up half his extra magic in a fight with one wizard who didn't have Veela or goblin blood, it would make sense that Potter was the one.

On the other hand, if he was that strong, why hadn't his contact in the Ministry informed him of the fact?

Draco turned and reached again for the file that he had received on Potter from his Ministry contact. It was possible that there were clues there, worded cautiously in case the file fell into the wrong hands, and he had missed them on his first swift read-through.

But it was also possible that the words were simply lacking altogether, which Draco now thought to be the case.

In which case, he would have a different kind of problem on his hands.

Harry collapsed at last on a loose slope of scree and boulders that looked ready to slide away at any minute. He was panting so hard that his ribs had started to ache again. If he could go any further, he would still be running.

Right now, he curled his legs beneath him and tried hard to rest sitting up. He didn't want to lie down, at least not until he had estimated the damage Thalia had done to his skull. If he had a concussion, he shouldn't go to sleep.

But when he reached up and felt gingerly around, he located only a small pair of holes that bled thin streams. Harry sighed in relief. A small piece of good luck on a supremely shitty day. Right

now, he'd take that.

He glanced around, trying to find, or think of, a place nearby that he could defend. But all the vegetation was scrubby here, and he saw no sign of a cave. He reckoned he could brace his back against a boulder, though that wouldn't keep an enemy from coming over the top of it.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry groaned, not even bothering to keep it under his breath, and whirled to place his back against the nearest boulder, holding up his wand.

The man who stood facing him widened his eyes and skipped back a few steps. Harry examined him narrowly. He had a weak face, wide blue eyes as clear as a baby's, and blond hair that looked like dandelion down. He was wearing, for some reason, brilliant orange robes. Harry wondered for a second if he could possibly be a guest in Fox Valley, a potential ally against Malfoy.

But he lacked the dreamy glaze to his expression that Harry had seen on the woman drained of her magic, so he didn't think so. *A pity,* Harry thought, and stared into the man's eyes. "What do you want?"

The little wizard squeaked and cowered. Looking up from beneath his arms, he said, "M-my name is Oliver Hurston. I w-work for Lord Malfoy. I was assigned to find you and bring you back." He cleared his throat and looked hopefully at Harry as if wondering whether that would be enough. The sight of Harry's iron expression seemed to convince him it wouldn't, because he hurried on. "A-and now I've found you. Could you come with me, please? It would save e-everyone a l-lot of trouble."

Harry decided that, despite all temptation to do so, he wouldn't sit down on the rock and laugh aloud at the universe and the way it faced him with these reasonable pleas from his enemies. After all, Thalia had turned out to be no joke, and Hurston might be the same way.

"Given that Malfoy will kill me if I go back to him," Harry said as calmly as he could, "no, I don't think I can agree."

"Oh, he wouldn't kill you," said Hurston. "He told me that himself. And m-my darlings won't kill you, either. I'll tell them not to." He was smiling now, bobbing his head as if he were listening to music that only he could hear. "So, c-could you come back?"

Harry settled his shoulders more firmly against the boulder. "And I'm just supposed to take your word for it that he won't harm me?"

"Not m-my word!" Hurston looked shocked that anyone would ask for such a thing. "Lord M-Malfoy's."

"No," Harry said. "Why don't you adopt a different kind of solution that won't make trouble for

people and just let me go?"

Hurston blinked. "But I can't do that," he said, and touched his left arm. Harry was really starting to hate that gesture, since he'd hoped it had died with Voldemort. "Lord Malfoy would be very angry. He knows that I can stop you, or at least hurt you, since I have my darlings."

"Your darlings?" Harry found himself staring at the buttons on Hurston's bright robes, wondering if that was an odd way of referring to hidden weapons.

"Yes," Hurston said, and looked both embarrassed and delighted. "I w-would introduce them to you, but you wouldn't want to meet them. No one ever does," he added mournfully. "Except for me. And my d-darlings are so *lonely.*"

Harry tensed. Hurston seemed thoroughly distracted, talking about these invisible darlings, and not that much of a threat. Harry could sense his magic; it wasn't powerful. Maybe he could strike at him and get away.

But Hurston saw him lift his wand, and danced back, shaking his head. "You shouldn't do that," he said. "Not when we w-were having that n-nice conversation." Then he lifted his head and called loudly, "Darlings!"

The air around Harry and Hurston turned chill. And then Harry caught a glimpse of darkness out of the corner of his eye, and heard the echoes of a scream. He whirled around.

Dementors closed in from every side, ghosting above the ground, silent and eerie and so swift that Harry knew it would do him no good to run. He braced himself against the fear already creeping over him, fixed his mind on the memory of solving his first case in the Aurors, and bellowed, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The Patronus bounded out of his wand, shimmering and silvery and as strong as ever, and lowered its head as it faced the Dementors.

"*Finite*," said Hurston loudly, and the Patronus vanished. When Harry stared at the little wizard, he saw that his face was pale, but determined.

"You shouldn't do that," said Hurston. "Th-those things are n-nasty to my darlings."

Harry drew his breath to retort, but then the Dementors were on him.

Green light and screams swam before Harry's eyes in a mist of grey. He lunged forwards and found himself hitting nothing. The cold of the Dementors swam away before he could touch it, and the fear grew so bad that he thought he would have preferred the touch of the werewolf's fur that had made him vomit again.

They'll kill me. They'll Kiss me.

The air around him was colder, and colder. It wasn't air anymore. He couldn't breathe. He was falling, or he was standing still, and either one might have been true as easily as the other.

But the Kiss didn't come, no matter how he sickened and weakened and felt as if a cut in his soul was letting all his happiness drain out. Instead, the Dementors simply hovered, and when Harry came back to himself, he was crouched on the mountainside he had started on. His knees and his hands ached, as if he had been pressing down on the rock at the same time as his mind floated and tumbled.

Hurston shook his head dolefully in front of Harry. "My darlings are so hungry," he said. "But Lord Malfoy said I wasn't to kill you, and I obey Lord Malfoy. Come, darlings." He smiled and raised his hand, and the Dementors flooded out of sight. No matter how hard Harry squinted at them—and with his swimming head, that wasn't easy to do—he couldn't see where they went.

Harry was left to shake and try to reassemble his thoughts. *Malfoy commands a man who can command Dementors. This man lives in terror of displeasing Malfoy, and he'll obey commands that obviously go against his own inclinations.*

Malfoy is terrifying.

But that only increased Harry's determination to bring him down. Someone like this could not be allowed to live and keep exercising control, or to create an army of wizards like Hurston. Who knew what he would do with that army once he had it? Based on his past performance, his ambitions could make Voldemort's look small.

For the moment, Hurston was holding back and just looking at him with mild blue eyes. Good. Harry did what he should have done in the first place and cast a *Stupefy* on him, though he had to do it twice, and nonverbally, because his teeth were chattering too hard to force the words out.

Hurston fell, his eyes gratifyingly wide. Harry staggered to his feet and began to lurch down the slope. He would run sideways this time, and see if he couldn't buy some time before Malfoy's next hunter found him.

Draco had read carefully, and twice. Only when he was sure that he hadn't missed anything did he put down the report from Arthur and fold his hands, looking carefully into the observation lens. It showed Oliver lying on a deserted slope.

Draco almost wished he could have shattered the observation lens, but that would be a waste of both a useful instrument and cold rage.

Arthur had said that Harry Potter's prowess had been exaggerated. He was not the unstoppable killing or arresting machine he was sometimes portrayed as to the public. The Ministry pretended he was, of course, for its own benefit, and Draco could recognize and appreciate that motive. He did the same thing when he had to, though as yet more of his prowess lay in secrecy than an

outlandish reputation.

Arthur had said that the last case—about which the report was irritatingly vague—had deprived Harry Potter of the will to live, almost, as well as bringing him into the bad books of both the general public and the Ministry. He'd fucked up, and two people had died. That meant that Potter, with his tendency to blame himself, would be especially vulnerable to any schemes that Draco might want to build around him.

Except that none of that was true. Potter was strong, and he obviously wasn't shy about using Dark Arts, which meant he had grown ruthless somewhere along the way.

If Draco had been thinking more clearly, then he would have known that the statement about Potter's losing the will to live was also false. Potter used guilt as a lash, driving himself on to larger and stronger feats. He might wallow, but only until he encountered another challenge and could use it to become a hero. Draco had seen that kind of *modus operandi* even in Hogwarts. Some things changed with time, but Potter's essential character was not one of them.

Now, all of these discrepancies could have easily been explained if Arthur did not have access to the truth of Potter's files and had believed what he wanted to believe, or collected evidence based on incomplete observations.

But given who Arthur was, Draco knew he was supposed to be holding Potter's true file.

That could mean only one thing.

Arthur had betrayed him, and had sent Harry Potter to Fox Valley to do something else entirely, perhaps to bring Draco down.

The more Draco thought about it, the more sense that made. Potter was a champion of freedom. He had hated the Dark Lord more passionately than anyone Draco knew. That meant he would hate anyone who Marked his followers in the same way, and who might seem to have the same goals.

Draco did *not* have the same goals, of course. He preferred quiet methods to noisy ones, and he preferred power to immortality or making people fear him. Making people fear him was something that had to happen only sometimes, one among a range of similar tactics. But from the outside, he could see how Potter would refuse to believe that of him.

Potter had come here as the weapon of the Ministry, whether or not he knew it, and the weapon of someone Marked against his will.

Draco could have admired the cleverness of the plan, except that not enough layers of deception had protected it, and it had fallen apart the moment its defenses were probed.

Draco did not lash out in rage and shatter his observation lens. Draco smiled.

My plan is perfect, then. I will harness Potter, and together we will punish my traitor and bring down the man who sent him here, not caring if he lived or died, not telling him the truth, and used us both.

And then I will teach Potter to rejoice in my cause and fight for me willingly, which will punish the Ministry that Arthur works for.

Yes. I like that plan.

I can't go much further.

Harry grimaced over admitting that much even to himself, but there was no question of it. His ribs ached more than ever now, his head felt grim and murky after the encounter with the Dementors, and he was rapidly nearing magical exhaustion from the blast of wandless power he'd used on Thalia. He crouched in a shallow dip in the hills that was the closest he'd found to a cave since his entrance point and shut his eyes.

I can't afford to sleep, either. Especially since I know they won't let me rest for long.

It wasn't long before he heard footsteps. With a long, slow groan, Harry clenched his fists against the ground and forced himself to turn so that he was at least facing the sound. He wondered if it would be Baines, the woman who had escorted him into Fox Valley. He might be able to bargain with her, if so.

But now, it was a tall woman with peculiar violet eyes and astonishingly ornate robes. Harry blinked. He thought, so far, that Malfoy had chosen people who deliberately seemed ordinary or even weak on the surface. This woman, though, dressed in a way that practically proclaimed, "I'm a Dark wizard!"

Harry chuckled weakly at his own thoughts, and then shook his head. If he found that funny, he was further gone than he'd believed.

"My name is Mina," the woman told him, and there could be no doubt after that that she saw him. She even *stood* arrogantly, head tilted slightly to the side as if she was examining Harry and finding him severely wanting.

"Haven't heard of you," Harry said. His eyes drifted to the glass vials strapped to her waist, and he grimaced. It looked like she was a Potions master. *Great, just what I need. More complications.*

"I wouldn't have expected you to have heard of me," Mina snapped, looking nettled all the same. "I conduct most of my work in secret, and then strike from the shadows." She plucked a vial from her belt and hefted it thoughtfully in her hands for a moment. "Would you like to see what I can do?"

"Not particularly," Harry said. He had thought of a spell that might not stop her, but would at least slow her down, and it was a minor one, meaning that he retained enough strength to cast it. He muttered the spell under his breath, and watched as the ground behind Mina trembled.

"Too bad," Mina said, and her cheeks flushed. "I'm going to show you anyway." She aimed the vial at him and then tossed it.

Harry rolled, his arms around his head in the approved way to defend himself against exploding potions, or, more accurately, the shrapnel and flying bits of stone they would unleash. He heard the vial break, but nothing explosive came out of it.

He heard Mina gasp in the next moment, as the stone he'd sent rocketing upwards plummeted back down and hit her in the back of the head .She was groaning, but didn't sound as though she'd been knocked unconscious.

A pity.

Then Harry felt a dizzying fatigue flood through his limbs, accentuating what was already there until he wanted to weep from sheer fragility. He crashed to the earth, trying to lift his head but unable to do so. His eyes closed inexorably. Sleep hovered a breath away, and he thought, dimly, that he knew what the potion had been meant to do now. Sleeping gas was more a Muggle invention than a wizarding one, but then, so were observing mirrors.

I don't think Malfoy disdains to learn from Muggles when it will serve him. At least, the new one doesn't.

Harry recognized that his thoughts were irrelevant, and forced them back on track with a jolt that physically hurt. When he stood, his head hanging and his muscles aching, it felt like the kind of effort that he would make in a dream. He turned, barely aware that his head dangled as if he were a bear disturbed from its winter sleep.

Mina was sitting up, but from the dazed way she moved and the frequent way she touched her head, Harry thought she might have a concussion.

Good.

He couldn't afford the effort that it would take to cast a spell right now—literally could not afford it. Even trying to think the incantation made his vision waver. He began to run, lurching and weaving back and forth.

In desperation, he turned to the one force that was sufficient to give him strength right now. Deliberately, he recalled the smell of burning flesh and the screams of the innocent as he condemned them to death.

The way he would ultimately be condemning people to death if he left Fox Valley's guests in Malfoy's control.

With guilt breathing through him like a second wind, Harry trembled and tottered on. His head began to feel better in a few minutes. He was clear from the influence of the sleeping potion.

That was good. He only had to keep going. He didn't think he'd left Mina in any fit state to choose rationally among her potions, either. He fixed his gaze before him, on the swimming mountains, and went on.

He didn't see the way the stone suddenly opened beneath him. He knew it only when he felt himself begin to fall.

Draco lifted his head. He knew from the slight tickle in the back of his brain and the vibration of the wooden fox in the glass case that someone was trying to contact him. A moment later, he heard Lisa's voice.

"Lord Malfoy, we've found Oliver. Stupefied. And Mina has a concussion, and Thalia a broken leg. Luckily, Potter's fallen and broken his leg, too." Lisa's voice was bitter. "The only stroke of good luck we've had so far. What do you want us to do, Lord?"

Draco let his eyelids droop. His admiration for Potter, and his determination to own him for multiple reasons, lapped him like the lazy heat from a newborn bonfire. He didn't have to consider the response that he sent back to Lisa for long.

I am coming to lead the hunt. Keep a guard on Potter, both you and Victor, but do not attempt to engage him unless he gives you no choice. I am coming.

He turned and gathered up new bracelets, the wooden fox, and a small, silvery lens on a copper chain that was a secret even from his most willing followers. Then he called to another Marked one, Eve, to come and take over the office, and jogged easily down the staircase.

His strides lengthened, until he was running towards the head of the valley, the stored magic in one of the bracelets strengthening his muscles. He wouldn't tire from this insane speed, no matter how long he kept it up. Draco laughed. He should have used this strength to face Potter from the beginning. He liked to be practical, and that would have been the practical thing to do.

But no, he had wanted to challenge Potter and take him down with little assistance from his enhanced magic, to prove how much he had changed in the years since Potter had last seen him.

And he could not really regret the impulse. Without it, he would have had no idea how strong Potter was, or how much it would cost the Ministry to lose him.

Or how much it would gain me to have him.

He reached the large boulder that marked the limit of territory guests were usually permitted to wander, and paused a moment to feel out the Marks. Then he nodded and turned north.

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Chapter: 3

Harry lay still, dazed by so much pain that he wondered at first if he had shattered his back. Then he rolled over and saw that it was a broken leg.

Or perhaps he should say that he *felt* it, because he was no longer dragging a whole limb but a wailing ball of agonizing pain.

Harry suppressed the cry that would have led his enemies to him and concentrated hard, trying to use the techniques that the Aurors had taught him for coping with pain. It didn't work, and after a moment he understood why and grimaced in resignation. Those techniques depended on magical strength. He had used too much today, with the wandless power if not with resisting Hurston's Dementors, and couldn't manage to call up what he needed to.

It hurt, yes. But he would survive, and when he trailed his wand above his leg and murmured a diagnostic charm, he found that it was a clean break. He needed to get out of these mountains.

I probably should have tried to break through the anti-Apparition wards in the first place, no matter how much it hurt, Harry thought, and locked his hands beneath him. *Can I drag myself on?*

A sharp jab of pain from his leg the instant he tried to stand put an end to that notion. Harry lowered his head and panted. The pain went on radiating in waves, and he grimaced. He would have to do something else, something he hated to do, because it would use more of the magic that was becoming increasingly rare in his muscles and spirit.

He hated the notion that he might not survive much more, though. There was that.

He cast a Feather-Light Charm on most of his body, then immobilized his leg with another charm. By then he was gasping, and it felt as though a hand of cold was reaching inwards to crush his heart. Too late, Harry remembered the training that said pain increased with magical exhaustion. Breaking his leg at this point was one of the worst things that could have happened to him.

But it was still something that had to be borne. He imagined smoke again, and the sounds of screams cut short. He imagined the heat that he knew would rise around him if he could be transported back to that moment in time, and the crushing relief it would have been if he could

have done something different once so transported.

He lashed himself with the whip of his conscience, and underneath it, he managed to cast the next charm, the one that would create a slight, constant wind behind him so that he would float upright. The wind increased until it billowed his robes, and then until it lifted him. As tired as he was, Harry grinned in triumph.

"Be careful, Lisa. He's dangerous."

Harry looked up sharply. Two figures were closing in on him, one from either side. The nearer one was the woman, Lisa Baines, whom he had met when he first came to the valley. The second one was a slender, dark man who moved with quiet confidence that marked him as *another* trained fighter.

"How many of you does Malfoy have in his stable?" Harry asked tiredly, and then shivered as another jolt of pain shot through his wounded leg.

"Many," the man said, his voice soft with something Harry identified, after a moment's disbelieving struggle against the notion, as respect. "But no one like you. No one who's resisted him so long."

Harry licked his lips. There was no way that he could defeat two seasoned physical fighters if they got the chance to move against him.

So don't give them the chance to move against you, the voice of one of his instructors snapped in his backbrain. Harry let his wand shiver against his palm, apparently coming close to dropping it, but actually settling it in a different, more offensive position.

"Don't you want to be free?" he asked. "If I resisted, couldn't you?"

"If we had known about the danger beforehand, of course we could have." That was Baines, with an impatient jerk of her head that looked as if it should have hurt her neck. "But there's a difference between knowing about enslavement and managing to avoid it, and knowing only after you're enslaved that it would have been a good thing to have foreseen."

Harry shook his head. "You could simply let me go," he said. "Tell him that you couldn't find me."

"We can't lie to him while we wear his Mark, either," the man said. He had come closer while Harry was watching Baines. *That's the problem with two opponents,* Harry thought, old Auror lessons as vivid in his head as if his trainers stood before him now. *They never hold still and attack you one at a time the way they're supposed to.* "And he knows that you're here. By now, *he's* on his way. And I don't think you'll resist him once he's trying to Mark you rather than trying to fight you."

"I still don't intend to surrender," Harry said.

"Good for you," Baines said. She actually sounded approving, which Harry didn't understand. "But you must know that two trained fighters can keep you busy when you have a broken leg and almost no magic left."

"*Lisa*," the man hissed.

"Relax, Victor," Baines said, without taking her eyes from Harry's face. "He knew from the beginning what we were. I saw it in the way his eyes widened. He knew it from the time he looked at me when I met him as escort into the valley. That wasn't the brightest of Lord Malfoy's ideas, to arouse Potter's suspicions that way. And you know that Potter will be the latest of us in a few minutes. I'd rather not have him prejudiced against me when he becomes one."

"I'd rather kill myself than let that happen," Harry said. "And if I mouth the right incantation before then, imagine what kind of explosion of magic my death could cause."

Baines shook her head, smiling. "No, I don't think you'll do that. Not as long as your survival might mean one of Lord Malfoy's slaves or victims gets free. And your dying like that, while it would certainly consume us, would also mean that the innocents would die along with us. I think I understand enough of your character by now to confidently predict that you'll do no such thing."

Harry swallowed, the muscles in his throat clicking. Baines knew him too well. He wished now that he had learned how to act a little more ruthless during his time as an Auror, and also how to lie more convincingly.

And I wish that someone had taught me how to fight with a broken leg, he thought, bracing himself as Baines shifted in, followed by Victor.

Baines launched a kick at his head. Harry managed to duck that one, but only by varying the wind that held him up, so it tilted him back a bit and brought him towards the ground. That gave Victor a perfect chance to kick him in his good knee.

Harry pulled his head back and gave voice to several wheezing noises in spite of his pride as something seemed to shatter in his knee. Then he felt the wind flicker. His magic was running out, even to continue such simple charms as these.

He let it fade. It meant he fell painfully to the ground, but that was nothing next to the pain from his legs, and anyway, the Immobilization Charm remained in place. Victor and Baines came closer, watching him cautiously.

Harry clenched his fingers around his wand, moving them rather than the wand itself in the necessary gesture, and mouthed the incantation.

Baines jumped back out of the way. Victor didn't, not in time, and the stronger wind carried him easily into the side of the cliff. He went down, bleeding from a lump on the side of his head, now safely unconscious, if not dead.

Harry turned back, panting with the effort of simply moving his head, to see Baines bowing to him. She straightened up, shaking her head, and prowled a few steps closer again, watching both his mouth and wand with rapid movements of her eyes that Harry didn't think were natural.

"I have to commend you," she said. "He sent five of us against you, and you've managed to defeat four. I think you could have done the same with me if you hadn't already fought our Lord and been wounded and tired."

"Look," Harry said, hating the way his words slurred because of his fatigue, "you must resent him for enslaving you."

Baines smiled again. "I assure you, Lord Malfoy is fully aware of that. He can sense most of our powerful emotions through the Mark."

Harry shuddered. "Why does he want to enslave me? Surely you can answer me that, at least."

"Consider the obvious," Baines said. "He has someone magically powerful under his control, and someone who has the kind of fame that will attract people to him and make them believe what he says. It's perfect. He probably would have ventured after you first, but he likes to take people with lots of preparation. He probably didn't intend this at all when you came, and only made the decision because you noticed the draining lenses."

"I won't help him," Harry said. "I really will die first, if he tries to take me prisoner."

Baines spread her hands. "I believe that you can stand up to pain better than we can. The problem is that he has other ways to convince you."

"*What* other ways?" Harry demanded. "If he tries to convince me with someone held as hostage for my good behavior, I'll find a way around it somehow. I promise I will."

"And again, I believe you," Baines said. "But here our Lord is now, and I'm sure he'd like to tell you some of his secrets himself."

Draco reveled in the way that Potter's eyes, full of hatred, turned towards him. Backed up against a cliff, with a broken leg and two of his enemies, counting Lisa, in front of him entirely unwounded, he still looked as if he was in control of the situation.

It would be Draco's pleasure to find some way to train Potter not to fight him, and to see his limitations, while encouraging him to retain that raging strength.

"I'll never work for you, Malfoy," Potter breathed. He looked as if he would have shouted, but

his chest was heaving with familiar exhaustion, sucking in ambient magic from the air itself to sustain him. Draco himself had reached that state of fatigue more than once before he began to store magic in his bracelets and thus became more powerful than any ordinary wizard. "If I have to wait a dozen years to punch you in the face, I'll still do that, and avenge all the wrongs you've made me and others suffer in the meantime."

"Such loyalty, Potter," Draco said, and lowered his voice to the purr that had made some of his more insane offers sound reasonable to all sorts of people. Lisa wisely backed up. Draco wanted an unobstructed line between him and Potter, and he wanted someone to check on Victor and make sure that he was all right. Though he hadn't specifically ordered Lisa to do that, she was sensitive enough to pick up on the desires swimming in the back of his brain. Draco saw her crouch down beside Victor before he faced Potter. "And to what? Don't you ever feel the lack of a larger driving purpose to sustain you beyond that faceless mass of innocents out there?"

"I'm an Auror," Potter said. The gasps for air and magic and life interrupted his words now. "I serve the Ministry."

"Oh, dear." Draco paused and put his best expression of worry on his face. "The Ministry that sent you here to die?"

That rocked Potter—and everything that could rock Potter and prevent him from pulling off some blast of suicidal wandless magic was a plus right now. He stared at Draco. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"The Ministry official who sent you here," Draco said softly, "is also the one who sent me your file. But he didn't tell me about how powerful and determined you were, and he didn't tell you anything about the true nature of my operation. I think he was hoping that we would destroy each other, or perhaps that you'd kill me and go back to the Ministry no wiser, where he could try something else to get rid of you."

Potter's eyes glowed with a frightening rage—frightening because Draco could practically see the idiot getting ready to expend all his energy in a last fireball. "Who was it?" he whispered.

"Ah, ah, Potter." Draco moved forwards once more, this time drawing his wand. "You're in no shape to go after him. I won't tell you the name until you've had some rest and you're properly under control."

Potter gave his head one more defiant tilt, but he was nearly done for. Draco could see in Potter's eyes that the man knew that as well as he did. It was stupid to resist, but Potter usually confused stupidity with honor.

"I'll never be under your control," he said. "I'll destroy you. I'll fight against you. I'll drag you down."

"I'm looking forward to it," Draco said. Let Potter wear himself out in a useless fight. Draco had

designed the Mark to be impenetrable to magic. In the meantime, that was energy that he wouldn't be putting into the kind of treachery that Draco's Ministry contact had managed.

Not that I intend to ever let him get far enough from me to make such treachery possible, Draco thought, smiling at Potter. *And he doesn't have the cunning or subtlety to pull it off under my nose.*

Potter had shut his mouth by now, and was grimly eyeing him. Draco stood still, watching him for a moment. He could have gone ahead and taken what he wanted, but he was interested to find out what Potter would say next.

Harry knew he was close to the end, though whether that end would be unconsciousness or death he wasn't sure yet. But his heart throbbed and his body shook with the throbbing, and he wanted to collapse. Fighting when he was in this state would be the stupidest thing he could do.

And he *knew* he'd been weakened by the Ministry reference Malfoy had made. He'd never been any good at hiding his emotions. For the most part, among the Aurors, he hadn't had to.

At the same time, surrendering himself to Malfoy would also be the stupidest thing he could do. Harry knew how powerful he was. He knew what Malfoy could make him do to other people. Just the thought of that was enough to make him resist with all his might.

He saw no way out of this situation except dying—which would be the most futile thing of all. Had he survived Voldemort only to die at the hands of someone who'd once been the weakest of Voldemort's minions?

"I could help you get your revenge on the Ministry," Harry decided to offer at last. "As long as you don't bind me."

Malfoy sighed. He had grown into a strange man, Harry decided, his face delicate and pretty and yet masculine, without the sharp angles that had marked it when he was a boy. "I'm almost tempted to take that offer. Unfortunately, I've known you for a long time, Harry." *I hate the way he says my name,* Harry thought. "I know that you'd turn on me the moment you had what you wanted and feel compelled to drag me into justice. I can't trust you unless I've Marked you."

"I'm not a traitor," Harry said. He was startled at how strong and dangerous his voice could still sound when he was backed into a corner, possibly without the ability to retaliate any longer.

"But you wouldn't think of this as treachery, since it would be against something you see as evil," Malfoy said simply. "I told you, I know you, and I understand the way your mind works." He lifted his wand. "Now, there's an incident in your recent past that I'm curious about. I know the way the Ministry file described it, but I'd like to see the truth of it. *Legilimens.*"

The assault hurt so much that Harry nearly gave up. But that would be letting Malfoy win, and more thoroughly than he had ever feared. He clung to his Occlumency shields, as pitiful as they

were, and his hatred of Malfoy; one of his teachers had told him that sometimes an intense focus on something else could work to block thoughts.

Malfoy made a thoughtful noise. Harry straightened, panting, as the pain pressing on his mind went away.

"I hadn't thought you strong enough to block me," Malfoy said.

There was a strange, savage expression on his face. Staring at it, Harry was revolted to realize it was *hunger.* It was as if Harry were a fresh fish that Malfoy couldn't wait to gut and clean and carve up.

"Well, I was," Harry said. "Arsehole."

Malfoy laughed, which wasn't the reaction Harry had hoped to provoke but which at least made the sharp expression on his face go away. "It's that last word which tells me it's coming from your mouth," he said. "Now. As I was about to say, your strength was a surprise. But from how pale you are just now, I *wouldn't* be surprised if you no longer have enough of it to do anything else."

Harry said nothing. He had his eyes on Malfoy's feet, the way he stood. There might be something he could do. There might be something there.

"Do pay attention," Malfoy said. "I'll be your Lord soon, and you can think about the various ways that you…please me." He moved to the left, but Harry didn't care, didn't look up. It didn't matter where Malfoy was standing, for the trick he was going to play.

If I have the strength left to play it.

"Struggle isn't pleasant," Malfoy went on. "But surrender could be. Very. Just ask Lisa." He turned his head, presumably trying to catch Baines's eye and humiliate her in some way. Harry wondered how a woman who seemed so proud could stand that, even if she had learned the futility of fighting Malfoy's Mark.

If she's given in, you mean.

Harry thought he wouldn't have a better chance than Malfoy's fleeting moment of distraction. He cast the spell on his foot, nonverbally, and then stamped down.

Malfoy turned back at once, but raised an eyebrow when he saw Harry still standing there, apparently without doing anything. "Have you given in, then?" he asked. "I was sure that you would be intelligent enough to realize there's no point in fighting when someone has closed the iron collar on your neck—"

The spell Harry had cast took effect then, radiating out from his foot and causing much the same

damage there would have been if he'd stamped hard on a floor of delicate mosaic.

The earth rippled and bulged up and shattered in different places, and Harry was thrown from his feet. He went with it, not trying to save himself at the moment, though his broken leg ached terribly when he fell. He kept his head raised, though, striving to see what had happened to Malfoy.

Malfoy was caught entirely by surprise. He fell, and Harry heard something he carried on him, or maybe a bone, break. Malfoy blanked his face so as not to show any emotion and raised one hand.

Baines sprinted away from the unconscious Victor and ended up next to her Lord, cradling him in her arms. She looked accusingly at Harry, who sneered at her.

Then the magical exhaustion made itself known to him, hitting so hard that Harry was unable to do anything but drop his head and surrender to it.

Maybe I'll die, and that's a waste.

But he'd done what he could. He hadn't served Malfoy's purpose. If he died, he died knowing that Malfoy hadn't been able to use him to hurt the Ministry or any of the people he kept prisoner here.

And he hadn't given in.

Draco had broken one of the bracelets when he fell. He knew it was a fragile one—made out of a thin layer of wood over an even thinner layer of ivory—and he had expected it to break someday.

But it would have been acceptable if he had knocked it off the desk in his office or trodden on it. It shouldn't have broken because Potter had called a fucking *earthquake* and knocked him down.

He summoned Lisa to him, and she came, bolting over the shifting, treacherous ground. Draco himself didn't look away from Potter, and the way that his head was lolling on his neck, his eyes staring helplessly at the sky.

If he had hurt *himself*, Draco was going to kill him.

"Fetch him up," Draco said. "And make sure that he's absolutely immobile." He drew another of the bracelets with stored magic off his wrist. It was silver, and studded with pearls. "Feed the magic inside to him. He'll need it when he wakes up, if he's not going to die of magical exhaustion."

Lisa stared at him in silence, mouth open to reveal a pool of saliva inside. Draco didn't really enjoy the sight, and stared at her until she snapped her jaw shut and nodded.

"Of course, Lord," she murmured, and then picked her way over the latest tremor, until she was crouched down at Potter's side.

She clasped the bracelet around his wrist, and Draco stood up and moved forwards, walking so silently that Lisa started when she found him next to her. Draco offered her an implacable glance—she should be more prepared than that—and then crouched down next to Potter and held his wand in front of his face.

Potter's color and breathing began to improve. His eyes fluttered. He sighed. Then he opened his eyes and squinted at Draco as if trying to remember what had happened.

Draco took no chances this time. Before Potter could focus his gaze, he aimed his wand and said, "*Legilimens*."

The memory didn't swim far from the surface of Potter's mind. Draco hadn't thought it would, given that he blamed himself more than was reasonable. Guilt would season the memory, keep it alive.

The house was burning. Flames raged through the stone itself, in a way that told Draco the fire was magical and the building a loss. The windows were long gone, the glass panes melted, the frames barely clinging to existence as tattered pieces of wood or stone. Draco thought that one could only call it a house by courtesy.

Potter stood in the middle of the blaze, his cloak swinging as he drew it around himself. He never ceased a steady chant of incantations that Draco grasped in instants must be responsible for the house's survival. He was holding it up so that others could get out. Draco, looking around, couldn't see any survivors in this inferno, but perhaps Potter could.

Draco's gaze went back to Potter, and he wondered how he *would survive the assault of the flames. Of course, someone who could do what he had done to Draco's Marked ones might have the magical strength to do so.*

A cry sounded from a corner. Potter swung his head about like a hunting hound. Draco turned with him, and saw the woman and child picking their way forwards from a corner, their faces pitiful with terror, their hacking coughs reporting the presence of smoke in their lungs.

Draco curled his lip. He had always despised weakness, and more than ever since the war, when he saw what it had wrought in the lives of his family. He would have left these pitiful remnants of people to their fate.

Not Potter, of course. He held up his wand and bellowed, "Adduco tectum ad solo!"

Draco stared. What was the idiot doing? He would—

And then Draco understood, even as the ceiling began to fall in towards the floor, smothering all

three of them in the devouring flames. Potter had made a mistake in the preposition. He had probably meant to lift the ceiling away from the floor and provide a path that they could use to climb away from the flames, perhaps with a rope; instead, he had summoned the ceiling towards the floor.

Potter's Auror instincts kicked in, and he Apparated. The memory ended when he did, but Draco had no doubt what had happened to the people he left behind.

Draco leaned back and blinked, carefully settling himself in his own mind once more, making sure that he had the command of his muscles and didn't think he was Potter. That was prone to happen with especially deep or absorbing Legilimency; Draco had heard of more than one Dark wizard whose talent for reading minds had spared the Ministry the labor of punishing him.

He could understand what had happened. A mistake, a double mistake, but no more than that. Potter had not done what he had done with any malicious intent. The wrong Latin word and then following his training…countless people could have done the same. And in a situation that agonizing, many people would have long since fled the scene, rather than stayed to help, as Draco thought Potter had, on the off-chance that there would be someone remaining in the house.

But Potter wasn't an ordinary person—even Draco could acknowledge that—and the Ministry and the public didn't think of him that way, either. Harry Potter, the Savior of the Wizarding World, the best Auror they had, didn't make mistakes. He should have rescued those people or died trying. Not lived because of too much speed, too much eagerness.

From the tormented way Potter's eyes fixed on Draco, he thought the same thing.

Draco bent back towards him and sent a thought to Lisa to make her step away. He had something to say to Potter, and he didn't want anyone else to overhear.

"It wasn't your fault," he said. "I saw everything that happened, and if I'm not an impartial judge, who is? You know I'd never speak this way merely to spare your ego, Potter. That wasn't what you meant to do. It can be forgiven. It can be excused. They still shouldn't have sent you here to die."

Potter didn't say anything. His breath was noisy and loud. He was staring into Draco's eyes as if hypnotized, and Draco was glad, because that meant he wouldn't think of using the restored magic and collapsing in agony because of the traps hidden in the bracelet.

"Understand me," Draco said, as calmly as he could when he could practically feel Potter's soul hovering in his hand like a butterfly. "I will give you something to live for, and bring you back from the brink of the abyss. I'll ensure that you forgive yourself."

But Potter's face creased with rage, and Draco barely got out of the way when he spat. He didn't try to use the bracelet, though. He was intelligent enough to realize when a free gift wasn't free, Draco thought in approbation. Really, he was a prize. The Ministry had been foolish to give him

up.

"I know what you want out of me," Potter said, his eyes hollow and contemptuous. "You want me to serve you. Forgiving myself would mean giving up my conscience, and that would just make me more vulnerable to you." He sneered. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Draco sighed. He *had* hoped he could persuade Potter, but when there was no other choice…

"Lisa," he said.

Potter turned his head to face her, his hand rising as if he imagined he could fend her off, but Draco had intended the word merely as a distraction. The real attack was his: a blast of magic from the silver bracelet on his wrist that slipped past Potter's defenses and rendered him unconscious without hurting him. He dropped to the ground with a muffled groan.

Draco bent over him and checked his pulse, to make sure that his apparent recovery was not a fluke; the bracelets often didn't work that well for anyone but him, since he was the one who had mastered the process of storing the magic. He nodded in satisfaction when he found it steady, then nodded again, to Lisa. "Conjure a stretcher for him," he said. "I'll take him back to the office and start the Marking."

Lisa bowed, a hint of hatred flashing in her eyes like a jewel before she turned away. Draco smiled. For the first time, he wondered what Potter had meant to her as a symbol of defiance. Perhaps she had wanted to be like that, too, before the Mark had taken the chance away from her.

I will need to change him, Draco thought, as he watched Lisa lift Potter into the stretcher. *His soul will never survive if he serves me as he currently is. I want to make sure that he will become pliable enough to live, but keep enough of his will to be interesting. That will necessitate, I think, a good deal of work.*

I cannot wait to begin.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He wanted to rest, but it seemed that was a luxury he would be denied. Or had he had enough rest already? His mind was filled with soft, hazy images that drifted towards him and then backed away like warm icebergs.

He felt no pain at least, now, and though he remembered his leg being broken, he could move it without trouble. He sat up on the low bed he appeared to be lying on and blinked down at his moving toes.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

Harry whirled around, though that made him fall back to the bed again. Malfoy leaned against the wall next to a door Harry hadn't heard open—he was choosing to believe that it had opened recently because the thought of Malfoy being in the room with him the entire time was

unnerving-and regarded him with amusement.

"We used some rather good healing spells on your leg," Malfoy continued. "And I made sure that you got the rest you didn't manage to find before you started running away from me." He paused. "It's odd, but it felt as though your magic was more depleted than it should have been, even for such efforts as you made. Had someone drained you during one of your recent cases?"

Harry sat up again. He had a plan in his head, so sharp that it felt as if it could strip the flesh off his bones.

He didn't pause to consider it long. He knew it was one of those plans that would work, knew it instinctively. He simply measured the distance from him to Malfoy and sprang.

He crashed to the floor in mid-flight, because pain was eating him alive from the inside out. It felt like someone was twisting his bones into a puzzle. Harry coiled around his stomach, where the agony seemed to be coming from, but then it moved around and focused on his arm. When he reached to touch that, it was suddenly the worst headache he'd ever experienced, even after Legilimency sessions with Snape.

"Ah, yes," Malfoy's voice said, somewhere on the other side of the pain, back in the normal world that Harry could dimly remember. "I should have warned you about that, though I had thought you would feel the difference in the flesh of your arm. You're Marked, now." There was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice when he said that word. "That means you're mine. And I can hurt you if you try to attack me, or if you do something I don't like."

Harry couldn't answer. How could he? The pain was in his gut again, and it felt as though someone was struggling to be born from his flesh.

Then the pain was gone. Harry fell limply on the floor and breathed.

"Of course," Malfoy said, "life in my service is not all slavery. I wouldn't blame someone who received no return from it for rebelling and finding a way to kill me despite the pain. A dog that's trained only to be vicious will bite its handler as well. And I want willing service—or service that I've trained to be willing. Thus, this."

Harry gasped. He was drifting suddenly in the middle of bliss. It was like the sensation that had filled his head when he wakened, the warm icebergs, but a thousand times more intense. Like the pain, it had no obvious source. Harry thought he could have dealt with a sensation of fingers touching him, or warm water being poured over his skin, but this was different. More diffuse, and more solid, by turns. The only time he had ever felt a shadow of it was when he had imagined what having parents would be like.

It ended. Harry shut his eyes, and thought of the despair in Baines's face when he demanded to know why she didn't rebel against Malfoy.

I understand that, now.

"I'm sure the Aurors teach you the basics of psychology," Malfoy said calmly above him. "Pleasure and pain work together. Long enough under both, and you start avoiding the actions that bring pain and doing the things that give pleasure. And it makes you kindly inclined to the person who rules over you. That's the way the human mind works."

Harry turned his head, and Malfoy straightened up suddenly, his eyes narrowed, his expression suddenly losing all traces of amusement.

"Not *my* mind," Harry said quietly. He was partially aiming to sound impressive, but he meant every word he spoke as pure, unadorned truth. "If you want to keep your life, Malfoy, you'll have to kill me, because I won't break, and I won't bend, no matter how much you alternate the pleasure and the pain, and someday I'll destroy you."

Draco thought it was a good thing that Potter's eyes were fastened firmly on his face, because he would probably have been puzzled why Draco was sporting such a large erection.

God. None of his Marked ones, not even Lisa, who had been the most furious when she was first taken prisoner, had ever said anything like that to him, much less assumed they could pull it off. Draco mostly enslaved survivors. They would curse and rage, and then give in and go along with it, assuming that things would change someday and let them be free. Some, like Oliver, were even grateful for the protection that the Mark had offered; it meant he could stay in one place and not be driven away when people found out about his closeness to the Dementors.

But Potter…

But Potter.

Draco wanted to fuck him so badly that it was torture to keep standing still. But if he went to him now, Potter might have some idea of the power he wielded over Draco simply by looking at him with that steady, bright gaze. And that would not do at all. Draco needed Potter to become powerful and devoted to him before he tried anything like that. He didn't intend to be enslaved himself, even if he gave more freedom to Potter than to any of his other subordinates.

"Aren't you the least bit interested in recovering yourself?" Draco asked softly. "I told you, I viewed that memory, and I have reason to be critical of you if anyone does. It wasn't your fault. If someone in the Ministry tried to make you feel it was, they were at fault, not you."

Potter shook his head. He hadn't bothered altering the position of his body at all, as if it didn't matter to him that he was slumped on the floor in an undignified puddle at Draco's feet. "You *would* try to convince me of that, Malfoy," he said. "So you can use the salve for my conscience to make me dependent on you, to make me all the more eager to bow down and kiss your feet. Well, I know what you're up to, now, and I don't intend to listen. I won't let you comfort me. It would all be false comfort anyway."

Draco sighed and grinned at the same moment. That was such a *Potter* thing to think, or at least the confession of it was, and yet it was accurate.

He will not be easy to tame. And I need the challenge.

"Think about this, then," Draco said. "I received information about you from the Ministry. They didn't tell me that you were such a fighter. On the other hand, they told you nothing about me, either, or about what you would be facing, here in Fox Valley. And they do know. The only sane conclusion is that they meant you to destroy me, or die trying."

Potter stubbornly shook his head, teeth chewing into the inside of his cheek. "I don't believe you. That's just the sort of thing you would say to try and turn me against my employers."

Draco turned and reached for the file on the desk next to him, holding it out to Potter. Potter leaned warily in, keeping one eye on Draco at all times—which charmed Draco with its absurdity; after all, he didn't need to use his wand or make a move in order to have Potter squirming in pain or pleasure—and looked at the handwriting.

His face turned the color of old milk, but his voice was steady. "That doesn't mean anything. You could have charmed the paper."

Draco shut the folder and turned it over. "You must have seen this file before. Do they ever leave the Ministry? In this exact folder? Someone had to get it through the wards. And I would hardly be welcome to walk into the Ministry, even assuming that no one knew about my crimes. Do you deny that I must have had an agent inside?"

Potter's breath had quickened. Still, though, he gave Draco a glance in which the hatred burned like the beam of a lantern. "You don't necessarily have someone who wants me dead," he said. "One of your Marked ones could have walked in. They wouldn't know who they were."

"And taken the file?" Draco asked. He was enjoying this, chipping away at Potter's hope little by little. It made a beautiful sound when it crumbled. "Could anyone who belonged to me and not the Ministry, no matter how skilled, get past all the wards and spells they use to guard their archives?" He snorted and shut the file. "Do be serious, Potter."

Potter shut his eyes and shook his head. "So, who is your supposed agent?" he asked, voice as sharp as broken iron. "It would be interesting to know that, and since you seem intent on bragging to me anyway…"

"He calls himself Arthur," Draco replied, deciding to overlook the use of the word "bragging." *This time*. "But that's a play on his first name, not his actual one. His name is Gawain Robards."

Cracks appeared in Harry's faith, and he felt it breaking like rotten ice.

Robards. He chose this resort. He was the one who suggested the holiday. He was the one who told me about the bad press the Ministry was receiving because of me, and never passed up any chance to make me feel guilty for not saving those two.

But that was the kind of thing he was *supposed* to do, as Head Auror. He watched over the health, both mental and physical, of his Aurors. He let them know when they'd made mistakes, and did what he could to help them recover from those mistakes. He—

He didn't need to choose holiday destinations, did he? And whenever Harry had asked to be let out of the holiday, or tried to counter the suggestion that he come here, Robards had some reason why he shouldn't drop it or why no other place would be as good for him to recover in. It had come to the point where Harry had almost wondered whether Robards had an interest of some kind in the resort, maybe an investment that allowed him to receive Galleons if he sent visitors there.

He shook his head and reminded himself that he still only had the information from Malfoy, and that Malfoy was cleverer with spells than he had thought. This Mark on his arm, for example—the stylized running fox—was like nothing that Harry had ever seen. And if he could compel people with pain, maybe he had decided to compel Robards.

"There's a spell I can perform on the file to tell if Robards was the one who sent it to you," he said.

Malfoy considered him, eyebrows rising higher and higher. Harry had no idea what his face looked like right now. He didn't think he cared. He simply kept his eyes on Malfoy, and said nothing. For a moment, even his hatred for the man was nothing next to the compulsion to know whether Robards was really behind this or not.

Malfoy finally said, "That would mean letting you have your wand back."

"Yes, it would," Harry said. He probably could have done the spell wandlessly, but fuck if he was going to reveal that to Malfoy. He would give up no advantage until he had to.

Malfoy shook his head. "I can't risk it."

Harry pulled his lips back until he bared all his teeth. "Then I'll continue to retain the privilege of not believing you."

Malfoy smiled. "You look like a wolf," he said. "Cornered, eyes flaring with green fire, but not yet dead. I think I'll call you that. My wolf."

Harry didn't growl, because it would have confirmed Malfoy's juvenile suggestion. He simply remained still, and let his stare bore into Malfoy, and waited for the conclusion of this ridiculous game.

Malfoy dropped gracefully and swiftly to his knees, so gracefully and so swiftly that Harry barely realized he'd moved at first. Then he said, "There *is* another solution." He drew his wand and held it out towards Harry. "Cast the spell with my hand on yours, controlling the motions, so that I'm sure you can't use it against me."

Harry stared at him. Malfoy looked at him from a distance of several feet away, close enough that Harry could see the delicate tremble of his eyelashes and the way his eyes flared under the lids. His face wore an expression of playful seriousness, if there was such a thing—and if there wasn't, Harry was sure that he would find a way to invent it.

He didn't withdraw his offer, and Harry knew that he was probably not going to get a better one. He drew a deep, bitter breath, reminded himself that he was a slave for the present and he had to think that way, and reached out a hand.

Malfoy came crawling towards him, moving his arse and his long, slender legs far more than he needed to. Then he slipped around behind Harry and knelt at his back, arms fitting around his shoulders, his hands covering Harry's as he held the wand out to him.

Harry tensed to surge to his feet, but a warning tingle of pain in his arm told him not to. He gritted his teeth, wishing he could do something other than surrender, and accepted Malfoy's guidance.

But a plan had already sprung into his mind, inspired, perhaps, by Malfoy's comment on his wolf-like qualities and the memory of the werewolves he had killed earlier that day.

If I can't free myself from him right away, then the best thing I can do is change him. Transform him into someone I can put up with.

Draco had to close his eyes in bliss. Oh, yes, this had been an *inspired* suggestion.

His cheek rested against the back of Potter's neck, his arms against Potter's shoulders, his knee against Potter's back. He could feel his muscles shifting, smell his scent, and feel the way he tensed and bent and unfolded and *was.* This close, too, Potter's power was a mist rising around him, fit to fill the world with fog, or to become a sun that would burn the fog away.

Draco stroked his fingers idly along the length of the wand, a hair away from Potter's fingers. Potter barely paid attention as he chanted the spell, a lengthy one that Draco didn't bother listening to. He could always use *Priori Incantatem* to recover it from his wand later, and besides, he probably already knew it.

No, his thoughts were filled instead with the perfection of Potter, and how he was going to make use of him. Change him into someone Draco could trust to bound tamely at his side.

He'd read about taming wolves once, when he had been a little boy and begged so hard for a tame one that his father had handed him a book that would explain why that was impossible.

Wolves were always a little bit wild, the book claimed. They could stand happily on a chain and act like dogs for years and years, and then they would turn around and bury their teeth in your throat when they decided to challenge you one day.

But Draco was happy to meet that challenge, since he had more than a little bit of wildness within himself.

Sometimes I think about freeing people when I'm done with them, he murmured soundlessly into Potter's ear, and watched the absent way Potter shuddered. In no more than a few months, that motion would not be absent. *But you. I will never let you go.*

Harry tried to ignore the way that Malfoy was drooling in his ear and focused on the results of the spell. The magic raced through the hawthorn wand in an odd way, and he *hated* the way Malfoy gripped his hands, but those didn't matter, either. The only thing that mattered was what the spell could tell him.

The conclusion was undeniable. The names of the people who had touched that file and another object—in this case, Harry had chosen an owl, since he thought the file had probably been brought that way—appeared in the air. The only two were Malfoy's name and Gawain Robards.

Harry shut his eyes. He had no reason to feel so personally betrayed, he thought. After all, he was only one Auror among many. Why should Robards feel a compulsion to shelter him particularly?

But for once, his attempts to make his suffering less than it was, and remind himself that he really deserved nothing, backfired. His harsh breaths through his clenched teeth turned to rage. He bore down hard enough that he thought he might have snapped Malfoy's wand, if Malfoy hadn't stroked his wrists and made him think about something else.

"Very well, I believe you," Harry said harshly. He kept his eyes shut. He would do something undignified like weep if he looked up now, and he didn't want to. *I gave all my strength, all my heart and my hope, to the Ministry. He had no right to treat me like shite.* "It was Robards."

"You'll have your vengeance, my wolf." Malfoy's breath was warm and wet, and Harry shuddered. *Why is he doing this? I don't think I'll ever understand him, which could be a problem if I intend on changing him into a different person.* "We'll bring him down, and we'll make sure that the entire Ministry knows the way he betrayed you. He'll suffer before he dies."

Harry's eyes popped open. Maybe it was because he was so consumed with his outrage over Robards, but he hadn't even thought about killing him.

"No," he said. "I don't want him dead."

"No?" Malfoy *licked* his ear. Harry stirred in revulsion. *What the fuck is he thinking?* "But I do. And I think you'll find, Harry, that it pays for you to do what pleases me."

Harry made himself sit still with an effort of will so great that he thought he could feel his bones creaking. Malfoy released the wand and pulled it away, and Harry heaved a sigh of relief, thinking that meant he was getting up.

But Malfoy didn't rise. Instead, he shifted his arms so that he was embracing Harry from behind, along the ribs and waist instead of the shoulders, and said, almost reverently, "Do you know how rare a prize you are? And the Ministry treated you as if you weren't worth anything at all." His touch was light, fingertips skating up Harry's shirt, and Harry shivered, hating himself for the gooseflesh that broke out beneath the shirt. "So powerful. You will only become more powerful once I show you how to drain magic and how to hold the bracelets."

Harry flung himself to his feet, and judged from Malfoy's grunt that he'd kicked something vital on the way. *Good.* He whirled around, and Malfoy gazed up at him, face sullen and shining.

"I'm not going to drain magic from other people and use it," Harry said. "Punish me all you like. As long as I'm writhing in pain, at least I'm not helping you."

Malfoy shook his head. The sullenness had faded, and now he simply looked amused. "You do not truly understand pain. What I have done with the Mark is based on the Cruciatus Curse, but stronger. And it will not make you go mad. In the end, you have no choice. No human being can stand up against that much agony."

Harry sneered at him. He didn't mind that he was giving up one of his advantages—well, he almost didn't mind—because what he said was something Malfoy could have figured out on his own. "Like I said, while I'm writhing in pain, I can't help you. And the minute I stop, then I'm going to refuse again. I can't be tamed by the fear of pain, the way that you've tamed those other poor bastards you've enslaved."

Malfoy climbed to his feet, never taking his eyes from Harry. "That pain can tame anyone."

Harry heard the wavering doubt in the back of his voice and pressed impatiently forwards. "Are you sure? Have you ever known me to be afraid of *anything*? And what you want from me sounds like it's more complicated and more intense than anything that you've demanded from them."

He paused. Malfoy said nothing, but the skin between his eyes was puckered.

"What do you want?" Harry asked. "Some cooperation on those things that I *will* help you with, like bringing down Robards, or a constant battle, where you'll destroy me before you get anywhere? I think someone could spend weeks recovering from the pain that you inflict through the Mark. That's what'll happen to me." He lowered his voice. "Or you *could* get some compliance out of me, which I know you hunger for, by giving in on one simple point."

He spread his arms in a mocking gesture, but never took his eyes from Malfoy. "It's up to you.

Choose."

Rage and hunger and admiration surged through Draco, and he nearly wondered how he could remember the names of the separate emotions, so thick were they, so intermingled.

He is trying to force me. No one can do that.

But he could see why Potter thought that no one could force *him*, either. Draco could try, but in salving his pride and his temper he would lose a tool and a companion. None of his Marked ones were true companions. They obeyed him, they often no longer seemed to resent him, and they used their talents in the ways he commanded them to. But that wasn't the same as being made of the same material as himself.

I could have that. If only I am patient.

Draco sat still until he was sure that he could command his rage. What he said was not always what he intended to say.

Potter's been with me five minutes and he already makes me aware of my weaknesses, he thought as he climbed to his feet. He did not (completely) mind. That would be a useful talent to have, so that he could avoid the pitfalls that might open under his feet before they opened. The only thing he must avoid was showing gratitude to Potter, who might otherwise get overconfident.

Besides, the Mark would always tilt the balance of power between them in a way that would leave Draco comfortably in control.

"I accept your offer, Potter," he said. "You help me bring down Robards, who is a traitor to both of us. Then you and I will negotiate what else you might help me do."

Potter nodded once, his eyes so bright that Draco knew he was envisioning a future in which he helped Draco do nothing else, but broke free and attacked his tormentor.

Draco gave Potter a slow smile. Although he would have to be careful of the way in which he used the pain and pleasure of the Mark, he could still, subtly, condition Potter to see the world through his eyes. He would change the man, give him rewards and attention and enough bickering that he wouldn't notice the first two things, until he came to Draco's side, slinking along like a great cat.

Great cats were dangerous, Draco knew. He had only to look at Thalia in her Animagus form to be reminded of that. And the man who had defeated her was more so. But they could be tamed.

I shall change his soul, and in the end he shall be of use to me because he desires to be.

Harry clenched his hands into fists at his sides. It hurt to bow his neck to Malfoy, but it was what he had to do for now.

The Mark couldn't be evaded by distance, as Robards proved. He couldn't kill Malfoy, and he believed that.

That left one option: to slowly steer Malfoy around to his side without making the steering obvious.

I shall change his soul, and in the end he'll be the kind of person who lets me go of his own free will.

Harry didn't acknowledge the thought that whispered after that one.

Or else the kind of master I can live with.

"Where do we begin, to destroy Robards?" he asked. "Do you have information on him?"

Malfoy turned his head in a supercilious manner and picked up a file from a large pile on his desk. "Yes. Come here…"

Harry put up with the hint of command because it wasn't pressing, and stepped up to Malfoy's side to read the file over his shoulder.

He wasn't happy, over *anything* that had happened, and he couldn't see that his next task, battling Malfoy while trying to keep his own soul from being tarnished, was going to be any easier than forgiving himself for what he'd done on his last case.

But there was one kind of hard comfort to be found in it.

I have to do it. So I might as well get to work.

The End. There will be a sequel, "Wolf in the Making."