Title: The Mark of a Civilised Man, Part 1.

Author: [info]jamie2109

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Summary: Harry and Draco face each other in fight for a seat on the Wizengamot. A fight Draco is sure that this time, he can win. But a third, more malignant force arrives on the scene. One that, left unchecked, could mean a return to the dark times of a Voldemort-run Ministry. Can they fight their rising passion for each other long enough to thwart the ambitions of a practised manipulator?

Author's Note: Big huge thanks to my wonderful [info]aoifene for her help with the plot and [info]blamebrampton for the amazing beta. Without those ladies this may have been a pretty incoherent pile of twaddle.

The interpretation for this prompt I am using is 'when all is lost, withdraw and live to fight another day.'

* Indicates wording taken almost directly from canon.

Written for the [info]hd_worldcup for Team EWE.

"That bastard!"

"What are you talking about, Harry?" Ron asked, eyeing Harry warily over the top of the morning newspaper.

Harry slammed the paper down on the table. "Four months out from the election and bloody Malfoy has 'let it slip' about that Sectumsempra curse I accidentally hit him with back in school."

"There was nothing accidental about that, mate," Ron snickered, then sobered quickly at Harry's glare. "I mean … Why would he do that?"

"Don't be any thicker than you need to be, Ron," Harry warned.

"Oi!" Ron protested, picking up a strawberry from his plate and tossing it at Harry's head. "Just because you're in a snit, don't take it out on me."

Harry ducked and scowled at his best mate and head of his security detail. "That article is going to cost us valuable support!"

"I doubt it," Ron disagreed. "You're the Boy Who Lived. You could take down the Minister and they'd still vote you into the Wizengamot."

"That was ten years ago, Ron. People have forgotten all that by now." Harry jabbed his finger angrily at the newspaper. "No, I knew Malfoy would use dirty tricks in his campaign, but I never thought he'd resort to using something I did as a child against me. I thought we'd moved past all that."

"You could always use his past against him," Ron said, sounding hopeful. "That would sort the ferret out."

"Like what? The Amnesty after the war sealed most of the important things. There isn't enough left on him to make a difference."

"Ask Hermione, then. She understands all this political shit, she'll know what to do."

He'd have to drag Hermione out of bed soon. As his campaign manager, she'd need to know about this latest broadside. Ron went back to reading his own newspaper, obviously unconcerned, and Harry sat at the table, grateful Ron had insisted on spending the weekend at his Unplottable house in the country. Had they been at the flat in London, they would have been up to their arses in reporters. It was almost as if Ron knew … Harry shook his head; he'd long ago given up trying to understand just how Ron seemed to know these things. For as long as he'd been friends with Ron, there had been times when he'd displayed this uncanny knack of knowing. At one time they'd joked about him being a Seer, but Ron's face had turned the colour of milk, even his freckles looked washed-out in horror. They never spoke of it again, and just accepted that sometimes Ron knew what had to be done.

There was a reason he was Harry's head of security that had nothing to do with the fact that he was Harry's best friend. Harry called Ron an 'intuitive strategist' and being here in the country was the perfect call. It allowed Harry his escape, yet they could easily Floo back to the office when they felt like it. Although, Harry knew he'd have to face the press sooner or later about this allegation. Bloody Malfoy.

The whole situation was making Harry angrier the longer he thought about it. Philosophical differences aside, Harry thought that he and Malfoy had come to at least respect each other's position and it infuriated him that it appeared his judgment was in error.

What riled him up more was that he knew any friction between the two of them would result in the voting swaying in favour of the third person running for the vacant seat.

A 'reformed' Dolores Umbridge.

Apparently having seen the light (after a year in Azkaban) and spending several years demonstrating how hard she was working for the benefit of Wizarding society, Dolores Umbridge was exercising her right to run for office. She was running on a hard line platform of exiling ex-Death Eaters from wizarding society upon their release from Azkaban. She advocated breaking their wands and leaving them to fend for themselves as Muggles, claiming a number of things. One was that there was no place in society for people with a Mark on their arm. Another that the Wizengmot had been too lenient but as there was no statute on the books about extending sentences, then exile was the next best thing, and also that Azkaban was hardly punishment anymore since the Dementors had left.

Unfortunately she had support from large sections of the Muggleborn community. From what Hermione told him, it was probably not enough to win the seat. Yet. But if Malfoy ran enough smear campaigns like the one today …

He looked up as Hermione entered the kitchen already dressed and looking business-like. "Morning, Hermione," he said, smiling. "It's the weekend, do you think you could relax your dress code?"

Hermione primly sat on the seat opposite and poured herself a cup of tea from the pot before she looked at Harry.

She smiled. "Good morning to you, too, Harry, Ron." She took a sip of tea, appearing to ignore their amusement at how she was dressed. "I have to go back into the office today and deal with the backlash over that article."

"You've seen it already?" Ron asked.

Hermione nodded. "I have a copy delivered to me as soon as it's printed. That way we can be prepared if anything like this happens."

"Pity you just can't stop the edition entirely," Ron muttered.

"Well, I'm going to give that Malfoy a piece of my mind. I don't know where he gets off–"

"It might not have been him, Harry," Hermione interrupted.

"How can you say that? He's the only one who knows about that curse."

"No, he's not," she replied bluntly. "We know it," she said, indicating herself and Ron. "And who knows who Malfoy told about it."

"Yeah, the Prophet," Ron grumbled.

"It's a possibility, I agree, but three days ago I received some leaked information about Draco that, should we use it, could be about as detrimental to his campaign as this is to ours."

"What was it?" Ron appeared eager now. Harry wasn't sure he was as keen to hear.

"It doesn't matter now, just some things that happened while he was at school. What is important is why we were sent it."

"Obviously someone wants us to knock Malfoy out of the running," Ron said. But that didn't sound right to Harry.

"No, Hermione's right. Maybe this is all too much to be a coincidence," Harry said thoughtfully. He read the article again while Ron chattered on in the background about how nothing with Malfoy was ever a coincidence.

Harry couldn't shake the feeling there was something odd about the story. Suddenly he realised what it was.

"Listen," he interrupted. "It says here: 'According to a source close to Mister Malfoy, if it had not been for the quick actions of the school nurse he would have bled to death.' But Snape was the one who healed him, not the nurse."

"And if Malfoy had wanted to use the information he surely would have used the correct information," Hermione agreed.

"Which means that maybe Malfoy wasn't the one who leaked that information to the media."

"It could always have been Umbridge," Hermione said, reaching for a piece of toast.

"I'm still going to see Malfoy this morning," Harry said after thinking on Hermione's statement. "You're right, I don't think it was him, but I'd like to see if they were sent any anonymous information."

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Looks like Malfoy is going to do the job of discrediting Potter for us.

It will not be enough. That episode happened when they were boys. A gullible public will write it off to youthful rivalry. Pity Potter didn't use the information I gave him.

We could always give that information to the Press ourselves.

No, we continue with our plan.

Everything is ready. The–

Hush. Plausible deniability. I do not need to know. Now be a dear and pour my tea before you leave.

.o0o.

"Hoggs! Come in here," called Draco, frowning over the newspaper. Being reminded of the spell that sliced his chest open made him feel like he should have forgone breakfast this morning. He wondered where the newspaper had received the information from, because he had not nearly died as reported, Snape had been very quickly on the scene. Had he not been so prompt, Draco was fairly certain that Potter would have eventually overcome his shock and actually done something about getting him healed.

Still, this blemish on Potter's record could only do him good. The sympathy vote always had a big influence on the outcome of elections and the public's sympathy was with him at the moment. He just needed to maintain it.

Hoggs, his aide, entered the room. "You rang?" The droll tone made Draco grimace. If Wendell Hoggs weren't so good at his job, Draco would not suffer the fool anywhere near him. The man was an obnoxious boor; his only saving grace was being able to get down and dirty in the field of politics. Draco often had a hard time reining Hoggs in from some of the more sordid ideas the man had, but he schmoozed with the best of them and knew how to get information on people that could be of use to him.

Draco tossed the paper to him. "Know anything about this?"

Hoggs took one look at it and smirked. "Of course. I leaked it."

"Why did you do that? It's not even accurate."

The smirk dropped from Hoggs' face. "It isn't? I was assured that it was factual." He frowned. "If Potter decides to dispute–"

"Oh, he won't." Draco waved him aside. "The casting of the spell was true enough, but the other information is incorrect."

Draco watched his aide relax.

"No, what I really want to know is why you thought it acceptable to release this kind of information without my authority?" Draco's voice was cold and unforgiving. He'd tried so hard to run a clean campaign, not wanting to be caught up in the political minefield of bribery and corruption like his father had been.

"I have told you many times, Draco, if you want to win this seat in the Wizengamot, then you must learn to take advantage of your opponents' weaknesses. The fact that Potter used such a spell on you is a chink in his armour and any little crack in his persona of the ultimate noble hero can only help your campaign."

Draco sighed. "For such a smart operator in the political arena, you have no forethought, do you?"

Hoggs' eyes narrowed and his fingers beat an angry tattoo on the desk. Draco could see how he was holding his tongue, but also how he also detested being told he was in the wrong.

"Stop that," Draco said, irritated. "Now, I am going to say this once and if I have any further disagreements with you then our working relationship is over. Do I make myself clear?"

Hoggs gave a short nod, looking anything but eager to listen.

"In order for me to overcome my past and the associations with my name, I must be seen to be as clean as possible. There are things in my past I would wish not to be made public knowledge. Things that Potter knows of. Do you see where I am going?"

"I do, but if the information I released to the Prophet is incorrect, then Potter will have no idea that it was you – us," Hoggs pointed out reasonably.

"That may be the case, but let me ask you this. Where did that information come from?"

Hoggs frowned. "An anonymous tip which gave me copies of your medical record from the Infirmary at Hogwarts, so I knew it was factual." He almost looked proud of that, Draco noted.

"Do you not think that perhaps this anonymous someone, our most generous benefactor might have also supplied the Potter camp with information on me?"

"I-I hadn't thought of that."

Draco shook his head as the man's smug assurance was dashed.

"Obviously." Draco sat forward and leant on his arms. "Let me say this one more time. You do nothing unless you have cleared it with me first."

"I understand."

"You are perhaps lucky that Potter generally is too transparently honest to use such underhanded tricks. That's not to say that, should the situation become any more damaging to him, he wouldn't retaliate in some way."

"Right." The man was deflated sufficiently now.

"You can leave."

Once Hoggs had left him alone, Draco sat back, fingers steepled under his chin wondering what to do about the situation. He was fairly sure that Potter would be in to see him at some point. Even though it was obvious that the information had not come from Draco himself, Potter was astute enough to know he should be making certain. And if Potter wasn't then Granger most definitely was.

They'd met often enough over the years since the war to become used to each other and not bristle and provoke an argument every time they met. Draco actually respected Potter's point of view on several issues and, whilst he didn't agree with him on some – the line he'd taken on ex-Death Eaters after their sentences in Azkaban had been served, for instance – for the most part he could at least agree that some thought had gone into the formulation of the policy.

Sighing, he debated whether or not to contact Potter first and let him know about his almost ex-campaign manager. Eventually, he decided to wait. Dealing with an irate Potter on his own territory was a much better option than having to put up with the other two members of the trio.

It was another hour before Potter stumbled through the Floo to Draco's office. He was, Draco noted, surprised that he'd been able to Floo directly through. Good. It was always a good idea to unsettle an adversary. He ignored the twinge of regret that made it necessary. In another life they may have been friends.

"Malfoy." Potter nodded abruptly and set to brushing the soot from his robes. It made Draco smile to see how inelegantly he Floo travelled. "I am surprised that you let me through. I was expecting to have to

rant at your secretary for an hour before I was granted an audience."

Draco laughed. Perhaps his assumption that Potter was unsettled was a tad hasty. "I was expecting you, Potter," he said. "And I pay Gwynne extra – danger money she calls it – to endure rants of all kinds though I am sure she would have appreciated one from the Golden Boy himself."

Potter scowled at him and Draco indicated a seat. "Can I offer you tea? Coffee, perhaps?"

"No, thanks. It's not really a social call."

Draco nodded in admission. "I thought it might be about the newspaper article."

"Yes, it is. Now, I know you didn't–"

"Before you start, it appears that I did." Draco's hands sat flat on his desk in front of him as if braced for the explosion. Potter merely looked confused.

"You, what?"

"My almost unemployed as of this morning, eager, though extremely short-sighted aide released it without my knowledge."

For several seconds, Potter just looked at him, mouth open in … disbelief? Shock? Whatever.

"And he kept his job?" Potter finally found his voice again, incredulity colouring his tone. "Are you that hard up that you'd allow such incompetence?"

"He's good at his job," Draco replied, but – at a look from Potter – added, "Mostly."

"I bet you don't care he released it anyway," Potter said, frowning. "It has to be good for your campaign. You'd use anything to win – just like always."

"I can't say I will be disappointed if that turns out to be the case. I need all the help I can get, which is why Hoggs is still in my employ, after a sound thrashing of course. And yes, Potter, I'm in this to win." Draco's lips twisted into a smirk. "Just like always and also just like you."

Potter sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Maybe I'll take that cuppa after all."

Draco nodded, still surprised that Potter hadn't shattered the windows with his anger, or let loose a horrific hex. Draco smiled to himself as he rang through to Gwynne for tea and asked not to be disturbed; he knew Potter had reined in his impulsive temper somewhat since the war, but he wouldn't be Potter without the occasional outburst. And it was still thrilling to watch – when you weren't on the receiving end of it.

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When the tea was poured, Harry took his cup and leaned back to sip it. The truth was that he was pretty angry with Malfoy's aide, though the anger did no one any good, seeing as the damage was already done. So, employing some of his newly developed restraint, he decided that he might as well find out as much as he could and be done with it.

"Does your aide have any idea where the information came from?" he asked.

Malfoy shook his head as he sipped at his own tea. "No, he said it was an anonymous tip. Although, he did say that the information came in the form of copies of the records from the hospital wing at Hogwarts."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Well, that would be why your aide assumed it was factual."

"And it narrows the field down a bit, doesn't it?"

Harry nodded. "It would have to be someone with access to Hogwarts records."

"And who had a grudge against you."

He raised his eyes to meet Malfoy's grey ones. "And you, too, apparently," Harry said, holding Malfoy's eyes with his own.

After several more seconds, Malfoy's eyes widened and Harry noticed a faint colouring in his cheeks. "You mean …?"

Harry nodded and returned to his tea. "Yes. Hermione tells me that we were sent information on an event in your past as well."

"One could wonder why neither of us received information on the esteemed Miss Umbridge," Malfoy said.

"One could," Harry agreed. "And come to several conclusions."

"You don't believe in it being a coincidence any more than I do."

"No, I don't," Harry admitted.

They both subsided into silence and Harry could see Malfoy thinking. He half-expected Malfoy to ask what information had been sent to him, but then he realised that Malfoy knew better than anyone, the things he had done that could put him in a bad light.

After several long moments, during which Harry finished his tea and replaced the cup on the table, Malfoy cleared his throat.

"What do you say to a deal, Potter? I think we both are in agreement that the last thing the Wizengamot need is Dolores Umbridge back among its ranks."

Harry nodded. "And what would be the mechanics of this deal?" he asked, pleased. Harry never had any intentions of playing dirty politics and slinging mud at Malfoy in the first place but Malfoy needn't know that.

"Neither of us resort to this gutter style politics in relation to each other but Umbridge is fair game." Malfoy's jaw tensed slightly. His voice was hard and cold enough to make Harry shiver.

Suddenly Harry was glad that he and Malfoy were not going to be fighting each other in anything but a fair fight.

"Deal," he said and held out his hand.

Malfoy looked at it for a moment and the icy exterior relaxed a fraction, allowing Harry to see a wry

smile forming in its place. Then Malfoy took his hand in a firm, warm clasp that almost had Harry wishing he'd taken Malfoy's hand all those years ago on the train.

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Have you seen the paper my dear?

I glanced at it quickly. Why?

A Muggleborn family was attacked and tortured. Whoever did it left several Dark magic signatures at the scene.

Those poor people. Is there any way to trace the signatures?

Unfortunately, no.

Are you sure?

Quite.

Very well.

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"Mister Potter! Mister Potter! Can you tell us who you think might be responsible for the attack?"

Several voices were shouting at him, which was incredibly annoying; he'd only come out to Diagon Alley to grab a quick meal with Ginny. Somehow the media had discovered he was out and had pounced. At least they had proper questions to ask him this time and not the completely useless fluff they came up with on a slow news day. Who could possibly want to know what his favourite flavour of toothpaste was?

He held up his hands to stop their excited jabbering. "No, I have no idea who perpetrated the attack, but I have faith that the Ministry will apprehend them quickly and see that justice is served."

One particularly bold one jumped in as soon as he'd finished speaking.

"What do you make of the Dark magic left at the scene?"

"It doesn't surprise me. Anyone capable of attacking innocent people like that is surely well versed in Dark magic."

"What do you think of claims that Mister Malfoy could be responsible?"

Harry looked at the reporter, scowling at the young man. "What planet are you living on?" he asked abruptly. "Mister Malfoy is campaigning about the rights of convicted Death Eaters being free once they serve their sentences, why on earth would he jeopardise that by attacking Muggleborns?"

"Maybe he can't help himself?" the reporter responded feebly, obviously embarrassed by Harry's scathing reply.

"Don't be ridiculous. I have complete faith in Mister Malfoy and his innocence."

He didn't feel Ginny tugging on his sleeve, but he did hear something that made his stomach turn over.

"Hem, hem."

Oh, please no … Harry turned around and sure enough, there was the toad-like woman Harry abhorred. Dolores Umbridge was standing not three feet from him in a fluffy pink cardigan that, even from this distance, Harry could see was covered in cat hair. The black bow was still in her hair and the smile on her face was simply feral.

Harry ground his teeth together, finding the pressure of Ginny's hand in his reassuring even though he found himself squeezing it past what she could have been comfortable with. But it reminded him he wasn't alone and that he needed to make sure he kept his temper. Harry found that Umbridge got under his defences more than Malfoy ever did.

"Dolores Umbridge," he ground out from between his teeth.

"Mister Potter," Umbridge simpered and gave her silly little laugh. "I'm sure that there is reason to

suspect Mister Malfoy in this case. After all, correct me if I am wrong," she gave that stupid simpering laugh again, "but wasn't he a Death Eater?"

With the press hanging on every word coming out of her mouth, Harry couldn't give vent to what he wanted to say in reply. Instead, he forced himself to sigh tiredly as if sick of explaining a simple concept to a child.

"No, he wasn't. We've been through this before."

"But … silly me … did he not let Death Eaters into Hogwarts?"

"That was along time ago when he was a child and Voldemort was holding his family hostage," Harry said, getting irritated now and hoping that was the end of it. He'd even begun to turn to enter the pub, but Umbridge wasn't finished yet.

"A family of Death Eaters he wants to let loose in our society in a few short years, if I am not mistaken."

Harry took a deep breath to reply and then thought better of it. Arguing with her in public was making more out of this than it needed to be. The press knew his opinion on releasing Death Eaters who'd served their time as well as he knew it himself.

For now, ignoring the woman was his best option. He knew that would get right up her nose, so he continued his turn and reached for the door.

Sure enough, there was a slight shuffle behind him and a coughed "hem, hem." He turned back, eyebrow raised.

"You don't have an opinion on that, Mister Potter?"

"Of course I do." Harry turned back to the door and grasped the handle, giving Ginny a wink. She giggled.

"Well?" He could clearly hear the frustration as Umbridge's voice was becoming squeaky and shrill.

Before Harry could say anything, Ginny took out her wand and waved it at one of the posters on the wall of the pub. It flew directly into her hand and she looked at it and smiled before handing it over to Umbridge.

"I think you'll find a clear concise opinion on this very subject right here in Harry's campaign poster."

Harry had to bite his lip to stop from laughing. Ginny was looking as innocent as pie and he allowed himself to turn around just in time to see Umbridge storm off in a humiliated huff. Most of the reporters were guffawing as well.

After a moment, Harry said, "I think you got your story, so how about letting Ginny and I eat in peace?"

One by one they all nodded and shook his hand before they left.

"That was priceless, Gin," Harry said when they were alone.

"Well that woman irritates me,' she replied. "Always has done."

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After several lengthy interviews with Kinglsey Shacklebolt who, despite being gracious about it, had a job to do, Draco was finally freed and allowed to return home. He understood that they needed to ensure that anyone with a past had an alibi for their whereabouts at the time the Muggleborns were attacked, but he was seriously aggrieved that he was asked to take Veritaserum. He was running for a seat in the Wizengamot, for goodness' sake, why would he want to attack anyone? Fair enough he needed to be cleared from all suspicion, but his pride was grievously dented when they doubted his word.

The lack of trust highlighted the very problem he was trying to overcome in running for the vacant seat. Sooner or later the wizarding world was going to have to deal with reintegrating ex-Death Eaters back into society. In barely two years, the first of them was to be released from Azkaban and no one had developed a policy about what to do with them.

When little in the way of a coherent policy emerged from the current Wizengamot, Draco was approached by the heads of the Pureblood families who had Death Eater members currently in Azkaban, along with the Dark families who had stayed neutral during the Voldemort war and were still struggling valiantly to uphold their heads in the new society. They put forward a proposal to Draco who, after weighing up the pros and cons for a week, accepted. The financial might of the Dark Pureblood families weighed in behind Draco and, using the fact that Potter had spoken up for him at his trial, Draco was managing to build himself a name to be proud of again. Several community projects had been financed by Draco's Dark backers and, while by no means giving them all halos, had at least rendered most of the wizarding world neutral.

That could all change if this crime proved to have been perpetrated by one of the Pureblood families. Potter could release all the embarrassing school information he liked and it still wouldn't do as much damage as being suspected of this attack.

Draco was quite well aware that he and Umbridge polarised the argument on how to repatriate ex-Death Eaters. He was all for reinstating them to full wizarding status immediately upon their release. His argument was that they'd served their time, paid the required debt to society and therefore deserved to

be allowed to live without further restrictions. Umbridge, of course, was the complete opposite.

It was somewhat comforting and even predictable that Potter fell somewhere in the middle, preferring to advocate a term of community service that, he claimed, would give the ex-Death Eaters a chance to show the rest of society that they had repented of their evil ways. Potter's idea had merits, but Draco's sense of justice and his backers had refused to allow him to admit that publicly.

He did know one thing, and that was that he'd prefer to have Potter in the Wizengamot than Umbridge. Potter was at least sane.

Sighing, he picked up the newspaper and read about the latest exploits of Potter who always seemed to be able to make the news. A fortnight ago when Hoggs had leaked the story about the Sectumsempra curse to the newspapers, he'd thought Potter might lie low for a while, but he hadn't.

During one of the several discussions they'd had since then, Potter had mentioned that Hermione was pushing him to stay in the public eye, as it tended to push the older story to the background when he gave them new things to write about. Perhaps that was a tactic Draco could employ at this time when his name was being bandied around as a suspect in the attack.

Short of a scandal involving a hidden love child sold to a slavery ring; or a married male lover, Draco didn't think there would be much he could do to convince people to forget he had been a suspect.

When Draco reached the section where Potter stood up for him, something grateful expanded in his chest and warmed him. It wasn't so much that Potter had defended him; it was they way he'd done it, as if thinking Draco had anything to do with the attack was the stupidest thing he'd heard. That unqualified belief in his innocence meant a lot to Draco, though he'd not admit that aloud, because it would raise serious doubts about the picture of Potter he had in his head and might give rise to the dream he'd had once where Potter was naked and bending him over the back of the couch. Once!

Perhaps, just for the publicity, and the sake of Draco's reputation of course, he could organise to have drinks with Potter to say thank you. In fact, the more he thought about that the more it sounded like a good idea. As long as he didn't drink too much and look too closely at his motives.

Quickly, before he changed his mind, he summoned parchment and a quill and penned Potter a quick note.

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Fickle. That's what the voting public were, Harry decided. Since the article about his run-in with Draco back in school had appeared, he'd had several scathing stories written about him and his actions during the war. Whilst generally his choices had been written off as necessary, there were still mumblings about requiring their politicians to be blemish-free. That particular article had Ron laughing so hard he developed a stitch in his side.

"Mum used to say that the only straight thing about a politician was either his wand or his sexual preference."

"That's two things," Hermione said, barely even looking up from a sheaf of papers she was reading about current polls on popularity.

Ron rolled his eyes. "That's not the point."

Hermione looked up from her book and Harry had to laugh at the way her glasses were almost falling off the end of her nose. It was endearing, really, proved she was human, Harry thought. "What is the point?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry interrupted. "None of the three of us are angels and so that article doesn't hurt one more than the other. Hermione what are the polls showing?"

The polls had only gone to prove his point more emphatically; not that you could trust them exactly, but they were a guide. He was still leading, though by a greatly reduced margin, and Umbridge and Draco were neck and neck. Umbridge had made quite a comeback with her tactics. Harry wondered if those tactics included setting up someone to attack the Muggleborns and making it look like someone versed in Dark magic. There was no way of proving it, of course, he thought, unless the Aurors caught whoever committed the crime.

Malfoy had good taste in pubs, Harry noted as looked at the up-market establishment from across the street. Not so posh that Harry felt out of place, yet not such a dive that neither of them would feel at home. The middle ground. It was a place that Harry was starting to feel comfortable in, he supposed, frowning. Finding himself being the voice of reason between Malfoy – or he should be calling him Draco now he guessed – and Umbridge was disquieting to say the least.

Harry was hoping that would be one of the reasons people voted for him. People were safe and happy and had been feeling that for a good long time so some of their natural compassion had been rekindled. Therefore they had not initially taken to Umbridge's extreme policies, though now in the face of attacks, allegedly carried out by Dark wizards, she was gaining momentum.

Harry smiled thinking how positively furious Umbridge must have been when he came out in support of Draco. Unconditionally. It wasn't as if he owed the man anything, but Harry knew that he had nothing to do with this attack.

As he crossed the road and entered the pub, he recognised that his little meeting with Draco would not go unnoticed by the media and that tomorrow the two of them would probably be front-page news. The idea didn't annoy him as much as he thought it would. Perhaps because he knew what it was like to be unfairly judged and pilloried by the press.

He'd even had the Chief Warlock owl him asking if he knew what he was doing backing Malfoy.

Harry could easily see why people still carried that distrust of the Malfoy name around – some people had long memories. However he wondered why it didn't seem to be the case with Umbridge. The public seemed to have overlooked, or forgiven her reign of terror during the war and the only thing he could put it down to was that Umbridge's actions had at least had the illusion of being Ministry-approved at the time.

All thoughts of Umbridge fled when Harry spotted Draco already seated at a table. He was impressed at his well-made elegant clothes. The man certainly knew how to dress well, Ginny had once said. She was right, Harry decided.

Draco looked up and saw him, and half-rose from his seat. Harry was unsure if he should offer a hand to shake, or, ridiculously, kiss his cheek as though he were a European. It was tempting, and not just to see what the reaction would be. The past weeks working together had done a lot to familiarise their relationship into something resembling a friendship and Harry had to acknowledge that Draco was very fit, indeed.

Grinning, he sat down opposite.

"What's so funny?" Draco asked. Harry waved him aside.

"Nothing. Occasionally I'll have fun imagining doing something totally outrageous that would make the journalists all wet themselves in their excitement to print it."

Draco gave him a weird look. "Who knew you had a sense of humour, Potter?"

"I always did," Harry responded. "You just never bothered noticing it. Couldn't see past this," he said, pointing to his forehead. "Just like everyone else."

Harry laughed to see Draco bristle. Not that he'd meant to insult him but it was true.

"I was always the only one who told you how useless you were. The truth, in other words," Draco said, an underlying hiss of anger in his voice.

"That may be the case, but because of this scar you assumed too much about me, just like everyone else did. Most of them were wrong, too. No offence meant, Draco."

It was impressive to see how much Draco had matured, Harry thought, watching him count to ten or imagining flying daggers making mince meat out of Harry's head while he settled down and didn't bite back.

"All right, you may have a point. Not as if we both haven't made assumptions about each other in the past but we're moving past that into some other sort of relationship, aren't we?"

Harry laughed. "What sort of relationship are you after, Draco?" he asked, enjoying the teasing.

And the faint blush across Draco's cheeks. Harry decided that it might be nice to see the colour bleed deeper across Draco's face. Red blood staining those porcelain cheeks.

Marginally surprised at himself, he let Draco off the hook. "I'm sorry, that was inappropriate."

"Perhaps," Draco acknowledged.

A waiter arrived and they both ordered drinks. When he left, Harry noticed a glint of mischief in Draco's eyes and he smiled, intrigued.

Draco leaned forward across the table. "Tell you what. You tell me what outrageous thing you felt like doing and I'll tell you what sort of relationship I thought of."

Harry's eyes narrowed, wondering what sort of game Draco was playing. It did cross his mind that he might be gathering information to use against Harry at some point closer to the election, but that didn't seem to fit what he'd seen of Draco the past few weeks. And whilst Draco had a history of not being any friend to Harry that was way longer than his history of being friendly, Harry felt he could trust this more.

Decision made, Harry grinned and leaned closer to Draco so that their faces were only inches apart. "Deal," he whispered, letting his eyes wander over Draco's face, across high cheekbones and sculpted eyebrows, down a long elegant nose to the surprisingly soft-looking lips. When Draco unconsciously licked them, Harry couldn't drag his eyes away. "I had thought you looked very elegant sitting here and wondered how berserk the press would go if I leant down and kissed you in greeting."

He had no idea how the atmosphere had suddenly turned serious. Even the mischievous look in Draco's eyes had disappeared and become charged with something Harry had seen in them once before. That of a trapped animal whose only thought was to escape.

"Oh, really?" Draco breathed out. He sat back, leaving Harry blinking at the distance and, he was sure, blushing at the admission and what he felt was probably a pretty obvious desire to do just what he'd said.

The waiter returned at that point with their drinks, which gave them an excuse for silence. Harry picked his up, kicking himself that he might have ruined their hard-won friendship.

"I had a dream once," Draco started when the waiter left. Harry looked up to see Draco staring out of the window, across the river. He was just about to say something, but Draco opened his mouth to continue and Harry saw the sudden flush across his cheeks, so he waited. "I had a dream once where you had me bent over the back of a couch fucking me."

Harry was glad he hadn't had a mouthful of drink or he would have choked on it. "You did?" was all he could manage and even that was squeaky.

Draco nodded and looked down at his drink.

"And that was what you thought of when I asked about…?"

Draco nodded once more.

"Oh," Harry replied, still shocked but recovering quickly. "Well, I expect that could be arranged easily enough. How strong is your couch?"

He grinned, as Draco looked up, shocked. "I didn't say I wanted it, Harry," Draco warned. "I was just keeping my end of the deal. You asking that question gave me a flash of that dream. That's it."

"But why that dream? Why not something else?" Harry pressed.

"I'd rather change the subject, if you don't mind. I'm only going to dig myself further into a hole and I have no desire to be sitting here with you watching my every word."

Harry ran his finger around the rim of his glass while he thought, watching how discomfited Draco was becoming. He had no desire to make him feel uncomfortable. He nodded. "All right, just to let you know that the offer is there if you change your mind."

Draco laughed softly at that. "It would be rather an outrageous thing to do and make the press … what did you say … wet themselves trying to be the first to print it."

Harry was glad to see the tension lift from Draco's shoulders, though he was still intrigued by the whole thing. "Oh, no, that would be something I would prefer to keep all to myself."

Draco gave him a searching look for a few moments and then nodded and smiled and, more importantly, changed the subject.

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Over the next few weeks, several things happened to change the face of the election campaign. There had been no more attacks on Muggleborns, something for which both Harry and Draco were grateful. And a woman had come forward claiming that during the war, Umbridge had sent her mother to China in exile, breaking her wand and altering her memory to the point where she thought she was a Chinese villager who lived and worked in the rice fields.

Of course the press jumped on the story as it was one that had not been included in the list of misdeeds Umbridge had been jailed for at the end of the war, but as there were no witnesses, the victim had never been found and no other form of evidence provided, it pretty soon went the way of all uncorroborated stories and was quickly labelled rubbish.

Umbridge launched a counter-attack by hinting, in a very oblique way, that perhaps someone with a vendetta against her might have deliberately planted the story. Someone who had a lot to lose if she rose to power and the Death Eaters were exiled as per her platform.

When approached at one of their twice-weekly dinners, Draco gave the journalists scathing looks and said that he was fairly sure that if he did plan an attack on the likes of Umbridge then he would do so only with incontrovertible proof of her guilt. Harry added that the poor woman was missing her mother and merely wanted some way of getting her back. Whether or not Umbridge had been responsible for her disappearance was irrelevant and the Ministry should be investigating the whereabouts of the mother.

Draco finished off his statement by reminding the journalists that whoever won the election was only one voice in the Wizengamot and any change in policy would be voted on by the entire group and perhaps it was Miss Umbridge herself that had unrealistic visions of grandeur in assigning more power to her vote than there actually would be.

Draco realised that he had probably made more of an enemy of Umbridge with that statement, but he felt that it was worth it. Perhaps people needed to be reminded what a despot she had been during the war and even during her time at Hogwarts. She had just taken over; working her little schemes into such a tightly legislated blanket of authority that no one had any room to manoeuvre or veto anything.

She needed to be stopped.

"Well done," Harry whispered in his ear as the reporters finally left them alone for the evening.

Draco smiled, ignoring the way Harry's breath rose the hair on his neck with its passing. "I thought the public needed reminding of what she was like. They're too taken in with this false 'redeemed' act of hers."

"They are at that. She worries me, though. Until you see the evil she is capable of, she comes across as a sweet little old lady that wouldn't harm a fly."

"But people should remember that. It's not ancient history. The war was only ten years ago, Harry," Draco protested.

"Another lifetime to some of these people and a lot of her supporters are Muggleborns, some of them young enough to have missed the war altogether."

Draco sighed. "Still, I wish she would stop singling me out for suspicion every time something happens. My backers are not happy."

"What will they do?"

Draco shook his head. "Nothing they can do, just work with me to negate all the bad publicity. You know the new wing at St. Mungos opens next week?"

"I do. You sent me an invitation, remember?"

"I did?" Draco looked confused.

"Maybe it was Gwynne."

Draco laughed. "All right, I can see her doing that." He should have a word to her. Regardless of how long she had been his secretary, she should keep her nose out of his love life. He'd thought it amusing at first, but her persistence was surprising.

When he'd asked her about it, she merely pointed to the picture that had graced the front page of the newspaper after their first meeting over drinks. Some enterprising reporter had managed to get a shot of them when they'd been leaning over the table to each other. It looked like they were about to kiss and it carried a headline claiming something similar.

"He looks like he's ready to eat you and you look like you're about to let him."

Draco would have admonished her, but she was right.

He looked at Harry now and wondered fleetingly what he would think if he suddenly decided to take him up on his offer of all those weeks ago. Ridiculous. He had a campaign to run. And win. There were too many people counting on him, he had no time for a personal life.

"You will be coming, I assume?" he asked instead.

"Of course, wouldn't miss it for the world," Harry replied. Damn he looked good, Draco thought, allowing himself to dream again. He should really stop it. There was no room for a secret messy affair with his rival. Maybe when this was all over with …

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"Damn it, Harry, I didn't know you were bringing a date," Draco said as he greeted Harry and Ginny at the entrance to the new medical wing of St. Mungos.

Harry laughed as he shook Draco's hand, and then pulled him in for a one-armed hug. "She's not a date, date. Ginny is a friend," he replied. "You know you're the only one for me," he added in a whisper right into Draco's ear. He grinned internally as he felt Draco's shiver, knowing the man wasn't as immune as he liked to think. Despite evidence to the contrary, Harry was not oblivious to the subtle signals Draco was sending him. And if he didn't have the serious responsibility of trying to win this election, he would have pressed Draco into admitting the desire.

Sometimes holding back was harder than a man should have to bear, though. Like now when he had the solid warmth of Draco in his arms, he could quite easily Apparate them both back to his place and spend the evening naked and enjoying themselves so much more than they would attending this opening.

Alas, that was not to be, he sighed as he stepped back and released Draco. "Ginny offered to come and keep the kindly ladies from the Auxiliary away. For some reason they keep wanting to set me up with their daughters."

Ginny laughed and lightly smacked his arm. "If you'd tell them you'd rather their sons I am sure they would oblige. They'd be lining up all the eligible bachelors for you, the best the Wizarding world has to offer, all laid out for you for the taking."

Harry had visions of all the spotty youths lined up waiting for an audience with him. He wrinkled his nose. "No offence, Gin, but I think I'd rather find my own blokes. Besides, I am not ready for the world at large to know I prefer co–"

"You're just a coward, Harry." Ginny glared at him. Then she turned to Draco. "Sorry, Malfoy. Harry is being an arse again." She held out her hand and Draco shook it, looking, Harry thought, rather like he'd walked in on his parents having sex. "Very glad to be here, the hospital has needed this wing for years."

"Yes, well …" Draco stammered slightly, still looking bemused. "Least we could do, really. Now pregnant witches have a dedicated birthing wing that will ensure the best treatment available."

By the end of the sentence Harry felt Draco had stepped into his public speaking mode and was sounding much more like himself. He grinned and shook Draco's hand once more.

"I will thank Gwynne for inviting me, but if you wanted a date, all you had to do was ask."

He grabbed Ginny's arm and sauntered off, satisfied that he'd managed to leave Draco speechless once more.

"Harry, tell me you don't have a thing for Malfoy," Ginny demanded when they'd moved out of the earshot of everyone.

"I don't have a thing for Malfoy?" Harry dutifully responded.

She gasped. "Oh, Merlin, you do, don't you?"

"No, Gin, it's nothing. You have to admit, though, he's pretty fit."

"Harry Potter, I know you better than you know yourself, obviously. It's written all over your face. That photo in the paper was right, wasn't it? It wasn't just a lucky shot misinterpreting the emotions on your face, was it?"

"Ginny …" he warned.

"Don't you 'Ginny' me, Harry. Tell me the truth."

"Well, all right, yes I do seem to have developed a thing for him. But nothing will come of it, we're both in this election to win and neither of us would if they knew we were shagging each other."

"I understand all that but where did this thing come from? You never showed the slightest interest in him before. In fact, I would say that you almost actively disliked him."

"You're sounding like Hermione now," Harry said, seeing her pose; hand on hips and indignant look on her face.

"Stop trying to change the subject," she growled, almost stamping her foot in impatience.

Harry sighed. "After that time we ran into Umbridge in the pub and I stood up for Draco, he asked me for drinks to say thanks for defending him. We've been having drinks or dinner a couple of nights a week

since then. No big deal, we're just working together to undermine Umbridge, that's all."

Ginny shook her head impatiently. "I know all that, I see you two in the paper all the time. I never thought anything of it until now. When did this thing develop?"

"I have no idea. When I saw him waiting for me at that first drinks invitation I wanted to kiss him hello and that didn't shock me. So, I examined why that might be and realised that I'd been thinking of him as bloody good to look at for a while. I have recently discovered that he's also good company." Harry shrugged. "He can still be an arrogant arse at times, but he's pretty well schooled most of that out of himself for this campaign and I like what I see. Is that so wrong?"

"Merlin, no, Harry, its bloody amazing." Ginny stifled a giggle and Harry realised that he'd missed the point where she let her impatience go.

"And why is that?"

"Because you two could have saved yourself a lot of angst if you'd realised that back in school. You could have been shagging instead of fighting."

"Ginny!" Harry laughed, tossing up whether to be scandalised or amused.

"It's true!" she insisted. "I would have watched that."

"What?"

"Well, two hot blokes going at it putting as much passion into that as you did into hating each other would have been something incredible to see. I'm only human, Harry."

"Keep your fantasies to yourself. Who's to say he wants anything like that to do with me? And anyway,

Draco and I are in an election campaign and neither of us can afford to be caught up in some sordid scandal."

"Nothing sexual between you and Draco could ever be classed as sordid, Harry." Ginny walked off, a little skip in her step, and Harry groaned at the amount of teasing he was going to be on the receiving end of now Ginny had discovered his secret. He wondered if there was a way he could surprise her with a silencing hex? Considering the consequences – one of her famous bat-bogey hexes – he decided against it and made a vow instead that he'd find something embarrassing to tease her with.

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"I am amazed no one has picked up on this before," Hermione said, looking between Draco and Harry.

"As I keep telling you, Hermione, there is nothing to pick up on," Harry insisted.

Draco sat there, letting the argument go on around him. Harry had agreed to let the bushy haired Granger attend their dinner, so he could deal with the harridan. He had never been able to stand hearing her shrill voice. Even before he knew she was a Mudblood, he'd hated that voice and had been relieved beyond words when she had been sorted into Gryffindor.

"Harry, you're having dinner or drinks with Malfoy more than once a week. You don't even have meals

with Ron and I that much."

"I do so! I virtually live with you two."

"Only for the campaign," she pointed out, reasonably. "Besides," she added, tiredly. "It's written over both of your faces."

Draco frowned. What was written over his face?

"Now you're just making things up, Hermione," Harry retorted, looking flustered.

"What is she talking about, Harry?" Draco asked.

Harry sighed. "Hermione thinks that we have been spending so much time together that the press will soon start making up rumours of an affair. She thought that if she began attending our dinners they would be seen more as business dinners and would put a stop to any rumours."

"But it's all rather pointless seeing as you two can't keep your eyes off each other anyway," Hermione said.

Draco risked a glance at Harry only to see him doing the same thing. Damn, it really was that obvious. Shit.

He stood up. "Right," he said and then stopped. What could he say? Deny it and lie or make up some lame excuse and end up looking like a fool? There was no other way around it, though, he would have to go. There could be no more dinners and drinks at least until after the election and even then maybe not. Unless Umbridge won and neither of them had any further public obligations to the Wizarding world. But that could not be allowed to happen and so Draco took the only way open to him.

"Well, this has been lovely, but I must go. See you round, Harry, Granger." He nodded and left, carrying as much of his dignity on the outside as he could, upset and embarrassed on the inside.

He made it as far as the foyer before Harry caught up with him.

"Draco, wait," Harry called.

Draco almost didn't. What good could come of having this sort of discussion in the middle of the foyer in the restaurant after just having stormed away from the table only five minutes after arriving? But the tone in Harry's voice called to him and he turned anyway, knowing that this could be the biggest mistake of his political career.

"Harry, don't say anything, please. Who knows who might be listening around here and apparently people can read our faces. I'd rather not have the public aware of my every thought and spoken word, thank you very much."

Harry threw up a privacy shield and Draco sighed. "That doesn't help. According to Granger we might as well be scrolling a monologue across our foreheads spelling out every thought and desire." Damn, he should not have used that word, because Harry's green eyes deepened.

"We've been stepping around this long enough, Draco. I know you think about me bending you over that couch, and to be honest, I haven't been able to get it out of my mind since you told me about it. We should do something about that before we do something inappropriate in public."

"We're adults, Harry and we both know that neither of us can afford the scandal. I don't have to like it but I do have to face reality. I have an obligation to my backers to do everything I can to win this seat so we have a voice on the Wizengamot."

"Who says anyone has to know?" Harry insisted. For an instant it shut Draco up and for that same instant he stared hard at Harry determining if there was any possible way…

No! It just couldn't be. Not now, maybe not ever. The injustice of that hurt, but the resolution made, he recovered his dignity and his face became impassive. "Look, I'll come back and have dinner with the two of you to try and help put the lid on any rumours but you have to keep Granger in line and no more talk of an affair," he said, adding no matter how much I might want one to himself.

Harry looked back at him and, obviously seeing how he'd steeled his features to give nothing away, finally nodded reluctantly and dropped the privacy shield. "All right, have it your way."

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"Draco, something must be done about these attacks," Thaddeus Cooper said, tossing the newspaper onto Draco's desk. "The families are becoming paranoid. They've all been questioned over this latest attack and are beginning to isolate themselves for fear of being spat on in the streets again."

"I know, sir." Draco sighed and scanned the article once more, frowning over three more attacks on Muggleborns. Once more Dark magic had been used. He wished there was something he could do about it; the loss of life was appalling enough but to have his backers' families suspected was damaging not only to his own campaign, but also to the unity of the Wizarding world. There were too many people who remembered Voldemort and the fear he engendered.

"I've been questioned as well," Draco said. He was only thankful that when these latest atrocities had been carried out he was dining with Harry, Granger and the Weasel so he had an alibi. It hadn't stopped

the media from reporting that once again he had been questioned, only this time they did mention that he had a solid alibi.

"Do the authorities have any idea who this might be?"

Draco could see the worried look on Thaddeus' face. He'd been elected as the head of the Dark Pureblood families when they'd needed someone to guide them through the minefield of renegotiating their place in a post-war world and he took it seriously. He ran a successful import/export business that bought and sold antique furniture; a family business handed down through many generations. An older wizard, with grown-up children, he was neutral during the war and considered by all families to be a wise choice.

And he had been, too, but if the perpetrator of these attacks wasn't caught soon, all their good work would be undone and nothing Draco could do would change that.

Draco shook his head in response. "Are you quite sure that none of the families had anything to do with this?"

His question was met with a hard stare. "If I didn't understand you were as worried by this as I am, I would be insulted by that question."

"I know and I apologise, but it needed to be asked. If I might make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead."

"It might be advisable to put a watch on Dolores Umbridge. She appears to have the most to gain from discrediting me."

Thaddeus nodded. "We had thought of that. What about Potter? He is still leading according to the polls

and it would seem that he has as much to gain by this as Umbridge."

Draco shook his head. "Harry doesn't work that way. He'd rather win in a fair fight than do anything underhanded. Besides, if he were going to discredit anyone it would be Umbridge. He and I have an agreement, so I know for a fact that there is no love lost between those two. No, Umbridge is the one we should be watching. Perhaps some surveillance to see who she interacts with?"

"One of our trusted members is organising that as we speak."

"Should I ask who?"

"You don't need to know, but when he's not upholding the honour of his family name in public, he is an Unspeakable. No need to tell you that the information goes no further," Thaddeus warned.

"No need at all," Draco replied, knowing instantly to whom Thaddeus was referring. What sort of Pureblood would he be if he had not done his homework on the families that wanted to back him? Draco approved. Jacques Cervone was a good choice.

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That was rather unfortunate timing.

What was?

The attack on the Muggleborns.

How so?

Haven't you seen the paper? Malfoy had a cast- iron alibi.

He did?

Hm, yes, he was having dinner with Potter and his two sidekicks.

Interesting. They seem to be seeing rather a lot of each other.

That is interesting. No one would believe it, though.

Oh, I don't know. Where there is smoke there is fire.

Part 2. "Harry, I think you should come and listen to this," Hermione called. Harry finished cutting his sandwich, picked up his drink and made his way to the lounge where Ron and Hermione were sitting listening to the wizarding wireless.

"What's up?" he asked, taking a seat on the couch beside Hermione.

"Sh, they're talking to Umbridge," she replied. "Ron, turn it up."

Ron dutifully did as he was bid but not without a roll of his eyes and a wry grin at Harry who returned it. Both of them accepted that Hermione liked to boss them around; Harry knew it was one reason Ron had grown out of his crush on her not long after the end of the war. Apparently while they were in danger it was all right because she was the brains of the outfit and she always knew best. After the war, when there was no need for that level of trust and quick thinking, her bossiness had worn thin. Still they were both happier being friends and that suited Harry just fine, too. He didn't have to play relationship counsellor, which was just as well because he was pretty shit when it came to sorting out emotional problems that weren't his own.

Harry turned his attention to the radio to hear the girlish tones that never failed to make his stomach clench.

Dyllis, in light of recent attacks on the poor Muggleborn witches and wizards, it seems prudent to reassess the situation regarding the convicted Death Eaters in custody. Forgive me …

Harry cringed as he heard that revolting little laugh.

… but it would be remiss of the Ministry to overlook the potential for evil that these people represent.

Are you suggesting then, Miss Umbridge that the Ministry look at creating new laws that allow for extending sentences of Death Eaters?

I would suggest that these Death Eaters be exiled, Dyllis, as you very well know. I have been campaigning on that platform since the beginning.

Your rivals in this election campaign have different views. Mister Potter suggests a term of community service and a restriction on the spells allowed. With Mister Potter being such a hero to everyone, what do you say to that?

If I might make the teeniest observation, Dyllis. I think I know Mister Potter better than most people, having taught him at Hogwarts, and it is my opinion that he has a history of showing little respect to our laws. Several of the Education decrees I was required to issue in my tenure there related directly to the activities of Mister Potter.

Ron snorted. "I reckon she might have shot herself in the foot with that one, Harry," he said. "Everyone knows that as a teacher she stunk as bad as Merlin's saggy drawers."

"People have short memories when it comes to some things," Hermione argued. "She's not making any huge claims against Harry, just intimating that he was a bit of a troublemaker. She's not even lying, really, you were," Hermione said, giving Harry a comforting smile.

"Not like I didn't have a valid excuse, though," Harry grumbled although he knew she was right. Suddenly he didn't feel like his sandwich anymore.

So, if you were to be elected, what would you do?

Dyllis, were I to be elected I would press the Minister to enact an emergency decree, of which I would be only too honoured to head as High Overseer, which would state that the High Overseer had supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges as pertains to inmates of Azkaban, with the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges as may be ordered by the Wizengamot. *

So you would have the power to override the Wizengamot in matters of sentences?

Well, someone must be seen to be protecting the public, Dyllis, and I would see it as my duty to ensure and oversee their safety.

I see. I suspect that Mister Malfoy would argue against this decree as he claims that under the present laws once a prisoner has served his or her sentence they should be free to rejoin society.

Forgive me, Dyllis, but Mister Malfoy would allow these prisoners free access to the very people that were victims in the war. I have it on good authority that he and Mister Potter have become very close friends of late. Mister Potter is easily led and one would hope that Mister Malfoy is not using their …

There was another girlish, breathy giggle here that made Harry feel ill.

… closeness to influence him in other unnatural ways.

What are you implying, Miss Umbridge?

Why, I am not implying anything, dear Dyllis, but Mister Potter and Mister Malfoy meet regularly and I feel rather sidelined by my opponents. But then I am a fussy old woman and those two very young men obviously have other things to discuss.

"Bloody hell, turn it off, Ron!" Harry exclaimed.

"She's doing it again," Hermione said, a deep frown on her face. "Did you recognise that decree she was blathering on about?"

"No, why?" Ron replied after switching off the radio and the irritating voice.

"I remember," Harry said soberly. "That was almost word for word from one of her Educational Decrees back in school. The one she used to override McGonagall's punishment of me and George for thumping Malfoy at that Quidditch game."

"Exactly, Harry, she's trying to set herself up as the one with the power again. Legislating people into submission through fear. Once she gets you into the prison system she can do whatever she likes with you."

"People aren't going to fall for that, Hermione," Ron disagreed. "The rest of the Wizengamot won't give her that sort of power. Will they?"

"You remember what she was like, Ron. Somehow she had the ear of the Minister and he gave her whatever she wanted. It wouldn't take much for her to scheme and plot to do the same with key members of the Wizengamot."

"She's not learned one thing, has she?" Harry asked.

"It appears not. And people will give her that power unless this person attacking Muggleborns is caught. People will get scared there's another Voldemort on the way."

"Then we have to stop her. You just have to get elected instead, Harry," Ron said gloomily. Then he brightened. "No problem. You're leading the polls anyway and once we get you some airtime you can

refute every word she says."

"I'd rather just ignore her and hope she goes away," Harry replied. "And where does she get off insinuating that stuff about me and Draco?"

"Insinuating what?" Ron asked, mystified.

"That were more than friends, or weren't you listening to the same thing?"

"But you aren't more than friends, so what's the big deal?"

"We could be," Harry admitted quietly waiting for the explosion.

It never came. Harry looked up and saw Ron looking at him blankly. Then he shrugged. "Whatever floats your boat, mate."

"It's a good thing we're attending all your dinners from now on, isn't it?" Hermione added.

"Yeah, well he can't afford any more adverse publicity either."

"Hopefully the public is as thick as Ron regarding that insinuation and they won't pick up on it," Hermione said.

Harry wasn't sure there was much chance of that and he sighed and rubbed his hands through his hair, frustrated that there appeared little he could do to stop people listening to Umbridge's rubbish. He looked at his poor sandwich sitting on the plate and smashed his fist into it, flattening it.

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Draco read the report in his hand for about the tenth time that day. He'd discussed it with Thaddeus when he'd delivered it and again with Wendell Hoggs and they'd both been of the same opinion. There was a lot of circumstantial evidence, but no proof. There was nothing he could do about any of it without more information and some hard evidence.

It all boiled down to one thing, though. Umbridge was behind the attacks on the Muggleborns, if not directly, then by association.

Harry needed to know this information, so he'd sent him an owl asking him over to the flat for dinner that night. This was not something that could be dealt with in a letter or in a public forum.

He left the report on the table and went to prepare. He dressed neatly, if casually, not unaware that he would have Harry in his own place, alone. Not that he could do or expect anything; it was too dangerous. But the fervent wish was there and he hoped both of them would remain sensible and mature about this situation.

The doorbell rang and he gave himself one final cursory glance in the mirror before he went to greet his guest.

Opening the door, he smiled at Harry who handed him a bottle of wine and entered. Sometimes Draco

regretted his choice of career. Almost any other one and he'd be able to act on this attraction he had developed for Harry. Especially as he looked rather edible. So edible that it made him frown.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just lamenting the fact that I will have you here all to myself all evening and not be able to do anything about it," he replied with forthright honesty. Something about Harry Potter made him want to be upfront with him. He saw Harry's eyes soften into regret as well.

"Well I hope you don't have reporters camped out on your front lawn or no matter what we do or don't do, they'll make up their own stories anyway."

"Oh, you caught Umbridge's unfortunate observations, did you?"

"And pretty much admitted to Ron and Hermione that we could have had a relationship, or something like one, had we not been involved in this election campaign."

Draco led Harry to the lounge and indicated that he sit. Then he took a seat opposite. "How did they take that? Or rather how did the Weasel take that? Granger already assumed as much."

"He was good, actually."

Draco raised an eyebrow but refrained from making any comment. He wasn't going to get into an argument about the Weasel; they had more important matters to discuss.

"He was!" Harry insisted. Draco nodded and directed the house-elf to bring them drinks and serve dinner in ten minutes.

"I'll take your word for it," he said, reaching for the report Thaddeus had given him.

"So, there was something you wanted to speak to me about?" Harry asked, looking curiously at the report in Draco's hands.

"Hm," Draco started. "It has to do with our favourite political opponent. I've had someone very trustworthy following her and looking into who she sees and where she goes. Surveillance that isn't covered by the press as part of her campaign. I'll bet you'll never guess who her private but rather constant companion is."

Harry shook his head.

"None other than Argus Filch."

Harry's mouth dropped open in shock and Draco rather liked seeing it like that if the twist in the base of his stomach was any indication.

"I thought he would be dead by now," Harry said. "He was old when we were at Hogwarts. I suppose that might explain how someone got hold of your medical records, then."

"That is, unless it's some sort of coincidence."

Harry shook his head. "I doubt it. I remember Filch had this unhealthy obsession with her while she was there. I think she might have promised him he could torture rule-breaking students by using corporal punishments."

"Oh, now you have given me the most awful vision of Umbridge in chains and Filch salivating all over her." Draco shuddered.

Harry almost choked on his drink. "I'll remember that next time I need to stop thinking dirty thoughts about what I'd like to do to a certain someone."

Draco laughed. Although he thought it might come in useful for himself, if it came to that.

"That's not all, though. My investigator delved a little deeper, looking for something that might connect her to these attacks on Muggleborns. Filch has a brother, Artemis. Now while Filch is a squib, his brother isn't. The family is Halfblood and Artemis approached one of the old Pureblood families asking for permission to marry their daughter. Emmaline was only twenty-five years old and Artemis is in his seventies."

Harry scrunched up his nose. "I bet they rejected it."

"They did, but not for the grounds you might think. Age disparity has little relevance to Pureblood traditions of arranged marriages and Emmaline is considered to be way past marital age. I know her family quite well, and they have allowed her the option of choosing her husband herself. She wishes to marry for love, which is understandable."

"The only reason one should marry in my opinion."

"Oh, I don't know. Some of the best marriages I know are arranged, Harry. The need to continue the family line is strong in Pureblood traditions. We find ourselves weakened enough by the filtering in of Muggle blood. Don't look at me like that, I have nothing against Muggles anymore," Draco said, glaring at Harry.

"But you still perpetuate the division between wizards?"

Draco sighed. "It's a tradition. We are not bound by it and I certainly do not intend to marry but as an option, yes. Over the centuries the families have become adept in choosing well."

Harry gave him a doubtful look. "Anyway, I gather they rejected him because he is a Halfblood?"

"That was the impression they gave him, yes, but it would have actually been because she did not wish it."

"Why would they have told him that?"

"Tradition, again. Because marrying well is tradition, rejection on grounds of blood or family isn't personal, therefore no offence is meant or should be taken. It's a business transaction."

Harry shook his head. "All right, say that's why he was rejected, where does this become relevant?"

"Artemis took offence. Apparently he saw the girl and decided she would be the one to take care of him in his dotage and hasn't taken kindly to the rejection. Swearing revenge on Pureblood families, in fact."

Sighing, Harry finished off his drink and asked for another. "So, there's the connection. Someone wanting to show the Dark families in a bad light could easily influence him into these acts. I assume you have no proof that Artemis was involved."

"No, only assumptions. But I thought you should know. My contact will be staying close to him and if it is him then he will be able to stop the next attack."

"Your connection an Auror or something?" Harry asked.

"Something like that," Draco replied, giving him a meaningful look. After a second, Harry's eyebrows rose and he nodded.

"We have to stop her," Harry said.

"I know." He could only hope that Artemis would make a mistake that would enable Jacques to arrest him.

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Hours later, dinner having been eaten and enjoyed, the two of them relaxed in the lounge, the fire both warming them and giving them something to look at. Something that Harry was extremely grateful for, because as the evening wore on and the alcohol did its thing with his inhibitions, he found it harder and harder not to stare at Draco. And he rather thought the firelight casting a golden glow on that pale skin might make it too difficult to restrain himself.

"Maybe I should go," he said, and reluctantly stood, swaying dangerously and barely catching himself on the arm of the couch.

"Perhaps you'd better not be seen in public in your current state of inebriation," Draco replied, putting an arm out to steady him.

"'M good," Harry said. "Your floor keeps movin' though." He blinked several times to try and get the room to stop spinning.

"Harry, you're sloshed."

Harry shook his head, balance restored now. "Nah, not too much. Just stood up too quick, that's all." Indeed, he did feel better now he was standing.

"Why don't you stay and sleep on the couch? I can assure you it's perfectly comfortable."

Draco's hand was still on his arm and he looked at it enquiringly for several seconds before raising his eyes to Draco's. Bad mistake, he told himself immediately, because before he could stop and think about it, he'd straddled Draco's lap.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

One hand came to rest on Draco's cheek and Harry bit back a quiet whimper when Draco moved imperceptibly into it. "Been wanting to touch you all night."

"I thought we agreed …"

"Don't care," Harry interrupted. "No one can see us in here. No one will know."

"Harry," Draco said in warning, but it was a weak, whispering protest and so Harry ignored it and leaned in to taste the lips that had been teasing him for months now.

Merlin, but it was worth the wait, he thought as his lips pressed against Draco's, moving in a slow dance that he knew could easily burst into a kaleidoscope of colours and textures and tastes brilliant enough to fill the night sky.

For several long moments they kissed, the slick sounds of their lips and tongues meeting, loud over the hurried breaths they snatched when they could bear to part long enough.

Then, just as Harry's hand slid inside Draco's shirt to feel the smooth, hard chest beneath, Draco placed a hand on his and stopped him.

"Harry, no," he said, sounding as breathless as Harry felt. "We can't."

"We can," insisted Harry.

"You're drunk and you'll feel awful about it in the morning."

"Merlin, you're stupid, Malfoy," Harry teased. "I could never regret this. I've wanted this for months and so have you."

Draco frowned. "I admit that, but we have an agreement."

Harry thought he looked bloody gorgeous under him with flushed cheeks and red kiss-swollen lips. He wanted nothing more than to kiss them some more, maybe bite them.

"Bloody hell, now you go all noble on me?" he said instead.

Draco's lip quirked at that. "Who'd have thought?"

"Who, indeed," Harry said, defeated. He slid off Draco's lap and back onto the couch. "All right, so where's these blankets then? And don't be surprised if they're sticky in the morning."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Use a cleaning charm, Potter."

"Might not. Might deliberately leave it there so you know what you missed," he grouched good-naturedly.

Draco stood and called a house-elf for bedding and then smiled down at Harry. "Good night, Harry."

"Good night, Draco, thanks for dinner."

Draco leaned down and kissed him gently on the lips once more time and then with a look of regret on his face, left the room.

When morning came and Harry woke feeling rather less than human, he sighed as the memory of the kiss came to him. It really was too bad that right when he'd found someone he might like to have more than a fling with, it was the wrong time and place and with the wrong person. Almost anyone else. But, no, it had to be Draco.

The kiss was definitely worth waiting for, though, even if he had been slightly tipsy. He sighed again in fond remembrance as he stood and collected his shoes, jacket and tie and left by the front door.

Too caught up in the dull ache in his head and the memory of warm lips on his, he completely missed the telltale clicking of a camera.

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It wasn't until that evening when the paper arrived that Harry had any idea he'd been photographed coming out of Draco's. By then it was too late. Splashed across the front of the paper was a picture of a man, clearly Harry, half undressed, shirt hanging out and mostly unbuttoned, hair that looked like it had been played with and pulled at all night and with a smile on his face that made him look like the proverbial cat that ate the canary.

The accompanying article with the headline 'Is Harry taking a walk on the dark side?' was at least fair, he supposed. At least they didn't blame Draco. Mostly. Although they alluded to Draco's past, they didn't come right out and say that he'd bewitched the hero. Which was a blessing.

"Harry, how could you have been so stupid?" Hermione berated him.

"Nothing happened, Hermione. I'd just had a few too many drinks and slept on his couch. We didn't want any nosy reporters catching me leaving his place late at night."

"Instead they got you leaving his place looking like you'd been shagging all night."

Merlin, but she had a shrill voice, Harry moaned silently. "I know, I know," he replied impatiently, trying to hide the bloody awful feeling that he'd just fucked everything up.

"Well, you're going to spend the next few hours doing some damage control. You'll face the reporters and tell them exactly what happened."

"Yes, Hermione," he said, resigned to hours of plastering a smile on his face and withstanding a barrage of questions about his love life. Or rather his assumed love life. "I don't have to tell them exactly what happened, do I?" he asked cheekily. "The kiss and everything?"

Hermione spluttered and Harry saw Ron choke on his dessert. "What?"

"I kissed him."

Hermione looked ready to explode. She threw her hands in the air and with an exclamation of disgust, stormed from the room, muttering something about imbecilic boys who wasted months of good work by thinking with their dicks.

"It was a good kiss," Harry said in protest, more to himself than to anyone else.

Later, all in all, Harry felt he'd done a god job of explaining the situation and when Draco corroborated his story, he thought that the storm might just die away. However, the next day several other newspapers carried the story and included lengthy editorials on whether it was appropriate that both of them were 'fraternising with the enemy'.

When Umbridge weighed in with her opinions of same sex relationships that seemed to resonate with many of the older wizards, Harry's popularity suffered greatly and he slipped in the polls to the extent that he and Umbridge were virtually level.

While Harry had never really hidden his preference for male partners, he hadn't made a big issue of it either and so he found himself inundated with requests to speak at forums on gay issues. He took up several of them, Hermione deciding that seeing as he'd been outed as such, he may as well take advantage and try and win the gay vote. He'd tried to argue that he hadn't been outed as he hadn't officially admitted to preferring men but to no avail. When Hermione made up her mind, then nothing short of the apocalypse would make her change it.

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Draco watched the slide of Harry's popularity with a sinking sense of doom. If he were to be honest with himself, he would admit that the likelihood of winning that seat himself was now practically nil. He'd probably been too optimistic right from the start going up against Potter. But with his backers behind him and many decent, well thought of community programs to highlight his commitment, he'd thought he had a chance.

They'd both made an elementary mistake in their search for the person attacking the Muggleborns and now they were paying for it.

Slowly but surely, Draco's dream of being a respected member of the wizarding community was slipping out of his grasp. If it had ever really been there in the first place, he acknowledged morosely. What had started with so much optimism was now floundering in the mire of innuendo, supposition and suspicion.

Even Wendell walked around the office looking despondent. He'd tried to make Draco take advantage of what little information they had on several other Wizengamot members, forcing them to come out in support of Draco, but Draco refused to run that sort of campaign.

With only two weeks to go, Draco had to face the fact that he was going to be unsuccessful this time.

He didn't even contemplate becoming annoyed that once again it was Harry Potter who had bested him. The irony was not lost on him, but it seemed pointless now. All those schoolboy fights and arguments seemed childish, were childish, now that they'd grown and Draco had developed some …fondness for the ex-Gryffindor. He did, however, curse the Gods that out of all the eligible blokes in the Wizarding world, he had to fall for the golden one, when careers, society and, in all likelihood, friends decreed it could never be.

The memory of that kiss had kept Draco awake for several nights, tossing and turning and wishing for something that was impossible. He knew it; Harry knew it and they'd denied any hint of it to the world. But it haunted him and he knew that had this chance at a seat in the Wizengamot not been so important to both of them that the scenario would have played out much differently.

As it stood now, though, there was a chance that it still could. He admitted to himself that there was no prospect of himself winning the seat and therefore he hoped Harry would, but as things were heading now, even that was looking less and less likely. Which meant that neither of them would be encumbered by protocol and free to pursue this thing between them.

It was tempting. More than tempting and the vision of finally having Harry bend him over that couch made him grit his teeth and groan in frustration.

But Umbridge could not be allowed to win.

That was more important than any physical, and perhaps even emotional gratification that a liaison with Harry would give him.

Heavy hearted, he sent an owl to Thaddeus asking for an appointment.

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"I should have thought of opening the Floo to you weeks ago," Harry said smiling as Draco stepped through and brushed off an imaginary piece of soot from his shirt.

"Might have saved both of us a bit of grief, I agree," Draco replied. "But then I never thought of it, either."

"We hadn't really had a need for it before then, though."

"We learn something new every day, then," Draco said looking at Harry and giving him a warm smile. Draco realised that Harry didn't really dress any differently in public than he did in private, which, he admitted was just like Harry. Not an air or any grace whatsoever about him. It was a wonder Draco was attracted to him, really.

"Grab that bowl and come through. Ron and Hermione are out tonight, so we have the place to ourselves." Harry took two bottles of Butterbeer from the fridge.

"And you were planning on sitting around eating…what are these?" he asked, picking up the bowl and following Harry through to the lounge.

"You've never had crisps before?"

Draco shook his head.

"Just try some." Harry grinned as he sat down.

Draco narrowed his eyes, looking for a trick, but then shrugged and tried one of the oddly shaped

objects. "Hmm," he said, pleasantly surprised at the salty flavour. "Not bad."

"Yeah, Muggles are good for some things," Harry teased.

"Give me that beer, Potter." Draco sneered playfully at him, taking the proffered beer and sitting beside him on the couch.

After a few moments, Draco took a drink from the bottle, and then he looked at the beer and then at Harry. "If you're going to force me to drink this swill, the least you could have done was to put it in a glass."

Harry laughed. "Put up with it, pretty boy."

Draco huffed but remained quiet and drank his beer. "So, what did you plan to do while you ate these crisps and drank the beer?"

"Well I was going to watch some porn, but I don't think that's terribly appropriate right now, do you?"

"Hmm, maybe another time, then," Draco replied, sounding distracted.

Harry gave him a funny look and then laughed. "This couch do?" he joked, patting the padded arm. "It's a good stro–"

Draco elbowed him in the ribs. "Don't tempt me," he said.

"All right," Harry replied. "So, if you're not here for sex, why are you here?"

"I had a question for you, actually," Draco said, looking at him carefully. "If you had to compromise one part of your released prisoner platform, which part would it be? The community service or the spell restriction?"

"Oh, a serious question, then?"

Much depended on Harry's response, so he was glad when the amused expression dropped from Harry's face and Draco could virtually see him thinking. It made him want to kiss away the frown lines from Harry's forehead.

To stop him thinking in that direction, he took another drink from the bottle, diverting his eyes.

"Well," Harry began. "I won't compromise on the community service. I think that will go a long way to reuniting them with those that might have been victims of Voldemort. It will allow doubters to see they've been reformed and paid the price we asked of them as punishment for their crimes."

Draco nodded. That was what he expected. "And the spell restriction?"

"The Ministry would be monitoring them throughout their community service and I suspect there'll be random wand checks so restricting the sorts of spells they can use isn't as important. I guess if I really had to compromise one to get the law passed, then that would be it. Why?"

"No reason," Draco replied mysteriously. "It might have all been a ruse to get you alone on your sturdy couch."

"A likely story, Malfoy," Harry retorted. But he was grinning.

Draco sighed. It was ridiculously unfair. "I hate this," he finally said, draining the rest of his Butterbeer, suddenly angry at the world. "Sorry, but I'm going to go."

Draco stood up and headed for the Floo. 'I'll see you later, Harry. Thanks for the beer."

"Wait!" Harry called jumping up and grabbing him by the arm, pulling him round. "What's the matter with you?"

Draco was about to wrench his arm free and snarl just so he could leave, go away where the temptation of Harry Potter wouldn't be mocking him with every breath. But when he turned, bright green eyes caught his in concern and he was trapped.

Involuntarily, he made a soft sound of distress. He had to leave; it would only take so little, just a tiny bit more before he–

"Draco?"

Oh, don't play fair, Potter, Draco complained silently, because it was an anxious whisper, designed to grate on Draco's restraint, irritating it enough to wear him down, surely.

"Let go of me!" His growl tapered off midway as Harry held him tighter. "Let go right now or I might–"

Harry smiled in understanding. "Give in?"

"Yes!" Draco snapped unthinkingly. "I mean no!" He shook his head, his eyes widening, but still Harry merely continued to hold his arm. He sighed when Harry did nothing else, just kept his hand where it was – never backing off, never letting go.

"Why don't you, then? No one even knows you're here." Harry's voice slithered up Draco's body like warm silk, teasing, caressing, and seducing him into relenting.

And his mind began to respond in kind, helpless against his own need and Harry's proximity. Why shouldn't he enjoy this just once? Merlin knew after the election it would be out of the question completely, so … He groaned as Harry pressed closer to him and he found himself back to the wall. A leg insinuated itself between Draco's thighs and Draco wanted to rub and rub against it until he came blindingly hard.

Harry's eyes still held his effortlessly in their spell, scant inches away and Draco felt his lashes flutter when Harry's breath wafted past.

Draco growled, deep inside. Fuck it, Harry was right. No one knew he was here; it barely mattered for his own career even if someone discovered them and in that event Harry could take care of himself.

Draco knew Harry was going to win and this would be his last chance, his only chance.

The growl forced it's way from his throat and Draco only had time to notice Harry's eyes widen slightly in reaction, before he ambushed Harry's lips, the ones he'd dreamed about since their last kiss. When Harry grunted at the onslaught, Draco crowed, jubilant, and slid his tongue into Harry's open mouth finding that willing heat as available and as tasty as last time.

He barely felt Harry's hands on his hips, but he could not fail to notice the hard length rubbing at his hip. One of them moaned; it could have been Harry, it could have been himself, but it didn't matter much as he quickly became aware that he was rubbing himself on Harry's leg. They were both pushing at each other; Draco's hands slid down to grab at Harry's arse to pull him closer, to work more desperately needed friction against his aching erection.

In dire need of a breath, Draco gasped harshly, lifting his head while he still gripped Harry's bum tightly, rocking into him. Then there were teeth at his neck and fuck if having Harry biting him didn't send his arousal into a frenzy of need. Powerful hands held him and forced a rhythm that dragged a whine from him as it felt so bloody good, but nowhere near enough.

He knew later he'd feel embarrassed by all the little needy noises he was making, but when he heard

Harry moan, the thrill it sent through him, knowing he'd done that, made him realise how Harry probably appreciated knowing what effect he was having, too. After that, he barely even registered if he was making noises or not; he just gave himself over to the all-encompassing drive to hang on to Harry and hump his leg until he exploded.

"Harry," he gasped, teeth stinging his neck still and sending stabs of arousal sheeting straight to his cock. "I can't hang on any …"

"'S all right. Me either. Shit."

Even if he never got anther chance to do this, it would be worth it, was Draco's last coherent thought as his body clenched for orgasm and he came jerking and clutching at Harry, head smacking back onto the wall as he did so. He vaguely noticed that Harry pulled back from his neck and watched him as he came, but he didn't care and only just managed to hang on while Harry swore and shuddered with his own climax.

Several minutes later and Draco still had no regrets, although he thought perhaps they could have taken their time and at least undressed. He raised a hand to run through Harry's hair, feeling his head resting heavily on his shoulder.

"Well, that was …"

"Amazing. I don't know why we never did that before."

Draco frowned, the rush of responsibility crowding back down on him. There were several very pertinent reasons they had never done that before. Important ones. Draco felt stupid for letting his hormones get the better of him.

"Whilst it was very satisfying, it's not something that will be repeated. There is an election to be won and we've already had enough bad publicity about this."

Harry sighed. "I know."

"Then please let me go," Draco said, feeling edgy and in need of an escape route again. He had no desire to become all snuggly with Harry after their rather frantic frotting. He could tell himself that anyway; his body definitely wanted it and maybe his heart did, too, but his head was already jumping through the Floo home.

Harry stepped back, confusion on his face.

"I have to go, Harry, please?" His voice didn't really sound pleading at the end there, did it? He ignored Harry's frown and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. "I'm sorry, this was a mistake. It won't happen again," he said brusquely, calling out his destination and stepping into the flames, barely able to look at Harry in farewell.

When he arrived home, he slumped back against the wall, exhaling deeply feeling as if he'd run the boundaries at Hogwarts. If he could have afforded the self-pity, he thought he might cry, but he'd grown out of useless tears years ago.

He'd lied to Harry; what they'd just done could in no way be construed as a mistake. What their passion had ignited was something he'd rarely come across in his dating experiences. He didn't regret a thing and the memory of it would have to be enough to keep him going over the next several weeks, months, years. However long it took to overcome this crush.

Telling himself to get over it, he pushed away from the wall and headed for a shower. After cleaning up he slid into bed for an early night; plans for the coming day warring with the sensation of kissing Harry and ensuring he had a restless night's sleep.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention please?" Wendall called out above the crowd of journalists milling around the Atrium in the Ministry. He did not look happy and Draco accepted the reasons for that, seeing as he'd caused them, but in the end Wendall had been very professional when Draco had broken the news to him.

As the noise died down, Draco moved up beside Wendall and shook his hand before casting a Sonorous at himself and clearing his throat. When he looked around the room he saw Harry and his sidekicks standing to one side. Umbridge and her party were nowhere to be seen, which didn't surprise Draco, since he hadn't invited them.

"Ladies and gentleman, colleagues and friends," Draco started, giving Harry a warm smile. Harry looked puzzled but returned it eventually. "I've asked you all to come here today because I wish to announce that due to personal reasons I am withdrawing my candidacy for the seat in the Wizengamot as of today."

He stopped and waited for the noise to die away before he continued. He couldn't bear to look at Harry's reaction. He knew that Granger and the Weasel were probably rubbing their hands together and telling themselves that Draco withdrew because he couldn't win and was being a sore loser. Let them think what they wanted; Draco knew the reasons he was withdrawing and as long as his conscience was clear then that was all that mattered. But Harry might feel betrayed that he'd not said anything the night before.

Smiling, he held up his hand for silence. "I would like to thank all those that supported my petition and been open minded enough to allow the things that I stand for a fair hearing. My backers, the Pureblood

families, would also like it to be known that they have decided to pledge their full support to Harry Potter in his campaign. We wish him all the best of luck. Thank you."

Draco stepped away, leaving the masses of journalists all firing questions at him, none of which he intended to answer. From the corner of his eye he saw Harry making his way over, pushing through several journalists that had noticed he was in attendance and were pressing him to answer questions.

But Draco kept walking past the barricade and making his way to the lifts in order go and make his withdrawal official. Harry caught up to him just as the door was closing and he held it open and stepped inside.

"What did you do that for?" were the first words out of his mouth. "I know how much this means to you, so why?"

"There was no way I was going to win this election, Harry, we both know it. At least this way we keep Umbridge out of the Wizengmot."

"You couldn't have told me this last night?"

"I think we had other things on our minds last night." Draco was looking at Harry fondly as Harry was running one hand through his thatch of messy hair and looking adorably Harry as he did so.

Harry stopped and stepped closer to Draco, narrowing his eyes. "That was why you asked me about compromise, wasn't it?"

Draco nodded.

"That was the price for the backing of the families?"

Draco could only nod once more. Harry was standing very close, after all. And he'd just walked away from one of the great goals in his life and was feeling rather exposed and vulnerable and he absolutely did not want Harry to take advantage of that.

"So, why last night? Why did you give in?"

"Because I needed it. I wanted to know exactly what it was I'd be giving up instead of wondering for the rest of my life."

"And what happens if I say I needed it too. I need it now and will need it for a long time to come?"

"You know that can't happen, Harry," Draco replied breath coming in short gasps as Harry moved forward and pressed him to the wall of the lift.

"We both know that with all your support thrown my way, I will win this election now, and these days, those seats are for life. It won't matter what people say about me then and if I want you with me, with me you shall be."

Harry's voice, the strength and passion it was laced with caused Draco to shiver lightly in lust, or desire, or more likely, hope.

"You've given up everything, Draco. You've sacrificed yourself for the greater good. When did you become such a Gryffindor?" Harry tried to joke, but the sudden finality and the enormity of what he'd done struck Draco and all he could do was try to remember to breathe.

A soft cheek nuzzled against his. "I'll need you with me to deal with those Pureblood families of yours," Harry said. "Please? We can teach people that there is nothing to fear from the Dark families, nothing to fear about being gay. We can do it together."

It was too much. Too much emotion, too much feeling, too much Harry. He took a deep breath and

pushed Harry away. "Harry, don't push me, please. I didn't tell you anything last night because I didn't want you to feel obligated about anything at all. But all this…" he indicated between them both "…is too much like feeling obligated."

"Draco …" Draco held up his hand.

"Don't. Hear me out. I want you to think about it for a few weeks. Right now you're caught up in all the emotions of it. The thrill of victory." Draco smiled at him. "Give yourself at least until after the election to think about it. Let things settle down first or you will not do your reputation any good at all. You still have to actually win this election you know. There is still over a week to go."

"But I've known what I wanted for a long time now," Harry replied kissing Draco's nose.

"I know you think you do, but once you've been elected you might see things differently. Trust me, I'll probably be a liability to you and I'd hate that. Give it a few weeks and then if you're still interested, let me know."

Apparently, Harry saw the logic in the argument. Draco knew he was right; the public didn't need all the innuendo of the past weeks confirmed as true right away, or else they'd find many of their supporters defecting to Umbridge's camp, he was sure.

"You're being a bloody Gryffindor again. Who are you and where is the real Draco Malfoy?" Harry joked, but it was a sad joke. Draco could see the honest disappointment in Harry's eyes.

Draco allowed himself one small taste of Harry's lips. "The mark of a civilised man is the ability to make his own choices, Harry, and a true Slytherin knows the wisdom of retreat." He smiled. "By withdrawing from a fight I cannot win, I live to fight another day. There will be another seat maybe at a better time, when conditions are a bit more conducive to a win. I can fight then.

"And when you do, you will have my complete support. I will back you all the way."

"Thank you, Harry."

They pulled apart as the lift doors opened. Draco stepped out and turned to face Harry. "Goodbye."

"Not good bye, Draco. See you later," Harry said grinning. "In a few weeks I am going to come and find you and prove to you that I'm not kidding when I say I want you with me."

"We'll see," Draco replied.

The doors closed and Draco was left alone in the foyer of the electoral office, filled with a sense of satisfaction. He didn't have his career any longer, nor did he have his man, and that saddened him greatly, but there was hope for both in the future and for now they'd warded off the possibility of Umbridge winning the seat.

He felt good.

.o0o.

It appears that all has been for nought.

Someone will pay for this Argus.

Yes, milady.

Get my whip.

With pleasure.

.o0o.

Draco continued to feel good for the rest of the campaign. He refrained from contacting Harry for professional as well as private reasons, preferring to keep to himself and, for the moment, live quietly, overseeing the several community projects under his care.

Harry won the election, of course, and Draco celebrated along with everyone else.

A week after the election result was announced, Draco sat in his breakfast nook reading the paper while he sipped his morning tea. There was sun shining through his windows, underlining his feeling of well being even as it shed burnished streaks of light over his newspaper, making it impossible to read without

squinting.

Still, he didn't need to read it for the seventh time to know what it said.

Artemis Filch had decided to take his frustrations out on another Muggleborn family after the election was held. Fortunately, Jacques had been there to arrest him. Under questioning, he'd admitted to being coerced into the crimes by his brother and Dolores Umbridge. Argus and Umbridge were tried quickly, as was custom in these cases. Argus Filch was sentenced to five years in Azkaban for inciting violence. Umbridge also received five years for the same crime, and Artemis was sent to Azkaban for the rest of his natural life.

Draco felt justifiably proud of his role in their capture.

He smiled as the sun went behind a cloud and enabled him to see the writing clearly once more, because the last part of the article was his favourite. The part where Harry Potter appeared to remind the public that they had placed their suspicions on an innocent man who had sacrificed his chances at the seat in the election because of them.

Harry went on to say that he felt both Draco and the Pureblood families were owed the deepest apologies that the Wizarding world could offer and their thanks because without the investigative work done by them, Artemis might never have been caught.

Draco felt that he might be waiting until hell froze over before receiving the thanks and the apology, but he didn't mind terribly much. That Harry had publicly said he thought he deserved them were thanks enough.

There was a kind of bittersweet happiness that settled in his chest when he thought of Harry, what they'd shared and what they could have shared. He had no regrets, but at times he cursed the fact that he'd grown a social conscience and couldn't just prostrate himself naked across Harry's couch and yell, "Take me!"

Telling Harry that he'd feel differently about Draco after a few weeks of being an elected official hadn't

been a lie; nor had it been the wrong thing to say but as he sipped at his tea he wished that the hope he held deep inside that things could be different, would fade.

Surrounded by his melancholy dreams of strong, warm lips, the sound of the doorbell when it rang startled him. The ugly man who shoved parchment and quill in his face when he answered the door startled him more.

"Sign 'ere," the man said.

When Draco snatched the parchment away, he could see a long, cream couch floating serenely behind the ugly man.

Blinking in surprise, he said, "I didn't order a new couch."

"Dunno, 'bout that. Alls I know is ter deliver this 'ere to you," he replied. "'Ere, there's a note or sumfink." The man handed Draco a grubby note that looked like it had been stuffed in a dirty pocket. Draco quickly signed for the couch and stepped aside letting the piece of furniture float into the room.

He handed back the signed parchment and opened the note, thrills of anticipation fluttering in his stomach because all of a sudden he knew who it was from. He wasn't wrong.

The rest of his melancholy mood disappeared like the last wisps of fog on a spring morning as he read the note and smiled widely.

Draco,

It's a good strong couch.

I'll be there at eight.

Time to make that dream come true.

Harry.