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Chapter 1 to 13

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Chapter: 1

Part Five

Draco and Harry: Escorts in Exile

Chapter One

The minute the door shut behind them at number 12, Grimmauld Place, and their brooms were propped in a corner, Draco slammed Harry up against the wall and took his lips hungrily.

He felt a flash of immense satisfaction as he tore open Harry's shirt and heard the buttons ping against walls and floor—God, how he had missed that sound! His hands were on Harry's skin, under the torn shirt, sliding over his back and ribs… Potter's hands were on Draco's arse and the Gryffindor made an impatient, whimpering sound as he met Draco's kiss. Malfoy hoped no one was home, because there was no way in hell they were going to make it upstairs to the bedroom. It would be a miracle of restraint if he could keep from taking Harry right here in the hall.

"Have we ever made love in the parlour?" he asked, moving his mouth to Harry's beautiful neck.

"No, you hate the parlour," Harry said, moving his hands to the front of Draco's trousers and unfastening them.

"Not any more. I love the parlour. It's my favorite room," Draco said, sucking hard on Harry's throat in between words.

"Why?" Harry gasped as he slipped his hands into the open waistband and touched Draco's—*oh my fucking god that feels so fucking good—*

"Because it's six steps from here," Draco replied hoarsely and half-dragged Harry into the parlour. The tenacious Gryffindor managed not to lose his grip, earning a groan of thanks from

Draco, who pushed Harry down on the plush rug in front of the fireplace.

"Did you buy this white rug?" he asked absently, certain he had never seen it before. Potter's black hair shone like a dark beacon against the fur.

"Tonks did," Harry said and stroked. Draco heard himself moan and quickly worked on the fly of Potter's jeans.

"I'll have to buy her something in gratitude," Draco said and pushed Harry's jeans down over his hips. Harry used his teeth and free hand to tear Draco's shirt open—spilling another set of buttons. They all disappeared into the thick rug. Draco kicked his trousers off carefully, trying not to interrupt Harry's excellent rhythm.

He pressed Potter's jeans and pants down, and Harry managed to shimmy them off. Draco firmly grasped Harry's erection and grinned at Potter's sound of delight. He locked his lips onto Harry's again and moved his other hand down to fondle Potter's testicles. Harry made another squeak of pleasure and Draco felt a rush of bliss that had little to do with Harry's grip on his cock.

"Draco," Harry started, trying to speak around Malfoy's tongue.

"I need to be inside you right now, Harry," Draco whispered, breaking the kiss for a moment. Harry released him in assent and Draco prepared Potter with a quick spell and an intimate caress before slipping into *hot, tight, oh so tight, perfect,* Harry.

Draco felt like he had come home.

Harry rocked upward with his hips and wrapped his arms around Draco's waist, which made it harder for him to move, but he wouldn't complain about having Harry pressed tightly against him. Draco had spent six long months without Harry—given the choice, he would wrap himself around the Gryffindor and never let go.

Harry moved for him, using his legs to lift and thrust himself onto Draco. His mouth attached to Draco's throat, muffling the panting moans he made. Draco's toes dug into the soft rug and his hands gripped Harry's hips to assist in the pounding motion. Fuck, Harry felt amazing. Every single time was heaven.

"Draco, yes, yes, I love, love, love, love you," Harry murmured in time with his exhalations. Draco pressed his lips against Harry's neck and whispered his name in a breathy chant.

The pressure built with every gorgeous stroke and Malfoy was nearing the pinnacle when he heard the front door open. His shocked gaze met brilliant green for an instant, and then Draco felt a yanking sensation that, amazingly, triggered an incandescent orgasm.

They appeared a foot above Harry's bed and slammed onto the mattress. Harry cried out as Draco thrust into him one last time, shuddering with delight, and then Harry's nails—thankfully

short—clawed over Draco's back as he buried a scream in Malfoy's shoulder. Harry actually thrashed with the force of his release and Draco began to laugh.

"Holy fuck, how did you do that?"

Sometimes, Potter's power was a bit alarming. The Gryffindor had been nowhere near his wand, and yet he had *Apparated* them both upstairs without uttering a word.

"Sheer, bloody panic," Harry admitted.

"Well, we should add *Apparition* to our routine," Draco decided.

Harry chuckled. "Yes, let's *Apparate* all over the house while we have sex."

"You have to admit it was amazing."

Draco kissed Harry and laughed again. "I plan to make love to you in every room in this house, anyway. I won't cross off the parlour yet, as we were not quite finished in there."

Harry's breath hitched and Draco smiled, heady with power. It was incredible that he could make Potter's heart leap with a few murmured words.

"I'd better go and greet the Lupins," Harry said and Draco obligingly shifted off the Gryffindor. Potter cleaned them up with another wordless spell that left Draco gasping—"A bit of warning would be appreciated!"—and then dragged on a pair of jeans. He yanked a t-shirt over his head and Draco swung his legs off the bed and sat up.

"Hey, Harry," Draco said when the Gryffindor started out. "Come here."

Harry gave him a curious look, but returned to the bed. Draco dragged him down for a searing kiss that left Potter looking decidedly dazed.

"I love you, Harry," Draco said softly and rumpled his black hair affectionately. Harry clung to him for a moment.

"I'm so glad you're home," Harry said and caressed Draco's cheek as he pulled away. He resolutely walked to the door again, and then looked at Draco expectantly. Malfoy laughed.

"I'll be right down. Just let me grab some clothes."

Harry grinned and went out.

ooOoo

Harry was so happy he could have floated without a Flying Spell. Six months of horrific, bleak

loneliness and pain had been washed away as though it had never been.

Draco was back.

He tripped down the stairs and nearly ran into Tonks, who held a squirming, fussy bundle in her arms. She caught sight of Harry's silly, dazed grin and smiled brightly.

"Looks like we interrupted something," she said suggestively. "Sorry about that, although perhaps the parlour wasn't the wisest choice for you, eh?"

Harry laughed. "No, probably not, but we… got carried away."

Tonks grinned. "Well, I'm just pleased to see you've stopped moping about, mourning that bastard cousin of mine. Who is the new flame? Anyone we—*oh.*"

Her words snapped off as her gaze went to the stairs. Harry turned to see Draco descending like Apollo from Mt. Olympus, looking decidedly godlike in black trousers and nothing else.

"Hello, cousin," Draco said amiably.

"Draco," Tonks snapped with a voice like iron. Harry felt the sudden tension in the air. Bloody hell, Tonks—and everyone else—thought Draco had mercilessly dumped Harry and disappeared for six months. Tonks and Lupin, especially, had borne the brunt of Harry's withdrawal from everything resembling a life after Draco's departure.

Malfoy continued down the steps until he stood next to Harry. The infant clasped in Tonks's arms let out a mighty shriek and thrashed, working herself up to a red-faced rage. Tonks sighed.

"She's been in a bloody dither all day. When I put her down, she wants up. When I pick her up, she wants down."

Draco held out his hands. "May I?" he asked. Both Harry and Tonks stared at him in surprise, but the baby's screams approached ear-piercing and Tonks handed her over.

Draco held the infant like an expert and the cries silenced instantly as she gazed up into Malfoy's face.

Apparently, no one is immune to his charm, Harry thought wryly. She wrapped a chubby fist around the long finger Draco offered and made a happy coo. Draco grinned.

"What's her name?" he asked softly.

"Lyra," Tonks admitted grudgingly. Draco looked at her pointedly and she grinned with a shrug. "Yes, I named her after a damned constellation, curse it all. But it was a fitting name."

"It's perfect," Draco said. Harry had already remarked on the fact that Lyra seemed to be a throwback to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. She had the same platinum blonde hair as Draco, though her eyes were still baby blue. It remained to be seen if they would change color.

"She looks like our mums," Tonks said. With Draco holding her, Lyra looked like his daughter.

"We'll be in my room," Draco informed them and took Lyra down the hall to the study—"his room."

Tonks fixed Harry with a steely gaze as he sidled past her into the parlour and began to Summon assorted items of clothing. Tonks followed.

"Look, I know he's my cousin, but he's bloody bad news, Harry. How can you just let him waltz back in here and turn your head? He smashed your heart against the wall without a second thought—"

"He was captured and tortured for six months," Harry said quietly. "It probably would not have taken so long, but he kept resisting the *Imperius Curse*."

Tonks looked properly horrified.

"The former Death Eater, Mulciber, meant to trap us both. It nearly succeeded. One of us should be dead." Harry smiled sadly. "He never would have left me like that. Part of me knew it all along, but I stupidly refused to acknowledge it. I won't make that mistake again."

"Oh God," Tonks said and sank into a chair. "I can't believe it. I had no trouble believing the worst of him."

Harry sighed. "We're all guilty of that. I plan to spend the rest of my life making it up to him."

He used his wand to banish the clothing upstairs and Tonks said, "Does that mean we'll be finding buttons all over the house again?"

Harry Summoned those that had fallen into the rug. A small pile appeared in his hand and he grinned. Tonks sighed, but smiled. She looked confused for a moment.

"How did you get upstairs when we came in?"

Harry raised a brow at her. "Best not to know. Where's Remus?" Harry asked as he pocketed the buttons, changing the subject.

"In the kitchen, making lunch."

"Well, now Draco's back, we will all be spared our own atrocious cooking, at any rate."

Tonks got a faraway look and her lips parted in a way that hinted strongly of true love.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Just thinking of Malfoy's cannelloni."

Harry's expression joined hers. "Oh yes, and his Paella Valenciana."

"Bloody hell, yes."

They stared at each other with visions of gastronomic bliss lighting their features.

"I'm so glad he's back," Tonks said with a laugh.

"Me, too."

After a quick lunch and a brief reunion with Lupin, Harry went to the study and found Draco sound asleep on the sofa with three-month old Lyra cuddled on his bare chest, also asleep.

Tonks joined him and heaved a deep sigh at the sight.

"They look like angels," she whispered.

"We could be looking at the two most beautiful people on the entire planet," he replied quietly.

"Oh! Let me get the camera!" She brandished her wand and quickly Summoned a camera. A photo was quickly snapped.

"And one for me," Harry said. Tonks clicked again.

"One for mum and da," Tonks murmured. Click.

"Hermione," Harry added. "And one for Draco, of course."

Several clicks later, the proud mother vanished the camera. Harry was pensive for a moment.

"When he left, I realized I did not have a single photo of him," he said quietly. "It disturbed me more than it should have, I suppose, although it isn't as if we were together all that long. I even went to Malfoy Manor to find one." Harry swallowed, thinking of Draco's loss. "I hate to think how many of his memories were destroyed when they razed the Manor. There were a few photos in the basement, but only of Draco as a child."

Tonks squeezed his arm. "Remind me later and I'll take one of you both together."

"That would be nice."

Tonks went out and Harry dropped into a chair to watch his Slytherin and the baby sleep.

"Potter."

Harry snapped out of his dozed and blinked at Draco, who grinned at him from the couch.

"The wee one is sucking on my chest."

Harry smiled. "Can't blame her, there. It's a fabulous chest. Very tasty, also."

"Tasty, perhaps. Lactating, no. Would you mind returning her to someone a bit more suited to providing sustenance?"

Harry got up and retrieved Lyra, who let out a sharp wail at being removed from her perch.

"I know just how you feel," Harry said to the annoyed baby.

Tonks hurried into the room, scooped the child from Harry's arms, and then stooped to kiss Draco on the cheek.

"Welcome home, cousin," she said and strolled out.

Draco sat up and smirked at Harry. Whatever he was about to say was lost when the front door opened and a loud voice called, "Mr. Potter!"

"In here, Maeve," Harry responded and Draco looked at him sharply.

"You brought her here?"

Harry scowled. "I did not have much choice. You were gone, she wanted a continuous dose of orders, and what the hell spell did you use on her, anyway?"

Maeve stopped short when she entered the room and spied Draco. She practically leaped forward and threw herself on her knees before Malfoy.

"Master! You've returned!"

"Er… yes, hello, Maeve. Nice to see you again."

She fairly beamed at him.

"I trust you completed all the tasks I set you to?" he asked and the redheaded witch nodded. Before she could speak, Harry interrupted.

"Maeve copied every spell in her possession and delivered them to Malfoy Manor. She also copied a set for Hermione. And one for me. Then she planted two dozen varieties of roses at the Manor. And she reorganized your closets. Stocked your wine cellar. Alphabetized your library. Monogrammed your socks. Waxed the Manor floors. Four times. And organized your potion ingredients by usage and type." He looked at Maeve. "Did I forget anything?"

"Actually, I waxed the floors *five* times."

"Five times," Harry repeated. "I sort of ran out of things for her to do."

"She works quickly," Draco commented.

"Too quickly," Harry said.

"Well, Maeve, are you seeking a new task?"

Maeve nodded happily and Harry was once again struck by her resemblance to a house-elf. The only difference was that Maeve never pounded her head against the fireplace mantle or tried to iron her ears.

Draco conjured a scroll.

"This will keep you busy for awhile, dear," he said smoothly. "This is the property of Aloysius the Alarmist. It's written in Ancient Runic. Can you please take this home and translate it into Greek for me?"

A look of consternation crossed Maeve's features.

"I don't speak Greek. Or read and write it, either."

Draco patted her hand. "Of course you don't. So you'll just have to learn that first, won't you?"

Maeve nodded.

"Off you go, then. Learn Greek. Translate scroll."

Maeve took the scroll and stood up. "Yes, Master. As you wish. Good afternoon." She sauntered out looking more content than Harry had seen her in weeks.

Draco grinned at him. "If that takes her fewer than three months, I'll kiss a Hufflepuff."

Harry reflected that the clever bastard had been sorted into Slytherin with damn good reason.

"As long as I get to choose the Hufflepuff," Harry said.

Draco snagged Harry's hand and with a laugh and pulled him down for a kiss.

"Done."

After some delightful snogging, Draco said, "Potter, there is one small thing I've been wondering about."

"Which is?"

"How did you *Apparate* us upstairs? Considering there is an *Anti-Apparition* spell on all of London, you know."

"Oh. That."

"Yes, *that*."

"I sort of… dispelled it," Harry admitted and braced himself for the explosion.

"You *sort of* dispelled the *Anti-Apparition* spell cast by the Ministry of Magic?"

"Yes."

Draco's eyes glittered dangerously.

"Did you at least have help when you performed this prodigious feat?"

For a moment, Harry considered lying. The words were on his tongue—*yes, yes, of course I had help*. He sighed and shook his head, knowing Draco would have pounced on the lie the instant it was uttered. Malfoy's arms tightened around him almost to the point of pain.

"That was extremely bloody foolish, wasn't it?" Draco gritted. Harry nodded.

"I was feeling a bit… despondent at the time."

Despondent. Hah. It had been a bit over four months since Draco's disappearance and Harry had been in the blackest mood of his life. He had considered picking up his wand and casting a Killing Curse on himself just to end the misery. Tonks had potentially saved his life when she had bustled in and complained about the broom ride to Diagon Alley in the bitterly cold rain pouring outside, and how things had been so much easier before the Ministry had fucked up transportation with their Anti-Apparition spell and chokehold on the Floo Network and Portkeys.

It had given Harry an idea.

"I think the spell was weakening," Harry said lamely, hoping to loosen Draco's irritated squeeze.

"It's not like the Ministry had anyone especially competent at the time they cast it. They were lucky it held as long as it did. Dispelling it was not nearly as difficult as it should have been."

That was all true, and yet completely omitted the fact that the act had nearly killed Harry. He had taken precautions, added bits of ritual magic, and cast various spells of protection. Even with those provisions, he had lain unconscious on the rooftop of an abandoned London building for three days after working his dispelling magic. After which he had crawled to his broom, flown home on the last vestiges of willpower alone, eaten a prodigious amount of food, and slept for a week.

"And it worked?" Draco asked.

Harry nodded. "We can *Apparate* to Malfoy Manor from here, if you'd like."

"Who knows about this?"

"Bloody hell, no one! I haven't even told Tonks or Lupin. The Ministry would have my head on a plate if they even suspected."

Draco's grip loosened slightly and he scowled.

"Promise me you will not do anything so insanely stupid and dangerous in the future."

Harry opened his mouth, but Draco pressed a finger to his lips.

"Never mind. Your definition of insanely stupid and dangerous differs from that of normal people by quite a large margin. I'll just have to keep an eye on you."

Harry took the finger into his mouth and caressed it with his tongue before sucking it gently. Draco's eyes turned to liquid silver. Harry released the finger in a slow motion.

"I'll hold you to that," he said huskily.

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Chapter: 2

Chapter Two

Things reverted back to normal fairly quickly at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Harry moved back into his room. Draco did not move back into *his* room—he moved into Harry's. They took a number of odd jobs escorting travelers about England, and when there were no jobs, they

destroyed pockets of dark magic. Or rather, Harry did while Draco supervised, made imperious suggestions, generally annoyed Harry, and enveloped him in relieved arms whenever the spell was complete.

Harry had done quite a lot of dark magic breaking during Draco's absence and was rather competent at it, but it was still nicely reassuring to have Malfoy fretting over him. Hell, it was just nice to have him around.

However, Draco's constant presence made it increasingly difficult for Harry to be devious. He had not been wickedly crafty since Hogwarts and Malfoy forced him to stretch those abilities to the limit. As May crept toward June, Harry decided he needed help.

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Potter was up to something. Draco did not suspect anything, at first. Harry's random disappearances were casually explained.

"Popping to Diagon Alley for a bit. No, no, I don't need company. Be right back," Potter would say. Or, "I'm dying for a Muggle pizza. Want me to bring you back one?" Or, "I need to talk to Fred and George. Back shortly."

The solitary trips would not, in themselves, have triggered Draco's suspicion. He did not own Potter and the Gryffindor could come and go as he pleased. It was the notes that tipped him off. An uncommon number of owls had been arriving for Harry. Potter would unroll the message, read it, and incinerate it on the spot. It was the incineration that did it. Potter was a notorious paper-collector. Draco would have bet a pouch full of Galleons that Harry still owned the scrap of parchment Ginny Weasley had given him with their initials encircled by a little heart. For Potter to destroy a piece of paper rather than smooth it out, make a notation on it, and file it away by date and relevance was beyond unusual. It was downright suspicious.

Draco tried his own counterintelligence. He intercepted some owls. The wax seals were easily bypassed, although Hermione's took a bit of tricky spellwork—the damned untrusting wench had not only double-hexed the seal, she'd encrypted the note. Still, it was child's play for Draco, who had nearly made a career out of thwarting Granger and knew most of her tricks.

Even then, the notes made little sense.

One read, "The Ravenclaw agrees." Another, sender unknown, said cryptically, "Lime. Who would have guessed?" Draco nearly torched the third himself in a fit of frustration. It was from one of the Weasley twins and read only, "Six."

What the hell?

To ice the cake, Draco noticed the cessation of several conversations whenever he walked into the room. Tonks, as an Auror, had the innocent routine down to an art, but Guileless Boy

managed to look guilty every time, tugging at his black hair or fidgeting with his spectacles.

Draco tried not to worry. He decided it could not be dreadfully serious, as Potter's affection had not lessened at all. If anything, his enthusiasm continually shocked Draco. The Weasley twins had dived wholeheartedly into the "marital aides" industry and Harry had cheerfully acquired every variety of Salacious Salve they produced. Cinnamon, honey, pumpkin pasty, vanilla, and Harry's favorite—chocolate.

Potter had gone along with Draco's suggestion to make love in every room of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and was busy plotting a way to make the owl-infested attic acceptable for that purpose. In the meantime, they had crossed off the parlour, the study, the kitchen, the library, and every bedroom but the Lupins.

Still, after a week of dealing with Harry's obvious attempt at being nefarious, Draco considered flying off to Malfoy Manor in a huff.

Harry's adamant insistence that he stay probably saved Draco's life, although neither of them knew it at the time.

Draco woke on the fifth day of June in a funk that quickly grew into something approaching depression. Harry had risen at some ungodly predawn hour, kissed him tenderly, and bolted. Draco had gone back to sleep for a while and when next he woke, a breakfast tray sat next to the bed. It was laden with hot tea, fresh fruit, scones, and jam. A bouquet of white roses sat next to the tray. A small card was propped against the marble vase.

It read simply, "I love you." Draco smiled softly. Potter did have his moments.

He drank his tea and went downstairs. Remus was bouncing Lyra on his lap in the parlour. The baby gurgled happily and flailed her fists in the air when she saw Draco. Lupin sighed and handed her over.

"I swear my daughter prefers you to me."

Draco laughed and pressed a kiss to Lyra's cheek.

"No, she just likes my hair," he said. One chubby hand was already wrapped in a hunk of platinum hair and Lyra tugged mightily. Draco winced.

"Now I remember why I cut mine short," Remus said.

"Where's Harry?" Draco asked, striving for nonchalance. He made nonsense noises to the baby and nibbled her tummy until she shrieked with giggles.

"I don't know. I thought he was with you," Lupin replied. Draco wasn't sure if Remus was lying or not, although why he would lie was unknown. He scowled. He was starting to see conspiracies

everywhere.

"Tonks?" he asked.

"Out shopping."

"At this hour?"

"She said something about getting to the market first in order to get the best lobsters. I think she wants you to make your Lobster Bisque, or something." Well, at least that was plausible. Tonks adored Draco's cooking.

"Want to come to Diagon Alley with me?" Lupin asked. Draco looked at him in surprise. Remus had always been cordial, but he had never gone out of his way to spend any time with Draco. Lupin grinned. "All right, you caught me. I was hoping you would come along and occupy Lyra while I buy some potion supplies."

Draco smiled. Ulterior motives, he could understand.

Lupin's potion ingredient search turned into a long spree at the Apothecary, followed by a trip to Madam Malkin's, and then a stop at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Draco waited outside during these forays, entertaining the small one, who was on her usual angelic behavior in Draco's company.

Draco perused the window displays of several shops and considered buying himself something. He sighed, realizing the only thing he wanted at the moment was a bottle of red wine and a brandy chaser, both of which he always had directly shipped from the vintner in the south of France.

Tonks flew in and rescued Lyra shortly before the need for sustenance turned her into a tiny, screaming monster.

"Shall we have lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, or go home and let Draco cook for us?" Tonks asked when Remus joined them. "I know which I prefer."

"I don't think Draco came back to Grimmauld Place in order to become our private chef," Remus said. Draco shrugged.

"I don't mind." In point of fact, he did not much care what he did, so long as the whole bloody day ended as quickly as possible. However, it was feasible Harry was home and, if nothing else, Draco could pick a fight with him and follow it with fabulous make-up sex. That would be present enough.

"Let's go home," he suggested. "I'll prepare something wonderful for Tonks." She smiled brightly at him and took his arm.

They landed in the street before number twelve. Tonks did not even have to think to cast an Obscuring Charm that shielded them from Muggle eyes. Draco could do it as well, but figured she needed to keep in practice. Her job required it more than his. Draco had added a permanent Glamour Spell to the house that shielded the front walk from Muggle notice, making it easier to come and go in groups.

As they approached the front door, Harry hurried out while Lupin and Tonks went in. Harry grabbed Draco and planted a kiss on his lips. He seemed to be fairly bursting with nervousness.

"What is it?" Malfoy asked.

"Don't kill me," Harry said and Draco groaned.

"Whenever you start a conversation that way, I know whatever you set in motion is already approaching epic proportion and killing you won't have the slightest effect."

"Er… well, you happen to be right, at least in this instance. Come inside and keep telling yourself that you love me," Harry said.

Thus forewarned, Draco entered the house. Harry ushered him into the parlour, bouncing like a golden retriever puppy. He grinned happily when a large assortment of people bellowed, "Happy birthday, Draco!"

Malfoy shot a sardonic look at Harry, whose duplicity was finally revealed.

"You've been planning this," he accused.

Harry nodded. "For days. Weeks, actually."

Draco had to smile. "I thought you forgot."

"I would never forget you birthday," Harry breathed. Draco would have kissed him, but for the crowd of people that hurried forward. Luna Lovegood arrived first and placed a kiss on his cheek.

"It's so good to see you again, Draco," she said warmly. "I'm sorry about that article we printed in the Quibbler stating you were eaten by nundus. It seemed the only plausible explanation for your disappearance."

"No problem," Draco said dryly.

"I invited Cho Chang, but she couldn't come because—"

"Because she would rather drink poison than look upon my face?"

"Well, yes, but she had a better excuse."

"I'm sure."

The Weasley twins attacked Luna with gleeful hugs, having just entered.

"Hey, Malfoy, mate!" one of them said. Draco had never bothered to try and tell them apart.

"We brought you a birthday present," the other said.

"'Course, it's partly for Harry," the first one added with a wink. They both laughed as one twin held up a shopping bag from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Draco grinned ruefully, but knew if the bag contained their infamous Salacious Salve he'd be blessing their evil little hearts, later.

"Thanks," he said sincerely.

Tonks hugged him and told him his present was in his room. Lupin actually gave Draco's shoulder a squeeze and handed him a wrapped gift. Malfoy began to feel self-conscious, but Harry's beaming face made him shut up and bear it.

He was astonished when Crabbe and Goyle sidled up, looking even more uncomfortable than Draco. Malfoy happily pounded each of them on the back. He felt guilty—it had been months since he'd seen them, even before his sojourn with Mulciber.

"You know you can have anything we got in the shop, mate," Crabbe said brusquely and then coughed and added, "You, too, Potter."

Harry laughed.

"That seems fair, considering I already bought half your stock at triple its value."

Goyle scowled and flexed his muscles, but Crabbe chuckled sheepishly. "You're right there, mate."

Harry looked at Draco with an expression that made him want to drag the Gryffindor upstairs, party be damned.

"It was worth it," Harry said.

Fuck it, Draco thought and threw an arm around Harry's shoulders. He pulled him into a kiss and chuckled when Fred and George Weasley whooped. Someone else clapped and Hermione said, "Finally." Draco deepened the kiss and felt Harry's hands move up to slide into his hair.

"All right," one of the Weasley twins yelped, "We're here to get foxed and eat all your food, not

watch you two snog all night."

Draco felt a hand on his arm, dragging him away, and caught sight of a dazed and blissful-looking Harry before he was whisked to another part of the room. Bill and Fleur Weasley had arrived and Fleur planted a kiss on Draco's cheek. Their passel of children pelted through the room, grabbed several sweets from the table, and bolted upstairs to destroy several of Harry's knick-knacks and furnishings.

"'Appy birthday, Draco," Fleur said warmly and Bill shook Draco's hand. Of all the Weasleys, Draco had despised Bill the least; he had never seemed to hold Draco in the same contempt as the others.

"I bought you a new broom," Bill said with a grin. "The Vortex. New model. One of the perks of being Chief Auror." Draco was amazed. It was quite a gift. "We got an advance shipment."

An ale was thrust into Draco's hand by Hermione, along with a plate piled high with Draco's favorite foods—obviously another part of Harry's plot.

"I thought of a dozen ways to kill you, when you were gone," Hermione said conversationally.

"Mulciber nearly performed that task for you."

"Harry told me. And now I feel wretched for not trying hard enough to find you." Her brow wrinkled over earnest brown eyes and her mouth tightened. "We always seem to find it easy to believe the worst of you without bothering to look deeper."

"I'm used to it," Draco said lightly. He would prefer Granger drop the matter, and sought for a way to head her off.

"Well, it wasn't right. I mean, Harry would never have given up. He would never have quit without us—without *me*—convincing him. Even when he got your note, he swore it was a trick…" Hermione twisted a lock of her hair in a nervous gesture. "I told him… well, I said some vicious things. I convinced him that you had left of your own free will. I told him… to grow up."

Draco noticed with alarm that tears sparkled in her brown eyes. She went on, "God, the look on his face. I'm so sorry." She clutched Draco's arm tightly, nearly spilling the ale she had put in his hand. Draco was thankfully spared the impending scene of Hermione throwing herself on him and sobbing by the arrival of her husband. Draco had never been so glad to see Ron Weasley.

"I recommend no more wine for her," Draco suggested and Weasley actually grinned. He smacked Draco on the shoulder.

"Good to have you back, mate."

Draco's eyes narrowed. Though they had established something of a truce in the month prior to

Draco's disappearance, Ron had never treated him so casually.

"No, I bloody well mean it," Ron added. "Harry was a right bugger with you gone. I nearly hexed him myself a few times. He didn't care whether he lived or died. Look at him now."

Draco's eyes moved to Harry, who was talking animatedly to Bill Weasley. Harry threw back his dark head and laughed, teasing a grin from Draco at the sight. Bloody hell, but the Gryffindor was even more gorgeous than Draco remembered. His hair curled over the edge of his white collar and obscured the tops of his glasses. It was only slightly mussed at the moment, and Draco itched to walk over and run his hands through it.

As if called by Malfoy's heated thoughts, Harry's gaze met Draco's and his grin widened into a smile of genuine pleasure. A hint of blush crept into Potter's cheeks and Draco found it difficult to breathe for a moment.

"Anyway," Ron continued, stressing the word, "It's good to have him back. Even if it means I have to put up with *you*."

Draco looked back at Ron. "Git."

"Prat," Ron replied.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Draco felt a hand touch his shoulder. Harry smiled at him.

"Want me to help you take your gifts upstairs?" Potter asked suggestively.

"Is Weasley an idiot?"

"N… that's supposed to be a yes, isn't it?"

"That's a definite yes, Potter."

Ron shook his head and muttered something about "lucky" and "birthday" and "hex… donkey ears" before strolling away toward Fred and George, pulling Hermione behind him. Harry sighed.

"Some things never change."

Draco smiled in bemusement, recalling Ron's words. "And some things do."

They each levitated a stack of packages and bags upstairs, tossed them haphazardly on the bed, and spent a full ten minutes snogging like starved beasts.

Harry finally pulled away, mumbling something about "duty to their guests" or some such nonsense, so Draco humored him and admired the gifts. He set a solid silver wand holder on the

table next to the bed. Lupin's gift. Draco wondered where he had gotten it. He placed his wand on it and it gleamed darkly against the silver.

"It's similar to the one I had when I was younger," Draco mused.

"Perhaps Remus spoke to Crabbe."

"He probably bought it from Crabbe."

"At a ridiculously overinflated price," Harry said.

Draco laughed. "Probably."

The gift from Tonks covered the bed—new bedding in a fabulous pattern of green, black, and silver. Harry made a face.

"That really does not go with my décor."

"I think we need to change the décor. It's so… Gryffindor."

"I suppose we can change it to Slytherin green. For a while. In honor of your birthday." Draco peered into the bag of items from the Weasley twins and chuckled happily as he pulled out an earthenware jar.

"New salve! Look, there's a 'custom' sticker on it."

"They made it especially for you."

"Lime!" Draco breathed. How Potter had discovered Draco's favorite flavor was a mystery. He did not think even Crabbe or Goyle had that information. Draco cracked the lid and touched a finger to the pale cream before putting the fingertip to his tongue. It was both sweet and tart at once. He looked at Harry speculatively, but the Gryffindor backed away with a laugh.

"Later!"

Hermione had given Draco an assortment of rare potions and Ron had bought him some special broom polish. Draco had not expected anything at all from Weasley, especially not something he would actually use. Accompanying it was a rare bottle of brandy.

"I think Weasley is smitten with me," Draco said.

"Which one?" Harry asked absently, toying with Fleur's gift. It was a tricky puzzle made of interlocking, swirled pieces of wood.

"Ron. He gave me a gift. I haven't opened the brandy, so it may yet be poisoned."

"He's gotten used to you, finally. That month you spent together working on Malfoy Manor must have taught him that you were human, on the rare occasions you allowed him to see it."

Draco sniffed.

A ruckus sounded from downstairs and Harry sighed. "We've been up here too long. You know we can't leave the Weasley twins unsupervised."

By "unsupervised" Harry meant that he was the only one with a jot of a chance of controlling the twins if they got it into their heads to make mischief.

"I'll have to give you your gifts later," Harry said.

"Gifts plural?" Draco asked with a grin.

"Yes, gifts plural," Harry said with a chuckled, walking to the door. Draco followed.

"Does one of them involve salve?"

"As a matter of fact, it does," Harry said wickedly and danced away from Draco's grasping hands to thump down the stairs with a laugh. Malfoy hurried after him and nearly ran him down as Potter stopped short on the fourth step from the bottom.

The tableau that greeted them was one of tension. The Weasley twins, Tonks and Lupin, and Ron and Hermione were crowded into the parlour archway. Several Ministry officials were packed into the front hall with their wands out, ready for anything.

"Draco Malfoy!" someone standing before Harry called loudly, "You are under arrest for the Improper Use of Magic, Possession of Illegal Items, Willfully Administering possible Unforgivable Substances, and Dabbling in the Dark Arts." Draco did not recognize the wizard who spoke, but Dolores Umbridge stood next to him.

"Dabbling," said Draco. "I never would have suspected *dabbling* of being an arrest-worthy offense."

The wizard blustered, but Draco spoke over him. "Good afternoon, Minister."

Dolores Umbridge spoke in the simpering tone that had not changed at all over the intervening years since her attempted takeover of Hogwarts.

"Mister Malfoy. I'm quite surprised to see you here in company of this…" Her eyes flicked over Harry, "…sort."

Draco saw Harry stiffen and felt a quick surge of protectiveness. He well recalled how the bitch

had loathed Harry in their fifth year. Harry's fists clenched and he took another step down. The blustering wizard actually stepped back, eyes widening. At least he was not foolish enough to want to take on the famous Harry Potter. Draco noticed another four wizards behind him—Umbridge's own personal guard, no doubt. They all looked competent. Draco joined Harry on the third step and let his hand slide gently up Potter's spine in a calming gesture. The last thing they needed was Harry unleashing his anger.

Draco said, "I shall, of course, come along peacefully in order to clear up this misunderstanding."

A dark-haired woman pushed her way past the others to stand by Umbridge. Her eyes flashed.

"Misunderstanding?" she hissed, raising her wand. "I'll show you a misunderstanding!"

Umbridge clamped a hand to the woman's wand arm, digging her pink nails into the flesh and succeeding in drawing her attention with a gasp. The wand lowered.

"Patience, Brigit. Mr. Malfoy has agreed to come with us. No need for unpleasantness." Bloody hell, Draco had forgotten the annoying timbre of her voice. Even though Draco had been a favored student during Umbridge's regime, he had never grown to like the woman. He had simply remained on the side of power, in the manner of all Malfoys before him. "Unless, of course, Mr. Potter chooses not to be as civilized."

The wizard that had previously spoken cleared his throat nervously. "Apologies, Mr. Potter, but you are also under arrest."

"For?" Draco demanded.

"Accessory to the charges against you, Mr. Malfoy."

"I see," said Draco. To Harry, he murmured, "Patience."

"I'll need to confiscate your wands," the man continued. Harry pulled out his wand, causing a flurry of motion from the gathered wizards. Draco nearly smiled; they obviously half-expected Harry to act like a loose cannon. Harry paused for a dramatic moment and then flipped the wand over in his hand with a casual toss and handed it to the wizard without a word. The others relaxed visibly; not realizing Potter was just as dangerous without it. Umbridge looked disappointed for a moment.

"Mr. Malfoy?"

"Sorry, I don't have mine on me at the moment." He had left it upstairs in the silver wand holder.

"Come along, then," Umbridge said and gave Harry's friends a warning glare before turning and waddling out. Harry said nothing; he shot a searching look at Lupin, who nodded.

"I hate birthdays," Draco muttered and followed Harry as they left the house with the Ministry members falling in behind them.

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Chapter: 3

Chapter Three
Harry paced in his cell like a caged lion. They had been taken to the lowest level of the Ministry of Magic, where criminals were held awaiting trial. Nothing at all had been said to Harry, other than Draco's continuous, low admonitions of "patience" whenever he sensed Harry about to lose control. They were separated immediately and placed into damp, unpleasant cells.

Harry knew Umbridge planned to let them stew in their cells overnight. Harry hoped to hell she did not plan to make them wait days for word of the trial date. Knowing her, she would be more than happy to force them to sit for months.

Bill Weasley got in to see Harry, carrying a bland plate of food and a paper cup full of tea. He set both on the low wooden table and joined Harry on the cot.

"They won't let me see Draco," Bill said. "It's bad, Harry. What do you know about Maeve O'Leary?"

"Maeve?" Harry burst out. "This is about *Maeve*?"

"Apparently, Draco used some sort of Dark spell on her," Bill said.

"He said he Obliviated her memory, but I know it had to be something more. She lived to serve his every whim."

Bill scowled at him. "You never bothered to look into it?" he asked incredulously.

Harry had felt guilty, on occasion, when Maeve would appear, but every time Harry had the urge to help her, the image of her standing over Draco with a knife would return.

"She tried to kill Draco," Harry snapped. "Pity for her was not something I could readily dredge up. She tried to fucking *sacrifice* him!"

"So you should have subdued her and turned her over to the Ministry. You don't make her into a mindless slave!"

"She fed him a bloody love potion to do the same to him!" Harry glared at Bill, daring him to use the "two wrongs don't make a right" argument. Bill sighed.

"I don't know how you two will get out of this one. Umbridge is out for blood."

Harry snorted. "When is she not out for blood? She's barely one level below Voldemort." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "But she likes Draco. He was on her pet Inquisitorial Squad back at Hogwarts."

"I'm not certain past sentiment will help. She needs to appease Bertram Aubrey."

"Bertram Aubrey? Why?"

"He's Brigit's husband."

"Who the hell is Brigit?"

"Maeve's sister. I thought you might have known that, at least. Apparently, Brigit paid a visit to Maeve and discovered her acting… strangely, to put it mildly. They managed to undo whatever spell Draco used on her—prompting his arrest. And yours, for knowing about it and doing nothing."

"Do we have any defense?" Harry asked wryly.

"I don't know. I've contacted Neville Longbottom. He's agreed to work on your defense."

"Neville?" Harry had not seen Neville since… bloody hell, not since the day of Voldemort's defeat. And Ginny's death. Neville had fought beside them. Harry vaguely recalled he had been badly wounded and spent a long stretch in St. Mungo's… Hell, Harry had not even gone to see him.

"He works at Hogwarts during the school year, but in the summer he spends a lot of time defending people from Ministry abuse. Umbridge despises Neville nearly as much as she hates you."

"That's just what I need. Someone that Umbridge hates, defending me."

"Well, there is a shortage of the other kind."

"Hogwarts is still in session, though."

"Well, Neville works with Professor Sprout. Eventually, he'll take over teaching Herbology permanently, but as his assistant, he has plenty of time to work on his hobby—thwarting Umbridge."

Bill stood up. "I'd better not stay. I'm sure Umbridge will come up with some horrid task for Tonks and me tomorrow, as punishment for daring to be seen in your presence."

Harry laughed in amazement. "But Tonks lives with me."

Bill shushed him and peered out of the cell nervously. "No one knows that! If Umbridge kenned for a minute that Tonks lived there, she'd be tossed out of the Aurors on some trumped-up excuse."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "How can she hate me that much? After all these years?"

"Harry, we all know the story of her last day at Hogwarts. The only person she detests more than you is Hermione Granger. Believe me, if she could drag Hermione into this, she would." Bill sighed. "She yet may. We need to be prepared for anything." Bill signaled through the bars to the guard at the end of the hall. "I'm meeting with Neville later this evening. Hopefully, they'll allow him in to see Draco and get the whole story." The guard unlocked the door with a spell and Bill departed.

ooOoo

Harry lay back on the cot and tried not to worry. He had called through the bars several times, but Draco's cell was at the farthest end of the long corridor, out of earshot unless Harry bellowed. Several other prisoners piped up in response to his voice. One was awaiting trial for using the Cruciatus Curse on his neighbor. Another was a convicted smuggler awaiting transport to Azkaban. The man was plainly terrified. Umbridge had cheerfully embraced the use of dementors at the wizard prison—a practice Scrimgeour had largely abolished in the months prior to his mysterious death.

When darkness had fallen and the ward grew silent, Harry found himself pacing in his cell. He paused in front of the door and cast a Silencing Charm before pulling in a small bit of magic and going to work on the lock. It was laced with an Alarm Hex over a magical Locking Spell, which had been placed over the physical lock. It took Harry barely a moment to dispel the alarm and banish the lock, after which a quick *Alohomora* snapped open the door. It swung open silently and Harry peered down the line of cells. A guard post stood at the far end, but the guard was deeply immersed in a newspaper, held high enough to shield Harry from view.

Harry shut his door and glided down the hall. He had left his shoes in the cell in order to move quietly. Draco's space was at the end and the Slytherin turned his head to regard Harry with a grin. His arms were crossed behind his head on the poor excuse for a pillow. One long leg was propped up.

"You're not supposed to look sexy in prison."

"It's a gift," Draco said with a lazy smile. "Did they let you out?"

"Hardly," Harry replied with a short laugh. After a quick glance down the hall where the guard was still buried in the paper, he spelled Draco's door and entered the cell. "We've got a problem."

Draco gestured imperiously and Harry obediently climbed atop him with a grin. He kissed the lovely lips and then pulled away abruptly. Harry repeated everything Bill had told him about Maeve, Brigit, and Umbridge.

"Neville Longbottom will be defending me? I should simply hang myself with my own shirt," Draco said dryly.

"This is serious. What spell did you use on Maeve?"

Draco's gaze sharpened. "You said Bertram Aubrey reversed the spell?"

Harry nodded.

"That's impossible. It wasn't a spell. It was a potion. They would have had to figure that out and then device the antidote. Without the original potion, it would take months."

"Then how—?"

"They were at the Manor. They found the antidote." The silver eyes glittered with rage. Even Harry felt a sick feeling at the thought of Maeve, crazed Brigit, and Umbridge ransacking Draco's home. He had been working so hard to rebuild it. Harry's heart ached for a moment.

"Sweet Marietta informed me that they've seized the Manor and frozen my assets. Until the trial, of course," Draco said.

Fuck. Last time the Ministry had "seized" Malfoy Manor, they had burned it to the ground. Harry did not want to think about that.

"Your assets?" he asked blandly, instead.

Draco laughed and some of the tension went out of his body.

"My Gringott's assets," he clarified. "A paltry few million. They can't touch my accounts in France, Switzerland, Monaco, or the United States. They've most likely frozen your assets, as well."

"You have money in the U.S.?"

"Potter, if there is one thing the uncouth colonials are good at, it's making money. I have a very greedy account manager in New York. The more money he makes for me, the more he can skim off the top."

Harry shook off the bewildering talk of finances and shady account managers, but he had to acknowledge that the entire war with Voldemort hadn't knocked a dent in the Malfoy fortune.

Now he knew why.

"Everything I own is in Gringott's," Harry said, acknowledging that his own funds were now at risk.

"That's not exactly true," Draco commented, but added, "However, you did not come here to discuss money. You came to give me my birthday present, correct?"

"Um… Draco, I—"

His words ended in a *mlph* sound as Malfoy kissed him hungrily. Harry surrendered to the warm glow of pleasure and lost himself in Draco's kisses for longer than was prudent. He finally pushed away, gasping.

"This is not exactly a brilliant place for this. I did not come to snog you. I came to break you out. We need to leave."

Harry had succeeded in rendering Draco speechless, for one of the few times in his life. And then Draco burst out laughing.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy," Harry hissed. "Someone will hear you."

"Harry Potter, you can't tell me you want us to flee like common criminals? Where would we go?"

"I don't know," Harry snapped. "But we can't win this. You're guilty as hell. You knew what was in that potion and you willfully used it. And I did not try to stop you. I won't see you in Azkaban, not even if I'm there with you."

"Gryffindors," Draco said with a sigh. "Potter, I've been dealing with the Ministry for a long time. After a bit of judicious bribery, we'll be free."

"Not every problem can be solved by throwing money at it," Harry said tightly.

"When it comes to politics, it can. Now stop fretting and go back to your cell, before you get caught in here. Or before I lose all control and shag you right here on this flimsy, wretched excuse for a piece of furnishing."

Harry sighed and gave up, knowing he'd have to knock Malfoy out and Levitate him in order to get him to move. They shared one more brilliant kiss before Harry slid off the Slytherin and moved to the door.

"You don't need your wand at all any more, do you?" Draco asked quietly. Harry flushed, feeling self-conscious for a moment.

"Well, it helps. Makes it easier to focus, but no… not really."

"I'm glad," Draco said and Harry threw him a grateful smile.

"Happy birthday, even though it did not exactly turn out as planned."

"Thanks, gorgeous."

Harry grinned and made his way back to his cell.

ooOoo

Neville Longbottom was tense. He was also quite astonishing to look at and Harry found himself going back over Neville's words due to a distinct inability to concentrate.

Neville's hair was longer than Draco's, and a thin strip of leather crossed his forehead to keep it out of his eyes. A large ruby glinted from one earlobe and his soft, perpetually nervous features had hardened into a confident, strong face. It was as though someone had taken the raw clay that had once been Neville Longbottom and sculpted it into this masterpiece. He reminded Harry somewhat of Bill Weasley. Including the worry currently tightening the edges of his mouth.

"This is serious, Harry. It's going to be difficult to come up with a decent defense." The voice was still the same, soothing and low, though a bit deeper than Harry remembered.

"Maeve tried to sacrifice him on an altar, Neville," Harry snapped.

"It's immaterial to the case." Before Harry could protest, he went on. "The charges against Malfoy are tough to counter. Possession of Dark Items—"

"That was his father's stuff!"

"His father has been dead for years, Harry. Why did Draco not dispose of it? Not only did he *not* dispose of it, he *administered* it with full knowledge of what it was."

"She followed us all the way from Ireland. She broke into Draco's bloody house and waited for him with a love potion—which she poured down his throat, by the way—"

"Why didn't he fall in love with her, then?"

"He—" Harry floundered for a moment. "She did not attune it, and Ron Stunned her, and Draco… fell in love with someone else."

"Who?"

"Well… erm… me. Frankly, he was under the influence of the damned love potion at the time, so

isn't it possible he wasn't thinking clearly? Couldn't he have been trying to protect me, or something?"

Neville looked thoughtful. "You might have something there, Harry. Why don't you tell me the whole story, from the beginning?"

An Auror unknown to Harry escorted him to Courtroom 10. He instantly felt a cloying sensation of revulsion. His memories of the place were unpleasant, to say the least.

Draco was already seated and *shackled*, Harry noted with a flash of anger. Even so, Malfoy managed a relaxed, slouching pose, and a sardonic smirk adorned his lips, making him look as though he had *asked* to be chained to the chair.

The grey eyes flicked to him and Harry felt his lips twitch in response. Hell, only Malfoy could make being tried for a crime look easy. A touch on his arm guided Harry to a seat at the edge of the gallery. His hands were magically bound in front of him. A large group of wizards and witches filed in, but it was a far smaller bunch than the fifty or so that had been present for Harry's hearing, so long ago. He had heard rumors that the Wizengamot had decreased in number since the war. Apparently the rumors had been true. Kingsley Shacklebolt was a newer member—he nodded to Harry, but made no other sign of recognition. Harry vowed to have him over for tea. He hadn't seen many of the Aurors since the war, except for Tonks, of course. Percy Weasley strode in, wearing his usual superior attitude and walking next to his longtime girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater. She had allegedly refused his wedding proposals several times, but he had yet to give up on her.

Several observers were already present. Lupin, Ron, and Hermione, of course, were seated next to Bill and Fleur. Luna Lovegood and the Weasley twins sat behind them. Harry recognized several more Aurors: the Patil sisters, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbot were present, along with with Dawlish and Diggle.

Harry's eyes went to Maeve the instant she walked in. The red-haired witch took a seat to the right of the central chair and was quickly joined by the dark-haired witch who had threatened Draco at number 12, Grimmauld Place—Brigit, apparently. Harry felt a sudden pang of guilt. It was no wonder Brigit was angry, if she had discovered her sister acting like an abject slave to Draco Malfoy. Then again, Maeve had tried to kill Draco merely for being related to Lucius.

Umbridge was the last to waddle in, looking even more toadlike and loathsome beneath robes of vile pink. Bizarrely, they were adorned with sparkles. Next to her sat someone Harry recognized, though it took him a bit to recall her name. Marietta Edgecombe. The same girl that had snitched on Dumbledore's Army. It seemed she had found tattling to be more lucrative as an adult, now that she was working directly for the Minister.

Umbridge had her gaze firmly fixed on Harry. Marietta began to speak.

"We shall now commence the trial of Draco Lucius Malfoy, who has been accused of offences

committed under the Statute of Illegal Items, the Decree for Improper Use of Magic, Ordinance Seven Hundred Sixty-One regarding the illegal use of…" Marietta's voice droned on and Harry found his mind wandering. He avoided Umbridge's gaze and studied the Wizengamot. He recognized very few members—the dumpy wizard with the thick mustache, and the ancient wizard—bloody hell, he looked about to drop dead from old age at any moment…

Harry snapped back to attention when Marietta got to: "Interrogators, Dolores Jane Umbridge, Minister of Magic; Kingsley Shacklebolt, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Percy Ignatius Weasley, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Court Scribe, Marietta Louise Edgecombe… Witness for the defense, Harry James Potter; and Representative for the defense, Neville William Longbottom."

"The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did deliberately, knowingly, and with full cognizance of the illegality of his actions, administer a dangerous, unapproved, and illegal magical substance to Maeve Anna O'Leary on 11th October, 2003, which constitutes an offense under paragraph…"

Harry dozed off again and entertained himself by admiring Draco. Neville had been allowed to bring them both a change of clothing, and Draco had apparently given Neville written instructions. Malfoy looked impeccable in a pristine white shirt that buttoned high on his throat, and expensive-looking trousers of charcoal grey. His hair had been drawn back in a silver clasp, but for two long strands on either side of his face that softened the look. His long legs were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He wore his ever-present black boots, of course. Draco looked relaxed and… completely bored.

"You are Draco Lucius Malfoy?" Umbridge asked.

"Yes." Draco's tone was casual.

"Do you reside at number 1, Malfoy Lane, Wiltshire?"

"Occasionally," Draco replied, and Harry nearly smiled. Draco had not even set foot in the Manor for six months, and prior to that had spent more time living with Harry at number 12, Grimmauld Place than he had in Wiltshire.

"Have you heard the charges?"

"I have."

"And how do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

Maeve leaped to her feet, dispelling the notion that this might be a sedate affair.

"Not guilty! You bloody bastard! I've been your ruddy slave for—!" Brigit dragged her sister back into the seat while Umbridge made that annoying, "Hem hem" sound that instantly set Harry's teeth on edge.

"In your turn, Maeve, dear," she said pleasantly, though a wolfish smile twisted her wide lips as she looked at Harry. "Brigit, as you were the one that discovered these malicious doings—"

"*Alleged* malicious doings, Minister," Neville corrected in a loud voice from his stance near Draco's chair.

"Hem hem. Alleged malicious doings," Umbridge allowed, though she shot a single, venomous glare at Neville. "You may describe the situation in your own words."

Brigit stood up. "I went to visit my sister, Maeve, in Ireland. It had been months since I had seen her and I was getting worried. She had not even come to visit us at Christmas, stating she was too busy. She returned owls, but her notes sounded distant… not herself. I wondered what the problem was. Maeve kept saying nothing was wrong, but I had a feeling… I finally had to check for myself."

Brigit put her hands on her hips. It would not help Draco's case that Brigit was a beautiful woman and had a fine speaking voice. A voice that carried with the force of her indignation.

"I could not believe my eyes! My own sister was trying to learn Greek—*Greek!*—in order to translate some bloody scroll for Draco Malfoy, the son of a Death Eater!"

"Strike that from the record!" Neville yelled. "It is irrelevant to the case!"

"Hem hem. It is, of course, public knowledge. And it may become relevant later," Umbridge said smugly. "Sustained."

Neville shrugged and Harry sighed heavily.

"Maeve would not come away with me, even to seek help. She was completely obsessed with finishing her bloody task for Malfoy. I knew she was under some sort of spell."

Brigit paused dramatically and put a hand to her brow, as if too traumatized to continue. Harry wondered if she held a job, because a career on the stage would suit her well.

"I had to Stun my own sister and bring her to the Ministry. I knew Bertram would help me." She smiled winningly at her husband, who nodded. "Bertram determined it was a potion, by the effects. We took Maeve to see the Minister immediately, after which Malfoy's house was searched and the antidote discovered—"

"Proving that it was, indeed, a potion," Umbridge growled, "and that it originated at Malfoy Manor."

"None of which proves that Draco Malfoy administered the potion," Neville said dryly.

Brigit snarled. "I suppose you think she drank it herself?"

Umbridge held up a hand, but Neville replied, "She may well have done."

Before Brigit could say anything more, Umbridge hem hemmed loudly.

"Thank you, Brigit. Maeve, can you tell us what you remember of those events?"

Brigit sat down as Maeve stood. Unlike Umbridge, her eyes were fixed steadily on Draco.

"Well, you could say it began when Draco Malfoy appeared on my doorstep, for reasons unknown. I can only assume he was after something, considering who his father was—"

"Speculation and opinion," Neville said in a tone so reminiscent of Draco that even Malfoy looked at him in surprise. Umbridge's mouth thinned into a flat line.

"Strike the last bit from the record. Please stay with the facts, Maeve, dear."

"Well, I invited him in, of course, and the next thing I knew I was waking up outside Blarney Castle with no memory of how I got there."

"You remember that he appeared on your doorstep, but you *forgot* you tried to kill him by cutting out his heart with a sacrificial dagger?" Harry snapped.

"Mr. Potter!" Umbridge snarled. "You may not speak until requested to do so. Remove Mr. Potter's comments from the record."

Harry scowled, but Neville's face was impassive.

"As I was saying," Maeve continued, "I went home with no memory of Draco Malfoy, until I found the Portkey he had left behind."

"Along with his clothes," Harry added dryly. Umbridge hissed like an angry snake, but Maeve went on before the Minister could threaten Harry.

"I knew something was wrong, and that someone had been in my house. I used my own Portkey to visit Bertram at the Ministry, where he discovered my memory had been tampered with."

"And also that the Portkey used by Malfoy had been *stolen* from the Ministry," Umbridge added scornfully.

"Can you produce this Portkey?" Neville asked before Harry could speak.

"Of course," Umbridge said coldly.

"And can you *prove* it belonged to Draco Malfoy, or that it was even in his possession at any given time?"

The Minister's face turned an unlovely shade of puce.

"I thought not." Neville looked at Marietta. "Let the record show that the matter of the Portkey is, at this point, purely conjecture."

Harry thought Neville had turned out to be rather brilliant.

Maeve went on. "Once my memory was restored, I went to Malfoy Manor to demand answers."

Neville interrupted. "You knew where Malfoy Manor was located, then?"

"Yes."

"Indeed," Neville said. "In fact, you have been reprimanded by the Ministry on several occasions for trespassing on Malfoy lands without authorization, is that correct?"

Maeve flushed. "That was a long time ago!"

"When you were, shall we say… fixated… on Lucius Malfoy?"

Maeve reacted as if slapped. Umbridge snarled, "Are you casting a slur on the victim's name, Mr. Longbottom? Your questions seem *irrelevant*."

"We are trying to establish exactly who the victim is here, Minister. I am simply pointing out that Miss O'Leary's behavior in regards to the Malfoys has been… erratic, to say the least."

"I fail to see the significance," Umbridge insisted dangerously.

Neville shrugged. "Miss O'Leary's transgressions are a matter of public record. If you think they have no bearing on this case, then by all means, strike them from these proceedings."

For a moment, Harry thought Umbridge might pick up her wand and hex Neville, but she regained control with some effort.

"I'm certain they have no bearing whatsoever, but I will allow them," Umbridge simpered. Harry was absolutely stunned at Neville's ability to manipulate the horrid creature. If Neville thwarted Umbridge like this often, his life could very well be in danger.

"When you went to Malfoy Manor, did you go inside?" Neville asked Maeve suddenly.

"Yes," Maeve replied, taken aback.

"Uninvited? Does that not constitute trespassing?"

Harry could have cheered. Both Maeve and Umbridge were visibly livid.

"The door was open!" Maeve snarled.

"So, of course, you went right in."

"I was looking for Malfoy. It's a bloody mansion. I thought he might not have heard me knock."

"And when you discovered he was not at home, you decided to wait."

"Mr. Longbottom, you will allow Miss O'Leary to tell the tale in her own words."

Neville gestured magnanimously. "By all means. Do continue." His tone was mild, but implied that Maeve would be somewhat less that truthful.

"I assumed Malfoy would arrive shortly. The place seemed to be under repair, but there were signs of recent occupation."

"Such as?" Neville prodded.

"Excuse me?"

"You said there were signs of recent occupation. Details the signs, please."

Maeve flushed, likely realizing she had just admitted to snooping through Malfoy Manor.

"Well, the larder, for one. It was well stocked," Maeve said lamely. Harry sneered, knowing she dared not mention she had been wandering through Draco's bedroom.

"Just to clarify," Neville said, "You were searching the house for Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes." Maeve glared.

"And you thought he might be lurking in the larder?"

Harry suppressed a snort of laughter, but several observers and even one member of the Wizengamot did not. Umbridge leaped to her feet.

"She has already stated that she searched the premises!"

"Very thoroughly, apparently," Neville agreed seriously. Another chuckle sounded from the gallery.

Umbridge visibly searched for a trap beneath his words and finally snarled, "Do not badger the witness."

"Certainly not."

Umbridge sat down, but Harry thought Neville had made his point, especially as several members of the court were whispering amongst themselves.

"What happened next, Maeve?" Umbridge asked. The simpering tone was gone.

"Well, Malfoy did arrive, as I'd expected. I was on the stairs when he came in. He immediately went for his wand, so I acted defensively and hit him with a Stunner. I only meant to question him."

She glared at Neville, obviously waiting for the inevitable questions, but he said nothing. Her expression grew wary and Harry wondered how she planned to weasel out of the next portion of the story.

"I wanted answers," Maeve explained. "I knew as soon as I released him, he would try to hex me, so I gave him a Binding Potion to keep him still while I questioned him." Harry nearly spoke, but Neville's silence forced him to remain quiet. Longbottom must have had a reason for not speaking up. Maeve went on, although she also seemed surprised at the lack of interruption. "I must have taken the wrong potion from my robes by mistake, because *he* came in and attacked me." She pointed at Harry, who gaped at her. The lying bitch! Harry hadn't even *seen* her before she had hexed him unconscious.

"I started to give the potion to Malfoy, but the next thing I remember… well, I remember it all now, of course, but for months I had no memory except what Malfoy had given me. Someone hexed me unconscious and when I awakened, Draco Malfoy forced an Obedience Potion down my throat."

"Exactly as you had done to him minutes before?" Neville asked mildly.

Maeve's eyes flashed. "It's not the same at all!"

"Really? According to my notes, a Love Potion and an Obedience Potion are quite similar. The base ingredients are the same, as are the effects—bending the will of another."

"I did not mean to give Malfoy a Love Potion!"

"Well, we only have your word for that, don't we?" Neville asked.

Maeve hissed angrily, but Umbridge said, "Don't let him upset you, dear. Please continue."

"The Obedience Potion caused me to obey Malfoy's every whim."

"What did he command you to do?" Neville asked.

"First Malfoy ordered me to obey *his* commands as his own," she said, pointing to Harry.

"Let the record show that Miss O'Leary is indicating Harry Potter," Umbridge said loudly. Harry scowled.

"And then?" Neville prodded.

"He forced me to copy all of my spell books and scrolls—every spell I owned. It took me months!"

"He made you copy scrolls?"

Maeve, eyes narrowing, replied, "Yes."

"Nothing sinister or Dark? He simply told you to go home and make copies."?

Maeve's lips twisted. "Isn't that sinister enough?"

Neville nodded with a half smile and said condescendingly, "Of course it is."

Harry sneaked a glance at Draco, whose face was impassive. Malfoy had always been a complete git to Neville. Harry thought that might undergo a change in the future.

"Did Draco Malfoy order you to do anything else?" Neville asked in a tone that suggested he was getting bored with the line of questioning.

"Not until recently. He ordered me to learn Greek and translate a scroll from Ancient Runic," Maeve admitted. "Malfoy was gone for months, but Potter had a jolly time ordering me about in his absence."

Harry mimicked Draco, schooling his features into a blank mask.

"What did Potter order you to do, Maeve?" Umbridge asked in a silken tone. Harry knew she would love to hear that he had ordered Maeve to yank the heads from small animals and slice open a vein to assist Harry with some Dark Magic rituals. Maeve happily rattled off the list of menial tasks Harry had assigned to Maeve to keep her from driving him insane asking for instructions. The most incriminating was the floor waxing, but Draco had spent so much effort putting those floors in that Harry had wanted them to look nice when Malfoy finally returned home. Even though Harry had been quite angry with him, at the time.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Potter?" Umbridge asked, dragging Harry out of his reverie. He raised a brow.

"I prefer not to comment at this time," he said mildly, not needing any cues from Neville to know he'd best keep quiet. Umbridge glared, and her face twisted into an odd combination of smugness and disappointment.

"Did you or did you not give such instruction to Miss O'Leary?" she asked.

"Yes, I did," Harry said simply.

"Then you fully admit that you knew about the Obedience Potion?"

"No. I had no knowledge of any potion."

The toadlike lips thinned again. "You thought her behavior was normal?"

"How would I know what was normal behavior for Maeve? She would drop by on occasion and ask for something to do. She wouldn't bloody leave me alone until I suggested something."

"You claim to have had *no idea* that Draco Malfoy tampered with Miss O'Leary's memory and forcibly administered an illegal potion?"

Damn. Of course he'd had some idea, especially about the memory tampering, because Draco had admitted to it.

"As I said before, I had no knowledge of any potion, except the one Miss O'Leary *forcibly administered* to Draco Malfoy!" He delivered the comment with an edge, hoping Umbridge would seize on his tone, rather than the words. It seemed to work.

"Do not think that your celebrity status will exempt you from justice, Mr. Potter," she said grimly. "If I deem it necessary, we can certainly utilize Veritaserum in order to reach the truth."

"Despite which, my answer would remain the same," Harry said flatly. He and Umbridge glared at each other as though they were the only two people in the room. Harry wished they were—he would love to have a go at the wretched creature, wand to wand. A few choice hexes sprang to mind immediately.

"We shall see," Umbridge said with a hmph. Harry was surprised she had not already dragged out the Veritaserum and forced it down their throats. It was likely she merely waited for an opportune moment.

"Very well, Maeve, you may sit down while we listen to Mr. Malfoy's explanation of these events," Umbridge said.

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Chapter: 4

Chapter Four

"Mr. Malfoy, you have heard the testimonies of Miss O'Leary and Mrs. Aubrey?" Umbridge asked, almost politely.

Draco bit back a sarcastic comment. If he said no, would Marietta be required to read the entire record aloud? It was a tempting consideration, but he was already tired of the whole proceeding and simply wanted it to be done with.

"Yes, I have, Minister," he replied smoothly.

"Can you refute their testimony?"

"Indeed. To begin with Maeve's tale, she is apparently under the impression that I engineered events in order to cause her harm. In actuality, my appearance in Ireland was purely accidental. When I stumbled upon Maeve's cottage, I had no idea who she was, nor that she had any prior association with my family."

"Accidental. Do you admit you traveled to Ireland by Portkey?"

"I do."

Neville interrupted. "How did you come by this Portkey, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I found it," Draco said, and willed Potter to clamp his jaw shut. He fully expected Harry to get them both tossed into Azkaban with his inability to keep his Gryffindor tendencies under control. "At the time, I was encamped on the outskirts of London. I was outside my tent and noticed what looked to be an ordinary piece of rubbish. When I picked it up, I was taken immediately to a wood in Ireland."

"Accidentally," Umbridge repeated in a tone of disbelief.

"Considering I was transported with neither wand nor *shoes* I would make that a definite yes. I was with several companions who can verify my unexpected disappearance."

Umbridge flicked a disdainful glance at Harry, as if she considered even the *idea* of testimony from Potter to be an affront. "They can be questioned later, if necessary. Do go on."

"After walking through the rain for several hours, uncertain as to which country I had been sent, it was a relief to stumble onto Maeve's residence." Draco left out the fact that the bloody wood had *herded* him to Maeve's cottage, likely by the same magic she had been trying to maintain by Draco's sacrifice. "She invited me inside and offered me both food and drink. Unfortunately, the drink happened to be laced with both Veritaserum and a sleeping potion."

Umbridge made a scoffing noise. "Why would she do that when she had only just met you?"

"Apparently she recognized me at the son of Lucius Malfoy."

Neville cut in. "Did you identify Draco as a Malfoy, Miss O'Leary?"

Maeve grimaced. "How could I not? He gave me a false name, of course, but I knew who he was. Look at him—he's the bleeding image of Lucius Malfoy."

Draco looked at Harry, who grinned wryly and shook his head almost imperceptibly. For some reason, it gave Draco a warm feeling.

"Go on, Mr. Malfoy," Neville said, but Maeve interrupted.

"He told me that he'd been sent to Ireland by someone named Ron Weasley."

Draco smiled, inwardly cursing the bitch for dosing him with Veritaserum and causing him to spill all manner of truths. "At the time I believed it to be true."

"Why would you suspect Ron of sending you away?" Percy asked, interjecting a comment for the first time, likely hoping to defend his brother.

"Ron believed his wife to be carrying a bit of a torch for me… at the time," Draco admitted. Which was perfectly true, although it had actually been the idea of Draco shagging his best friend that had sent the Weasel over the edge. Percy scowled and several sets of eyes fixed on Hermione, who flushed to her roots. Draco refrained from blowing her a kiss, barely. Neville was looking pointedly at Maeve.

"Did you, in fact, administer Veritaserum to Draco Malfoy?" he asked.

"I… I did," she admitted.

"Without Ministry sanction?"

"We have reviewed Maeve's case in regards to the Veritaserum incident, and she has been given a pardon," Umbridge stated smugly.

Draco saw Neville's hands clench. "You pardoned her, even though her actions had a direct

bearing on this case?" Neville growled. Umbridge smiled, her wide mouth stretching with satisfaction.

"Yes. The hearing was held the day before yesterday, prior to Mr. Malfoy being taken into custody. She admitted her guilt and has been chastised."

"Chastised," Neville snapped. "My client is on trial for administering a potion, as well. Do you plan to give him the same *chastisement*?"

The smile left Umbridge's face. "Mr. Malfoy administered an *illegal and dangerous* potion, Mr. Longbottom. Do not presume to question the decisions of this Court simply because you do not agree with them!"

Neville dragged in a breath and only Draco was near enough to see him struggle for control. Draco had to admit that an angry Longbottom was a novel sight. Neville had finally grown into his Gryffindor potential, apparently, and he was a good deal braver than most if he took on Umbridge frequently.

"My apologies to the Court," Neville said in a placid tone. "What happened after you were unwillingly given Veritaserum and … what was it? A sleeping potion?"

"Yes. Well, I don't remember anything after that, until I awoke bound to an ancient stone altar with Miss O'Leary standing over me with a very large dagger, intending to cut out my heart."

"Speculation on the part of the witness!" Umbridge said loudly.

"Which part?" Harry yelled. "The bit about the altar, or the bit about cutting out his heart?"

Umbridge turned on Potter like an enraged ghoul. "Mr. Potter, you have been warned about speaking out of turn. Do not do so again."

Neville asked quickly, "Mr. Malfoy, are you speculating in regards to the sacrifice?"

"No. Maeve stated to me directly that the wood required a blood sacrifice in order to renew the spell that kept it protected from the Muggles."

"Is this true, Miss O'Leary?"

Maeve scoffed. "Of course not. Blood sacrifice was banned before my lifetime. The potions must have addled Mr. Malfoy's wits."

Harry made a ridiculing sound and Umbridge glared at him. Draco noticed Harry was absently rubbing the back of his right hand, as if afflicted by an old wound.

"Very well, assuming you did not intend to plunge a knife into his chest, is it nevertheless true

that you bound him to an altar?" Neville asked.

"No, I did not."

Draco thought Harry was going to come over the railing. A sharp cough from Neville steadied Potter, thankfully, and he sat back with features taut and angry. Umbridge watched Harry with a smile playing about her horrid lips, and Draco suddenly knew she would be ecstatic if Potter caused a scene.

"I assume you have an explanation for how Malfoy came to be bound to an altar when prior to that he was drugged senseless in your house?"

"I do not. I took him to Rock Close so that he would not awaken in my house. Once he was beyond the boundary of my forest, he would not be able to find his way back again. I expected that someone he knew would be looking for him." Her eyes flicked to Harry. "I placed him on the altar, merely because of its convenient location, but he was not bound."

"And the knife?" Neville asked.

"What knife?" Maeve demanded. Draco almost grinned. The lying bitch was Slytherin through and through. It was almost admirable. "I assure you, the dagger Mr. Malfoy speaks of is purely a figment of his imagination."

"Isn't it fascinating that we both have the same figment?" Harry snarled. Umbridge looked like a spider with her eye on a very tasty fly as she stared at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, if you speak again, you will have a Silencing Charm placed on you. As it is, you will serve seven full days of incarceration for speaking out of turn, despite several warnings. Do you wish to say something more?"

Harry's jaw worked furiously, but he sat back, looking like a chained, extremely volatile, predator. Draco hoped Umbridge did not provoke Potter too far. *Patience, Harry*, he willed, but Harry was glaring at Umbridge with the utmost loathing.

"Finish this, Longbottom, before Potter explodes," Draco murmured.

"Did you keep the knife?" Neville asked softly enough that only Draco could hear.

Fuck. Draco thought back.

"No. We left it in the Druid's Cave. It could be retrieved, though."

"Too late—she can claim to have put it there herself. If you'd kept it, we could have traced it to her. Not that it would help."

"Is Mr. Malfoy finished, Mr. Longbottom?" Umbridge called in her falsetto voice.

"Not even close, you wretched bitch," Neville muttered. Aloud he said, "After you woke upon the altar, Mr. Malfoy, what happened next?"

"Maeve explained why she planned to sacrifice me. She raised the knife… and then Harry Potter was there. He hexed Maeve—Stunning her—and released my bonds. I used a Memory Charm to remove Maeve's memory of us, considering her reaction to my father's name; and the fact that she had nearly killed me. I wanted only to return home and forget I had ever been to Ireland."

Umbridge spoke to Marietta. "Please make a note that any attempt on Mr. Malfoy's life is unable to be proven and may be pure prevarication on the part of Draco Malfoy."

Harry hissed loudly as Marietta scribbled, and though several pairs of eyes shot to him, he said nothing identifiable. Draco chuckled silently, realizing Potter was speaking Parseltongue. Though he could only imagine what Harry was saying; it was most likely not flattering to Umbridge. Her eyes narrowed at the Gryffindor, but she plainly could not challenge him for hissing.

"When we arrived at Malfoy Manor the next day, Maeve was waiting for us, after apparently freeing herself from the Memory Charm." Draco had left out the fact of their spending the night in the Druid's Cave and Apparating back to England. That was something neither the Ministry nor Neville needed to know. "She hexed me with a full Body-Bind the instant I stepped inside the door of my own house and then Stunned Potter when he followed. Maeve's claim of self defense was bollocks—Potter never even got a chance to pull his wand out."

Maeve started to speak, but Neville glared her down. Draco continued, "She then took a love potion from her robes and poured it down my throat while I was immobile. It was sheer coincidence that Ron Weasley walked around the corner and saw her. He stopped her with a Stunner and released the spell on me."

"Why did the love potion not take effect immediately?" Umbridge asked with a dubious tone.

"It wasn't attuned, obviously, and she did not have a chance to activate it. I kept my eyes closed once I could move again."

"And you kept them closed for how long?" Umbridge sneered. "Weeks?"

"Only a few minutes, actually," Draco admitted.

"And?"

"And then the potion was triggered by Harry Potter."

The gallery erupted into a buzz of conversation. Umbridge and her idiotic hemming were

completely drowned by the din and she had to stand up and shout for order. She glared about malevolently, sparing no one, until the room was quiet once more.

"You fell in love with Harry Potter?" Neville asked quietly, "Because of the potion?"

Draco allowed himself one soft glance at Harry, whose eyes sparkled in return. Malfoy had been hopelessly in love with Potter long before Maeve's potion, but it had been an interesting addition.

"Yes," he replied. "Luckily, there was enough potion left in the bottle for analysis. We acquired an antidote, of course."

"And Maeve?"

"I planned to restore her once I determined a way to keep her from trying to murder me," Draco said dryly.

"A process that took over *seven months*?"

"I was delayed. I was held against my will in a Scottish dungeon for six months by a former Death Eater. It was his intention to release a deadly spell on the wizarding community during the Quidditch Finals."

Umbridge waved her hand dismissively.

"Which is to say, all we have is your *word* that you planned to give Maeve the antidote. Eventually."

Draco shrugged, knowing he had little defense for leaving the raving bitch under the spell of the Obedience Potion. Not for the first time, he regretted not slashing her throat and leaving her body to rot in Ireland. Of course, Harry would have stopped him and they would still be in this boat. He sighed.

"I think saving the wizarding world from a psychotic madman might count as extenuating circumstances," Neville interjected.

Umbridge made a scoffing noise. "We're not here to judge under what conditions Mr. Malfoy *might* have administered an antidote. We're here to determine whether or not he did, indeed, dispense a dangerous and illegal potion to Miss O'Leary. Seeing that Mr. Malfoy freely admitted to doing so—regardless of the circumstances—I believe the testimony portion of this trial can be concluded."

Harry's eyes were flashing again and Draco sighed. This was not going to end prettily.

"We will now have a show of hands. I should like to recommend a sentence of no less that ten years in Azkaban for this heinous crime," Umbridge stated. Draco sucked in a breath at the

unexpected sentence and Harry looked too shocked to even speak.

"I find such a sentence to be rather harsh, Minister," Neville protested and several voices rose in assent from the Wizengamot. "The potion did not cause any lasting damage and my client has stated his intention to reverse the effects. If Miss O'Leary was trying to kill him, his actions can be construed as self defense."

"I agree, Dolores," Kingsley said and was echoed by a large number of Aurors. "Perhaps a lesser sentence would be more fitting?"

Umbridge glared at the impassive faces ranged behind her and seemed to realize many of them would rather free Draco than see him imprisoned unfairly. She nodded.

"I seek only to prevent future crimes of this sort from taking place," she said in a self-righteous tone. "A harsh sentence can be a deterrent. However, since a firm hand is something not all can understand, I rescind the sentence to seven years. Those who believe Mr. Malfoy to be guilty as charged, please raise your hands."

A large number of the Wizengamot raised their hands. Draco counted quickly. Was it a majority? He noted Percy Weasley had jumped on the guilty bandwagon—the prat. So much for the Weasleys moving to Draco's good side.

"All opposed?"

Another set of hands rose, including Kingsley Shacklebolt's, Draco was pleased to note. Umbridge stood and held up a parchment that must have magically tallied the votes. Her eyes were on Harry Potter and her smile could not have gotten any wider.

"Very well. The majority has spoken. Draco Malfoy is hereby sentenced to seven years in Azkaban."

ooOoo

Harry was out of his seat with a denial bursting from his lips. Only the hands of the Aurors on either side of him kept him from leaping forward and strangling Dolores Umbridge with his bare hands. Harry was so enraged it did not even occur to him to use magic.

"*HARRY!*"

Only one voice could have penetrated the red haze of wrath that clouded his mind. Harry's gaze shot to Draco, who glared at him imploringly.

"No!" Malfoy said in a severe tone. Neville gripped Harry's hands a moment later—he must have sprinted from Draco's side to reach Harry so quickly.

"It's what she wants," Neville said urgently. "Look at her—she's itching for you to do something irrational!"

It was true; Umbridge was seated again, looking like a fat toad that had just swallowed the fattest fly imaginable. Her loathsome face peered at him expectantly. Harry's nails dug into his palms. For a moment, he was back at Hogwarts, helpless against her authority, forced to bite his tongue and bide his time. Well, he wasn't helpless now, was he? Harry took a deep breath and began to draw in his magic.

"Malfoy said if you use your magic today he'll never speak to you again," Neville said urgently. Harry gasped in surprise and stared at Neville in amazement. The blue eyes were serious. "I'm not sure what he meant, but those were his words."

Two Aurors were removing Draco's shackles, but Malfoy's silver gaze had not left Harry. The magic slipped away from Harry's grasp as though draining through a sieve. He glared at Draco.

"This is not over," Harry snapped.

"Of course not," Neville said simply. "I'll begin the appeal process immediately. They can't keep him in Azkaban that long for a bloody potion—the Minister is power mad. I'm not sure I agreed with Malfoy's suggestion that I begin bribing Ministry officials, especially as most of them are motivated by fear of Umbridge rather than monetary gain…" He trailed off, realizing the Aurors next to Harry could hear him.

"Don't worry," one Auror said. "Not many Aurors side with Umbridge. We keep hoping she meets a grisly end and Shacklebolt will become the new Minister." The Auror sighed. "Unfortunately, he has forbidden us to bring about such a happy accident. Good man, Shacklebolt."

Harry did not care about Ministry politics, or Aurors, or bribery. He felt nothing but ice-cold terror at the thought of Draco in Azkaban. He remembered what the place had done to Sirius, and he had been a *dog* most of the time! Hell, Harry remembered the chilling horror of merely being around dementors. Malfoy would be forced to endure them day in and day out for *seven years*? Something irrational. Harry was ready, willing, and quite able to do something irrational. Even if it meant Draco would never speak to him again.

"Can I see him?" Harry asked Neville, not quite ready to take that chance.

Draco had already been escorted away.

"I'll see what I can do," Neville said and hurried after Malfoy.

Harry's trial followed Draco's, though Harry barely paid attention throughout. The testimonies had already been heard and Harry had little to add. Umbridge lobbied for the use of Veritaserum, claiming personal knowledge of Harry's penchant for lying. At that point Hermione Weasley was

removed from the courtroom for shrieking at the Minister. When the commotion died, the more rational members of the Court—most likely earning them the Minister's undying hatred—denied Umbridge's suggestion. Harry was certain that hatred grew when he was found innocent of all charges.

He was grateful for the verdict, although he wondered how much of it was based on the fact that he was still considered to be the Savior of the Wizarding World. He almost would rather have been sent to Azkaban with Draco. Not that they would have been able to see each other. From what Sirius had told Remus, it was a bleak, cold place, and prisoners were confined to their own private cells; and private hells. Umbridge would have to be satisfied with the seven-day sentence she had placed on Harry for speaking out of turn. Even that was to be served in the Ministry dungeons—not Azkaban.

To make matters worse, Harry had been denied the chance to see Draco, who had been taken to Azkaban that very day. The only communication they had been allowed were short notes passed through Neville. Draco had ordered him to remain calm and allow Neville to follow legal channels. Neville had been given access to Draco's funds in France to use for Malfoy's defense, or for bribery, or for whatever would get Draco the hell out of Azkaban as quickly as possible.

Harry paced in the study of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. He had quietly served his seven-day sentence. The damned bars could not hold him, but Draco's words certainly did. Hermione glanced up from her book now and again to watch him worriedly. Harry ignored her and mulled over possible solutions. Even if Neville succeeded in winning an appeal, it would likely take months to even schedule another trial. And unless Neville succeeded in bribing over half the Wizengamot, Harry did not even see the point. Malfoy still had no decent defense for turning Maeve into his human house-elf for months, regardless that the bitch had tried to kill him.

Harry stopped suddenly, remembering his last conversation with Neville.

"They seized Draco's Gringott's account, but they can't touch anything overseas, correct?" Harry had asked.

"Not without authorization from the countries in question, and that is never an easy task. Unless the Ministry is desperate for cash—or unless Umbridge carries her spite to a ridiculous extreme—they won't even attempt it."

"What about Malfoy Manor? Last time the Ministry got their hands on it, they burned it to the ground."

Neville had snorted. "They have no reason to burn it, at the moment. It was suspected of being Death Eater headquarters during the war, which is why it was destroyed. More likely, Umbridge will move into it. Draco still owns it, of course, but the Ministry will be free to use it until his release, in the absence of any heirs to take over. They will claim to be maintaining it for him, of course."

Harry hoped Neville had been joking about Umbridge. The very idea of that woman in Malfoy Manor made Harry's skin crawl. Thinking of her sleeping in Draco's room—in *their* room—made him want to vomit. He couldn't help Draco at the moment, but he wasn't about to allow Dolores Umbridge to get her twisted claws on Malfoy Manor.

"I'm going to visit Hedwig," Harry said suddenly.

"Harry," Hermione said before he went out. He paused and looked at her.

"He'll be fine. We're doing our best," she said, trying to sound earnest. Harry forced a fake smile, and knew that Hermione knew it was fake. He would rather not think of the fact that Malfoy had already spent a week in Azkaban. Only three hundred and sixty three weeks to go. The thought made him ill.

"I'll be back," he said hoarsely.

He made a quick stop in his room and then hurried to the attic. The instant he was alone with the owls, he Disapparated.

Malfoy Manor was tightly locked and magically sealed with Ministry spells. Harry, with wand in hand once more, barely paused as he dismantled the locks and wards, and went inside. He padded through the halls and took a quick inventory, glad to see the place was still empty. The only items visibly missing were those in the formerly-hidden basement, which had been stripped bare. Harry suppressed a flash of anger, knowing many of those items were Draco's only remaining link to his parents. Regardless that Lucius had died a Death Eater, Draco was still entitled to his childhood memories.

Harry sighed and got to work. Hermione would most likely send out a search party when Harry did not return, but he would worry about that later.

It was time-consuming. Darkness had fallen completely by the time Harry finished. It would have taken half the time with assistance, but Harry did not want to endanger his friends by confiding in them. Umbridge would likely have apoplexy the minute she discovered Malfoy Manor had disappeared. It was already Unplottable, but now that Harry had added a Fidelius Charm with himself as the Secret-Keeper, Draco's home was effectively out of the Ministry's grasp.

When Harry had finished, he grabbed his broom and Disapparated.

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Chapter: 5

Chapter Five

Harry looked at the rugged Scottish coast and marveled that it had been mere weeks since he had stood in the same spot with Draco. The Brough of Deerness. It was a beautiful place. He remembered the Slytherin's silvery hair spread out over cloak and grass and felt an unwelcome tightness in his throat. He looked at the surf, crashing on the rocks below, and knew he stood on a metaphorical precipice, as well as a literal one. He was about to make a step that would change his life forever.

Hermione was going to kill him. Ron was going to kill him. Hell, *Draco* was probably going to kill him. He sighed and then smiled broadly. Harry hadn't done anything blatantly, ridiculously harebrained, nor had he broken so many rules, since he had left Hogwarts. For some inexplicable reason, the thought made him want to laugh aloud.

Harry mounted the broom, checked the compass, and flew out over the dark, roiling sea.

Azkaban Prison was an imposing structure, even in the dark. Harry hovered on the broom and wished he had brought something warmer than his invisibility cloak. A bloody Arctic wind shivered over him from the north and his hands were stiffening on the broom handle.

The structure itself was huge—Harry estimated twelve storeys, though it was hard to tell—very few lights illuminated the place and the windows seemed to be little more than slits, barely wide enough for an arrow to pass through.

Azkaban perched on a barren island of solid rock. Harry doubted it could be approached by sea; the pounding surf would dash a boat to pieces. He examined the place from all angles, taking care to stay far enough away to avoid detection by roving dementors. There seemed to be only one entrance—a small courtyard perched on a rocky promontory, looking like a landing pad for Muggle helicopters. Or wizard brooms.

Harry sighed, realizing it was the only way in.

"Straight through the big, main doors, then," he muttered. He landed in the courtyard and stashed Draco's broom behind a nearby boulder, along with his pack. He cast a quick Concealment Charm to hide them; made sure his cloak was fully covering him, and approached the doors.

They were imposing—fully twelve feet high and reinforced with iron. Harry put a hand on the doors and cast out with his special brand of magic, seeking to identify the spells on the portal. They were several and varied. A couple were even deadly. As expected, however, they were designed to keep people from escaping, not entering.

It took Harry nearly thirty minutes to dismantle the spells, starting with the alarms, and ending with the Lightning Hex. They were bloody serious about keeping prisoners inside. Those that

had set up the spells had been competent, to say the least. Harry rested his forehead against the weathered door in weariness. After casting the Fidelius Charm, Apparating to Scotland, and flying to Azkaban to dismantle several complicated spells, he was beginning to feel the effects. He judged it to be nearly two o'clock in the morning.

No turning back, now. He cast *Alohomora* and one of the huge doors slid open—soundlessly due to the Silencing Charm Harry had cast. When it was open enough to squeeze through, Harry did so. He decided to leave it partially open, just in case the damned wards reset automatically when the doors were shut. He would most likely not have a half-hour to take them down on the return trip.

He found himself in a small, dark antechamber with a large dais in the center, upon which sat a stone desk. During the day some sort of receiving clerk or receptionist likely occupied it. Four stone doors led from the room, one on each side and two at the rear.

Harry hurried forward, hoping to find some sort of records. The desk drawers—two of them—also stone, were locked. *Who the hell would come in here and try to break into these drawers?* Harry wondered. *Well, besides me?*

He unlocked them without speaking a word. The first drawer was filled with ledgers. He pulled out the topmost volume. It was a massive tome, conveniently marked with a blue silk ribbon. Harry set it atop the desk and flipped it open to the indicated page.

Draco Malfoy was the second name from the bottom, marked with the date of his admission. Next to his name was a notation: *B7-38*. That was helpful.

Harry slammed the book and tossed it back into the drawer with a curse. Unless he could figure out where the hell *B7-38* was he would have to wander the halls of Azkaban. After the Mulciber incident, Harry should have placed a Tracking Spell on his Slytherin. Harry grinned, knowing what Draco would have said about that idea.

Using what he hoped was logic, Harry chose the second door from the left. It seemed like a B. He found himself in a long, dark corridor—and facing a dementor! It swiveled toward him immediately with a hungry sort of eagerness, likely sensing untapped emotion. Harry felt the cold sucking at him instantly, but he no longer heard the tortured screams of his mother. Harry had faced so many dementors working with Draco that he could dispel them in his sleep.

It didn't hurt that he had an arsenal of happy thoughts at his disposal—one of his favorites was of Draco with a braided wreath of flowers on his head. The Slytherin had fallen asleep one afternoon on a job and Harry had twisted dozens of wildflowers into a crown before placing it over Draco's head.

Harry had laughed uncontrollably when Draco awoke and sat up. It had somewhat backfired on Harry, because Draco had looked like a damned Greek god, but it had not stopped Harry from calling Draco his Fairy Princess for the rest of the afternoon until Malfoy had tackled him and

tickled him into submission, before kissing him into another form of submission—all in all, a very happy memory.

The stag burst from Harry's wand and exploded the dementor into a puff of black mist. Harry smiled and acknowledged that he never tired of doing that. He noticed a lift at the far end of the corridor and jogged silently toward it, trying not to peer into the cells. The place was ridiculously cold and unpleasant. Harry was certain if he allowed himself to look at any of the prisoners, he would free them all in a fit of altruistic pity, and some of them likely deserved to be there.

As he entered the lift, he revised that opinion slightly. Azkaban was so horrifying it was possible that *no one* deserved to be there. For certain no one deserved to be fed upon by soulless dementors for years without end.

The lift turned out to be one of the most ancient, loudest, and most rickety contraptions imaginable. The sound of it rattling and wheezing up to the seventh floor reverberated throughout the whole bloody place, it seemed to Harry, and he fully expected an alarm to be raised the instant he stepped out.

He was only met by two dementors, however, and savagely dispelled them. He knew there had to be human guards, but probably not patrolling where the dementors roamed. Perhaps Harry's Gryffindor luck would hold.

Small plaques were set into the walls near each cell door. Harry cast a tiny Lumos to read one. It read 20. The next cell was 21. Both were empty.

A prisoner in the next cell moaned and sobbed in his sleep. Harry hurried past. He counted the doors, turning a corner as he passed the 20s. He saw two dementors hovering before a cell door and felt a cold tendril of fear, instinctively knowing it was Draco's cell. Fresh meat for the dementors.

Harry dispensed with the Patronus and cast of one Draco's favorite spells—the Disruptor. Both dementors exploded in a flash of purple light. The glare and accompanying crack awakened a prisoner, who began screaming incoherently. Harry tried to shut out the sound as he reached the door and peered through the bars. A figure huddled on a small cot in the bitterly cold cell, with arms wrapped around his shins and blond head resting on his knees.

Draco.

Harry Silenced the door and spelled it open. He was on the cot holding the Slytherin in his arms in an instant. Malfoy was shivering with cold.

"No dreams," Draco moaned. "God, no more twisted dreams."

"Draco, it's me," Harry said and shrugged off his invisibility cloak. He felt tears scald his eyes as he tried to warm the Slytherin by rubbing his hands quickly over Draco's shoulders and arms.

"I'm here."

Draco tried to shrink away. "You can't be here," he said harshly. "You're merely a figment. You're going to turn into some horrid, fanged creature of my worst nightmares. I'm already going mad. Oddly, I thought it would take much longer."

Harry laughed. He couldn't help it. The mere fact of holding Draco in his arms again made all seem right with the universe. The sound made Draco raise his head and stare in amazement.

"Potter?"

Harry grinned and nodded.

"Please tell me you're not really here."

"I'm not really here."

Draco sighed in relief. "Then get on with the turning into something foul and eating my face off, so the dementors can get their jollies and I can get some sleep."

"I lied. I'm really here, but I do like your face-sucking idea."

Harry took Draco's lips with his own. They were cold as ice and chapped to the point of cracking. Harry tasted them gently, striving to warm Draco's mouth without hurting him. Malfoy inhaled sharply.

"Harry, what are you doing here?"

"Breaking you out of Azkaban."

Harry couldn't see anything of Draco in the darkness but the outline of his body and a bright flash of hair, but he could picture the expression perfectly.

"Are you completely insane?" Draco hissed.

"It's been suggested. Mostly by you, of course. I'm not leaving you here. Now come on. It's a long way down in the loudest lift on the globe."

Draco did not move.

"You can't—! Potter, you're the Gryffindor Golden Boy. The Poster Child of Righteousness. You can't just—turn yourself into a common criminal!"

"I most assuredly can, and frankly all those idiotic titles were beginning to annoy me. Now get up. Can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk," Draco snapped. He levered his legs off the cot and stood up, only to sway and nearly collapse. Luckily, Harry had not released him. He held Draco tightly.

"All right, so I haven't stood in a couple of days," Draco admitted. "I didn't really see the point."

"Lean on me," Harry said softly. Draco did, for a moment, and Harry pressed a kiss against his temple. Draco pulled away sharply.

"I'm not leaving, Harry. You need to get out of here before you're discovered."

"That's a very good Gryffindor impression," Harry said.

"No need to insult me," Draco replied. "This is for your own good."

"I thought you might fight me on this."

"Damn right."

Harry sighed, touched Draco with his wand, and hexed his lover with a Sleep Charm. He caught Draco as the Slytherin fell.

Harry slipped back down the hall with Draco, Levitated and covered with Harry's invisibility cloak, trailing in his wake. He hurried, uncertain how long dementors stayed dissipated when hit with a Patronus, and wondering if they would raise an alarm when they reformed.

The rattling lift was just as loud on the return trip and seemed slower than Harry remembered. He found himself reaching out occasionally to touch Draco, reassuring himself of the Slytherin's unconscious, unseen presence.

The ground floor cell block was empty of both dementors and guards, but the shrieking elevator had awakened several prisoners, who shouted hoarsely as Harry pelted past with all concern for stealth gone. He just wanted to get out.

In the entrance antechamber, a man stood over the desk, holding a lit wand and looking confused. Harry nearly bowled him over as he raced through the door. The man shouted and looked straight at Harry for a dazed moment, and then Harry's wordless Stunner hit him. The man fell and Harry bolted for the huge front door, praying the man had not shut it.

It was still partially open, as Harry had left it, and he murmured heartfelt thanks as he raced across the courtyard to the hidden broom. An alarm suddenly shrieked from the prison and Harry maneuvered Draco onto the broom haphazardly. He kicked off and flew from Azkaban as fast as the Vortex could manage.

ooOoo

Draco shivered, but he was aware of comforting warmth pressed against his back. He leaned into it with a sigh of contentment. He had been so bone-numbingly cold recently it seemed he would never be warm again.

Soft lips touched his neck and Draco's eyes snapped open.

Harry.

Draco rolled over swiftly to confront the smiling face of Harry Potter.

"Hi," Potter said sweetly.

Draco nearly smiled back, but the enormity of what Harry had done stilled his reaction. His tone was harsh when he spoke.

"Potter, you shouldn't—"

Harry scowled. "Shhhh. It's done. I couldn't leave you there and I couldn't possibly live without you for seven long years, especially knowing you were trapped in that cold, dark hell. If we have to live on the street in a… a cardboard box, or flee the country and live in Budapest, I don't care."

Harry words caused a lump to form in Draco's throat, but he had to make the Gryffindor understand the trouble they were in. He sat up angrily.

"I don't think you realize exactly what you've—where the hell are we?"

The room was completely unfamiliar to Draco. It was astoundingly decorated, with a huge wrought-iron bed, iron-shod dark wood furnishings, and forest-reminiscent colors of brown, burgundy, and green. The place was beautiful.

Harry grinned.

"This is part of your birthday present. Remember when you told me I could redecorate the Pristine Palace?"

Draco gaped at him. "This is my London flat?"

"It was. Now it's *our* London flat. I stripped the bleached whiteness and made it a place tolerable for humans."

"When did you do it?"

"Mostly while you were gone… with Mulciber. I wasn't sure if you would ever return, but if you did, I'd hoped you would come to the flat. It gave me something to occupy my time. Shopping is

such a chore."

"Shopping is never a chore, Potter."

"Do you like it?" Harry asked shyly.

Draco had to smile. The damned Gryffindor was constantly fishing for compliments.

"It's perfect. However, we were not discussing furnishings and interior decorating. We were discussing you taking on the entire Ministry of Magic and becoming a wanted criminal. And giving *me* that dubious distinction while you were at it! I'm a bloody fugitive!"

"Well, it's not the first time," Harry said defensively.

"It is for you! Have you any idea what you've done?"

Harry threw himself out of bed and stalked to the window. He was dressed in green boxers that Draco recognized as his—mostly from the golden DM monogram. Draco immediately began to plot ways to get Harry out of them… He scowled and forced his thoughts back to the conversation.

"I don't care, Draco! That trial was a farce! The Ministry is acting like an idiotic version of Voldemort! Fucking Maeve tries to murder you and you get sent to Azkaban while she gets *chastised*! As far as I'm concerned, that potion you gave her was no more than she deserved, and better than she should have gotten!"

Draco leaned back into the pillows and tugged the blankets around him. He could not seem to get warm and felt another shiver seize him.

"Are you really prepared to take on the entire Ministry, Harry? Even your friends will be after you! Tonks, Bill Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt—they'er Aurors! It's their job to track you down and bring you to justice! How could you place that burden on them?"

Harry glared at him. "They won't find us. No one knows about this place."

"You plan for us to stay here forever? Living in hiding like… like scared rabbits?"

Harry stormed back to the bed. "What would you have me do, Draco? Leave you there? I would rather die than think of you in Azkaban! All right? I would rather die! I don't care if I have to live as a fugitive and never see my friends again! I will not have you in that place with those *creatures* feeding on you! I will not have it."

Draco sighed, realizing his Gryffindor was having a Harry Potter moment, where logic simply would not intrude. Truthfully, Draco was bloody glad to be out of the horrifying prison and did not relish the thought of going back, *ever*. If he had to live in Budapest or a… cardboard box?…

then so be it. He shivered again and Harry's angry visage softened immediately.

Potter lifted the covers and pressed himself against Draco's back.

"Still cold? You were only there for eight days, Draco." Harry's lips caressed Draco's neck and breathed welcome heat against his skin. "I couldn't leave you there. I just couldn't."

"Warm me, Harry," Draco said thickly, taking Potter's hand and gripping it tightly. Harry did, using lips, and hands, and breath, and body, until Draco was filled with blissful heat and gasping for breath. He held the Gryffindor tightly as the last trembling shudders faded.

"Thank you," Draco said softly.

"For warming you?"

"For rescuing me."

Harry's arms tightened.

"You're welcome."

"Even if it was stupid."

Potter laughed into his hair and Draco grinned. Bloody Gryffindor.

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Chapter: 6

Chapter Six

Harry left Draco asleep after planting a soft kiss on his temple and touching the platinum hair gently. Malfoy murmured and a smile curved his lips for a moment as Harry tucked the blankets around him. A glance at his watch showed it to be just past noon. Harry was starved. He didn't recall eating anything the previous day. Draco was probably hungry, as well.

Of course, Harry was shite as a cook, so he didn't even try. Instead, raided the pantry and found enough ingredients to make a haphazard sandwich, which he wolfed down while drinking copious amounts of scalding tea. An owl had dropped off the Daily Prophet at the front door. He walked down the hall to pick it up as he stuffed the last bite into his mouth. Mustard dripped onto his chest and he swiped at it absently with a finger as he opened the door.

He Summoned the paper rather than bend down and risk spilling his tea, but he nearly dropped the mug anyway when he saw the headline.
DRACO MALFOY ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN
Convicted felon, Draco Malfoy, son of notorious Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy, escaped from Azkaban in the early hours of the morning, assisted by an unidentified wizard. The prison is guarded by dementors and it is unknown how the prisoner and his accomplice managed to disable the alarms and bypass the dementor guards. Herbert Ledbetter, a clerk at the prison, was awakened by the sound of a lift in the middle of the night and went to investigate. "I was near knocked down by the bloke!" Herbert states, "Dark haired, he was! He was rushing for the doors—I never saw Malfoy, not since the day he was brought in." Herbert was Stunned before he got a good look at the man. The unknown wizard had to be very powerful, according to Azkaban officials, to disable the alarms and hexes on the main doors. Draco Malfoy had been sentenced to seven years in Azkaban recently for administering an illegal potion to an Irish witch whose name has been withheld by the Ministry of Magic. Malfoy had been working with Harry Potter at the time of the trial. Potter is currently being sought for questioning regarding Malfoy's escape and possible whereabouts.

Harry snorted. Sought for questioning. They might just as well have printed, "Harry Potter broke Draco Malfoy out of Azkaban." Everyone would jump to that conclusion after reading it, anyway. He tossed the paper on the kitchen table and piled a tray high with various foodstuffs. After adding a pot of tea, he carried it back to the bedroom. He set it next to the bed and climbed back under the blankets to cuddle with Draco until the Slytherin decided to wake up.

ooOoo

Draco felt something tickle across his chest and snapped awake in a veritable panic. His mind screamed *dementor!* Before he could scramble away, a warm body stirred against his, quelling the need to flee and bringing him back to reality. He was no longer in that godforsaken place. Thanks to Harry.

Harry moved again and his hair brushed over Draco's chest again. Draco tightened his grip on the Gryffindor, earning a soft oofing sound. The head tipped back and bright green eyes met his. Harry smiled and Draco slid down for a kiss.

"You must be starved," Harry commented.

"Hell, yes."

Harry crawled out of bed and poured some tea while Draco availed himself of the lavatory. He could hardly wait to climb into a hot bath. When he returned to the bed, Harry set a tray across his lap and fed him bites of fruit, cheese, meat, and pastries in between kisses. Draco would have shoved the tray aside and feasted on Harry, instead, but the Gryffindor would not allow it.

"You need to eat. What did they feed you in that place?"

"I don't know, but it did not resemble food."

"If it's any consolation, Lupin, Tonks, and I nearly starved without you."

Draco laughed. "One of you needs to learn to cook."

"No, I think we'll just keep you around."

"How do you propose to do that, now that we're fugitives?" Draco asked.

Harry looked uncomfortable. "We can move."

"Budapest?" Draco asked archly.

"Well, maybe not there. Somewhere nice. How about the islands?"

"Which islands?"

"Bermuda."

"You would go stark raving mad living in paradise, Potter, and you know it. You can't survive without a challenge. Think about it. No more Dark Magic to battle; no Death Eater enemies crawling out of the woodwork; no one to *save*."

Harry scowled. "I could become a lifeguard."

"And have people pretend to drown day in and day out, just for the chance to grope your body? I think not," Draco griped.

Harry laughed. "You're jealous of potential drowning victims?"

Draco ignored that disdainfully. "It doesn't matter, because we're not moving to Bermuda."

"Jamaica?"

"We're staying here, Potter."

"Here, *here*?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Here in Britain. I'm certainly not going to remain in hiding, though, no matter how attractive the prison. Or the company."

"What do you propose we do, then?"

Draco leaned back after fluffing his pillows against the headboard. He propped his hands behind

his head.

"We could take on the Ministry."

Harry stared at him in shock for a moment, and then laughed.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy, for a minute I thought you were serious."

Draco grinned widely.

"I am serious."

Harry's chuckles choked and died. He scowled. "How do you propose we do that?"

"I'm not sure, yet. I'll have to do some planning," Draco admitted. Harry flung himself out of bed with an oath.

"We can't take on the Ministry, Draco," he said. "It's bad enough they're hunting us! Kingsley, Tonks, Bill, Susan—what would you have us do, fight them?"

"Harry, Harry, Harry. You're thinking like a Gryffindor. It's not always about confronting danger head on."

"You mean to beat them indirectly? But how?"

"We don't have to beat them at all, Harry." Draco let his eyes slide over Potter's mostly naked form and began to plot how to get him back into bed. It usually wasn't difficult. "The problem… is Umbridge. Once we get rid of her, we can petition for another trial, hopefully expose Maeve for the bloodthirsty witch she is, and clear my bloody name. You know as well as I that the worst I should have received is a hefty fine." He waved away Harry's protest. "Yes, I know, a very hefty fine. And reparations to sweet Maeve. All of which I would have done."

"What do you mean by 'get rid of'?" Harry asked. "Leave it to the Gryffindor to pluck the only potentially lethal word from the bunch.

"Do you want me to be honest, or sugar-coat it?"

Harry glared. "I really hate it when you do that. You are *not* going to kill Dolores Umbridge."

Draco said nothing, he just cocked a brow at Harry, who yanked at his hair in his usual manner. Draco gave him an appreciative look—a *very* appreciative look—and Harry waggled a warning finger at him.

"Don't try and distract me."

Draco smiled wickedly. "All right. Let's look at this logically. The Ministry has been utterly useless since the panic surrounding the war. They lost control of the Floo Network, they passed a load of tripe laws trying to regulate everything under the sun, they sealed off London—and all of that while under Scrimgeour's rule. How much worse do you think it will get with that psychotic woman in control?"

Harry nibbled on a nail, unable to comment because Draco knew he'd heard the stories. Tonks kept them apprised of the affairs at the Ministry and the insidious changes made by Umbridge. The Minister had a hand-picked group of Aurors loyal only to her, rather like her Inquisitorial Squad at Hogwarts. Their primary job was to cover up incidents that Umbridge wanted buried, and ferret out information on those the Minister wanted discredited.

There had been several mysterious accidents among Ministry officials who opposed Umbridge, including Rufus Scrimgeour. Rumors abounded that directly before his death, Scrimgeour was initiating an investigation into abuses of power, with Umbridge as a prime suspect. There had been hope that she would be fired.

However, the unthinkable had happened. Scrimgeour had been killed in a freak accident on a routine job when the building he was in collapsed. One of the Aurors with him had been killed instantly and the other had later died at St. Mungos. Umbridge, as Deputy Minister, had assumed control.

Since then, officials less than enthusiastic about Umbridge's policies had been demoted, fired, or handed unpleasant task after unpleasant task. The most outspoken of her opponents was Kingsley Shacklebolt, but even Umbridge dared not take him on with the large percentage of Auror staff loyal to him. Instead, she had been steadily eroding his power and downsizing his department, citing a lack of need for Aurors now that most of the Death Eaters were dead or in Azkaban.

"How badly will she want us, Harry?" Draco asked seriously.

Harry sighed and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't know. She hates me because I defied her as a child, and now I've defied her again. I think it's safe to say she will want me very, very badly."

"Well, that's something I have in common with Umbridge, then," Draco said huskily.

Harry turned and his eyes went soft and liquid. He crawled across the bed in a slightly predatory fashion and planted himself on Draco's chest. Harry's tongue drew across Draco's nipple, earning a gasp. Draco felt a twitch of arousal. He slid his hands over Harry's back, reveling in the feel of the smooth skin and corded muscles. Harry groaned softly and encircled Draco's nipple again, tracing circles around the areole before sucking on it gently.

Draco's cock twitched again. Damn, but the Gryffindor was sexy. Harry worked on the other nipple for a bit, until Draco tucked his fingers into Potter's thick hair and squeezed. Harry moved

up and took Draco's lips hungrily. Their mouths melded together and they drank deeply of each other for long minutes.

Harry's head rose and he looked at Draco with that bemused, well-snogged daze on his face that Draco loved. Potter tried to speak but could not find his voice for a moment. His lips were parted and wet—flush with Draco's kisses. Draco ran a finger over Harry's lower lip and Potter's tongue flicked out and touched it gently. Draco shut his eyes, nearly overwhelmed by the sudden rush of want.

Harry tried again. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Later," Draco whispered, but Harry chuckled.

"No, I might forget, and it's simple. Malfoy Manor is located at number 1, Malfoy Lane, in Wiltshire."

Draco grinned in bemusement. "I know that, Potter."

"Now that makes two of us."

It took a moment for Draco to process it, and then he laughed aloud.

"You didn't."

Harry nodded. "I did."

"Oh, Umbridge will not stop until she's turned over every bloody stone in Britain to find you." Draco paused. "How safe are we here?"

"As far as I know, we're the only two that know you own this flat. I've never brought anyone here, nor told anyone about it. You?"

Draco thought back. Had he ever had guests here? Hell, he couldn't remember being in it himself more than eight times.

"No, I don't think so."

"I'll cast another Fidelius, if you think we'll need it."

Draco shook his head. "I can think of better things to do with your time, at the moment."

"Oh really?"

"Absolutely. Starting with you getting up and drawing me a nice, scalding bath."

Harry reared up on his elbows hotly. His green eyes flashed and Draco grinned.

"After which, you can join me and let me shag you senseless," he said in a low voice. The fire in Harry's eyes changed—banked to molten embers. "And then you can do the same to me."

Harry groaned and kissed him again.

"I might be able to do that. With one revision," Potter said.

"Mmmm?"

"Not scalding."

"Nearly scalding?"

"How about just warm?"
"Hot?"

"Oh yes, you're very, very hot. Extremely hot."

Draco chuckled and kissed Harry again while sliding his hands over the Gryffindor's body. If Potter kept that up, Draco would never get his bath. He bit Harry's lip gently.

"Bath, Chosen One."

"I think you can draw your own bath, you lazy prat. Just don't make it too hot if you want me to join you. I need to fetch something."

Harry climbed off of Draco and went to the door. Draco exited the bed with a sigh, resigned to filling his own bath. He would wait until Potter was in the tub to raise the temperature.

"Fetch what?" he asked on his way to the bath.

"The lime Salve. For after our bath," Harry said suggestively.

Draco decided that being trapped in the flat with Harry forever would not be all that bad.

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Chapter: 7

Chapter Seven

Hermione awoke with a start to find Remus Lupin leaning over her bed. She stifled a cry of surprise, but found her wand in her hand, Summoned instinctively. At least she had not forgotten everything in the war. Lupin saw it as well, and grinned.

"Sorry to wake you," he said.

"Remus?" she asked groggily as she sat up. She tried to shake off the fog of sleep, knowing Lupin would not disturb her, especially when it looked to be just past dawn—unless it were important.

"Hermione?" Lupin asked, "Have you seen Harry?"

The concern in his voice made her instantly alert. She swung her feet free of the blankets and pushed them away. "Not since yesterday evening. Why?"

"He's not here. And his bed hasn't been slept in."

"I'll be right out," she said quickly. Remus nodded and left. What had Harry said yesterday? *I'll be back*. Nothing out of the ordinary, there. Harry had gone upstairs to visit Hedwig, and that had been the last she'd seen of him. Hermione had assumed he'd gone off to bed in a depressed funk. Now, she wished she had taken him a tray at dinner. She missed Ron, suddenly. He would have stuck to Harry through all of this, but her husband had finally decided to throw caution to the wind and try out for the Chudley Cannons Quidditch team. He had left three days ago for Chudley, and would not be back until tryouts were concluded.

Hermione wondered where Harry could have gone, and why Remus was even worried. Harry was not a reckless child any longer. He did not creep out into the night with his invisibility cloak, intent on saving the world without assistance. Regardless, Hermione dressed quickly and went downstairs. Lupin was in the kitchen making tea.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt sent Tonks a Patronus, asking about Harry," he said.

"Kingsley? At this hour? Did he say why?"

"No. I searched the house for Harry, and then sent a response to Kingsley. He has not replied. God, I hope Harry is not in trouble again."

Lupin poured tea, and Hermione sat tensely at the table, suddenly nervous. Remus paced.

Kingsley's ram Patronus suddenly enveloped Lupin. It must have been a long message, for the silvery light did not dissipate for what seemed endless minutes. When it did, Lupin collapsed into a chair and set his cup down so heavily it sloshed tea onto the table.

"Harry broke Draco out of Azkaban," he said abruptly.

"*What?*" Hermione choked out, in the absence of any rational comment.

"Early this morning. One of the guards… recognized Harry. They did not see Draco with him, but the fact that Malfoy is the only missing prisoner is fairly telling. Kingsley is putting off notifying Umbridge, but the story has most likely already been leaked to the Daily Prophet. Kingsley is questioning everyone possible at Azkaban, trying to get the truth before Umbridge and her goons show up to twist everything into the worst possible light." Remus gave her a horrified grin. "Not that it can get much worse."

"How could Harry be so… so…" Hermione felt like crushing her mug in her need to get her fingers around Harry's throat.

"Typically Potter?" Lupin finished. He sighed heavily. "I should have seen it coming. I should have known he would never allow Draco to suffer in Azkaban. Not after…"

"Not after Sirius," Hermione finished. "We all should have seen it."

"Umbridge's hounds are going to be after them. She won't pass up this opportunity. She's finally got Harry Potter dead to rights."

"Damn it! Any idea where they might have gone?" she asked. Lupin shook his head.

Hermione got to her feet. "I'll see if he might have let a clue. Not that he ever asks for help," she added bitterly.

"In this particular case, that might have been a good decision," Lupin said rationally.

"If he had, maybe one of us might have been able to talk him out of it!" she said adamantly before she went out, getting in the last word. She realized she had a bad habit of doing that, but at the moment, she didn't care.

In Harry's room she found a note, neatly penned and folded atop his desk. It was not addressed.

I'm going to Malfoy Manor, was all it said. She looked at it skeptically, wondering if it were at all plausible for Harry and Draco to hide out at the Manor. It would most likely be the first place the Ministry looked.

She took the note back to Lupin. Tonks was with him, rocking Lyra in her arms while she fed the baby.

"Do you know where Malfoy Manor is?" Hermione asked. It was odd, but she could not quite recall, for some reason. Granted, it had been months since she'd been there—shortly before Draco's disappearance, but still… she should be able to remember. Lupin shook his head. Tonks nodded, but her brow crinkled in puzzlement.

"I've been there… but I've forgotten exactly where it is. I'll have to look up the address."

Hermione snapped her fingers. "Neville will know. It's in the Court documents. They read it aloud at the trial. Damn, it was a simple address, too… something with Malfoy in the name."

"We need to let Neville know, anyway. He'll be less than thrilled to find his most famous clients are now wanted for escaping from prison, and for engineering said escape."

"I hate to wake him with a Patronus," Hermione said, "But this is important."

She cast the message, and the silver otter streaked from her wand and disappeared through the wall.

"I should go in to work," Tonks said as she handed the silver-haired baby to Remus, who kissed the little face until Lyra giggled and pulled at his cheeks with chubby fists.

"It's your day off," Lupin said. "It would look suspicious if you went in for no apparent reason."

"I could make up an excuse." Tonks snorted. "Or hell, I could go as someone else." Her features molded and melted and her hair color changed until Percy Weasley stood before them.

"No," Lupin said firmly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please, not Percy. It's difficult enough to put up with him when he shows up at Christmas for his obligatory visit."

Tonks pouted, an expression that looked out of place on Percy. "No one ever lets me have any fun."

In moments, she was back to herself, although she perversely kept the red hair.

Neville's Patronus arrived a bit later, and Hermione listened to the message. She was puzzled.

"Neville checked his copies of the court documents, and the address is blurred. He looked in three different places, and it is always the same—illegible. He says he should remember the address, because it was simple. Something Malfoy Lane, or Malfoy Place."

Lupin and Tonks looked properly shocked, and Hermione nodded with a grin.

"Harry must have cast a Fidelius Charm. They have to be hiding out at the Manor. I'm sending Harry a message."

She lifted her wand, but Tonks grabbed it quickly. "Wait! What if it's a decoy!"

"What do you mean?"

"Harry is no idiot. The note, the Fidelius Charm—he wants it to look like they are at the Manor. He wants the Ministry to focus their attention on breaking the Charm. It will take weeks at best, and months, more likely. Meanwhile, they could be anywhere. What happens if they are sitting in an Irish pub? A Muggle Irish pub? And you send a Patronus?"

Hermione scowled, but set her wand down. "An Irish pub? At 7 a.m.?"

"You know what I mean. Send Hedwig, if you must, but no Patronus."

"What would we say?" Lupin interjected. "'Bad Harry. We've very disappointed. Where are you?'" He shook his head. "He has to know we all want to hex him for behaving so irrationally—"

"And irresponsibly, and *illegally*, and—"

"Yes, yes, all of that. He knows. And he can't tell us where he is. So, truly, what is the point of contacting him?"

Hermione bit her lip, knowing Lupin was right. She supposed she simply wanted to vent her anger and rail at Harry.

"So what can we do?"

"We wait, and pretend complete ignorance."

"That shouldn't be difficult!"

They looked at each other in mutual helplessness. Hermione debated sending a message to Ron, but she did not want to distract him. He would find out soon enough.

Two hours later, a knock sounded at the front door. Hermione looked at Tonks in surprise. She ran to the door and dragged it open, hoping against hope that it was Harry.

Instead, the snarling face of Dolores Umbridge met her startled gaze. Beyond Umbridge stood a large group of her hand-picked Aurors, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, who not only looked apologetic, but also enraged. He had obviously been unable to warn them.

"Where is he?" Umbridge snarled.

"Who?" Hermione asked, knowing it was a stupid question, but unable to stop herself.

"I assume Harry Potter still owns this house, does he not?" Umbridge asked, not even trying to disguise her hatred. The Minister probably still heard the hoof clops of centaurs in her

nightmares, because of Hermione.

"Yes, of course," Hermione said haughtily, recovering herself.

"Is he in?" Umbridge asked, almost politely.

"No."

"Very well." She gestured imperiously to her minions. "Search the house."

Hermione stood her ground. Umbridge yanked out her wand.

"Are you obstructing our search for a dangerous criminal and his accomplice?"

Hermione nearly snapped, "Draco is not dangerous!" but she bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood and asked instead, "What are you talking about?"

"Step aside. We do not have the time to spend in idle chit chat while they possibly escape from another exit."

Several of the Aurors pushed by Hermione and thundered into the house. In the parlour, Lyra began to cry.

The house, of course, was empty of criminal elements, and soon the residents were gathered in the parlour while an incensed Minister of Magic paced across the wooden floors. The planks seemed to creak in protest with every step.

Tonks sat next to Hermione on the sofa, rocking Lyra nervously. Lupin sat across the room in a comfortable armchair, looking tense. Kingsley leaned against the wall, affecting an air of boredom, but Hermione knew he dreaded this confrontation as much as any of them. Umbridge was too well known for irrational and disturbing behavior.

"Well, well, well. Is this not interesting?" Umbridge was saying. "*You*, I half-expected to see here." She gestured at Hermione with her wand. "But to find that Harry Potter is still consorting with werewolves…" Umbridge made a tsking noise. "Well, I suppose I should not be surprised, considering how unpredictable and dangerous Potter can be."

Hermione held her tongue, knowing that half the words spewed by Umbridge were designed to provoke.

"But you, Nymphadora, are quite a surprise," Umbridge said, stopping in front of the Auror. "I was not even aware that you knew Mr. Potter. It is rather disturbing to find that one of our most esteemed Aurors is… consorting… with known criminals. Quite disturbing, actually. I fear we shall have to conduct a full investigation."

Tonks glared at her. "My *consorting* with Harry Potter has no bearing on my ability to do my job! And perhaps you have forgotten, Harry Potter saved us all from Voldemort. The Ministry should be kissing his arse, not trying to hunt him down!"

Hermione suppressed a cringe. She didn't think Umbridge had ever fully embraced the fact of Voldemort, even after the Ministry came to its senses and joined the battle with Harry. She would bet her life that Umbridge had stayed plenty isolated and safe during the battles, the horrors, and the fallout.

Umbridge smiled, the evil smile that never touched her eyes. "I see you have fallen into the trap of the lies that Mr. Potter spews. How sad."

Hermione gripped the arm of Tonks to hush her, knowing anything she said could only make matters worse.

"Take them in to custody," Umbridge barked. "They will need to be questioned more… thoroughly."

Hermione surged to her feet. "You cannot do that! On what grounds do you detain us?"

"On the grounds that I believe you know the whereabouts of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. If not, of course, you will be freed immediately. But either way, we shall get to the truth of the matter."

Hermione's instincts screamed for her to fight, to flee, but she dared not start a battle with an infant in the room. She had no concept of the honor of Umbridge's Aurors—they might pay no heed to flinging curses about the room haphazardly. It would also be counter-productive to become an outlaw, like Harry. They needed to remain on the right side of the law, if Harry were to have any chance at all.

They reluctantly gave up their wands and were taken into custody.

Hermione's head lolled and she jerked upright, trying to concentrate. Bloody hell, she had forgotten the sedating effect of Veritaserum. She had not been dosed with it since the early days of their fight with Voldemort, when McGonagall had insisted they all be administered and trained on how to minimize the effects. She nearly laughed. There was really no effective way of minimizing the effects. The only hope was to remain as focused as possible, and hope the person asking the questions did not know how to properly pry the desired information from the victim.

She was in a small, cold room with no windows or doors. Her wrists were shackled to the arms of the uncomfortable wooden chair in which she sat. Two other chairs faced hers—both cozy-looking padded armchairs. Dolores Umbridge sat in one. In the other sat a man Hermione barely recognized.

"What is your name?" the man asked. Hermione blinked at him and felt a momentary chill.

Damn. Theodore Nott had not joined the Death Eaters, like his father before him. He had spent his seventh year at Durmstrang, far removed from Voldemort and the battles that surrounded the evil wizard. Once Voldemort—and Nott, Sr., as it happened—was dead, Theo had returned and joined the Ministry of Magic. Umbridge had welcomed him like a long lost son, rumors had it. Hermione had no idea what department he worked in, but she had little doubt he knew how Veritaserum worked.

"Hermione Jane Granger," she was compelled to reply.

"Where do you live?"

Hermione recited her address.

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"To whom are you married?"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley."

So far the questions were simple, attempting to lull her into answering without thinking.

"Are you acquainted with Harry James Potter?" Nott asked.

"Yes."

"Is he a resident of number 12, Grimmauld Place, in London?"

"Yes."

"He is not there right now, though, is he?"

She nearly smiled. For all she knew, Harry could be sitting in the study at 12 Grimmauld Place, drinking a bottle of scotch, and snogging Draco senseless on the sofa.

"I don't know."

"Are you aware of the fact that Harry Potter broke Draco Malfoy out of Azkaban early this morning?"

"Yes." Direct question, there.

"How did you first learn of the escape?"

Hermione nearly responded with Kingsley's name, but choked it back with a surge of panic. She wished she could respond with The Daily Prophet—the papers had proclaimed the news loudly early that morning.

"Remus Lupin told me," she said truthfully.

"How did Remus Lupin know?"

She nearly cringed, and hoped to hell Kingsley was prepared with a believable story. "Kingsley Shacklebolt contacted him."

A surprised huff from Umbridge caused a shard of guilt to spear through Hermione. The toadlike creature began taking furious notes. Nott went on.

"Were you aware of Harry Potter's intention to release Draco Malfoy prior to the escape?" Somewhat ambiguous, but a safe enough question to answer honestly.

"No."

"Do you know where Harry Potter is at this moment?" Nott asked. Hermione nearly smiled. Even if she knew where he was, she could claim not to know his *exact* location.

"No," she said flatly, and relaxed slightly.

"If you were to seek Harry Potter at this moment, where is the first place you would look?" Damn, that was harder to dodge. The answer clamored for attention and fought to be spoken aloud. *Malfoy Manor. Malfoy Manor. Malfoy Manor.* Bloody hell, she could think of no other answer.

"Malfoy Manor," she admitted.

"Where is Malfoy Manor located?" Nott demanded.

Hermione was bemused by the sensations generated by the question. She should know where the Manor was located. Yesterday morning, she could have flown there easily. Now, the magic of the Veritaserum dug at the knowledge, but it was just beyond the grip of her memory—blurred and confounded by the far-reaching magic of Harry's Fidelius Charm. She felt lightheaded when she answered, "I don't know."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she thought about the question. She wondered if Nott had ever been to Malfoy Manor. His father certainly had, as a Death Eater, but Hermione wondered if a trip to Malfoy Manor had ever been on the Nott's social agenda. She didn't remember Draco ever being particularly close to Theo in school.

She expected more questions relating to Malfoy Manor, but Nott surprised her.

"Do you know why Harry Potter released Draco Malfoy from Azkaban?"

Hermione blinked at him in surprise. Only about a dozen reasons, she thought. Of course, the main reason was obvious, although she tried to talk her brain out of answering in the affirmative. Nott had asked a yes/no question. Even though she did not know *exactly* what had driven Harry to Azkaban, she did know enough to answer the question. She stalled until Nott's eyes glittered, and the Veritaserum started to induce nausea.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"And why do you think Harry Potter released Draco Malfoy from Azkaban?" Nott asked softly. Hermione glared at him. Clever bastard! By asking her opinion, rather than a direct question, it forced her to give the most likely answer. It sprang to the front of her mind and hung there expectantly. *Because he loves him*. She fought the urge to say it, and felt instantly sickened. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

"Because… he… he wanted to," she spat. Still the truth, though not the one that gave her a sudden, splitting headache.

Nott smiled without humor. He reminded Hermione of a jackal. Grinning and merciless. "Why do you think he wanted to?"

Because he loves him! Loves him, loves him, loves him! She wanted to scream the words to stop the headache, and the sudden tingling that assaulted her limbs. She felt bile rise in her throat. Hermione fought for control, nearly biting her tongue from the effort.

"Harry is… fond of Draco," she said tightly, panting. Still the truth. Still the truth. She felt sweat trickle a cold path down her spine. Her hands were clenched on the arms of the chair, but she could not seem to force them to relax.

Nott smiled again. "Fond of Draco," he repeated softly, and then chuckled. "How fond?"

Her nerves steadied slightly. She took several deep breaths before answering. "I don't pretend to know the measure of Harry Potter's fondness," she snapped.

"Is Harry Potter in love with Draco Malfoy?"

Hermione blanched and her fingers trembled against the wood. Damn Nott! Damn him straight to hell! How the hell could he ask a question like that? She struggled to find a way out, but it was a direct question. And she knew the answer. It screamed like fire through her veins, and blazed into the worst headache of her life when she fought to deny it. *Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.* Her body shook with the effort not to answer, and sweat caused her shirt to cling uncomfortably both front and back. Forgive me, Harry, oh god, please.

"Yes," she whispered and sagged in the chair. Blackness licked at the edges of her vision and she hoped for blessed unconsciousness. It did not take her. She heard a chuckle.

"Interesting," Nott said. Beside him, Umbridge made a sound hissing sound and her quill scratched on the paper. Hermione thought she might throw up.

ooOoo

Harry and Draco had emerged from the bath and were toweling each other dry when the Patronus came in. The silvery creature was a hare, quickly recognized as belonging to Luna Lovegood, which was shocking in itself. Harry had not heard from Luna, except through an occasional owl message, since he and Draco had escorted her and Cho Chang to Hogwarts the previous year. The message was puzzling.

"Luna wants to meet with us. She has news. Hermione, Tonks, and Remus have been taken into custody! She says she will tell us more in person."

Draco raised a brow. "I suppose that should not be a surprise. Can you trust Luna?"

Harry blinked at him. "Of course!"

Draco shrugged. "You know her better than I do. Do you think she would set you up? You know Umbridge must be getting rabid with the need to capture you."

"Capture *us*, you mean. But Luna? I trust her as well as Ron or Hermione. Now, how am I going to get Hermione and the others out of the Ministry? It was easier to pull you from Azkaban than it will be to break into the Ministry of Magic, although I suppose I should wait until after dark, for a start. From what I recall, the guard in the cell block was not exactly alert…"

Draco considered ignoring the Harry's ridiculous rambling, but he knew the Gryffindor was earnest in his determination. Draco sighed. "You can't be serious. That's precisely what Umbridge is hoping you'll do. She's trying to draw you out."

Harry headed for the bedroom angrily. "Well, it worked. I've got to go and get them."

Draco restrained him with a hand on his arm and a sardonic grin. "Harry, you can't go breaking everyone out of custody. Will you set all your friends on the run? Turn them all into criminals, like us?"

Harry scowled and pulled his arm from Draco's grip. "You sound like you wish you were back in Azkaban."

"Of course I don't. But I would have liked the opportunity to make a choice in the matter. You know I would have forbidden it—and so will your friends. You know damned well Hermione will not thank you for turning her into a fugitive. Think about it."

Harry yanked at his wet hair until Draco tugged his hands away and held them tightly. "What can we do?" Harry murmured.

"First of all, we'll meet with your friend, Luna. And we wait and watch. Umbridge can't do anything but question them—and they don't know anything. We should probably cast a Fidelius on this place, just in case some overzealous Ministry goon decides to dig through the records of every Malfoy property ever purchased. It would take awhile, but eventually someone would find it."

"All right, we'll do that first, then," Harry said. "I'd prefer to stay in London, close enough to the Ministry to get our friends out, if it becomes necessary." Harry's face set in stubborn determination. "I'll not suffer them to be tortured by that horrid woman, though."

Draco chuckled. "Harry, that's a dreadful way to speak about the Minister of Magic."

"You know, I've never liked *any* of the bloody Ministers of Magic. This one is, by far, the worst of the lot."

Draco sighed. "No argument there. Send a message to Luna. Where does she want to meet?"

"At the place where the elemental attacked us on the way to Hogwarts. Only the three of us and Cho Chang know where that is."

"Safe enough, then."

Harry sent a quick Patronus to Luna. As the stag disappeared, he turned to Draco with a heavy sigh. "I can't believe Umbridge arrested Hermione and the others. I suppose I didn't think this through very well."

Draco laughed aloud and pulled Harry into a warm embrace. "Potter, some things never change."

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Chapter: 8

Chapter Eight

They met Luna at the designated spot. Even though Harry expected no treachery, Draco was far less trusting. He demanded Harry conceal himself beneath the invisibility cloak, until they were able to verify that Luna was alone. Harry stood nearby, grumbling, while Draco ignored him, feeling rather exposed on the open field. Draco's only attempt at anonymity was the dark

sunglasses he wore.

Luna hopped lightly off her broom, and hurled herself at Draco, who hugged her awkwardly. He wondered if he would ever get used to the Ravenclaw girl's exuberant affection. Probably not.

"Draco, it's so nice to see you!" she cried. "I could not abide the thought of you in Azkaban. I tried to help Neville as best I could, but if I had known Harry planned to break you out, I would have helped him instead."

Draco grinned. "It's bad enough that Harry did it."

"Well, it certainly got Umbridge up in arms! She's locked up Hermione, Tonks, and Remus. And Kingsley has been suspended."

"Suspended?" Harry burst out, tearing off the cloak. Luna seemed unsurprised by his sudden appearance, and quickly embraced him.

"Yes, Umbridge questioned them all, and found out that Kingsley contacted Remus this morning, looking for you. Neville says it was precisely what Umbridge has been wanting—a reason to get rid of Kingsley."

"Damn it!" Harry shouted, looking nearly ill with guilt.

"Of course, Kingsley insisted it was a casual inquiry as part of the investigation, but Umbridge said Kingsley was trying to tip you off. She's put him under investigation. Tonks, of course, has also been suspended."

"What of Lyra?" Draco asked sharply. Luna bit her lip and shook her head.

"She has been placed with some cronies of Umbridge. Neville is trying to locate her, to insist she be sent to Andromeda. So far, he's been blocked at every turn." Luna sighed. "It's worse. Umbridge is rumored to be drafting anti-werewolf laws. You know she's already made centaurs illegal."

Draco nodded. The first act of Umbridge had been to pass laws making it legal to hunt centaurs. Few people were stupid enough to attempt it, of course, and the centaurs did not seem to care, having little contact with humans, especially since the war.

Werewolves, however, were another matter. Many of them held perfectly respectable positions in the wizarding community.

"How can she make anti-werewolf laws?" Harry snarled, obviously outraged. "They can't help being werewolves, any more than Muggle-borns can help who their parents were! She's just another Voldemort, using pureblood rhetoric to force her bigoted ideals down the throats of—"

"We already know that, Potter. The question is: what are we going to do about it?"

"You are supposed to be the one coming up with a Slytherin plan!" Harry snapped.

"I've only been working on it for a few hours, Potter, and *you* keep distracting me."

Harry goggled at him, and Draco pulled him into a rough embrace and kissed him until the Gryffindor melted against him. Luna giggled.

"Well, I can see why you rescued him, Harry."

Draco released Harry, who wore the exquisitely dazed look that Draco adored.

"Neville wanted to come, but Umbridge is losing patience with him. If she gives him Veritaserum, he says it's better if he knows as little as possible. Now, what can I do to help you?"

Harry shook off his bemusement. "You really should not be associating with us at all. It could be very dangerous for you."

"I can take care of myself, Harry. First of all, I would like to write an article about you for the Quibbler. The Daily Prophet is up to its usual tricks of painting you in the worst possible light, thanks to that complete hag Rita Skeeter. I'd like to write the truth about why Draco was sent to Azkaban."

Draco shrugged. It did not matter to him what people thought, but he hated to have Harry's image tarnished. He smiled ruefully. Not so long ago, he would have been ecstatic at the thought of Harry Potter falling from grace.

"It can't hurt. We can't really explain why Potter broke me out of Azkaban, other than his tendency to act irrationally," Draco said, earning a punch on the arm from the irrational one.

They retreated to the shade of a nearby tree and told Luna the entire story of Draco's unintentional visit to Ireland, and the aftermath with Maeve. Luna took notes and asked enough questions that Draco began to appreciate her Ravenclaw status.

"It might be worth a trip to Ireland to check out that forest of Maeve's and see exactly what sort of magic sustains it. Susan Bones and Bill Weasley have offered to help, although Umbridge is keeping a close eye on Bill. Getting to Ireland, however, could be difficult."

"There is a Portkey at the Ministry that will take you there," Draco said dryly and described the one that had landed him there to begin with. Luna nibbled on a nail thoughtfully.

"Maybe one of the Aurors can get it for me," she said.

"All of that is rather irrelevant," Harry said. "I don't really care about public opinion. How long

can they keep Hermione and the others?"

"Legally? Overnight. But this is Umbridge, and she has control of the Ministry. With Kingsley suspended none of the Department heads will stand up to her. She can pass laws with impunity."

Draco nodded. "Make sure Neville documents any abuses. We can hopefully use them against her."

"When?" Harry asked.

"When I come up with a plan, Potter, now drum up some bloody patience."

"What are you planning to do?" Luna asked curiously.

"We're going to flee to Budapest," Draco replied. Harry rolled his eyes and tugged at his hair while Draco laughed.

Back at Draco's flat, Harry paced while Draco watched him.

"She won't release them," he said and pulled at his hair.

"Potter, I like your hair the way it is. Stop tearing at it. What do you presume Umbridge will do? Send Hermione to Azkaban?"

"She sent you there!"

Draco smiled humorlessly. "Yes, but Granger is a war hero. She has no stigma of association with Death Eaters. I doubt the Wizengamot can be swayed to put someone as obviously noble as Hermione Granger behind bars."

"What about Lupin?"

"Yes, well, perhaps we can engineer another rescue," Draco drawled.

Harry glared at him. "How can you be so bloody calm about this?"

"Because you're agitated enough for the both of us," Draco snapped. Potter could really be annoying, at times, although Draco had no complaint with watching Harry's lean body stalk back and forth across the living room. Potter actually had more pacing room here than at Grimmauld Place, and he was making the most of it. Six long strides and a spin. Six more strides. Spin. Pull at hair. Six strides.

"Potter, you're turning me on doing that."

Harry froze in mid-stride and blinked at Draco. "What?"

"You heard me. Stop pacing and pulling your hair or I'm going to drag you into the bedroom."

Harry licked his lower lip and his green eyes flicked toward the bedroom. Draco smiled wickedly, knowing the Gryffindor was considering it.

"I'm hungry," Potter said in a petulant tone. Draco sighed. Food first, and then he would take Harry's mind off the Ministry. Draco rose and started for the kitchen. He paused to give Harry a searing kiss, still hoping for a detour, but the Gryffindor chuckled and pushed him away.

At that moment, a doglike Patronus burst through the window and a loud voice rang in the room. No silent Patronus, here. "*Are you completely fucking mental? What were you thinking?*"

The silvery image faded and Harry looked sheepishly at Draco. "I think Ron found out I rescued you."

"Good thing we didn't go to Budapest," Draco muttered and went to prepare some culinary delight while Potter drafted a suitable response to the Weasel.

ooOoo

The news was not good the next morning. Harry was aroused from his lime-flavored lover's side by a Patronus from Luna. Apparently, Umbridge planned to keep Hermione and the others indefinitely, in order to force Harry to turn himself in. She had also decided to round up anyone else who might have knowledge of their whereabouts, including Ron and the Weasley twins. Luna had sent warning messages to everyone.

"How is she getting this information from the Ministry?" Draco mumbled sleepily when Harry recapped the message.

"I think she's been spending time with Neville."

"Spending time? You mean, like the way we spend time?"

Harry grinned and leaned over to press a kiss against Draco's mouth. Malfoy's arms enfolded him.

"Perhaps not quite so energetic, but yes, similar to that."

"How Longbottom has changed."

"We should meet with Fred and George. I'm surprised Umbridge is bold enough to take on the twins. They have Ministry contracts with nearly every department."

"That only gives her leverage to bargain with, Potter. She can put them out of business."

Harry scowled. "She has to be stopped."

"All right, let's meet with your twin Weasel friends. I may be able to use their help with the plan."

Harry sent a message to the twins, requesting them to meet at Hyde Park, since every wizarding place known to them all would likely be thoroughly watched by the Ministry. Harry hoped Umbridge's resources were stretched to the limit.

Harry also asked the twins to bring him something, although he didn't mention it to Draco. That particular matter was not open for discussion.

Fred was enraged. He gesticulated angrily while speaking.

"After all we've done for the bloody Ministry!" he snarled. "Do we not supply the Aurors with Extendable Ears, with Headless Hats and Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder? Did we not spend valuable research hours developing their bloody Disillusionment Bracelet?"

George cringed. "Fred, that's top secret."

"Not any more!" Fred yelled. "The bitch has cancelled our contracts until we agree to help them locate Harry and Draco. Blackmail us, will she? I'll say we take our merchandise and market them to… to…"

"The Americans?" George suggested. Fred looked at his twin with something like awe. He nodded happily.

"Exactly! The Americans. We'll be rich."

"We're already rich."

"Richer, then."

Draco and George sat on a bench overlooking the lake. George was absently conjuring bread to feed to the ducks. Draco sprawled with his hands behind his head, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. His trousers were dark blue and he wore a light blue shirt with tiny black stripes.

Harry could barely keep his eyes from the Slytherin. The warm silver glow in his eyes made Harry want to drag him back to their flat, and have another session with the lime salve. He shook his head and tried to focus on Fred's rant.

"We got a message from Neville. Bill has been suspended, too, on some stupid, trumped-up charge. Lupin, Tonks, and Hermione are in the clink, Bill and Kingsley have been pulled, and rumor says they're looking for Ron, to haul him in for questioning, likely with Veritaserum and

torture."

Harry looked at him sharply.

"Do you think they used Veritaserum on Hermione?"

Draco snorted. "Potter, it's Umbridge. She used it on students at Hogwarts. Do you really think she would hesitate to use it on your friends?"

Harry swore. "No, you're right. We have to do something."

"We've never wrought mass havoc at the Ministry," George said speculatively.

"We haven't?" Fred asked.

"*Mass* havoc, I said," George clarified. "That bit we did in the Department of Magical Games and Sports doesn't count."

"Right, that was localized havoc," Fred said.

"And it wasn't our fault Ludo Bagman was fired," George added.

"Yes, it was," Fred said.

George grinned. "You're right. It was."

"We all know it would be simple to go in and get the others out," Harry cut in. "However, as Draco pointed out, Hermione won't thank us for turning her into a wanted criminal."

"We can't do anything until we find out where Lyra is," Draco said sharply.

Harry was stricken. "Fuck. I forgot. George, can you send a Patronus to Luna and see if Neville has had any luck locating her? My Patronus is fairly recognizable."

Fred snorted. "Fairly recognizable? As in the entire wizarding world knows it?"

George looked around for possible Muggle onlookers, and then cast the spell. There was a lull in the conversation and Fred threw a rock at the ducks. Half the flock dove at it, thinking it was bread.

Harry cleared his throat. "So. Did you bring it?" he asked.

George snapped his fingers and then reached into a pocket. He pulled out a small vial and tossed it to Harry, who snatched it out of the air easily. Draco's eyes bored into him suspiciously, but he said nothing. Harry took a small packet from his jeans and opened it. He removed the single hair

contained therein, and pushed it into the vial, before giving it a quick shake. It turned orange.

"I need to go to Diagon Alley," Harry explained, speaking to Draco without actually looking at him.

"Did you lose your invisibility cloak?" Draco asked.

"I want to buy something," Harry said, "Not steal it."

"The twins could not have picked it up for you?" Malfoy's voice was soft and warm, but Harry caught the dangerous edge to it. There would be hell to pay for this later.

"No, not this. I'm not even sure I can find it."

"'It' being?"

Harry smiled at him and raked his eyes over the slim body seductively. "You'll see," he said in a low purr. Draco sat bolt upright. Harry grinned. He tipped the potion down his throat, surprised at the citrusy taste. He fought through the unpleasant effects of the Polyjuice potion, and then looked at the others to judge their reactions.

"Oy, nice job, Harry," Fred said. "No need to change clothes, eh?"

Harry shook his head. The jeans were a bit tighter, but his shirt was looser in the shoulders.

"I chose him for his size." Harry took off his glasses, no longer needed. Draco's eyes were narrowed again.

"Chose him? Who was he?" Malfoy asked. Harry shrugged.

"Some random Muggle."

"Some *random Muggle*?" Draco asked in a dangerous tone. Harry gaped at him.

"For pity's sake, Draco, I didn't sleep with him! I was behind him in line at the market and plucked a hair off his sleeve!"

Draco glared at him measuringly, apparently unable to judge Harry's veracity in the new body.

"Be right back," Harry said quickly and Disapparated.

Harry appeared in a dark, rarely used part of Knockturn Alley. He did not want anyone to know that Apparition was possible again—well, except the Weasley twins. Draco was most likely explaining it to them now.

He walked swiftly to a shop near Borgin and Burkes. It was similar to the Apothecary, but carried more questionable items. What Harry sought was considered dangerous by the Ministry. It was not illegal, but definitely borderline. He searched the shelves, which were dimly lit, but clearly labeled. Another patron bumped into him as she passed.

"Excuse me," he said, offering her a quick smile. The woman grunted and Harry gasped in surprise. It was Brigit! She looked at him curiously, caught by his reaction. Harry pitched his voice lower and stammered, "S… Sorry."

"Do I know you?" she asked in a polite tone.

"No… You're just… pardon me, I don't mean to offend. You're very beautiful."

And vicious, and spiteful, and horrid, he added to himself.

Brigit smiled. "And married," she said with a smile. "But, thank you."

She turned away, dismissing him. Harry searched the shelves quickly, and found the jar he sought. He snatched it and then lingered in the store, waiting for Brigit to approach the counter. The minutes ticked away, and Harry grabbed a couple of random items, so he didn't look too suspicious.

Brigit finally set her items on the counter, and Harry hurriedly joined her. As the bored clerk tallied and packaged her purchases, Harry tried to memorize them all. Some of it was not very unusual—pennyroyal, lotus petals, and Celtic quartz, but the powdered dragon's blood was rare and generally only used in very special rituals. And the bridge crystal was an interesting addition.

What the hell was she doing?

"Are you stalking me?" Brigit asked teasingly.

Harry tugged at his forelock nervously, only to find it missing. The Muggle's hair was far shorter than Harry's.

"Only if you want me to," he said flirtatiously, mentally giving himself an acting award. "Happily married, then?"

Brigit sighed. "I'm afraid so."

"Pity," Harry said and grinned a false smile that he hoped looked disappointed. He waited until Brigit left before setting his own items on the counter, making a mental note to ask Neville if Maeve was still lurking around the Ministry. She had to be livid that Draco was out of Azkaban. He hoped she and her sister were not planning something unpleasant.

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Chapter: 9

Chapter Nine

Harry was a bit nervous when they returned to the flat, mostly due to Draco's obvious simmering irritation. Luna had no good news to report on the search for Lyra. Umbridge had hidden the baby away, likely expecting to keep her as a final bargaining chip. Harry was somewhat surprised the Minister hadn't dangled the infant as bait to lure him out of hiding. Perhaps Umbridge knew that Neville would seize on such an act and proclaim the ruthlessness of it far and wide. Umbridge had to save it as a last resort.

The news had put Draco in a fine snit. That, coupled with Harry surprise trip to Knockturn Alley, and his close encounter with Brigit seemed to have thrown Draco into a bottled rage.

"What was so bloody important that you had to use Polyjuice to slither into Diagon Alley?" Draco asked from his tense sprawl on the couch.

"This," said Harry. "I'm curious as to what Brigit is doing with Summoning ingredients." Harry rolled the small jar in his fingers and Draco looked at it curiously, but did not move.

"She's probably planning to call up her demonic relations for some personality tips," he said. "*Accio* jar."

It flew out of Harry's hand and into Draco's.

"What is it?" the Slytherin asked, brow furrowed as he tried to decipher the label.

"I'll tell you later. First, I need to ask you something. I'm not sure if you're willing… If you're not, it's fine, of course, I'll understand, but in case you are… well…"

"Potter, you're babbling and not making a bit of sense. Now what is it?"

"The rest of your birthday present," Harry said quietly.

Draco looked at him curiously. "New salve?" he asked in a hopeful tone. The question jolted Harry out of his serious mood long enough to chuckle.

"No, it's not new salve. Let me fetch the important part." Harry walked into the bedroom and retrieved an item he had hidden inside the small desk. He held it tightly for a breathless moment. His nervousness had returned tenfold.

Draco hadn't moved. Harry sat next to him on the couch.

"I want you to know, if you don't want to do this, it's okay. I will understand. I just…" Harry took a deep breath, aware that Draco was watching him with placid amusement. "I just don't want to lose you. Ever again."

With that, Harry opened his hand and flipped open the small box.

ooOoo

Draco sat up, wondering if Potter would ever cease to surprise him. He blinked at the matched pair of platinum rings in amazement. He raised his gaze to Harry's, realizing his lover was nearly paralyzed with nervousness.

"Why, Harry Potter," he said lightly, "Are you asking me to marry you?"

Harry flushed and shook his head quickly. "Oh no. No, nothing like that. No. Well…. Yes, sort of. Not… officially, you know, since the Ministry would hang us both if they caught wind of it… but, magically."

Draco set down the jar he'd been holding and gently wrapped his hands around Potter's, holding the ring box between them.

"Harry," he said and leaned forward to place a kiss on the Gryffindor's lips. "Tell me."

Harry sighed heavily and kissed Draco fervently. "Okay, when Maeve copied all of those damned scrolls and books, and I had loads of time to read…" He hurried on, obviously not wanting to remind them of the reason he'd had "loads of time to read." "I found a spell. A couple of spells, actually, that I thought I could link together. It's sort of a ceremony. I mean, it's definitely a ceremony. It's pretty involved, and it's… it's permanent."

"Like marriage?" Draco prompted.

"Erm… more. Marriage can be undone with divorce. This can't be undone. Except by death." Draco caught the unspoken words: *Maybe not even then*. He looked into those serious green eyes, and the face that had become more important to him than he would ever have dreamed possible. He knew if Harry Potter asked him to walk through Hell, Draco would conjure a glass of ice water and start trekking.

"Okay," he said softly. The emerald eyes widened.

"Draco, are you sure? This is not something to decide lightly, and I don't—"

"Harry, I said 'yes.' Now kiss me already and let's get started."

Harry flung an arm around Draco's neck and snogged him so hard Draco thought the ceremony might have to wait for a few hours, but Potter recovered himself. He sat back and straightened his glasses. Draco held the box. He opened it and grinned at Harry.

"Which one is mine?" he asked eagerly, feeling a trifle foolish, but damn if he didn't love presents.

Harry plucked out the ring and held it up. Draco took it, sliding his fingertips over Harry's, and wanted to shag him again. He looked at the plain band and caught a flash of engraving on the inside.

"*Amor fortior morte*," he read.

"Love stronger than death," Harry whispered. Draco swallowed hard, remembering that they had nearly died together, not so long ago. Harry took the band from him and slipped it onto the ring finger of his left hand.

"Perfect fit," Draco said. His throat felt tight.

"In every way," Harry replied, and his gaze felt warm and tangible as he looked into Draco's eyes.

Draco took the other ring and held Harry's hand, caressing his palm in a light whorl with his thumb. He slid the band over Harry's finger and laughed suddenly, hoping to lighten the mood, and stave off emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

"You're a romantic sap, you know that?" he said.

Harry smiled and allowed Draco his levity. "Or maybe it's just another ploy to get you naked."

Draco raised a brow. "You didn't say it was a *naked* ceremony."

"I am now," Harry said suggestively. "Where's that jar?"

The preparation took far longer than Draco had expected, but Harry was meticulous and focused. He cleared the living room, produced a white rug similar to the one at Grimmauld Place, and traced a large protection circle and pentagram on the floor, enclosing the rug.

Draco got bored watching him, and prepared a quick dinner of filet mignon, new potatoes, and fresh vegetables. Harry took a break to eat. When they finished, it was completely dark, and Harry lit a few of the candles around the circle.

"Time to get naked," he said with a smile.

"I thought you'd never ask."

They disrobed slowly, never taking their eyes from one another. Draco wanted to tear Harry's shirt off, but thought the buttons might interfere with Potter's careful preparations. It was enough of a pleasure watching Harry remove each item and set it aside.

When they were finished, Draco stepped forward and embraced Harry, sliding his hands over the nicely exposed flesh. Harry allowed them one molten kiss and a few warm caresses before pulling away with a chuckle.

"No distractions," he said adamantly. "We'll need our energy. Come into the circle."

They sat on the white rug in the center of the enclosed pentagram. Harry quickly lit the remaining perimeter candles.

"We need to get into position," Harry said and grinned. "You'll like this part."

The Gryffindor shifted until he sat directly in front of Draco with his legs wrapped around Draco's waist. Draco's limbs enclosed Harry, crossing at the ankles behind Harry's gorgeous arse. Harry pressed their foreheads together for a moment. They were close enough to breathe each other's air. Harry's hands lightly touched Draco's waist, and Draco's rested on Harry's thighs. He restrained himself from caressing—barely.

"Try to keep your breathing slow and steady," Harry murmured.

"That's rather hard when I want to press you backward and shag you into the rug."

Harry laughed. "I know, but this is a centering position. It's called a Tantric Kiss. You breathe out when I breathe in, until we're in synch. We have to seal the circle first, though."

Harry had prepared a silver tray that sat next to them. It contained an assortment of items—four candles, a small censor with incense, a silver goblet, and a tiny ceramic bowl filled with white crystals. Next to those rested the mysterious jar he had purchased, an empty silver plate, and two bundles of multicolored ribbon. Their wands sat next to the tray.

"Oh yes," Harry said. "Rings off."

He pulled off his platinum band and set it on the silver plate. Draco did the same and Harry picked up his wand.

"Just in case things weren't solemn enough for you, I'm invoking the Quarters."

Draco had expected it, based on the items bedecking the tray. Potter was really taking this seriously. Draco nodded and Harry cleared his throat. He linked his free hand with Draco's and Levitated the censor and the yellow candle. He sent them to the easternmost portion of the circle

and lowered them gently. Harry spoke in a clear voice that echoed a bit in the room.

"As we are without witnesses to this binding ceremony, I summon thee, oh Lord of Air and Guardian of Innocence. Watch over us with the power of your knowledge, intangible as a breath, solid as the wind." Harry lit the censor with a word and a spiral of smoke curled upward. Draco thought he caught a whiff of jasmine. "By the first gentle rays of dawn, I invoke thee."

With that, Harry lit the yellow candle.

Next, he levitated the red candle to the southernmost point, which was behind Harry's back, so he cocked his dark head slightly to avoid sending the candle over the line.

"I summon thee, oh Lord of Fire and Guardian of Intuition. Watch over us with the power of your energy, bright as a candle's flame, warm as a summer day." Harry lit the red candle. "By the intensity of the noonday sun, I invoke thee." He spoke another word and the candle flared into a miniature sunburst. It sparked red for a moment, and then died back to a normal flicker.

Draco squeezed Harry's hand for an instant as Harry sent the blue candle and the goblet to the westernmost edge, at Draco's right.

"I summon thee, oh Lord of Water and Guardian of Love. Watch over us with the brilliance of your passion, fluid as a river, endless as the sea." Harry spoke and the blue candle flared into life. "By the gentleness of evening's dusk, I invoke thee."

"Last one," Harry murmured against Draco's ear as he leaned forward a bit. The bowl of crystals—salt, most likely—and the brown candle were sent over Draco's shoulder to the northernmost point.

"I summon thee, oh Lord of Earth and Guardian of Learning. Watch over us with the fullness of your strength, solid as granite, durable as the earth." Draco couldn't see it, but he expected the brown candle to be lit. "By the hidden depths of midnight, I invoke thee."

Harry sighed, task completed. Draco did not feel any different, and if there were hidden guardians surrounding them, he could neither see nor sense them, but he knew the protective power of the ancient magic, and did not question its effectiveness. He expected that nothing could penetrate the circle Harry had made, not even a Patronus. It was rather comforting to know that they would not be disturbed for the duration.

"Centering time," Harry breathed and rested his forehead against Draco's. He set his wand aside and took Draco's other hand, lacing their fingers together. Draco grinned and obediently synchronized his breathing to Harry's, surprised at how quickly they managed it. It was really a lovely feeling, being wrapped around Harry and breathing his air while holding hands. All tension seemed to drain away, leaving him relaxed and lethargic. Umbridge and all of their assorted problems seemed very far away and unimportant. Draco vowed to try the technique next time he felt particularly tense.

Harry leaned back a bit and released Draco's hands, moving unhurriedly. He reached for the small jar and his wand. Harry opened the jar, tapped the edge of it once with his wand, and cast a single spell. The dark liquid inside glowed with a green light that made Draco start for a moment—it looked eerily like bottled Avada Kedavra. The glow seemed to disappear into the liquid and Harry set his wand aside.

He met Draco's gaze and took a shaky breath. "Ready?" he asked. Always the noble Gryffindor, giving Draco a chance to back out, even after all the preparation. Draco quirked a grin.

"Ready."

Harry dipped his index finger into the jar. The digit came out looking as though he had simply dunked it into green ink. Harry reached up and touched Draco's temple with the substance. Draco wasn't sure what to expect, but it felt like nothing more than Harry's finger, slightly cool, tracing a symbol on his left temple. Harry continued the line down Draco's jaw and then followed the jugular vein down to the collarbone. Draco thought Harry would stop and apply more ink, but the Gryffindor did not pause. He traced the collarbone to the center of Draco's chest, and then moved down and leftward. Harry drew a complicated sigil over Draco's heart and then returned to the center on Draco's chest. The finger slipped downward and another pattern surrounded Draco's navel. It tickled, and Draco fought not to squirm.

Harry's hand moved lower and Draco hoped to hell Harry wasn't planning to decorate Draco's cock, because it was already hard just from Harry's proximity, as well as the delicate touch of the fingertip on his skin. Harry's hand veered, however, and drew a small sigil on Draco's flank, just where the blond curls began, and a few inches from where Draco began to ache for Harry's touch.

The Gryffindor drew upward again, retracing his lines, but with a pattern this time, as though interlacing them. The sigil over Draco's heart was completed—he looked down to see a green, vaguely Celtic design that resembled knotwork, and then Harry's hand moved to Draco's shoulder and down his left arm. Harry used his free hand to hold Draco's steady as another symbol was drawn on Draco's wrist—and who would have guessed that a feather-light touch on the wrist could be so utterly erotic?—before the tracing moved to his palm. Harry's breathing sounded a bit ragged by this time, mirroring Draco's own. A circle was drawn completely around Draco's ring finger and then the knotwork on his palm was completed in a sequence of jagged lines and whorls.

The tracery continued back up Draco's arm, linked through the heart sigil once more, and then up Draco's neck to finish at the temple. Harry sighed with relief and withdrew his hand. He murmured a word—*iuncto*—and the entire design seemed to flood with heat on Draco's skin. He drew in a breath of surprise and Harry met his gaze with concern. Draco shook his head to reassure the Gryffindor.

"Your turn," Harry said. Draco reached across their laps and dipped his own finger into the

jar—the liquid was half-gone now, magically transferred from the jar to Draco's skin.

Draco touched Harry's temple, wondering if he were supposed to make up the design as he went, but the instant his finger touched flesh, he inexplicably knew what to do. He followed the same pattern Harry had used, but added a Slytherin twist of his own. While drawing with his index finger, he let his other fingers glide along Harry's skin as he drew, turning the artistry into a caress. Harry trembled beneath his hand, and nearly stopped breathing altogether.

As Draco scrolled around Harry's navel, he was pleased the see the Gryffindor was just as hard and needy as Draco—Harry's cock glistened with precome and Draco groaned at the sight of it. He shut his eyes for a moment, trying to think non-arousing thoughts, and then let the magic keep his fingers moving, focusing on the spell as he drew.

It seemed to take forever to finish the tracing—arm, wrist, palm, and back again to Harry's temple. When he finally lowered his hand, Draco was shaking with need. He repeated the word Harry had used and then blinked in surprise when he felt another jolt of heat. The green lines traced on their bodies turned black.

"The hard part is finished," Harry said thickly and leaned forward to kiss Draco. He took Harry's mouth eagerly, demanding more than either could give at the moment. Their tongues twined together, plundering the sensitive spots that both knew well. Harry pulled away first, laughing shakily.

"Not yet," he said and took Draco's left hand with his own. Their fingers linked, and Harry pressed their palms together, holding them at chest height so that the sigils on their palms touched.

Harry's right hand reached down and plucked a ribbon from the stack. A gold one. He met Draco's eyes and the green seemed to intensify.

"Draco Malfoy, are you fully cognizant of the meaning of the ceremony in which we are about to partake?" Harry asked softly in a formal tone.

"I am," Draco said quietly.

"Are you aware that the words spoken today shall create a bond between us that cannot be broken, save by death?"

"I am," Draco replied.

"Do you, therefore, seek to enter this bond of your own free will?"

"I do."

Harry sighed quietly, as though relieved, although Draco doubted Harry truly expected him to

back out at this late stage. The Gryffindor began to twist the gold cord around their linked hands.

"By this cord do I bind our spirits as one. May our lives be blessed with the virile energy of the sun, and our unity overseen by the powers of light. By this cord do I add my energy to yours."

Draco solemnly repeated the questions to Harry, and then added his own golden cord with the same invocation. Energy seemed to pulse around them and Draco wondered if it were a component of the spell, or simply his imagination.

The next cord was silver. Harry spoke as he twisted it over their hands.

"By this cord do I bind our spirits as one. May our lives be blessed with the purity of the moon, and with the creativity and love symbolized by its silvery light. By this cord do I add my love to yours."

Draco repeated the words and bound his silver cord with Harry's. His eyes never left the Gryffindor's, and his voice sounded rough in his own ears. Harry's emerald eyes looked particularly bright.

The next cord was black. "By this cord do I bind our spirits as one. May it grant us the wisdom to overcome negativity and banish evil. By this cord do I add my wisdom to yours."

They each added more cords in succession: green (May it grant us luck and success); blue (May it grant us patience and tranquility—Draco nearly laughed aloud at that one, and Harry gave him a warning glare, although his lips twitched); and finally red (May it infuse us with strength and passion for the rest of our days).

"The knots of this binding are formed by the vows we have spoken, and shall not be severed even after the cords are removed," Harry said and swallowed hard. "By this final symbol, I join myself to you, Draco Lucius Malfoy." Harry picked up Draco's ring from the silver plate and held it over their bound hands. "Mind to mind, heart to heart, hand to hand, soul to soul, I bind myself to you with this."

Harry slipped the ring over Draco's finger and added a single word: *sempre.* Draco gasped as the black lines and sigils on his body suddenly turned gold. He drew in a shaking breath and then steadied himself. The magic around them was nearly a tangible force now, and he wondered if any of it was Harry's doing. He reached for Harry's ring.

"By this final symbol, I join myself to you, Harry James Potter. Mind to mind, heart to heart, hand to hand, soul to soul, I bind myself to you with this."

Draco placed the ring on Harry's finger and repeated the final word of magic. The lines on Harry turned gold and then both sets of drawn sigils began to glow. Draco felt an almost blinding sense of power as the magic enveloped them, seeming to flow from their bound hands outward. It flooded Draco's entire being and he threw his head back, overwhelmed by the sensations. His left

hand clutched Harry's like a lifeline and their right hands joined instinctively. Just when Draco thought his head would explode, the power began to dissipate slowly. It did not disappear, but seemed to settle into Draco's flesh and blood, leaving him tingling and energized. He snapped his gaze back to Harry's, whose green eyes gleamed with a smoldering fire. He looked like a feral god.

"It's done," Harry said roughly.

Draco leaned forward and took those gorgeous lips in his. After a few moments of passionate kissing, Draco found their bound hands to be an obstruction. He tore at the cords, to find Harry doing the same. When the ribbons were finally strewn on the rug like multicolored confetti, Draco pressed Harry back into the white softness with a growl of suppressed desire.

Harry's hands were everywhere on Draco's skin, touching him as though he explored something rare and precious. Draco's flesh seemed more sensitive than usual, even more so than when they used the incomparable Weasley salve. Draco wondered if it were part of the spell, or if his heightened emotions were responsible. Regardless, he felt inflamed by Harry, who had never looked more beautiful. He tasted Harry's throat and trailed a hand down the Gryffindor's smooth chest, wondering where the lines had gone. The sigils had vanished.

Harry's questing hands were hot on his skin and Draco suddenly didn't give a damn about the lines. He moaned into Harry's neck. He needed to touch every inch of the creamy skin under his fingertips. Draco kneaded Harry's shoulders, biceps, and forearms before briefly touching his hands. Harry's fingers gripped his for a moment and he felt Harry's teeth nip into his shoulder in a bruising kiss. Draco's tongue laved over Harry's collarbone and then trailed lower, tasting the salty sweetness of Harry's skin. The Gryffindor's hands left Draco's to slide over his buttocks and up the curve of Draco's spine.

Draco moaned and then licked teasingly at one of Harry's nipples. He chuckled when his lover arched against him—god, Harry must have been feeling the effects, too. He teased it again with his tongue and Harry's panting moan was music to his ears. Gentle hands clutched at Draco's hair.

"I can't… hold it," Harry gasped as Draco's hands drifted over his abdomen.

"It's okay," Draco breathed. "Let go, love."

He touched Harry's cock lightly and slid his thumb up the length of it. Harry made an almost tortured sound and came. The heat exploded between their bodies, nearly triggering Draco's orgasm. Harry sped that along by taking a hand from Draco's hair and shifting himself down a bit to grip Draco's quivering shaft. The exquisite, firm touch was all it took, and then Draco's fluid joined Harry's on the Gryffindor's flat belly.

Draco groaned at their lack of control, and rested his cheek against Harry's.

"It's been awhile since we gave each other hand jobs," Harry commented lightly.

"If they are always this brilliant, we should do them more often."

"I think it's the spell," Harry said, sounding a bit regretful.

"I don't think so," Draco replied confidently and took Harry's lips again.

Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Events represented herein do not correspond in any way to the author's opinion regarding the state of matrimony.

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Chapter: 10

Chapter Ten

Harry woke up to the delightful sensation of someone nibbling on the underside of his jaw. A shivery tickle of soft hair wafted over his chin and brushed over his throat. He sighed happily and reached back for his lover, but his hand grasped empty air.

His eyes opened and he saw Draco's lazy grin, albeit upside-down.

"I won't even ask how we ended up in this position," Harry said. He was sprawled diagonally across the bed and his feet hung off the corner. A sheet partially covered his legs. Draco's feet were where the pillows should be—those were missing—and he had no covers at all. Draco's hand roamed over Harry's chest and played gently with a taut nipple while his tongue stroked the hollow of Harry's throat.

"Want me to remind you?" Draco asked.

"Okay," Harry said breathlessly.

Draco moved down and over a bit until he hovered over Harry. He placed a steaming, tender kiss on Harry's lips, all tongue and teeth and teasing lips. Harry tangled a hand in the silvery hair, more than willing to have his favorite breakfast—Draco Malfoy.

A hand slapped against his abdomen and Draco pulled away. He sat up with a wicked grin. "Unfortunately, we don't have time."

The naked blond headed for the bathroom, seemingly oblivious to Harry's arousal, and the shocked expression on his face. Harry sat up and struggled to free himself from his awkward

position on the bed. He ended up tangling his feet and falling out of bed with a thump.

"Wha—? Draco, what?" he managed as he climbed to his feet.

"We're off to the Ministry today. Just as soon as we have another chat with your Weasel friends," Draco called from the bathroom.

"You have a plan?" Harry called and hurried to join the Slytherin.

"I have a plan."

Harry grinned as he leaned against the doorframe and watched Draco enter the hot spray of the shower. Harry had a plan, too, and Draco's plan would just have to wait a tick or two. Draco did not exactly resist.

The nice weather had come to an end and rain hammered against the windows. Harry arranged for the Weasley twins to meet them in the gardens at Hampton Court. Harry had no idea where that was, but both Draco and the twins apparently knew it well.

Draco made breakfast while Harry put the living room back to rights, blushing a bit with remembered pleasure as he moved the white rug to its new resting place beneath the coffee table.

Later, fed and appropriately dressed for the rain, Draco Apparated them to a hedge-enclosed garden. A brick palace loomed in the background. Fred and George were already there, looking oddly morose in their dark, hooded cloaks.

"Thanks for fixing Apparition, Harry," Fred said.

"Bloody hell, yes," George added. "It was beastly, going everywhere by broom."

"We're staying at one of our warehouses. It's not pretty, but it's dry and secure. We'll take you there."

Fred took Harry's arm and George embraced Draco's shoulders with a laugh. They Disapparated.

"This is Weasley Warehouse Number Two," Fred announced when they appeared before a dilapidated wooden structure enclosed with a chain link fence. As they approached the door, Harry heard the sound of vicious dogs barking.

"Don't worry, they aren't real," George said. "But it keeps the Muggles away."

"We made it Unplottable so the Ministry won't get their hands on our goods."

"Been that way for years."

"Never trusted them."

The warehouse was huge and dark, and stacked with row upon row of boxes marked with the distinctive triple W of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Fred ushered them up some rickety stairs and into a spacious office heated with a wood-burning stove.

Ron threw himself out of a chair and gripped Harry's arms.

"Harry! What the hell? I mean, seriously, *what the hell* were you thinking?" The blue eyes flicked to Draco and back. "No offense, Malfoy, but breaking him the fuck out of Azkaban, Harry? What possessed you?"

For reply, Harry sent a helpless look at Draco, whose lips quirked in a beautiful grin and Harry's heart flipped over with a happy sigh.

"I'd do it again," Harry said simply and Ron groaned.

"You're completely hopeless. Utterly in the cauldron."

Harry nodded and shuffled sideways a couple of steps to lean into Draco, who put an arm over his shoulders possessively.

"Hermione is in lockup, Harry! Did you think about her for one bloody minute? Or Lupin and Tonks?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but realized that he deserved whatever abuse Ron chose to dish out. He had acted in a completely selfish manner and the fact that he was ecstatically happy as a wanted criminal, so long as Draco was with him, had no bearing on the guilt he felt for involving his friends.

"What do you plan to do about this?" Ron asked.

Harry turned hopeful eyes to Draco, silently pleading with Malfoy not to mention Budapest, because Ron might actually go mad and hit him.

"I have a plan," Draco said. "But I need your brothers."

Malfoy pressed a kiss against Harry's forehead and went to huddle over the small table with the twins. The wooden surface was soon covered in parchment, diagrams, scrolls, and sweet wrappers. Harry thought it was awfully brave of Draco to eat sweets offered by those two, but his tongue did not grow to massive proportion and his skin did not turn a garish shade of violet, so Harry figured they were normal confections.

Ron had set up his portable wizard chess game on one of the cots, and Harry sat down next to him. He pretended to play while listening to Draco and the twins plot.

The Plan consisted of the four of them sneaking in to the Ministry after hours. Harry and Ron would go to the dungeons and have a chat with Hermione and Lupin, while Draco and the twins went do something Draco assured Harry he would rather not know about. As long as it did not involve outright killing, Harry decided he did not have a problem with it. He also wondered if Draco's Slytherinness were rubbing off on him, because he seemed to be losing his conscience. Then again, perhaps it was just Umbridge.

The key to their success was Harry's invisibility cloak and several of the Weasley twins' Headless Hats. Except that they were no longer called Headless Hats, since the twins had managed to extend the glamour to cover the entire body.

"We're still arguing about the name," Fred explained as he plopped a hat on Draco's head. It was a black top hat, and did not look entirely out of place on Draco, except that he would need dress robes to complete the look, and perhaps that silver-headed cane his father used to sport.

"I want to call them Chameleon Caps," George said and plucked the hat from Draco, replacing it with a red beret.

"I don't wear *red*," Draco said adamantly. Harry thought the beret made him look sexy and French, but George sighed and removed it.

"I prefer Hiding Hats," Fred said. George made a scoffing noise.

"Please. That sounds like a five-year-old made it up."

Fred plopped a fedora on Draco's platinum head and Harry sat up with interest.

"You look like a really hot gangster," Harry said as Draco looked in the mirror and cocked his head.

George snatched the hat. "We'll put this in the 'maybe' pile."

Fred yanked a balaclava over Draco's head, pulling it down nearly to his eyes. It was pale grey, and looked quite nice. Harry grinned.

"Too hot, Weasel. It's summer, remember?" Draco said. Fred dragged the hat off, causing Draco's hair to stand up in a halo of static. Malfoy patted it down with a grimace of annoyance.

A trilby was next. It was black with tiny green pinstripes and a green band.

"Winner," Harry said quickly. God, who would have guessed a hat could look so good? Draco smirked at him. George nodded.

"Good choice. I'll take the fedora. Fred?"

Fred grabbed the beret, but turned it blue. "I am feeling rah-zair French today," he said with a horrible attempt at a French accent. George guffawed. Draco rubbed his temples.

"Balaclava for you, Ronnie-kins," Fred said and pulled the knit hat over Ron's head and down past his nose. Ron yelped and batted him away in annoyance. He tore the hat off and glared at his brother. His red hair stuck out at every angle.

"Cor! Now you look like Harry!" George said.

Harry remembered why the twins' company was best in moderation. He forced a smile.

"Well, we can't leave until dark. Has there been any word from Luna or Neville?"

George shook his head. "No, but we heard from Bill this morning. They haven't taken him in, but he's been ordered to take a sabbatical after his suspension. His house is being closely watched by Umbridge's goons. Same with Kingsley. We don't dare reply, in case they figure out a way to track our Patronus messages."

"Luna is our best contact, although she's probably being watched after that article in the Quibbler."

At Harry's questioning look, Fred scooped up a nearby newspaper and handed it to him. Luna had written an article about the arrest of Harry's friends. She had signed it "anonymous", but the vitriolic cast of it was certain to bring the entire staff of the Quibbler under the attention of Umbridge. Harry smiled at the questions in the article: "What sort of tyrant is running our government?" and "Should the scales of justice reside in the hands of one mad person?"

"She's brilliant," Harry said.

"Let's hope Neville can keep her from being arrested," Draco said dryly.

Ron shook his head. "Don't underestimate the power of a loyal fan base. The public will come down on the Ministry like a stack of cauldrons if they arrest the editor of the Quibbler. They love that silly rag."

"What about Harry's fan base?" George asked.

"Harry has been out of the limelight for years, mate," Ron said and threw Harry an apologetic look. Harry shrugged. Most of his "fans" had disappeared once he'd lost his powers, and he had retreated into a hermitlike state for far too long, hiding from attention. Once he'd recovered his powers, he had focused on his life with Draco. Public acclaim seemed far in the past. He didn't miss it.

"I have all the fan base I need right here," he said and grinned at Draco, who snorted.

"Just don't expect any letters with our names outlined in hearts."

For some reason, that comment set the twins off again and they mercilessly tormented Draco until he threatened to turn them into radishes. Harry expected it to be a long afternoon.

They Apparated in an invisible group to the main entrance of the Ministry. The door locked at precisely 9 p.m., so they had timed it to arrive at 8:55. One straggling employee pushed the door open and departed. Harry caught the door and held it open while a rush of quiet footsteps filed past. It was difficult to judge when the last of his friends went through, and he bumped into one as he entered and shut the door behind him.

He opened the hood of his cloak slightly, partially uncovering his face. He felt warm lips press into his.

"That better not be you, Ron," he said quietly.

"Very funny," Draco murmured and Harry chuckled. He put his arms around the invisible blond.

"Meet you back here in thirty minutes."
They located each other through hissed whispers. Harry and Ron entered the lift and pressed the button for the dungeons. Draco and the twins went somewhere that Harry was not privy to, because Draco said he would rather not know.

The dungeons were just as Harry had left them—dark and damp. He knocked out the dozing guard with a Sleep Spell, since the aftereffects of a Stunner would alert them of foul play.

Ron deactivated the invisibility device on his cap and pulled it lower on his head to conceal his red locks. He lit his wand and they quickly walked the passage, checking each cell.

"What you wakin' us for?" one groggy prisoner whined.

"Go back to sleep," Ron growled in an authoritative tone.

Lupin was stretched out on his cot, apparently asleep. His head faced the wall. Harry marked the cell, but they kept searching for Hermione, finally locating her in the cell where Draco had been held.

Harry dismantled the alarms and unlocked the door, finding it much easier with his wand. Ron pushed inside immediately and snatched Hermione into an embrace. She shoved him onto the floor with a gasp of rage, and nearly followed it with a punch to the face.

"Ron!" she cried, and threw herself on the floor to embrace him. Harry took the Portable Silence Chamber from his pocket and flipped the switch, instantly enveloping them in a sound-dampening bubble. The twins really were useful at times. He shook off the cloak.

"Harry!"

He grinned at her sheepishly. "Feel free to yell at me. I know I deserve it."

She sighed and shook her head. "I won't pretend to know what you were thinking. You haven't been exactly rational where Malfoy is concerned. I do wish you'd thought of the consequences, though."

Harry nodded grimly. "I know. I'm sorry, and I'm trying to fix things, short of turning us in."

"God no, she'll have you both in Azkaban for the rest of your natural lives."

"She brought back the dementors, Hermione. I couldn't leave him there."

"I know. You would have done the same for either of us, too."

Harry blinked, and then nodded, relieved to know that was true, at least.

"You didn't come to break me out, as well, did you?"

"Not unless you want to come," Harry offered.

"Considering how much trouble you're already in, I think I'll stay awhile."

"In that case, I'm only here for advice. I'm relieved you don't think I should turn myself over to Umbridge."

Hermione made a sound of disgust. "She's utterly horrid, Harry. Far worse than she was at Hogwarts. I haven't paid much attention to happenings at the Ministry, working from home all this time, but she's taken iron control of nearly every department. Neville has told me of her excesses. She's cut the Muggle Relations office back to nearly nothing, and those that are left are Obliviators."

Ron said, "We don't have time for a history lesson, 'Mione. We need some suggestions."

ooOoo

Only one hard-working Ministry official remained on the first floor. Draco and the twins walked by his well-lit office, silent and unseen. The Minister's office was at the end of the hall. For a moment, Draco wished he had brought Harry, because the door was guaranteed to be warded against intrusion.

Draco cast a few revealing charms and detected several alarms, as well as two curses. Umbridge was one wicked bitch, that was certain.

"Nasty," he muttered, "But perhaps not too bright."

Draco moved down the hall a bit, bumping in to one of the twins. There was a scramble, and some random cursing, before they all deactivated their hats. Draco checked the door of the office next to Umbridge's. It was not warded. In fact, it wasn't even locked.

The sign on the door read Undersecretary. Trusting, that one. Draco walked inside and went to the wall that joined it to the Minister's office. The twins followed. Draco cast another succession of spells and tsked.

"Sloppy. She's been too long among Hufflepuffs. She's losing her Slytherin edge," he said. He raised his wand and cast a Cutting Charm, drawing his wand up the wall from the floor, over, and back down. He pressed gently on the center of the incised area, and the wall toppled outward, landing with a cloud of dust in Umbridge's office. Draco gestured.

"Sometimes it's simpler to make your own door."

He stepped into the Minister's office, Levitated the broken wall, and cast a Cleaning Charm to eliminate the dust. He could seal the makeshift portal when they left. He scanned the room quickly, noting the kitten plates Umbridge favored were in place on every wall. Luckily, there were no visible portraits, just horrible mewling kittens.

Draco moved to the desk. Fred and George did the same. They needed to find an object they could turn into a Portkey; something that Umbridge would touch. The twins had been working on the Portkey spell ever since what they called the Ireland Incident. Stealing a Portkey from the Ministry had set off a chain of events leading to… well, the situation they currently found themselves in. The twins had decided to learn to make their own Portkeys.

This one would take them to number 12, Grimmauld Place, where Draco and the twins would be waiting. They would then disarm her and use the Imperius Curse to put her under their thrall. Draco knew Harry would have a Gryffindor fit in regards to The Plan, which was one reason Draco was glad to have the unscrupulous twins in his corner.

"The quill?" Weasley One suggested.

Draco shook his head. "Anyone could come in and borrow it. It would be just our luck to get that Edgecombe twit instead of Umbridge."

"Teacup?" Weasley Two asked.

"Do you think the bitch fetches her own tea?"

"Has anyone told you you're really obnoxious, Malfoy?"

"Today?" Draco asked mildly. He cast a spell on the desk drawers and swore. Locked and warded. Suspicious, untrusting twat! "One would suspect she has something to hide." He sighed and began an Unravelling Spell to break the wards, hating to do it, but there were no obvious items to use on the desktop. They needed something more personal.

Draco paused in mid-spell and shot a startled gaze at one of the Weasleys. A strange tingling had begun somewhere near his midsection.

"What the hell?" he managed before he felt the familiar pull of Disapparition.

ooOoo

"I don't see much help for it, Harry," Hermione said. "We'll just have to ride it out. You and Draco stay hidden. Umbridge can't hold us forever, and there is nothing she can charge us with. She'll have to let us go soon. Between Neville and Luna, the pressure is mounting. Others are beginning to ask questions."

"Well…" Harry began, and then squirmed a bit. "We might be able to do something other than bide our time."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. Harry grinned lamely and Ron put on his best innocent face, as though what Harry had to say was news to him. Coward.

"Spill it," she said.

"Draco and the twins worked out a plan."

"Draco? And the twins? The three of them. Together."

Harry nodded, thinking it sounded much worse when Hermione put it out there like that. How bad could the plan be? Harry immediately envisioned the Ministry building as a smoking pile of rubble, and realized he probably should have dragged a few more details out of the Slytherin. It wasn't as though he hadn't tried! Draco was simply a master of distraction. God, that mouth of his…

"What sort of plan?" Hermione demanded, and Harry pulled his mind back to the present. He shared a sickly grin with Ron, whose expression changed to one of hopeful encouragement. Harry opened his mouth to concoct some sort of story that Hermione would see through in an instant, and then he clutched his abdomen. A freezing pain stabbed through him. Harry gasped and sank to one knee.

Both his friends were at his side in an instant.

"Harry!" Hermione cried.

"Oh god!" Harry said. "Oh no, oh god no, it's Draco. Draco's gone."

Harry had felt a lurch through his system, as though something warm and comforting that surrounded him had been torn away, torn away forcibly. He hadn't really felt Draco's presence nearby… not until it was gone.

"I have to go," Harry said as he shook off his friends' hands. He climbed to his feet and ripped blindly at the cell door.

Nothing mattered now but finding Draco.

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Chapter: 11

Chapter Eleven

Harry barely had the presence of mind to pull his cloak back on as he fled from Hermione's cell. He raced down the corridor, not caring if his passing was heard. He had to find the Weasley twins, if they were still in the building. It was possible they had disappeared with Draco.

The lift doors had barely opened when Harry leaped out—and slammed into someone unseen. Harry went down in a tangle of cloak and limbs. Fred stared at him, hatless.

"Harry?" he asked. Harry snatched off the invisibility cloak.

"Where is he?" Harry tried not to sound frantic, and failed.

"He just disappeared, mate!" Fred said as he groped on the floor, searching for the invisible beret.

"Why? What did he touch?" Harry attempted to calm himself. He knew Draco was alive. That, at least, was a certainty. He could feel Draco, but only faintly.

"Nothing!" George's voice sounded out of thin air. A slight shimmer appeared, and then George was visible. One hand still gripped the brim of his fedora. "I was right next to him. Malfoy wasn't touching a thing. He was casting a spell—trying to unlock Umbridge's desk."

"Umbridge's desk? You were in Umbridge's office?" Shouting now. Yes, he was shouting. So much for calm.

"It was Malfoy's idea!" Fred protested, inching away from Harry, still on his hands and knees.

Harry stood, and Fred finally located his hat. He grabbed it and moved to stand behind George.

"It was like he Disapparated, Harry," George said. "There was even that cracking sound, but Malfoy didn't cast the spell—like I said, he was midway through another spell when he popped out."

"He was surprised," Fred added

"Maybe someone invisible Disapparated with him," George suggested.

"Someone else just happened to be in Umbridge's office? Invisible?" Fred scoffed. "Besides, Malfoy would have noticed someone touching him. Did he act like someone grabbed him?"

"I was looking at the desk," George admitted.

Harry's frustration was growing. He needed to think.

The lift doors opened and a man stepped out. He stared at the three of them, and then his eyes widened as they flitted to Harry's scar.

"*Obliviate*!" Harry yelled. The man's face went blank. Harry escorted the official to the front doors and out, modifying his memory to block any recollection of him and the twins. When the man was safely away, Harry returned to the twins, who watched him uneasily.

"What?" he snapped.

"You're getting a bit scary, Potter," George said. Harry glared, not at all in the mood for a lecture on ethics from the Weasley twins.

"Let's go get Ron."

Harry hit the guard with another Sleep Spell, just in case he thought about waking, and stalked back to Hermione's cell. He didn't bother to pull his cloak on fully, not caring who saw him.

"I've got to find Draco. Again," Harry snapped. "Are you coming?"

"Malfoy certainly disappears a lot, doesn't he?" Fred commented. Harry rounded on him with a snarl.

"When has it ever been his fault?" he hissed, not forgetting the twins' part in the Maeve fiasco.

"Forget I mentioned it," Fred muttered.

"I'm coming," Ron said quickly.

"Me too," Hermione said. Harry turned back to blink at her. She shrugged.

"If Umbridge has resorted to kidnapping, she'll stop at nothing. I might as well be a fugitive than sit here to be used as bait."

They left the cell and retreated down the corridor. George stood in front of Lupin's cell, talking to the werewolf.

"Lupin's coming," George said.

"I want to find my daughter," Remus said grimly. Harry opened his cell with a flick of his wand.

"Is Tonks at Grimmauld Place?"

Lupin nodded. "Under house arrest."

They exited the dungeons. A couple of prisoners set up a clamor of questions, but the others ignored them. In the hallway outside the cellblock, Harry said, "Let's meet at Grimmauld Place. We can Apparate from here."

Harry did not wait around for the others. He Apparated into the living room at number 12, Grimmauld Place, where a man gaped at him from the couch. Harry Stunned him and bound him in several ropes just as Fred and George appeared. A yell sounded from the kitchen, and then a thud. Ron and Hermione stood in the doorway a moment later. Ron grinned.

"Got the one in the kitchen, mate. Prat was eating all you food, looked like. From the size of him, he didn't need it."

They heard a happy cry from upstairs—obviously Lupin had located Tonks. The Lupins pounded down the stairs a moment later. Tonks threw herself at Harry.

"I could wring your neck, Potter! I really could!" she said angrily, but held him tightly regardless.

"I know. I'm sorry. Call Neville and try to find Lyra while I look for Draco. One way or another, this thing will be done with." He paused. "You might let Kingsley and Bill know the situation, just so they won't be surprised when all hell breaks loose."

Harry went to his room, accompanied by Hermione and Ron.

"What did you mean 'look for Draco'?" Hermione asked.

Harry waggled his hand and the ring glinted slightly.

"I have an advantage now," he said. "I just need a Circle of Protection and a spell."

He conjured one of the books Maeve had copied, flipped to the appropriate page, and started to read. Hermione, unable to stop herself, read over his shoulder. Ron sprawled on the bed.

For once, Hermione did not attempt to talk him out of casting the spell. She wordlessly helped him draw a circle and pentagram on the floor. They lit several candles and Harry seated himself cross-legged in the center.

"If I'm gone too long…" Harry grinned humorlessly. "Well, you'll figure out what to do."

Hermione tried to smile and failed. Harry read through the spell once more, centered himself, and cast.

ooOoo

Draco, slightly disoriented from the strange sense of being Disapparated by means unknown, still managed to cast *Protego* the instant his feet touched solid ground.

It blocked a shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!" but did nothing to halt the blow that landed sharply on his forearm, nearly dislodging his wand. He lost it anyway when it was snatched from his numb hand just as another spell caught him. How many were there?

He sank to his knees as the Weakening Spell sapped his energy so quickly he could barely stay awake. A rough hand grabbed his jaw and forced his head upright. He glared into the mad eyes of Dolores Umbridge.

She squeezed so hard his jawbones creaked in protest. "Mr. Malfoy," she purred, "How nice to see you again."

"Fuck you," he managed.

She released his face and then slapped him hard. The blow knocked him to the ground, head ringing.

"That's a very filthy mouth for such a pretty face," Umbridge said. "Wouldn't you agree, Maeve?"

Draco opened and closed his eyes slowly, trying to focus. He got to his hands and knees, trying to muster the energy to stand. He glanced at his surroundings. They were outside, beneath a dark sky. The stars were invisible, so he assumed clouds, although it wasn't raining. He knelt in a clearing ringed with trees. The grass beneath him had been shorn, and a circle, drawn with white sand, surrounded him. Candles edged the ring, although one had been knocked over by Umbridge. Draco noted dimly that the splash of wax had hardened on the blades of grass.

A Summoning. Brigit and Maeve flanked Umbridge, and all three looked at him with varying degrees of satisfaction. Their features looked horrific in the dim light of the candles. Brigit had

cast a Summoning—but you couldn't Summon *people*, could you? Draco had never heard of such a thing.

"*Accio* wand!" he said and it twitched in Umbridge's hand. She chuckled nastily.

"Oh no, Malfoy. You are going to stay right here and be the pretty bait for Harry Potter. And if your precious lover doesn't get here in time… Well, then you'll die."

She laughed again and cast a spell that sent Draco into darkness.

When Draco awoke, he was cold. He opened his eyes. It was still dark, and he could not tell how much time had passed, though he seemed to be in the same clearing. By the feel of his limbs, it could have been hours. He tried to move, and the pain in his arms was instantly obvious. They were tied over his head, bound to a rough pole.

He tugged at them experimentally. Fuck. He was roped to a stake. At the base, surrounding his bare feet, was a large pile of dry faggots and chunks of split wood. Draco was nude, which explained the cold.

"It's no surprise, really, that Potter was unable to resist you. How long did it take him, I wonder?"

He had been trying to ignore Umbridge, who stood in front of him with her fat lips split into a grin. Draco said nothing, but the thought of Harry caused a twinge of pain. The Gryffindor had found him last time, but by the look of things, time was something Draco had in limited quantities.

"An interesting article will be printed in the Daily Prophet tomorrow, speculating on your relationship with the Boy Who Lived. I wonder how he will enjoy that? His reputation…" Umbridge clucked in a parody of sympathy. "It's simply a shambles, isn't it? And all because of you."

Draco shoved down the unwilling guilt prompted by that statement and evaluated his situation. He wondered if Umbridge held his wand, or if she'd given it to one of the others. It was doubtful he could get it with an *Accio*, regardless. His eyes moved away from the toadlike visage of Umbridge, seeking Maeve and Brigit. Both were visible in his periphery, with their arms upraised as they chanted.

"Fire can be so purifying, don't you think?" Umbridge asked casually, but he heard the eagerness beneath her words. He was surprised she hadn't already lit the bundle of kindling beneath his feet. "Maeve is casting her protection spell on the land—the same one she tried to cast the last time Potter interfered, actually. Try, try again, I always say." Her simpering chuckle rang out.

Draco sneered absently, wanting to kick her. Back in Ireland again, then. He was starting to develop a severe dislike for the island. Maeve and Brigit finished with their preparations, apparently, and began to walk their way. Draco shifted, and noticed his feet stood rather

precariously on a block of wood. If he kicked it over, all of his weight would rest on his arms.

He wondered grimly what would be the best way to die by fire. Smoke inhalation, most likely. Burning would be unpleasant. Better to breathe in the smoke and choke to death.

He was about to try Summoning his wand again, but a sharp tingling sensation overcame him. He gasped, a sound echoed by Umbridge.

"What is that?" she demanded.

Draco looked down in amazement. His patterned tattoo was back, and it was glowing. The tracery gleamed a brilliant gold, the same shade as Draco's sudden rush of hope. He felt Harry's presence, surrounding and filling him.

"Potter?" he whispered in awe.

Maeve ran forward and touched her hand to the sigil on Draco's flank.

"It can't be!" she cried. "What have you done?"

Draco grinned at her. He wasn't sure how, but he was utterly certain that Harry Potter was about to throw a very large hex into their well-laid plans.

The tattoo faded and disappeared. Draco nearly moaned at the loss of Harry's essence.

"Light him up!" Maeve snarled.

Draco laughed aloud. "Better hurry," he said. Umbridge threw him a vile glare.

"*Incendio*!" she snarled. Flames flickered to life and caught quickly at the dry tinder. Draco's smile never faltered.

ooOoo

"Got him!" Harry yelled, causing Hermione to jump violently. "Come on!"

Harry leaped to his feet and pelted down the stairs, nearly tripping and breaking his neck when he slipped halfway down. The twins looked at him expectantly, but the Lupins were gone.

"They went to meet with Neville. He might know where they've taken Lyra," George said.

"I know where Draco is," Harry said. "I think Umbridge plans to burn him alive." He was surprised at his own calm tone, especially considering he felt like screaming. Ron and Hermione entered the room and he said, "Is everyone ready?"

"Ready for what?" Hermione asked.

"To save Draco, of course," he replied. "Everyone join hands." They looked at him blankly. "Do it!" he yelled in his best Savior of the Wizarding World voice. They joined hands.

Harry gathered in as much magic as he possibly could, making sure to exclude everyone in the room in order to keep them from passing out. He took a deep breath and Apparated the lot of them.

Harry staggered to his knees when they arrived, weaker than he could have imagined. The distance had been father than he'd expected, and Apparating all seven of them at once… well, he admitted it was stupid.

"Too late, Potter!" he heard Umbridge yell. "*Extonere ager*!"

Harry fell face down and blackness licked at his vision, held off by willpower alone. Damn it! Umbridge had set up a Knockout Field and he had walked right into it. He fought to focus, and saw Draco's horrified face staring at him through a billow of white smoke. Oh god!

Umbridge yelled once more and Harry felt his wand slip from his grasp, unable to prevent it. He concentrated and pulled magic from the ground into himself. It was difficult—he was beyond tired and he was being magically compelled to sleep, on top of the drain of Apparition. The extra power began to revive him, but slowly—too slowly. He felt a boot kick into his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. A foot stomped into his chest, pinning him to the ground. Umbridge bore down and Harry found it hard to breathe. He heard Draco coughing nearby.

"Bind them!" Umbridge snarled, not looking at Harry. He wasn't sure who she was talking to, and he didn't care. He reached up and grabbed her ankle, squeezing as firmly as he could through the leather of her boot. She pressed down harder and darkness once again flickered at the edges of his vision. Harry pulled suddenly, not with his hand, but with his energy, and sapped every bit of magic out of Umbridge. She collapsed on him in a dead weight and Harry fought to free himself, alert once more, but now trapped. His eyes flew to Draco, who was nearly obscured by smoke. Flames licked higher.

Harry roared and gestured, letting fly with a burst of pure force. The burning pile of wood surrounding Draco was suddenly scattered into a fiery furrow in the grass that stretched for twenty meters. Malfoy sagged on the pole, seemingly unconscious, or dead.

Harry shoved at Umbridge's dead weight and finally succeeded in rolling her away. He was halted in his attempt to rise as a wand tip pressed painfully into his throat. His eyes rose reluctantly to meet the angry visage of Brigit.

"Say goodbye, Potter," she said. "*Avada Ke*—"

Before Harry could even react, Brigit collapsed. Harry stared, surprised, into the grim face of

Susan Bones. She smiled at him and then turned away.

"Wake them up!" she yelled. "Is this the sort of Ministry you plan to serve? One that burns men alive? Stop blindly following orders and think, for once! This travesty needs to stop! Are we Aurors or fucking lapdogs?"

Harry got to his feet and saw a group of Aurors surrounding his unconscious friends. They looked at Susan nervously. Only one had conjured ropes to bind one of the Weasley twins. Harry took two steps toward Draco, but he had waited too long. Maeve was already there. She had cut Draco down and held his limp form tightly, although she struggled against his weight.

Maeve did not bother to speak, but Disapparated with Malfoy. Harry cast the spell that activated his Bond with Draco. The link allowed him to join ethereally with Draco, and see what he saw, as if he were present as a ghost. He held onto Draco's essence for a moment, drinking in the warm glow of life that still flowed in Malfoy's veins.

Harry pulled back into himself as Maeve stepped away from Draco. It was quicker this time—she had not gone far. Harry Apparated, and found himself glaring at a shocked Maeve. They stood in a small room—probably Maeve's house, Harry figured. She raised her wand and snarled a spell at him, which he deflected with a hastily cast *Protego*. He moved to Draco; Maeve had tossed him haphazardly on the sofa. Harry wrapped his arms around the naked Slytherin, trying to warm him.

"How do you keep thwarting me?" Maeve screamed. "Bloody fucking Boy Who Lived! Why can't you just let him die?"

"I love him," Harry said simply. The words seemed to enrage her beyond rationality. Draco stirred in his arms and began to cough. Harry pressed a kiss into his temple. It tasted of smoke and sweat. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to destroy Maeve and Umbridge, and anyone else that dared to hurt his Draco.

"This isn't over, Potter. I'll get you for this. I'll have Malfoy, yet."

She raised her wand and Harry knew she was about to Disapparate.

"I wouldn't leave if I were you, Maeve," he warned.

She sneered at him and Disapparated. Her scream echoed in the small room and Draco's eyes snapped open. Harry smiled softly.

"Cutting it a bit close this time, aren't you?" Draco asked. His voice was a horrible rasp.

"Sorry," Harry said and kissed him.

"It would help if people would stop snatching me, eh?" Draco said when Harry allowed him up

for air.

"It's because you're beautiful. They can't help it." Draco melted in his arms and kissed him more deeply than before. Harry sighed happily. "At least Maeve won't be snatching you any more."

"Really?" Draco's silver eyes were puzzled. Harry gestured over his shoulder, to the place where Maeve had attempted to Disapparate. Draco flung himself off the couch in horror. "What the hell?"

Harry shrugged. "She Splinched herself. I told her not to leave."

Half of Maeve's body lay on the floor, the other half having Disapparated to her intended location.

"Harry, you—! You didn't—?" Draco's silver eyes were disbelieving. Harry glared at him.

"Yes. I did. And I'd do it again. I'm finished with people fucking with you, Draco. I've had enough of people screwing with our lives when we're just trying to mind our own business. Maeve was never going to stop, you know. *Never*. And trying to burn you alive? That was the last goddamn straw. I'm Harry fucking Potter and it's about time people around here started to remember that." He stood up. "I'm going to make sure the others are all right. I'll bring you some clothes."

Harry waved a hand and Disapparated, not willing to see the growing concern on Draco's face. God, he hoped he hadn't royally messed up.

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Chapter: 12

Chapter Twelve

Draco's eyes went to the floorboards when Harry disappeared. They had molded themselves around Maeve's boots, effectively trapping her in place when she'd tried to Disapparate. Harry's final wave had restored them to normal, making it seem as though Maeve's death had just been a normal Splinching accident. All done by Potter with a flick of his hand, and no wand. And he'd sent the flaming wood surrounding Draco scattering without a sound, back in the sacrificial clearing.

Draco sat down hard on the couch. He thought back over the past several days. Harry breaking the wards in the Ministry dungeons. Harry rescuing him from Azkaban. Harry casting the Binding Spell. Harry using the spell to find him, and save him yet again. Draco had to admit

it—Potter's powers were growing. He didn't even need a wand any longer, not at all. The problem was, as Harry's abilities grew, it seemed his conscience was shrinking. The Harry Draco knew would never have arranged Maeve's death, no matter how enraged he was. Breaking him out of Azkaban was crazy enough, but this… Draco felt sick.

Shit. This is so beyond not good I don't even want to think about it. Draco snatched a throw from the sofa and slung it about himself. He went outside, needing the night air to clear his head. It didn't really help. He stood looking at the cloudy sky and waited for Harry to return.

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Harry Apparated back to the clearing to find general chaos reigning. Umbridge was still an unconscious lump, but apparently some of the Aurors had chosen to support the fallen Minister.

Harry's friends had been revived. Bill and Tonks stood beside Susan Bones, shouting orders and trying to subdue the rogue Aurors. The Weasley twins were causing general havoc by shooting off every sort of madcap spell imaginable. Tendrils of pink fog had enveloped one Auror and seemed to be *tickling* the man to death. Another was trying to flee, but his feet had become huge flippers—he sprawled headlong and a Stunner kept him down.

Hermione was busy binding Brigit in ropes while Ron called unhelpful directions to the twins. Harry ignored everyone and Levitated Umbridge. He bound her to the same post to which Draco had been tied. The urge to bring back the wood and set it aflame was strong—he actually had to clench his fists and talk himself out of it. Hermione's hand on his arm startled him. Harry blinked at her.

"Is Draco okay?" she asked.

Harry flushed guiltily. He shouldn't have left Draco alone, but the surprised chastisement in the grey eyes had made Harry seek escape. He could deal with disapproval from anyone but Draco.

"He's fine. I need to get him some clothes."

He vaguely wondered what Umbridge had done with the clothes Draco had worn. She had probably kept them as a souvenir. Or Maeve had, since her obsession with Lucius Malfoy had started this entire nightmare. The thought of Maeve brought another surge of emotion. He hadn't really meant to kill her, but he felt no remorse at all over the fact that she was dead.

If the others weren't present, Harry might have sent Brigit and Umbridge to join her. The knowledge caused him to rake a hand through his hair in agitation.

"I'll be right back," he said and Apparated home. He grabbed some clothing and boots for Draco, and then returned to Maeve's cottage. It took him a moment to find his lover, who was outside.

Harry joined him and handed him the clothing bundle. His eyes searched Draco's, but the silver

eyes were unreadable.

"Everyone okay?" Draco asked and shrugged the blanket from his shoulders to stand naked in the brisk air. Harry felt a curious tightness in his throat. Draco borrowed Harry's wand and spelled the clothes to hover in midair. He pulled the pale shirt on first. Harry had to smile. Normal people put undergarments on first, but not his Draco. Harry knew it was madness to feel a surge of hot desire now, but he couldn't help himself.

"God, you're gorgeous," he said.

A familiar grin quirked Draco's lips, and he reached out with a groan to gather Harry into an embrace. Harry met his lips hungrily, and the tight knot of fear fell away. If Draco was horrified by Harry's engineering of Maeve's death, he was apparently willing to overlook it.

Before Harry became too mindless, he forced himself to break the kiss and step back to let Draco finish dressing.

"You didn't answer my question, Potter." At Harry's blank look, Draco laughed. "I asked if everyone was all right."

"Oh! Yes. Damn, I told Hermione I'd be right back."

"Hermione? I thought she was at the Ministry in lockup!"

"Um… She was."

Draco looked at Harry and waited. The Gryffindor squirmed slightly, and scowled.

"It was her decision! She did not want to be used as bait."

"Like me."

"Well, yeah."

When Draco was clothed, they Apparated back to the clearing. Things were more under control, with most of Umbridge's Aurors subdued, but for two that floated in midair, doing a strange sort of spiraling dance around each other while begging for mercy. Harry overhead Bill talking to Susan.

"Damn them for not finishing their NEWTs. What Aurors they would have made."

This was apparently in reference to the twins, who reluctantly lowered the floating Aurors at Hermione's enraged bellow.

"Yes, but who could control them?" Susan asked.

Harry largely ignored this as he strode to Umbridge. He knew from experience that she would be out for hours yet. Unless he did something about it. Aware of Draco's steadying presence next to him, Harry did not even bother to raise his wand. He sent a concentrated burst of magic at Umbridge.

Her body jerked and he allowed himself a grin. Maybe that one had been painful. Just a little. Umbridge groaned and twitched. Harry raised his wand to cast a more traditional spell.

"Ennervate."

Dolores Umbridge raised her head. It only took a moment for her to process her surroundings, and then her mouth opened. Harry could imagine the vile invectives spewing forth. He had to imagine, because he had encased her in a bubble of silence. He glanced at Draco, who looked at him quizzically. Harry grinned.

"I woke her up, but I don't have to listen to her."

"Potter, this new wicked streak of yours will take some getting used to, but it has its good points."

Harry turned to Bill. "Bring them here!" He jerked his head toward the assorted fallen Aurors. They were quickly lined up behind the raving Umbridge, whose mad eyes glared at Harry. He walked before them like a general inspecting his troops.

"All right, listen up!" he bellowed. "There are going to be some bloody changes around here!" He halted his pacing in front of Umbridge, but fixed his gaze on each Auror in turn.

"When this psychotic bitch attained the office of Minister, I did nothing, hoping that her obvious insanity would become clear to everyone. When she brought the dementors back to Azkaban, I did nothing, hoping cooler heads would see how obviously fucking wrong that was. When she reorganized the Ministry in her own twisted image, I did nothing, thinking that an ineffective Ministry run by a madwoman was at least better than a world run by Voldemort. When she sentenced a man to *seven years in Azkaban* for using an illegal potion, I did nothing." *Except break him out*, Harry added mentally. "But when she stoops to using Dark Magic to summon a man with intent to *burn him at the stake* I feel it's time to stop doing *nothing*!"

The Aurors muttered amongst themselves, and Harry assumed many of them were surprised and probably disbelieving.

"I was put on this earth to rid the world of evil," Harry continued. "I thought my job was finished when I killed Voldemort." He let that sink in for a moment as a subtle reminder. "But I've learned that evil still exists. Draco Malfoy taught me that Voldemort left more than bad memories behind. He left pockets of evil magic that I'm sure every one of you Aurors has encountered. Draco and I have worked for the past year to eliminate those, while your Minister has been in

London, basking in her own powers and doing nothing to improve things! Why is it dangerous to Apparate? Why has the Floo Network not been repaired? Why are Portkeys still under Ministry control? Voldemort has been dead and gone for six years and the Ministry might as well not exist for all the good it has done!"

There were frightened looks and louder mutters at that. He could practically hear them wondering if Harry planned to destroy the Ministry altogether. Umbridge screamed silently, so enraged a line of spittle edged from the corner of her mouth. For a moment, Harry thought about crushing the Ministry. He could do it. The magic sang in his veins at the thought and he felt his hair stand on end. The tip of his wand crackled with blue sparks.

"Potter. You're glowing," Draco said calmly.

The words steadied him. Harry siphoned some of his magic into the ground, causing the grass to thicken and darken in a fifty meter radius, unseen in the darkness.

"No, I do not plan to bring down the Ministry, nor do I intend to set myself up as Minister, or Dictator, or anything. I still have work to do out there." He flung out a hand. "I have to clean up the mess the last pretender to ultimate power left behind. However, I will not follow this Ministry any longer! There will be changes made, and they will be made right now, or so help me I will bring the fucking Ministry down brick by bloody brick!"

Harry took a deep breath and glanced at Draco, whose expression could have been carved from ice, but for the argent fire in their depths.

"Now, Bill, if you please, will you call all of the Department Heads? We're having an impromptu Ministry meeting. Tell them to convene in Courtroom Number 10."

Bill sent out a number of silvery Patronus messages, and then he looked at Harry. "What about the Wizengamot?"

Fuck the Wizengamot, Harry thought bitterly, having no mercy for the collective that had sent Draco to Azkaban. "Them, too," he said grimly. Bill looked as though he might speak, but thought better of it.

"You can all Apparate back to the Ministry," Harry announced. "I fixed that, at least."

Several people gaped at him. Susan's tone was hushed. "You fixed Apparition?"

Harry nodded curtly. "But only in London. I wouldn't try it outside the city yet. We're still working on that. Hermione, will you and the others Side-along our unwilling participants? I'll take our soon-to-be-ex Minister. Oh, and one more thing. *Accio* Draco's wand!"

Harry wasn't certain who had it, but Umbridge's robes shredded on one side as Draco's wand snapped into Harry's hand. Harry handed it to the blond.

"Here you are, love. Sorry you'll need to disinfect it."

Draco took it, and watched as Harry loosened the ropes that bound Umbridge to the stake. She might have staggered and fallen, but Harry's magic held her upright. He wanted no one to have reason to pity the hateful creature. She glared at him, still snarling wordlessly.

"Save it," Harry snapped. "You'll get your bloody chance." He glanced at Draco, knowing he could Apparate Umbridge and Draco easily, but he knew his Slytherin would not appreciate being dragged around like a sack of produce now that he had his wand back.

Harry grabbed the Minister roughly by the shoulder and Disapparated.

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Draco watched Harry and Umbridge disappear, quickly followed by Weasleys and Aurors. For a moment, Draco thought about Apparating home (although at this point home was a nebulous concept) since Harry seemed to have everything under control. He sighed and popped into the Ministry lobby, knowing it wasn't going to be as easy as that to convince the Ministry and the Wizengamot to oust Umbridge.

A few harried wizards and witches milled about, looking frantic. It had not taken long for Potter's actions to wind up the Ministry, even at this ungodly hour of the morning. He heard a shriek, and glanced over to find a pudgy witch gaping at him before she clutched the wizard next to her and whispered urgently. Draco smiled evilly, recalling that he was now a wanted criminal.

Bill Weasley appeared next to him with a bound Auror in tow. Bill pressed the button for the lift.

"Come on, Malfoy, you're causing a stir."

They entered the lift and made their way to Courtroom 10. Potter was already there, and Umbridge sat in the central chair, shackled. Draco grinned at the sight. He seated himself casually in the spot Harry had occupied during Draco's trial. Potter strode over to join him while the other either Apparated in, or filed through the doors. Neville entered and hurried over, with Luna in tow. He looked nervous, a shadow of the boy he had been at Hogwarts.

"What's happening?" Neville asked with an anxious glance at Umbridge.

"Potter is asserting himself," Draco said with a smile, and Harry gave him a sardonic look. "Have a seat, Longbottom. This could get interesting." He reached out and caught Harry by the collar. Draco dragged him close and murmured in his ear. "Don't do anything stupid."

Harry's chest pressed against his for a moment, and then he pulled back and winked at Draco.

"When have I ever done anything stupid?" he admonished. His laugh hovered in the air as he

returned to Umbridge, not giving Draco time to conjure the Encyclopedia of Stupid Things Done By Harry Potter.

When everyone had seated themselves and the general uproar was loud in the small room, Harry raised a hand. The place went silent.

"I'm sure all of you know who I am. I'm sure all of you know what I've done in the past. Some of you know what I've done recently, and some of you only think you know."

Harry's voice was clear and confident, as if he spoke for a living. Draco sat back to enjoy the show. Harry seemed to have a plan. Either that, or he was flying by the seat of his pants, which was far more likely.

"I'm here to clarify a few misconceptions. In order to do that, I'm going to have to go back a few years. I'm sure you all remember Voldemort."

Draco loved the way half the people in the room still flinched at the name. He loved even more the way Harry had reminded them all of what they owed him, and in his humble Gryffindor manner, so they couldn't even resent him for it. Draco's eyes were drawn to the furious Minister. *Well, some of them couldn't*, he amended.

"After Voldemort's demise, I took some time off. I had been fighting him, on and off, since I was eleven years old. I needed a break." Not many people knew that the defeat of Voldemort had cost Harry most of his powers. It was fairly common knowledge to those that had fought in the war, but the general populace did not know.

"I met Draco Malfoy again when I hired him to guide me to Hogwarts," Harry continued. Draco almost smiled. Lupin had hired Draco much against Harry's will. "It was then that I discovered the legacy left by Voldemort, whose talent for spreading horror did not die with him. Dark Magic scattered across Britain had been allowed to run rampant, growing and mutating."

Harry paused and let his gaze roam over those gathered, seeming to touch every person in turn.

"What has the Ministry done about this?" Harry asked. "Travel has been halted almost completely. No one with a hint of magic is safe in the outlying areas. Even Muggles are dying in magical incidents, or from attacks by trolls or altered creatures. The Ministry spends all its time trying to cover up the fact that they have lost all control, rather than dealing with the problems!"

Umbridge's eyes bulged nearly from their sockets, and her hands twisted so savagely in the manacles that her wrists gleamed with blood.

"Why are the Aurors not out there trying to fix things and mopping up the shite left by Voldemort's bid for power? Why has the Auror Department been cut back to nearly nothing, and populated mainly by those loyal only to her?"

Harry cast a finger at Umbridge.

"I will tell you why. Because of power. Many of you were at Hogwarts during Dolores Umbridge's brief reign of terror. Do you remember what it was like?" Harry thundered. Draco kept his face expressionless, because he had only good memories of that time. It had been Draco's first real taste of power, and he had liked it. On reflection, of course, he and his friends had been utterly ruthless and somewhat irresponsible. Do-gooders such as Potter would have remembered it as a period of grim darkness. Many heads in the room nodded. Susan Bones, the Weasleys, Granger, and several of the Aurors.

"The Minister," Harry sneered the title in such a striking imitation of Draco that the Slytherin felt a jolt of pride, "Is content for us all to huddle in London like insects in her web. Do you remember how life used to be? When Apparition was not a deadly exercise? When using the Floo Network to visit a friend did not carry the risk of sending you to Gibraltar?" *Or Budapest*, Draco added silently, wishing he could say it aloud just to witness Harry's long-suffering expression.

"Should the Ministry not work to restore those things to us?" Harry demanded.

"Yes!" the Weasley twins shouted. Their voices were echoed by others, and a loud murmur ghosted through the room, sounding almost hopeful. It was really too bad his darling Harry despised the limelight. Draco knew they would install Potter as Minister right now if he only suggested it. And with Draco behind him—! What a blazing pair they would make.

Draco huffed a sigh. His Gryffindor would never accept it. Draco admitted to himself that he probably wouldn't be quite so in love with Harry if he were more grasping and power-hungry.

Still, Harry could give it a go just to try it on. Draco wondered how much lime salve—or withholding thereof—it would take for Potter to change his noble stance.

"Yes!" Harry cried, snapping Draco back to the courtroom. "Yes, it should. And I, for one, would like to hear an accounting of why it has not." Harry turned slowly to face Umbridge, and bowed with exaggerated slowness. "Minister, perhaps you can explain."

Draco felt a tiny surge as Harry released the spell that kept Umbridge quiet. Almost as an afterthought, he raised his wand and said, "*Finite Incantatum*." The green gaze flicked to Draco in amusement. Draco returned a look of such heat the Potter started, and a hint of pink touched his cheeks. When this was over, Draco planned to rid Harry of every single button he wore. The exhange took only an instant, and then Harry's attention went back to Umbridge, who had found her voice.

"Arrest them!" she screamed. "Arrest these criminals at once!"

A couple of the Aurors moved, but others stopped them almost instantly. A smiled of satisfaction touched Harry's lips, and Umbridge looked even more livid. If she had possessed Harry's powers,

Potter would have been lucky to leave a smoking pile of ash to mark his passing.

"You'll pay for this!" Umbridge snarled, at first to Harry, and then including the rest of the room. "You'll all pay for this defiance! You're traitors, the lot of you! All of you Weasleys will rot in Azkaban! And Susan Bones! I am not surprised that you are a turncoat! You have probably conspired behind my back! Haven't you?"

Harry turned to scan the crowd, and his calm demeanor was a marked contrast to the twisted rage exhibited by the Minister.

"And Shacklebolt! You have been plotting with Potter, as I suspected! I should have rid myself of you long ago!"

"Like you rid yourself of Rufus Scrimgeour?" Kingsley asked loudly.

There was a shocked silence as everyone recalled the circumstances surrounding the death of the former Minister. Umbridge glared, but the accusation seemed to have jolted her back to a semblance of calm. She relaxed slightly and sat back with a rictus of a smile.

"Stop clinging to childish fancies, Kingsley," she said condescendingly.

"No fancy!" Kingsley said angrily. "It was murder! Good men were killed that day!"

"They accepted the risks of their positions," Umbridge said placidly. She seemed to have recovered her aplomb. Draco preferred her ranting. His eyes narrowed, but Harry was apparently not in the mood to be ignored.

"Hem hem," Harry said in such a perfect imitation of Umbridge that several people burst out laughing. Harry grinned wickedly and Draco felt such a surge of desire that he had to cross his legs and murmur a localized Glamour to hide the evidence. Damn, but vengeful Potter was enticing.

"Excuse me, Minister," Harry said politely. "We'll get back to Scrimgeour in a bit. Right now, I would simply like an answer. Why is the Ministry doing nothing to rid us of the Dark Magic left from the war?"

Draco saw something dark and treacherous slide through Umbridge's eyes. His gaze sharpened, and he wondered if Harry had noticed.

"The Ministry does not explain itself to civilians," Umbridge spat.

"No?" Harry sounded disappointed. "Well then, perhaps the Ministry can explain itself to the Ministry." He turned back to the gallery once more. "How many of you would like an answer to the question?"

Several hands shot up at once, and others more slowly, until nearly every hand was in the air. Draco made note of those whose hands were down. They bore watching, and it was always good to prepare for future enemies.

Harry spun back to Umbridge. "Apparently, the Ministry is somewhat unclear as to its position on restoration. As Minister, you might want to explain it."

Harry's smug attitude was novel, and guaranteed to send Umbridge back into a froth if he kept it up. She attempted rationality, likely because of the sheer number of those opposing her.

"It is important to maintain order close to home," Umbridge stated.

Neville got to his feet. He raised his hand, and Harry acknowledged him. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. If I may, Minister, I have a list here of the calls the Auror Department handled in the past month." He held up a sheaf of papers and looked at them dramatically. "These, of course, are a matter of public record. Let me see, on 20 May, three Aurors were sent to investigate an incident of public drunkenness by Mr. Jacob Hanley." Neville tsked.

"Poor Jake, he must be over eighty by now. Took three Aurors to subdue him, did it?"

"He was using magic in plain view of Muggles," Umbridge snarled.

"Yes, I see that. In days past, a single Obliviator would have been sent out to deal with Mr. Hanley. Three Aurors! And Jake was served with a 300 Galleon fine."

"Order must be maintained, Mr. Longbottom," Umbridge snapped. She seemed to have forgotten Harry, completely focused on her arch-nemesis.

"Order and replenishing the Ministry coffers, apparently," Neville said dryly. Umbridge said nothing, so Neville loudly flipped a page.

"On 27 May, two Aurors were sent to Paige's House of Pleasure, which mysteriously burned to the ground that same night when a magical fire got out of control."

"A fire set by a patron!" Umbridge gritted.

Neville made a humming sound. "So it says. Although the attending Aurors were not questioned under Veritaserum—"

"I am not in the habit of disbelieving my Aurors!" Umbridge said loudly. Neville looked surprised.

"Your Aurors? Then how do you explain the routine program of Veritaserum interrogations given to Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks, and Bill Weasley, among others? Were they not your Aurors? If not, whose Aurors were they?"

"I suspected them of treason! Quite rightly, as it turns out!"

"Interesting," Neville said blandly as an angry muttering passed through the crowd. It seemed most of the Wizengamot had not been privy to several of Umbridge's practices. Neville returned to his scroll. "On 1st June, four Aurors were dispatched to subdue Mr. Orrin Lightlinger, accused of tampering with the Floo Network."

"We were trying to protect Mr. Lightlinger," Umbridge said.

"Despite his claim to have fixed his own Floo in order to transport himself to his sister's house in Cambridge, due to her needing care for an illness."

"The Floo Network is dangerous!"

"Apparently, free-thinking is dangerous. Why did the Ministry not investigate Mr. Lightlinger's claim? Perhaps his technique could have been used to repair the entire network?"

"Mr. Lightlinger was delusional. He could not possibly have fixed his Floo!"

"We will never know, will we? The Aurors dismantled his entire chimney brick by brick."

"That was done for Mr. Lightlinger's protection," she repeated primly.

"Really?" Neville asked dryly. "Where is Mr. Lightlinger now?"

Draco thought Umbridge might explode from the force of her ire. For a long time, she glared without answering. Neville waited patiently, and finally prodded, "Minister?"

"He is in Azkaban," Umbridge admitted with obvious reluctance.

"He is in Azkaban for attempting to fix his Floo?" Neville managed incredulous with such panache that Draco actually envied him for a moment, before he filed the thought away under Things Never to Admit Even Under Torture.

"He is in Azkaban for resisting arrest and badly hexing two Aurors, as well as unauthorized tampering with the Floo Network."

Neville looked dubious. "Azkaban. Sounds a bit excessive."

"Excessive!" Harry burst out. "Azkaban is the Minister's answer to everything, isn't it, Dolores? You sentenced a man to Azkaban for using an illegal potion! Seven years for an offense that should have warranted a fine!"

Umbridge would have retorted—oh how she wanted to—but apparently Harry had no intention

of allowing commentary in regards to that particular issue. Her jaw worked, but no sound emerged. Harry's cold smile warmed Draco's heart.

"In case you have not received a clear picture of the sort of Ministry we currently have, let me present another piece of evidence," Neville said after rustling his parchment again for attention. "Despite Nymphadora Lupin's exemplary record as an Auror for over a decade, she was recently put on suspension and her young daughter was taken away merely because she was suspected of knowing the whereabouts of Harry Potter, despite the fact that questioning under Veritaserum proved that to be an erroneous assumption. Not only was she not reinstated to duty, but her child was not returned to her." Neville let that sink in and Draco was amused by the looks of outrage suffusing the faces of those gathered.

He continued, "If that was not unconscionable enough, the child was not even handed over to relatives of the Lupin's, but instead was given to hand-picked persons of the Minister's choosing. Nymphadora was allowed no contact with her daughter at all, and was placed under house arrest by order of the Minister."

Tonks tried to look victimized, but could not quite manage it. Instead, her eyes glittered with suppressed fury. In Draco's opinion, that was even more telling.

"In the interest of time, I shall not even mention the violation of rights suffered by her husband while the Minister attempted to pass retroactive laws in order to justify sending him to Azkaban, as well."

An angry buzz had begun to hum through the room. Draco thought he might send a gift basket to Neville merely as a token reward for bringing that particular shade of puce to the face of Umbridge.

Neville returned to his seat next to Luna, who beamed at him in such adoration that Neville blushed deeply.

"I think we have all heard enough," Harry said loudly to quiet the growing voices. "I recommend that the Wizengamot and the collective Ministry remove Dolores Umbridge from office and place her under arrest pending investigation of her past practices." He paused and added, "I shall, of course, present myself for arrest in order that the Wizengamot may satisfy itself as to my motivation for the actions I've performed in the past few days. I'm sure Mr. Malfoy will do the same, especially considering I removed him from Azkaban against his will. I am prepared to present a Pensieve memory and undergo Veritaserum questioning in order that you may verify such as fact.

Draco rolled his eyes. Potter was still determined to save him, no matter the cost.

"Comments, Minister?" Harry asked sweetly.

Umbridge said nothing.

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Chapter: 13

Chapter Thirteen
Umbridge said nothing, because Harry would not allow her to. He felt a dark twist of satisfaction at controlling her, and the ugly rage in her eyes merely fueled the fire. His hand seemed to throb with remembered hate when he recalled the words she had forced him to carve into his own flesh.

She was lucky he had allowed her to speak at all. Her eyes widened and panic slackened her features. Harry realized his magic had tightened around her—he was unconsciously crushing her. He bared his teeth in a smile.

When Umbridge began to turn red from inability to breathe, Harry released her.

"How are you doing that?" she choked when she could speak again, showing a hint of fear for the first time. Harry leaned close to her. He ignored the sounds of debate in the gallery behind them. He ignored everything except the titillating glint of disquiet in those horrible, protruding eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Harry taunted quietly. He smiled again, but his wicked glee was curtailed when Umbridge's hand twitched. His fingers were quickly caught in her iron grip. She twisted them savagely until they neared the breaking point. Pain lanced up Harry's arm.

"Not so smug now, are you, Potter?" she snarled. She squeezed, sending another jolt of pain spasming through his digits.

He was about to unleash his magic in fury when she spoke again. "He is going to get you, Potter. You are interfering in things you do not understand. He will make you pay." She cackled.

"Who?" Harry asked, utterly confused.

"The Benefactor, of course. You think I killed Scrimgeour?" Umbridge laughed harshly. The fear in her eyes had turned to malicious delight. "It was the Benefactor. He makes the rules, Potter—all the rules. The Ministry is his. The wizarding world is *his*."

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded, ignoring her hand as it ground his knuckles together excruciatingly.

"Don't be thick, Potter. Why do you think nothing has been done about the Dark Magic, or the Floo Network, or Apparition?" Her eyes glittered. "He wants it that way. He wants things to stay the way they are."

"Who does?" Harry asked again. He wondered if she had gone completely mad, after all.

"I don't know. He issues the orders, I follow. We are all his followers, Potter, and if you cross him he will kill you."

Her fingers threatened to crack his knuckles, and Harry suddenly had enough. He sent a burst of heat from his hand into that of Umbridge. She squeezed tighter, until the heat increased. She snatched her hand away and it spasmed against the manacle that held her.

Harry backed away slowly, and healed his hand with a soothing rush of magic. He flexed his fingers and glanced worriedly at Draco. He strode over to Neville abruptly.

"If it please the Wizengamot, I should like to hand over my wand as a gesture of good faith." Harry handed his unneeded wand over to Griselda Marchbanks, who sat forward to take it gingerly. Harry turned and cocked a brow. "Draco?"

Draco shrugged, wondering what game Harry played now, but took his wand out and flicked it to Potter, who caught it and handed it to Marchbanks, as well. She examined them for a moment, and then handed them to Percy Weasley. The redhead examined them even more minutely, as if expecting them to be fake. Harry walked quickly to Draco and bent down, as if simply chatting with him.

"Cover for me for a minute," Harry said. He sent his powers flying back to Umbridge, and tore into her mind in a parody of Legilimency. She screamed, but Harry barely noticed it. He was intent on his search, flitting through her memories in quest of the identity of the mysterious Benefactor, or even seeking validation of his existence.

"Stop him!" Umbridge howled and thrashed in her chair. The sound echoed in the room. "It's Potter! Stop Potter!"

Harry sorted through bits of memory—owled communications, messages relayed through dark-caped strangers, encrypted bits of parchment… Nothing that even hinted at the identity of the puppet-master pulling the Minister's strings.

Umbridge shrieked again. Her defenses beat ineffectually against Harry's intrusion. It was possible the process hurt. Harry did not care. He vaguely heard Neville and others hurry toward Umbridge, and managed to feign a look of concern when he felt Draco turn him around, making it seem as though Harry did it under his own power. He stared through Umbridge.

"What are you doing?" Draco demanded quietly. Harry could not reply.

"Minister?" Neville cried. Umbridge threw her head from side to side.

"Kill Potter!" she snarled. "*Kill Harry Potter*! Kill him, kill him!"

Harry delved deeper, horrified at the brief flashes of memory he encountered. Umbridge had been a woman of pitiless excess, and everyone that got in her way suffered. He witnessed threats and machinations, from simple sabotage of employee records to the actual murder of a young werewolf child. Harry thought of Lupin, and something seemed to turn over inside him.

Her memories were useless. She did not know the identity of the person controlling her. She did not even care, so long as she was allowed to wield the power obvious to everyone. Harry decided she did not need her memories any longer. Perhaps she would be a better person if she could not recall the horrors she had committed.

Umbridge screamed one last time, while those clustered around her released her shackles in an attempt to help her. They were too late.

Dolores Umbridge sagged in the chair. Harry took a deep breath and leaned back against Draco's warmth, shuddering slightly.

Neville cast *Ennervate*, trying to rouse Umbridge. The toadlike eyes opened and she launched herself upward to wrap her large hands around Neville's throat. Luna screamed. Susan and Bill grabbed Umbridge and wrestled her away from Neville, who dropped to his knees, gasping. Luna held him tightly and glared at Umbridge.

"Minister, what is the meaning of this?" Griselda Marchbanks demanded angrily.

"Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?" Umbridge sang. "Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full." She tittered.

"What did you do, Potter?" Draco whispered.

"She's gone mad!" Bill Weasley said.

"She's *been* mad," Harry said loudly. He sounded tired, even to himself. "She's been mad for years."

Umbridge began to giggle insanely and roll on the floor with her arms clasped about her.

"Seventy four, seventy four, seventy four, seventy four," she chanted.

"We need to get her to St. Mungos," Susan said sharply. They quickly Immobilized the ranting Minister, and Apparated away.

Marchbanks spoke up. "Well, Mr. Potter, it appears your allegations may be accurate. Can I trust you and Mr. Malfoy to remain under house arrest until a full investigation can be conducted into this matter?"

"Of course. We will be at number 12, Grimmauld Place. We will await your call."

"Percy, please return their wands."

Percy Weasley approached, looking almost wary. He gingerly handed the wands to Harry, who took them both and passed the hawthorn to Draco.

They Disapparated together and appeared in the parlour of number 12, Grimmauld Place. Harry had barely opened his mouth to speak before he was enveloped in Slytherin. After several breathless moments of kissing, Harry felt Draco's teeth nibble their way down his neck.

"What did you do to Umbridge, Potter?" he asked as his hands clenched around Harry's arse and pulled him forward. Harry's hands gripped Draco's shoulders, and his head tipped back in mindless abandon. Malfoy's tongue lapped at Harry's throat, and it took a moment for the question to sink in.

"Um… no more than she deserved," Harry said breathlessly. One hand slipped up to tangle in Draco's hair.

"I know she deserved more than madness, Harry," Draco said against his collarbone. "I asked what you did to her."

Several pops sounded nearby and Harry peered around dazedly.

"Not in front of the baby," Tonks said dryly. Her arms were full of a blonde bundle. Harry's relief at the sight was tangible. Draco released Harry immediately, and strode forward to snatch up Lyra.

"My angel," he cooed, and pressed kissed into Lyra's cheeks. The baby giggled and grabbed Draco's hair in both fists.

Lupin stood behind Tonks, and wrapped his arms around her waist. They both looked tired. Hermione crossed her arms.

"All right, Harry. What was that all about? I don't believe for a moment that Umbridge went mad in front of the Wizengamot merely by coincidence."

"Of course she did, 'Mione," Fred said as he threw himself onto the couch. George joined Draco in tickling Lyra, and pulled an array of silly faces at her.

"I think she was already mad, Hermione," Ron added and Summoned a bottle of butterbeer from the kitchen. Fred Summoned it from Ron, earning a dirty look before Ron retrieved a second bottle.

Hermione looked unconvinced, and Harry avoided Draco's eyes. He knew the blond would drag

it out of him later.

"As much as we would all love to grill Potter," Draco said mildly, "I, for one, am exhausted. No Malfoy is willingly awake at this hour of the morning."

Hermione wanted to protest, Harry could tell. No rain, no sleet, nor ludicrous hour of the morning could deter Hermione Granger (Weasley) from her never-ending quest for knowledge. She scowled, but Ron grabbed her arm.

"Come on, love, you can torture Harry later."

"I do not plan to torture him," she snapped, but she allowed herself to be led out of the room. Their footsteps were heard on the stairs.

"Bloody good idea," Tonks said. "Give over, Draco. Stop hoarding my daughter. I've only just recovered her."

"I thought Gryffindors were taught to share," Malfoy said, but he handed the child back to her mother.

"I'll share once I get used to the idea that she won't be snatched away from me again," she replied. Harry winced. Tonks approached and kissed him on the cheek. "No, Harry, I do not blame you. And if you had anything to do with Umbridge's breakdown, then I'm glad."

She swept out, followed by Remus, who gave Harry a pained smile before departing.

"Should we go home?" George asked his twin.

"Do we have food at home?" Fred countered.

"Leftover takeout from four days ago."

"We'll stay."

The twins Disapparated, obviously popping upstairs to stake out their usual rooms. Harry grinned, thinking it was nice to be home.

"Alone at last," Draco said as he swept Harry into an embrace and Apparated them upstairs. Harry sagged in Draco's embrace and rested his forehead on the Slytherin's shoulder. He was suddenly very, very tired. Draco's breath was warm against his hair. The blond's chest moved over Harry's as he chuckled.

"You win, hero. I'll save the interrogation for later," Draco said. "Let's get some sleep."

Draco undressed Harry and put him to bed before climbing in after him. Harry wrapped himself

around Draco. His worries about the Ministry, and strange benefactors, and faceless enemies seemed to fade with every rise and fall of Draco's chest.

Harry woke up hard, which was understandable, because Draco's hand was wrapped around his cock and moving expertly. Harry sighed in contentment and pressed back into Draco's warmth. He felt Draco's lips tease the back of his neck.

"I wondered if you planned to sleep all day."

"Mmm, how could I possibly sleep with you doing that?" Harry murmured.

"You mean this?" Draco asked and twisted his hand slightly, sending a shiver of delight coursing through Harry's body.

"God, yes."

Draco's erection was hot against his arse, and in moments it was better still, buried deep inside of Harry. They moved together in practiced rhythm, with hands and bodies linked and moving in blissful synchronicity.

It's really good to be home, Harry thought when they lay in the afterglow of sweat and labored breathing. The afternoon sun spilled through the half-open curtains, and Harry turned around to run a hand over Draco's cheek while he drank in the warm glow in the grey eyes. Draco grabbed his hand and pressed a kiss into Harry's palm.

"God, I love you," Harry said fervently, feeling he might burst from the force of it.

"I love you, too," Draco said with a smile that shifted slightly as he added, "But your sweet Gryffindor platitudes will not distract me. Spill it, Potter."

Harry sighed, but propped himself on an elbow.

"This is serious, Draco. Umbridge said she was taking orders from someone else, someone unknown." He told the Slytherin about the mysterious Benefactor. Draco's eyes narrowed sharply.

"And you found nothing in her memories?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing useful. I'll put everything I remember into a Pensieve. Perhaps you or Hermione will see something I missed. Whoever it is, he seems to have covered his tracks quite well. Umbridge had no clue about his ultimate goal. Or *her* ultimate goal, or *their* ultimate goal. We really have no idea who or what we're dealing with."

Draco sneered. "If you had a grandiose plan, would you reveal it to *that* demented creature?"

Harry grinned. "No. Probably not."

"So after you found nothing of use, you destroyed her mind," Draco commented mildly. Harry flushed.

"That's not how it happened. She was fighting too hard—you know she was already ninety percent mad. Something just snapped when I was in there."

"I'm not saying she did not deserve it," Draco said. His calm tone did not appease Harry. For some reason, he sensed disapproval, but perhaps it was merely Harry's own feelings of guilt. Regardless, he left the bed and drew his clothing on, wondering if there had been any news from the Ministry.

"Coming?" he asked Draco, who still lay against the pillows with his arms crossed behind his head.

"Hmmm. I'm sure everyone expects me to cook for them this evening," Draco said.

"It's your own fault for being the culinary genius. Besides, your bloody ego loves the adoration, and you know it."

Draco heaved a great sigh that did not fool Harry for a moment. He laughed and opened the door.

"Potter?"

Harry stopped and cocked a brow at the blond.

"Don't get too attached to those buttons."

Harry glanced down at his shirt as a rush of heat nearly consumed him. He groaned and went out with Draco's chuckles trailing after him.

ooOoo

Draco watched Harry leave, and his smiled faded slowly when the soft footfalls on the stairs became inaudible. Draco's unease had grown since Maeve's death. And Harry had lied.

Draco climbed out of bed and padded into the adjoining room, where many of his clothes still resided. He dressed slowly while replaying the scene in Courtroom 10. Harry did not seem to realize how closely they were bonded. Draco could not read Harry's mind, but he could definitely sense Harry's emotions, and those had been blatantly obvious when Harry had been sojourning through the mind of Umbridge. Determination had been there, of course, since the Chosen One's entire backbone was made of determination, but it had evolved into anger.

Understandable, considering the bitch had nearly broken his fingers, Draco thought, although he

was likely the only one paying close enough attention to have caught that particular exchange.

Draco dressed and returned to Harry's—their—room to pull on his boots.

What had not been understandable was Potter allowing his rage to turn into something darker. It had not "just happened", as Harry had claimed. Potter had willfully and gleefully, twisted Umbridge's mind inside out.

Draco sat on the edge of the bed and wondered if he was blowing this out of proportion. It had been a long night. Harry had been forced to track Draco, bring his friends to Ireland, take down Umbridge, rescue Draco from Maeve, (*murder Maeve*), and then go through the courtroom drama in front of the Wizengamot. He should have been exhausted. His powers should have been stretched to the breaking point.

And that was the crux of the matter, Draco knew. Because Harry's powers had not been diminished at all. Harry had healed the damage to his hand without a thought, and then gone after Umbridge—wandless, and from across the room. The facts were incontrovertible.

Harry's powers were growing.

Draco just wasn't sure what to do about it. He made the bed with a flick of his wand, and went down to the kitchen, which was full of Weasleys—the main drawback of living at number 12, Grimmauld Place. For a moment, Draco strongly missed the flat where he and Harry had spent the past couple of days.

Harry wrapped him in an exuberant hug the instant he stepped into the kitchen. Draco patted him on the back with a wry smile. Maybe he was overreacting—Harry was certainly not evil just because he'd given in to a Slytherin impulse or two.

"Wonderful news, Draco! Neville dropped by. The Wizengamot instated Bill Weasley as the Acting Minister of Magic. Bill asked us to join the Auror Department. He wants to us to teach the Aurors how to dispel Dark Magic."

Draco drew back and looked at Harry wryly. The Gryffindor shrugged innocently. They both knew Harry was the only one able to dispel the mutated Magic the Death Eaters had left behind.

"Well, it won't be much different than what we're doing now, right?" Harry said. Draco sighed. He had no intention of joining the Ministry, even under the benevolent rule of the only tolerable Weasley.

Draco surrendered to the pleading looks, and the less-than-subtle begging, from the Weasley twins, and began to prepare dinner.

Granger prattled on, as usual.

"Brigit got off with a rather light sentence, I'd say, considering she nearly killed Harry."

"What sentence?" Harry asked.

"House arrest and a huge fine. Susan Bones witnessed her trying to cast the Killing Curse on Harry. She's lucky not to be in Azkaban. I don't think we'll be hearing much from her in the future. Her husband Bertram was none too pleased to hear she had jeopardized his posh Ministry position by kidnapping and attempted murder."

"She's lucky not to be a pile of ash," Harry muttered into Draco's ear. He chuckled and handed Harry a stack of plates.

"Set the table, Boy Who Avenged."

It was quite late when they escaped the celebratory air that had overtaken the group below. Draco suspected the Weasley twins would be up most of the night, drinking and installing pranks throughout the house. Draco made a mental to allow Harry to wander around and spring them prior to Draco exiting their room tomorrow.

Draco dropped his wand into the silver holder on the bedside table, and threw himself onto the Slytherin green bedspread with a grin. He wondered how long the Chosen One would put up with the emerald color scheme, although it did go quite nicely with Potter's eyes. Those same eyes gazed down at him, and a smile curved his gorgeous lips.

"Oh, I like that," Harry murmured.

"What?"

"You, lying there, awaiting my pleasure."

Draco smiled lazily. "What makes you think I'm not awaiting my own pleasure?" he asked.

Harry nudged Draco's legs open and slid his knee forward to rest on the bed, pressing his thigh against Draco's groin with the movement.

"Not this time, I think," Harry said enigmatically. Draco raised a curious brow. Harry reached down and wrenched Draco's shirt open with a swift movement, scattering buttons over the bed and onto the floor.

Draco made a moue of disapproval. The button-popping was normally Draco's game, not Potter's. He forgave the Gryffindor as soon as Harry's hot mouth slid over his chest and fastened on one of Draco's nipples. Harry sucked at it eagerly and bit down slightly.

"A bit aggressive tonight are we?" Draco asked with an intake of breath.

"Mmmm," Harry allowed and moved to suckle the other nipple. "Get on the bed."

"I am on the bed, Potter."

Annoyance crossed Harry's fine features. "In the center," he said in an even tone. Draco huffed, but pushed himself up until his head lay upon the pillows. His knuckles brushed against the headboard as he framed his head with his arms.

"Happy now?" Draco asked.

"Perfect," Harry breathed and moved onto the bed to kneel between Draco's legs. Harry cast a spell that made Draco's buttonless shirt disappear. He cast three more spells in succession, and Draco was somewhat alarmed to find his wrists bound to the headboard with magical ropes. His eyes met Harry's in surprise.

"Potter, what the—?"

"Shhhh," Harry hushed and placed a finger on Draco's lips. His hand dropped to Draco's crotch and caressed the bulge there. Draco's words turned into a gurgle, and he decided he could play along with Potter's bondage fantasy… for a bit.

Harry leaned forward until his lips brushed Draco's ear. "You're mine," he breathed and squeezed Draco's cock, rather harder than warranted, Draco thought, even as he held his breath at the pleasure of it. "Tell me you're mine."

"I'm yours," Draco said and meant it. The words seemed to placate the determined Gryffindor, and Harry sat back. He set his wand aside and fumbled with the fastenings on Draco's trousers. The concentration on his face was terribly cute, Draco thought.

All thought of cuteness fled when Harry tugged Draco's trousers and pants off. He tossed them carelessly to the floor. Harry's face transformed into something almost feral as he stared down at Draco's nude body. Draco suddenly found it hard to breathe.

Harry put his hands on Draco's thighs before sliding them upward, trailing over Draco's flanks, ribcage, and chest. The hands continued, past Draco's shoulders to drift over Draco's bound arms. They stopped where the magical ties held Draco in place, and Harry's body stretched over Draco's. He moaned and levered upward slightly, pressing against as much of Harry as he could. He cursed the clothes Harry still wore.

"I need to touch you," Draco whispered and pulled at his bonds.

"Not yet," Harry murmured and then claimed Draco's mouth in a bruising kiss. Harry's hands tightened on Draco's wrists and his kisses became almost painful. Draco could feel Harry's erection straining against the material of his trousers, and used his legs to frot against the Gryffindor, hoping to encourage Harry to remove his fucking clothes.

Harry's hips thrust downward roughly, as if to punish Draco for his impatience. Draco was surprised at Potter's intensity. Normally, he was content to let Draco lead—or at least guide—their lovemaking sessions. Tonight, it seemed he was determined to be in full control.

Harry's mouth left Draco's at long last, and Draco gladly drank in much-needed air. He tasted blood, which was quite unlike Harry, as were the biting kisses Potter placed on Draco's throat. The Gryffindor nipped and drank at Draco's flesh, leaving marks for certain as he worked his way down. Harry's hands left Draco's wrists at last.

Draco thought he might go mad with need. He quivered at every touch of Harry's mouth, and every stroke of Potter's hand against his skin.

Draco yelped as Harry's teeth sank into his thigh. He wrenched at his bonds.

"Fuck, Potter… Harry, stop," he said. Harry's fingers dug into Draco's hip bones, and the dark head rose to glare into Draco's eyes.

"Mine. You are mine and everyone needs to know it," Harry snarled. "No one will ever fucking take you from me again."

Draco swallowed hard, not recognizing the man that stared at him from the familiar green eyes. He felt a sharp tremor of almost-fear, remembering the power Harry now possessed.

"Harry, release my hands," Draco said levelly.

The dark head dropped, and Harry's teeth bit into the tender skin of Draco's groin. Draco tried to move with a hiss of pain, but Harry held him in place. Even through the torment, Draco's erection had not diminished, and the soft brush of Potter's hair against his cock nearly negated the pain of the Gryffindor's bite.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Draco demanded.

"Marking you," Harry said placidly.

"*Accio* wand," Draco snapped as anger overrode his unease. Harry chuckled, a dark sound Draco had never heard. Draco's wand did not move from its holder, courtesy of Harry, no doubt.

"No you don't," Harry said and pressed a finger into Draco's unprepared opening. Draco nearly cried out from surprise and discomfort. Harry chuckled again. "Like that?" he asked. "How about another?"

A second finger joined the first, and fuck, that one did hurt. Draco tried to edge away, but found himself held tightly by an unseen force.

"Going to fuck you so hard you'll forget your name, Draco," Harry said in a sullen tone.

Normally, those words could nearly cause Draco to spontaneously come, but when they were uttered by this strange, nearly vicious Potter, they had the opposite effect.

"No," Draco said. "No, Harry, please stop."

"Mmmm, begging. That turns me on." Harry rammed in a third finger. Draco began to feel true fear, even as Harry's tongue laved over his cock from base to tip. *Shit!* He would have bucked mindlessly if he could have moved. Harry's lips curved over the head of Draco's cock for a moment and his tongue dipped into the slit. Draco's breathing sounded like the Hogwarts Express.

"Harry…" he managed.

"One more, baby," Harry said and pressed in a fourth finger. Spell be damned, Draco arched in excruciating pleasure, especially when Harry's mouth returned to his cock and took it in completely. Draco's wrists twisted against his bonds, wishing to *fuck* he could get his hands free and—

Harry's mouth left its wonderful task and Draco nearly sobbed. Harry's fingers pressed inside *hard*, and Draco heard a guttural noise tear from his throat. He was going to kill Potter when he was free… if he survived.

Harry's clothes were suddenly gone, although he hadn't spoken a word, and his wand still lay on the bed. Shit, Potter's wand.

"*Accio* Harry's wand," Draco said raggedly. It snapped upward, but hovered, quivering mere centimeters from Draco's hand. Harry was not amused. His hand departed from Draco and the Gryffindor sat back on his haunches.

"I think I might have to punish you for that," Harry said calmly, but there was a glint in the green eyes that Draco did not like at all. He had to stop this now.

"Harry," he tried, using his most soothing tone.

"We'll start with preventing you from speaking, I think," Harry said and picked up Draco's shirt from the edge of the bed. It fell into strips without a spell being spoken, and Harry leaned forward with a long piece of white cloth. Draco felt a real shard of fear. What the hell had gotten into the Gryffindor?

"Harry, please wait. Listen to me; you're not acting rationally. You have to—"

That was all Draco managed before the wadded cloth was stuffed into his mouth. Harry placed a kiss against Draco's lower lip—and bit into it gently—before tying a longer strip of the shirt over

his mouth and tying it behind Draco's head, effectively gagging him.

"Now, where was I?" he asked and smiled wickedly.

Harry turned his attention back to Draco's nether regions and Draco's mind whirled. He had never felt so helpless, and Malfoys did not deal well with helplessness. His palms were sweating with the effort to free himself.

Harry's mouth closed over his cock again, and Draco felt sharp teeth bite into him slightly… no doubt just a small taste of the "punishment" he was about to receive. Damn it, he needed to get Harry back to his senses, but how?

Rational thought deserted him for a bit, because even overcome with the need to torture Draco, Harry had not lost any of his talent for fellatio. His lips and tongue brought Draco to the very brink before a hurtful squeeze on Draco's testicles sent him crashing back to reality, panting brokenly. Draco thought he might actually suffocate with the gag on.

Harry suddenly moved up to cover Draco's body with his own, and even through his nervous rage, Draco shivered slightly, because it was still Harry, somewhere under the inexplicable behavior.

He caught sight of the scar, shimmering slightly on Harry's forehead, and something clicked into place. Draco shut his eyes and tried to concentrate. He took as deep a breath as he could manage, and recalled what he had felt when Harry had found him in Ireland. He had been filled with warmth and heat, and the presence of Harry…

It flooded through him again in a rush, and Draco opened his eyes to see Harry staring down at him with an expression of astonishment. The tattoo that crossed over Harry's forehead and down the side of his face seemed to be etched in molten gold.

The green eyes blinked shut for a moment, and Harry shuddered atop him. When Harry's eyes opened again, Draco read consternation in their emerald depths.

"Draco? What the hell am I doing?"

Harry's hand fumbled with the gag, nearly tearing out Draco's hair in his haste to remove it. When the cloth fell away, Draco dragged in unfiltered air with relief. An instant later, Draco's hands were free. He lowered his arms, wincing at the sharp sensation of leaving their strained position.

Draco wrapped his arms around the stunned Gryffindor and held him tightly, feeling relief and trepidation in equal measure. He hoped the shaking in his limbs was caused by abused muscles.

"I'm sorry," Harry murmured against his lips. "I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me."

"It's all right, Harry," Draco said. "I'm not going to break. Now, suppose you get back to what you were planning, only… a bit more gently this time?"

Harry smiled at him softly, and Draco was glad to see it was all Potter this time, with no sign of the dark undertones. He held tightly to their Bond, just in case, and the tattoos gleamed against their skin.

Harry made love to him tenderly, taking extra care to press soothing kisses over the bruises already forming on Draco 's flesh, and there was apology in every caress. They came simultaneously, and Harry fell asleep cradled in Draco's arms as the lines of their joining slowly faded back into invisibility.

When Harry's breathing was deep and even, Draco left the bed and went downstairs to pour a stiff drink. He sprawled on the couch in the study and swirled the liquid in the glass absently. Something had to be done about Harry's power. It had come to Harry when the Gryffindor had destroyed the final Horcrux, and now Draco wondered. Had some remnant of the Dark Lord transferred somehow to Harry? If not, what the hell was causing him to act like… well, to act like a Slytherin? Draco didn't mind a hint of it now and again, but he had grown rather fond of Harry the way he was.

Draco cursed softly. The time had come to get in touch with someone he swore he would never contact. Draco pressed two fingers against a growing headache at his temple. It was time to fight Dark with Dark.

Draco wanted his Gryffindor back. By any means necessary.

Author's Note: This is the end of Part Five (don't kill me!) and Part Six will begin as soon as I get around to working on it… Don't worry, I can't leave my Escorts alone for long.