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Chapter 1 to 8

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Chapter: 1

Title: Harry's Project

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

Rating: R/M.

Pairings: Harry/Draco, Ron/Hermione, past Pansy/OMC.

Warnings: DH Spoilers, EWE. Sex, swearing, lots of long conversations, characters learning things.

Summary: Harry is bored after the war. When he accidentally finds a file indicating that the Ministry was less than just to the Malfoy family, he decides helping them can be his next pet project. Whether they will become more than that is up to Harry—and Draco—and, for some reason, Pansy Parkinson.

Author's Notes: Technically this is a WiP, but this will be a short fic, probably around seven or eight chapters, the length of a long one-shot.

Harry's Project

Chapter One—Harry Is Bored, Draco Is Pathetic

"Quidditch," said Harry triumphantly.

"And?" Hermione put a hand on her hip and raised her eyebrows.

Harry frowned at his fingers. "My job."

"I already told you that wasn't an acceptable answer, Harry." Hermione held up a hand, and Harry resisted the temptation to comment snidely on how much like a professor she was behaving at the moment. "Now. What *else*do you talk and think about? What *else* does your life revolve around, beyond Quidditch and your job?"

Harry sat back in his chair and tried desperately to think, but he couldn't come up with any other answers. He frowned at Hermione, who nodded sternly.

"You're bored," she said. "And it's driving Ron mad—"

"Why are you here talking to me, and not him, if he's so upset with me?" Harry muttered, and kicked the bottom of his desk. He felt like a sulky little boy, and the glance Hermione was giving his desk, covered with crumpled sheets of parchment, ancient tea spills, and ink splotches, wasn't helping. He kicked the bottom of the desk again. It was better than kicking Hermione, surely.

"He didn't trust himself not to yell," Hermione said tranquilly. "According to him, you start arguments lately whenever you get bored, because fighting at least gives you something to think about."

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it again. He really couldn't *deny* that, though he wouldn't have pegged boredom as the reason. He just knew his life seemed more shiny and exciting when he was fighting with someone. He had insults to plan, pranks to watch out for, and the eventual reconciliation to look forwards to. His fights with Ron were nowhere near as vicious as his fights with Snape or Malfoy used to be; they weren't even as bad as the argument that had driven Ron away from him and Hermione during the Horcrux hunt. Harry used them as a game, a diversion.

"Holy shit," he said, awed. "I *am* bored."

"Yes, you are," Hermione said, and leaned towards him, threateningly enough that Harry had to fight to hold his comfortable, relaxed pose in the chair. "And Ron's sick of it, and I'm sick of it. I know that you don't want to date someone—"

"That will come," said Harry airily. The fact that nothing had "come" for a year now except a few hurried one-night stands was none of Hermione's business. Harry had been left absolutely flat-footed when Ginny told him, gently, they had nothing in common anymore, and left him. He'd tried dating a few people, but no one worked out. That was boredom, too, maybe, Harry admitted. He just felt like he *knew* everyone already, because the people most eager to date Harry Potter were always of a certain type. And then they fawned on him and told him nothing new or interesting.

"Well, if you don't want a life of your own because of the person you're dating, then you'll just have to get one some other way," Hermione said firmly. "You're driving everyone in your Department mad, too, from what Ron says. These are the people you *work* with, Harry. Just because you caught the last Death Eater doesn't mean there aren't more Dark wizards out there."

"We never seem to run into them," Harry muttered.

Hermione's hand hit the edge of the desk, causing Harry to jump. "You'd probably use even *that* as an opportunity for excitement," she said dryly. "I think I might know why your superiors are keeping you from those cases."

Harry slid down in his seat, folded his arms, and sulked.

"Go find *something* to do," said Hermione. "You still like helping people, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I do that in my job," Harry said, peering up at her through his fringe. "You got upset when I worked too hard at *that* last year." He still couldn't see why Hermione had thought herself justified in cracking his office door down the middle and dragging him away from a rape case six months ago. Harry had only spent three days in his office, and he'd used Sobriety Charms and Cleaning Charms to be sure he was awake and clean. Food really wasn't all that important, not when he had tea ready to hand.

"Charity work," Hermione practically growled at him. "Go help orphaned Kneazles. Or *war* orphans. That would be even better." She took a few deep breaths, and then said in a calmer tone, "I know you don't mean to do this, Harry. But you need *something* to do that isn't Quidditch. Go find it."

"Or you'll find it for me?"

"I *know* someone with a lot of orphaned Kneazles," Hermione said threateningly.

Harry raised his hands placatingly. "All right, Hermione. I'll try to think of something over the weekend and let you know on Monday. Okay?"

"Monday," said Hermione with a sharp nod, and then turned and walked out of the room like a queen in coronation robes. Harry made a face at her back.

"Don't think I can't see you rolling your eyes back there."

Harry clamped his mouth shut, stirred his fingers restlessly through the papers on his desk, and at last picked up the file on Dark magic in the early twentieth century that he'd been meaning to return to the Ministry archives for the last week. It wasn't going to lead him to any miracles where Hermione was concerned, but it would give him a chance to stretch his legs. And maybe Ron, who had stayed away since the middle of the morning, would feel able to creep in. Harry would do his very best not to pick a fight with him when he got back.

He burned and stewed with resentment at Hermione on his way to the lifts. *I'm twenty-five years old. Surely that's old enough to decide my life on my own?*

His anger drained away when he remembered that he hadn't been even able to recognize his own boredom until Hermione pointed it out to him.

All right, so maybe not.

Harry held his breath as he stepped off the lifts, the way he always did.
And, as always, it did no good. He sneezed explosively, and the dust gathered around the files, bookcases, stacks of parchment, ledgers, tattered books, and cabinets of the Ministry archives flurried into the air and danced around him in a storm that would make Harry look as if he'd been crawling through attics for weeks by the time he finally went back to the office.

Muttering, he looked around the immense room, but of course none of the few employees who worked on this section of level ten were available. Harry couldn't even make out their desks under all the loose paper. He rolled his eyes, aimed in what he thought was the general direction where he'd found the files on Dark magic, and stumbled off.

Three painful collisions with hidden desks, two near-fatal falls, and one sight of a chained, snarling book later, Harry finally arrived at shelves that looked familiar. He scanned the few packed files that had their spines pointed towards him, and then relaxed. Yes, these looked familiar. *Dark Magic in the Nineteenth Century…Dark Magic in the Eighteenth Century…*

Well, they weren't in order. Feeling virtuous enough and deciding it didn't particularly matter what order the damn things went in, Harry shoved the file he held under the bulging mass of the others and then turned to make a graceful exit.

A piece of parchment on the floor didn't agree with his notion and slid wildly under his foot. Harry yelped and went down on a knee, which made a cabinet near him wobble. He whipped out his wand and cast a Lightening Charm on the cabinet, then tried to stand, only to hit his elbow on a shallow pile of folders. That toppled over and sent up a thick mist of dust that completely covered his glasses, which made him sneeze, sneeze, stumble, and carom sideways into a number of books.

Several books bounced down and hit him on the head in seeming punishment for being so disturbed. Harry flung an arm over his face and found himself cradling a book precariously on his chest and forearm. It stayed there, and as no more fell, Harry cautiously poked his head up.

He warned himself not to make any sudden moves that would attract the notice of the rampaging book hordes, carefully deposited the book he "held" in his lap, and took off his glasses to wipe them. It wasn't easy to find a patch on his shirt not already covered in dust, so in the end he cast a Cleaning Charm, though with his glasses gone he couldn't see where he'd aimed the wand very well. It seemed to work when he put the glasses cautiously back on, though; he could see the title of the book in his lap.

And he could see a torn edge of paper poking out of it.

Harry winced and opened the book to the torn page, wondering if he could repair it. Of course, he could probably put it *back* and no one would notice until the next time someone needed the book, but the keepers of the Ministry archives supposedly had spells that would let them track down those who did damage to their precious files (although why they couldn't clean up all the dust was a mystery).

Or maybe he was so bored that even repairing torn books with spells he barely understood was better than going back to the office right now and trying not to pick a fight with Ron.

He caught his breath when he realized the projecting piece of paper wasn't a page at all. It was a folded, separate parchment, stamped on the back with the official seal of the Ministry. Harry flipped it over, and found himself staring at a long list of numbers, which seemed to be amounts of Galleons.

He focused on the writing at the top, but it turned out to be just a list of names he'd never heard of. He wasn't even sure what they were, other than the names of places. And wait, wasn't that the name of a Muggle city in Scotland?

He focused on the paragraph under the numbers.

Above property transferred to Ambrosius Holdings, from the vaults and possessions of the Malfoy family, as of May 24, 2000.

Harry blinked and stared. He knew Ambrosius Holdings. They were a company that had come into existence after the war, supposedly to help rebuild the wizarding world. Led by an older half-blood wizard, Hector Ambrosius, they had struggled for a year, until they suddenly received an anonymous donation from some rich wizard.

Except…

Harry could also remember the fuss the Malfoys had made over suddenly losing most of their Galleons and their possessions, including Malfoy Manor. They claimed the Ministry had tricked them out of their rightful property using laws that only came into existence *after* the Wizengamot decided the family didn't need to pay more than a paltry sum in the way of reparations. The case had been splashed all over the *Daily Prophet* for weeks, and diligently investigated, but no evidence in favor of the Malfoy claim had ever turned up; it was assumed they'd made a deal that had gone sour and were trying to escape the blame. In the end, the papers had lost interest, and the Malfoys had to move into a small house in Hogsmeade, where their neighbors barely tolerated them.

Harry flicked his eyes to the paragraph above the list of numbers. And yes, now that he knew what he was looking for and could concentrate to read the scrawling, nearly illegible hand, he could make out *Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England*, among the list of properties deeded to Ambrosius Holdings.

Against the will of the Malfoy family. By someone in the Ministry who probably had fuck-all legal authority to do that.

His heart pounding, Harry rose and pressed the parchment to his chest, dust and all. He had a criminal to track down—a criminal in the Ministry, who probably wouldn't be easy to find. He had a family to help, a family that had somewhat helped him; he still remembered Narcissa's lie to Voldemort in the forest and Draco's refusal to identify Harry when he showed up at Malfoy Manor. They wouldn't thank him for his help, but that was all the more reason to do it, to show that Harry, at least, had got over the wounds inflicted on him before the war.

He had something to *do.*

Really, it was that, more than the thought of someone criminal in the Ministry or the expression that would be on Malfoy's face when Harry showed up at his front door, that gave his step its bounce as he went back to the lifts.

Malfoy's expression really *was* quite good, Harry thought. He looked as though Voldemort outside his door would have been preferable to the sight of Harry Potter in the same place. Harry leaned on the doorframe, grinning, and resisted, just barely, the temptation to reach out, catch Malfoy's chin, and tilt his jaw shut again.
He felt vaguely surprised that Malfoy had answered the door himself, but then, of course, they wouldn't have house-elves anymore. Those had been on the list of transferred property, too.

Harry cleared his throat politely and raised his eyebrows. "Can I come in?" he asked, trying to convey through his tone that he thought it the height of rudeness to leave him waiting on the stoop, and that that rudeness said bad things about Malfoy's breeding.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Potter?" Malfoy with control over his tongue sounded no better than he ever had. He was still an expert at the sneer, and he was still pointy. Harry felt his enjoyment growing. He really didn't need to feel guilty over rowing with Malfoy, since he was trying to *help* him, and the row promised to be a good one.

"I've uncovered evidence that your property really was stolen from you, the way you've claimed all along," Harry said casually, and bit his lip savagely to keep from laughing when Malfoy's jaw fell open a second time.

He did utter a yelp of protest when Malfoy seized his arm and dragged him into the house, barely giving Harry time to duck the ugly trellis that clung above the door. "Malfoy, damn it—"

Malfoy looked out, glanced up and down the street with a savage twist of his head, and then slammed the door. Leaning on it, he stared at Harry and cast several complicated spells that made Harry tingle from head to toe, but didn't appear to have any ill effect. He let out a rush of breath and shook his head, then shook it again. Harry raised an eyebrow, wondering if the trials he'd endured in the last few years—or the justice, as Ron would have it—had addled his brain.

"You really are who you say you are," Malfoy muttered, and then brushed past him and into the next room. "Come on. I'll have to bring Mother and Father down here to listen to this."

"Not so fast, Malfoy."

The other man whirled around to confront him. Harry blinked. Everything about Malfoy seemed whipcord, taut, frantic. Harry didn't think his announcement had caused all of it. Malfoy's forehead was wrinkled with habitual lines of strain, and his hands were clenched in front of him.

"Potter," he said patiently, "my parents have the right to hear what happened to their Galleons and the house they've lived in since childhood."

"Your mother didn't live there," Harry felt compelled to point out. "I've seen one of the houses your mother lived in. It wasn't pretty."

Malfoy's hand gripped his wand again, but he held back, maybe because of what Harry had said before, maybe because he'd just thought of what his record would look like if he attacked one of the Ministry's Aurors. He bobbed his head twice, then said, "You want to talk to me alone first?"

Harry nodded.

"Why?"

"Because I trust you more than your parents," Harry said. "I know you better, anyway," he amended, when Malfoy's eyes widened. God, his eyes were *sunken.* A little pity blossomed to life in Harry, but only a little. So far as he knew, Malfoy didn't need or deserve more than that. "I think I can make a deal with you to keep quiet about this for right now. Your father—I don't know. Do you think he would? Or would he immediately take off and try to force the Ministry to right everything?"

Malfoy hesitated for some moments, then nodded shortly. "I—you heard the newspaper reports, of course."

Harry nodded back. The newspaper reports had included Lucius Malfoy trying to hex Shacklebolt for up to two years after the Ministry had decided that the Malfoy property had not, in fact, been stolen. He'd finally been sent to St. Mungo's for treatment and come out subdued but still brooding.

"I can't blame you," said Malfoy, with a sad dignity that Harry never would have expected of him and which he'd probably had to have forced into him at wandpoint. He gestured to the small drawing room that lay off the entrance hall. "Let's sit here."

The entrance room was—green. Green curtains, green walls, green carpet, green couches, and pillows so bright a green that Harry considered them a hazed to vision. Malfoy sat down on a plush chair and leaned forwards. Harry hesitated, then chose a stool that was slightly less green

than the rest of the room.

"What evidence do you have?" Malfoy's face was a little more guarded, but his eyes still burned and blinked and watered and stared. Harry felt a surge of very agreeable and enjoyable power. Yes, he was going to help Malfoy because that was what he did and because he was bored, but there were things he could have found to take up his time which wouldn't *satisfy* this way.

Harry drew out the parchment he'd found and extended it. Malfoy took it with trembling fingers. Harry kept from rolling his eyes and snorting, but it took a lot of effort.

Pathetic.

Malfoy read the words carefully, slowly, as if they were the food that would keep him from starving. He leaned back and stared at Harry when he was done, the hand that held the parchment curling it towards his chest as if it were a baby. "You haven't found out who did this yet," he whispered.

"Actually," Harry said, "I used a spell Hermione taught me—"

And yes, *there* it was, Malfoy's lip curling. Really, couldn't he abandon his stupid blood prejudice when he'd lost everything else? Apparently not, Harry thought irritably. Malfoy would rather not admit that Hermione was doing better than he was, in every sense, right now. He would cling to the fact that his ancestors had been a bunch of inbred wankers and gloat over it when he had nothing else left to soothe him to sleep.

"Potter?" Malfoy prompted impatiently.

Harry shook his head and returned to the topic. "Right. I used a spell Hermione taught me that analyzes handwriting. The person who wrote this document was called Chester Flutefog. But he transferred to the Brazilian Ministry five years ago, apparently right after your money went into Ambrosius Holdings. He can't be reached. And I can't track down anyone else who was associated with the transaction."

Malfoy cursed weakly and bowed his head. "Why come here, then?" he demanded. "If you can't get us revenge—"

"I didn't say I *could* get you revenge," said Harry. "I think I might be able to get your properties and Galleons back. I would have assumed you'd want that more."

Malfoy blinked at him, then said, "Go on."

"Hector Ambrosius died two years ago," Harry said briskly. "Since then, his widow's made a fortune of her own breeding house-elves. Ambrosius Holdings barely exists anymore, and it's shut down most of the former outposts it established—which I suspect used your homes and properties. I think there's a chance I might be able to talk Mrs. Ambrosius into giving back your

properties, and probably a good portion of your Galleons, if I smile charmingly enough."

Malfoy threw back his head and began to laugh. His voice sounded like a sob at the end of it. Harry frowned and pushed his glasses up his nose. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Malfoy was supposed to be grateful and all but fall at his feet.

"You didn't bother to look up the first name of Hector Ambrosius's widow, I reckon?" Malfoy was mopping at the tears on his face. He hiccoughed and shook his head. "She was Pansy Parkinson before she married him, Potter. Now tell me why you think Pansy Parkinson would be at *all* willing to talk to you, to give us back our property, or basically to do anything that doesn't benefit her, her little son, or her immediate family."

Harry licked his lips. It was true he hadn't bothered looking up the name of the widow; all he'd really known was that Hector Ambrosius had married a witch much younger than himself, and she was in sole control of the current money and property. "Er. Didn't she have a crush on you, in Hogwarts?"

"She never got over my rejecting her in sixth year," Malfoy said. His fingers writhed over each other like worms. "She'll take every chance to hurt me." His breath was practically squeaking out his lips now. "It's worse to know this now than never to have known who robbed us in the first place."

He started to stand, but Harry blocked his exit, shaking his head. He hadn't realized how much he would have to make the Malfoy cause his own, but he'd do it. It was still better than sitting around the office and teasing Ron. "Stop it, Malfoy. It is not. It's true that she probably wouldn't listen to you. But I might be able to offer her something."

Malfoy stared at him a moment, then snorted. "Believe it or not, Potter, there *are* some people in the world who don't want to fuck the Savior."

Harry laughed. "There would actually be a problem if she wanted that, since I tend to prefer men these days."

Once again Malfoy disappointed him. He narrowed his eyes, and lightly flushed, but said nothing at all, instead of exploding into a rant about how unnatural Harry was and how he should get the fuck out of his house.

Disappointment or not, Harry had started this, and he was going to finish it. "Let me talk to her," he said. "So she might not give me anything on the first try. Maybe she'll eventually get tired of my always coming around and agree to give you a pittance." He paused a moment, then added, "How could you not have known that Ambrosius Holdings owned Malfoy Manor?"

"We were forbidden from going within a mile of any of the houses we'd owned, and apparently the *Daily Prophet* only saw fit to report the new names they'd given the Manor and the others," Malfoy muttered. He was staring at Harry's face as if fascinated. "Why are you doing this,

Potter? The truth."

"I'm not tired of having you owe me yet," Harry said. "And I'm bored."

Malfoy sneered. "So we're just a diversion."

"Got it in one." Harry leaned back a little and cocked his head. "So. What about it? Should I go talk to Parkinson—er, Ambrosius, or not?"

Malfoy agreed, of course. He didn't have a choice. And Harry was warm with anticipation all the way home.

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Chapter: 2

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Harry Is Clever, Draco Is Cruel

It hadn't actually been that hard to get an appointment to see the widow Ambrosius. She might breed house-elves, but she mostly had humans working for her, especially in the Diagon Alley office that took orders to breed certain types of elves. Harry walked in and leaned casually against a doorway until someone noticed him. In this case, that particular "someone" was a young witch with extremely blonde hair, who sat behind the desk in the front of the office and had just finished with another visitor. Then he straightened, pulled out the smile Hermione called *the* smile, and took a step forwards.

The smile had seen a lot of use in the past year, since Harry decided that he wanted to have relationships with men. He had worried about how to approach them at first, when he was only used to flirting with women, but he had quickly discovered that the gay wizards he met in pubs and at parties were mostly after the same thing he was: a swift fuck with an attractive partner. The *attractive* part was important. And Harry had practiced *the* smile in front of a mirror until he knew exactly how well it lit up his eyes and made them shine like open flowers in full sun. It made him more approachable, too, which was important with the lightning bolt scar and the reputation for continual arrests and captures he bore.

Now it was working on the witch in front of him. She flushed deeply and leaned back in her chair, one hand rising to pat at her hair as if she were worried about its escaping from a largely nonexistent style. Then she cleared her throat and tried to look professional.

Harry leaned on her desk and gave her a large dose of *the* smile so she would stop trying that

silly thing, and then murmured, "I suppose you know who I am?" He could manage to sound bashful about his reputation when he tried, and he was trying now.

"I—I do, Mr. Potter." The witch cleared her throat again. "I don't suppose you want an order for a certain type of house-elf?" She ducked her head and peered up at him through her lashes. "You have reasons not to buy from us, after all."

Harry felt a small surge of admiration for her. She hadn't crumbled in the face of *the* smile right away; in fact, she had remembered his association with Hermione and Hermione's vigorous campaign to abolish the ownership of house-elves altogether. That didn't mean Harry would let her get away with denying him, but *still.*

"Actually," he said, leaning towards her and lowering his voice in a way that he knew thrilled the people he spoke to, "I'd like to make an appointment to see Mrs. Ambrosius." He turned his head and met her gaze full on with a pair of magnificent green eyes—or at least he was fairly sure they were magnificent, from hearing it so many times.

This kind of flirting still troubled Harry, in the part of him that bothered to keep track of his effect on other people. But it was necessary to get this job done—and sometimes the ordinary job, too, when they ran into people who were intrigued enough by the famous Harry Potter to confess their secrets freely. Harry had decided it was not *his* fault if people thought he was handsome because he'd cared enough to sacrifice himself for the world. It was useful, and as long as he could keep busy and perform the job he'd taken up, he didn't mind that much. It did them no permanent harm.

The witch swallowed, and then said, "Mrs. Ambrosius is very busy, you know. She's a mother as well as a businesswoman. No one just waltzes in and sees her, not even the *famous* Harry Potter." She seemed to know what effect he was having on her, to suspect it was deliberate, and to be fighting it.

Harry widened his eyes and bit his lip, a move that he knew made him look childishly innocent and desperate. "Oh, but I wasn't trying to waltz in," he said, and lowered his eyelashes modestly. "I was following the correct procedures, after all. I just want to see and talk to her, and I know that this is the place you have to make an appointment."

"Surely the Ministry could give you an order—"

"Oh, but it's not connected to a case." Harry let his cheeks flush lightly, keeping his gaze on his hands. "Not official. This is just a favor for a friend, a favor that involves me having a candid and clear conversation with the widow Ambrosius." He let his gaze wander back up to her, and lowered his voice once again. "I don't suppose you could let me visit her *anyway*, even though it's not official?"

The witch's hand wavered for a long moment. Harry, studying her with an eye sharpened by five years of Auror training and then ordinary work in the field, could tell she was intrigued, as well

as uneasy lest she make a mistake her mistress would scold her for.

"All right," she said suddenly, at last. "But of course I have to tell her who's coming, and you have to realize that she may change the time and date of the meeting." She was already writing down a date that Harry recognized, from reading it upside-down, as next Thursday. "And if she does keep the same time, she'll expect you to arrive promptly." She handed the parchment over to Harry, who turned it and read the expected date, as well as *5:00, the former Malfoy Manor.* "Will you be available to owl?"

Harry looked up with a smile that he hoped to make dazzling in its simplicity, even though it was not *the* smile. "I will be. Thank you very much—"

He let his voice trail off, and she flushed and murmured, "Cynthia."

"Cynthia." Harry caught her hand and kissed it, then strolled casually out of the shop. Let her have a glimpse of his arse, if she wanted one, as payment for her trouble.

She took it. Harry had become very good at knowing when eyes were following him.

Harry Apparated to the white gravel path outside Malfoy Manor, and then raised his eyebrows. The Malfoys' former home had certainly changed.

Gone were the wall and the iron gates that had closed it off from the world on the day that Harry came to return Draco's wand. Instead, the house was surrounded by a clear, spreading strip of land sculpted into small hillocks, with rich green grass covering them. Small, single trees perched on the hillocks above equally small and singular ponds. Here and there a cluster of wildflowers grew, but never high enough or brilliant enough to severely challenge the trees. Harry felt himself relaxing without effort. This was the kind of place that he would have liked to live.

The white gravel path ran to the front door. As Harry clapped the knocker, he glanced up in admiration at the house. It had been dark and brooding before, looking as if it had been built by someone with more money than taste. (Of course, it *had* been built by a Malfoy). It was pale now, with white and blue stone worked into twining patterns among the dark wood and black stone, and the myriad windows were thrown open to the sunlight.

The door opened at once, and a graceful, dignified house-elf, taller than any Harry had ever met, bowed to him. "Master Harry Potter is expected," the elf said. Even its voice wasn't as squeaky as the others'. "If he will come in and make himself comfortable in the front drawing room? Mistress will be with him shortly."

Harry followed the elf through a variety of glittering corridors with actual restraint behind the decorations, and found himself in an octagonal room obviously meant for viewing the sunset. The window was the focal point of the entire set-up, and showed the light coming in perfectly across a delicately trimmed expanse of lawn. Harry sank back into a comfortable chair, and

found himself with a cup of tea in his hand. He blinked and looked up, but the elf had already departed.

He had just a few moments to sip and glance around before Pansy Ambrosius walked calmly through a door on the opposite side of the room he had entered by. Harry stood up without having consciously decided to do so.

Pansy Parkinson in Hogwarts, from what he could remember, had been pug-nosed, square-faced, and not particularly attractive even *without* the constant sneer on her face. This woman was beautiful. Harry hadn't spent a lot of time appreciating female beauty in the past year, but he hadn't foresworn women altogether, and he felt a stirring of interest.

It wasn't just her face, either, which had a deep tinge of healthy color to rival the sunset, or the carefully brushed dark hair hanging to her shoulders. Her expression had changed and relaxed. She was a woman in command of her environment, by the tilt of her head and the direct stare of her eyes, and she knew it. Harry had always found self-confidence attractive.

He offered her his hand. Pansy clasped and shook it, then let him kiss the back of her fingers. She merely watched him thoughtfully, and didn't blush the way most people of Harry's acquaintance would on being touched by him.

"A favor for a friend," she repeated, as if he had just now spoken those words to Cynthia. "What does *that* mean, Potter?"

Good. She won't dance around the subject. "I learned recently," Harry said, "by accident, that the accusations the Malfoy family made a few years ago were true. The Ministry *did* arrange to illegally transfer their money and buildings away from them. Where they went, the Malfoys weren't sure at the time, because they were prevented from finding out who owned their homes afterwards. But now I know that their property was an 'anonymous' gift to Ambrosius Holdings."

"Yes, that's correct." Pansy watched him curiously. "I can assure you that I believed it was anonymous at the time, and did not learn the truth until after my husband's death."

Harry blinked. He'd been prepared for at least a *little* opposition. "All right." He bit his lip for a moment, then said, "Well, I've come to ask you if you would consider restoring their homes to the Malfoys. And an amount of Galleons comparable to the amount of Galleons Ambrosius Holdings took from them."

Pansy smiled a little, then looked away from him. "Why?"

Harry relaxed. This sounded more like the conversation he'd already planned out in his mind. "Because I know that you've made a fortune on your own, above and beyond the Ambrosius fortune, given your breeding of house-elves," he said. "I would like to see that fortune remain with you, whilst at the same time, you restore the Malfoys'. You don't *need* that money—"

Pansy laughed and turned to regard him again. "Once could argue that the Malfoys don't need it, either. They're living well enough, aren't they?"

"Better than many people," Harry had to agree. "But I've been to see them, and it's wrecked their spirits. Or at least Draco's spirit. I didn't get to see Lucius or Narcissa."

"Ah, Draco." Pansy sat down in the chair nearest her and arranged her dress robes prettily over her knees. They were a pale mauve color, just the shade of the sky above the setting sun, and Harry had to admit they made her look like a queen. "Draco's spirit is so easily wrecked." She glanced up at him, tilting her head back and baring her throat. Someone else might have thought this made her the picture of vulnerability. Harry knew better. "One might wonder why you care, when you were always his enemy in school?"

"I'm bored," Harry said. "And this is something to do."

Pansy laughed again, but this time the sound seemed to startle her as well as Harry. And it was delighted, Harry thought, feeling his hopes rise again. If he could intrigue Pansy, then he didn't have to impress her. He might be able to make her listen, and that was the primary goal.

"You mean," she said, leaning forwards, "that you're fighting like an enraged hippogriff for the Malfoys because you're *bored*?"

"This isn't an enraged hippogriff," Harry said. "I haven't smashed into your house, held you at wandpoint, and demanded that you give them their houses and their Galleons back, have I?"

"Maybe that comes next." Pansy clapped her hands, smiling. "Oh, Potter, I don't think anything has *surprised* me in so long. My life is interesting and very pleasant, but not very often unexpected." She paused, studying him, then added, "Of course, that doesn't mean that the Galleons and properties are yours for the asking. I want to know more about why you're here instead of bellowing like an enraged bull through the corridors of the Ministry."

"I've investigated the case as far as it can take me," Harry replied, settling back into the chair he'd risen from. It really *was* very comfortable, and the tea at his elbow was still hot and very good, probably a property of the cup, or maybe the house-elf's magic. "The only person identifiable transferred to the Brazilian Ministry five years ago. The others are so well-hidden that nothing I do uncovers them. I never promised the Malfoys revenge, and I don't think I'd be able to get it for them. On the other hand, maybe I *can* win this."

"Mm-hmm." Pansy narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. "And what was Draco's reaction when you went to visit him?"

"Stunned is not too strong a word for it." Harry grinned in remembrance. "He tugged me into the house and looked up and down the street as if Hit Wizards were going to come down on us at any moment."

"He always did have a tendency to paranoia," Pansy said softly, whilst the shadow of a memory passed over her face. "If he was doing something secretive—and he *always* was—he was convinced that everybody knew about it, or was waiting for the chance to know about it and ruin it for him." She glanced sideways at Harry. "I can't imagine that he's really letting himself trust you'll win concessions for him."

Harry frowned and sat up a little straighter. "Well, he should. I'm not going to destroy your house—it's his house, really—" Pansy responded to the baiting only by raising her eyebrows a little higher. "But I will keep coming and talking to you until you get tired of me and give the houses and the money back."

"It would be very easy for me to shut you out, you know." Pansy put her palms together and smiled at him. "Easier than you can imagine."

"Then I'll find a way in, and keep talking to you." Harry pretended to flick an imaginary piece of lint off his sleeve. "Until you get bored, and desperate, and give the Malfoys the houses and money to get me to go away."

Pansy laughed again. "I believe you would." She paused meditatively. "Well, Potter, I don't promise anything yet—except another chance for you to try and convince me. You can go and tell Draco that I've invited you for another conversation a week from now, and see what he makes of that." A fond smile crossed her lips as she rose. "Probably something horribly dark, twisted, and evil," she murmured, as she started to exit the room.

"Why?" Harry called after her. "Are you bored, too?"

Pansy looked over her shoulder. "Say, rather, that I'm bored with the way everyone talks to me," she answered. "Since my husband died—and he was a good man in many ways, say what you will about his age—I've had very few people near me who will speak the truth. They dress it up too prettily. And they're all too afraid of losing their jobs to do otherwise. Besides, I *would* sack them if they were rude to me. But you—you're like the one figure in a medieval court who could speak truth to the ruler."

"The Seer?" Harry asked with a frown. He hadn't studied much Muggle history.

"The jester." Pansy smiled at him again, and swept out. A moment later, the house-elf came to escort him to the front door.

Harry rolled his eyes as he knocked on the Malfoys' front door. Draco had demanded Harry come muffled in a large cloak, so that was what he'd done. He was, of course, getting more attention whilst bundled up like a Death Eater than if he'd simply strolled down the street as himself and knocked on the door. The people watching could always have assumed the Malfoys had done something *else* that required the intervention of the Ministry.
The door opened on his fourth knock, and strong, pinching fingers dragged him inside. Harry swore and tried to tug himself away from the grip, but it remained until the door had slammed

and been locked shut with several wards.

He finally batted the concealing cloak away from his face and saw Malfoy staring at him hungrily with a pale, strained face. Harry smiled in spite of himself. He *did* like being regarded that way. All the times that Malfoy had gone out of his way during school never to depend on Harry, never to treat him like anything special, and now he had no choice but to depend on him, and on the Gryffindor heroics he'd pretended to despise.

"I've had my first conversation with Pansy," he said casually.

Malfoy's fists clenched, and he seemed to keep himself from reaching forwards and ripping a hand down Harry's cheek only with the greatest of effort. "And?" he echoed, his breath coming short.

"She agreed to see me again." Harry relented and offered a little more than that when Malfoy's shoulders slumped. "She seemed intrigued by me. She said it was the first time anything had *surprised* her in years."

Malfoy's face lit up, a transformation that actually made Harry wince a little; it emphasized how hopeless he normally looked. He clamped his hand down on Harry's arm again, but luckily on a different patch of skin this time, so Harry could bear it.

"That's *wonderful,*" Malfoy whispered. "That's more than she's given anyone in years. That's more than I thought she would ever give anyone." He let his eyes drift shut for a moment, as if contemplating a delicious taste.

Harry studied him unobtrusively. Yes, he thought he preferred Malfoy this way, not full of spite but forced to acknowledge his own humility. It was too bad that nothing Harry said had managed to really shock him last time, but there was always this conversation.

Malfoy's eyes abruptly snapped open, as if he had heard Harry's thoughts, and he frowned. "What are you *smirking* about, Potter?"

"I didn't know I was smirking," Harry said honestly. He paused, and then, because doing good for the Malfoys hadn't done anything to quell his desire for exciting rows, he added, "How does it feel?"

"How does *what* feel?" Malfoy dropped his arm and retreated a few paces, his hand going not-so-subtly to the robe pocket that held his wand. Harry rolled his eyes and snorted aloud.

"Not *that*, you prat," he said. "You know you couldn't best me in a duel, anyway. How does it feel to know that, when your money and your home are restored, you'll owe everything to the one person you hate most in the world?"

Malfoy clamped his lips shut. A moment later, listening carefully, Harry actually heard the sound

of his teeth grinding together. He laughed.

Malfoy shot across the distance between them. Harry didn't bother lifting his arm to defend himself. He let Malfoy grab him and bear him backwards until his spine hit the wall next to the staircase. And then he laughed directly into Malfoy's face, and shook his head.

"Potter."

Harry shut up, frowning. He couldn't tell exactly *why* he shut up, but the tone of Malfoy's voice had something to do with it. There was something heavy and hurtful in Malfoy's voice. It was—

Well, it sounded like the way Harry had spoken after Sirius fell through the veil.

But that couldn't be, because Harry really doubted Malfoy was capable of that depth of emotion. He was just opening his mouth to argue back when Malfoy started speaking again, in that same thick way, and Harry found himself helplessly compelled to listen.

"You are not the person I hate most in the world, Potter. That was the Dark Lord, and he's gone." Malfoy's hands shifted to his shoulders and he leaned in, sneering. Harry couldn't blink, and couldn't look away. It was most disconcerting. He wondered if Malfoy had somehow cast a spell on him.

Right. Wandless and non-verbal? He was never that *good.*

"But you are the person I *despise* most in the world," Malfoy went on, his words descending into a snarl. "You show up here, prancing around, expecting me to *appreciate* what you're doing, even though you're less than gracious about it. Even though your motive for acting this way is *boredom*, so much less noble than almost anything else you could have settled on." His breath was coming more quickly now, and his hands on Harry's shoulder were like cage bars. Harry struggled weakly for a moment. Malfoy just clamped down harder. Harry felt a muted surprise. He hadn't thought the idiot was this strong, either.

"You don't see me as human," Malfoy said, every word a near-bark. "You think I'm just a toy to be played with, and put back on the shelf when you're tired of. You want to spin me around like a top, get your fill of desperation and pitiful gratitude from me, and go your way. You want to make an enormous mark on *our* lives and never be touched yourself.

"Let me tell you something, Potter. The things we suffered in these past few years have *changed* us. You'll never mark us the same way. If you win back the money and the houses for us, we'll take them, but you'll never have our *gratitude.* I'll never acknowledge you in the street and fawn on you. I'll never drop my eyes when you walk by.

"Why?"

He paused. Harry shifted his feet, again weakly trying to get free, both incredibly fascinated and

incredibly sure that he didn't want to hear the end of this proclamation.

"Because I know what you *are,*" Malfoy whispered, his lips a few inches from Harry's ear. "Because I know that you still require validation from other people for doing something good. You can't be heroic without your cheering crowd. Even if the crowd is just one person. Even if you know that they really shouldn't be grateful to you at *all.*

"I won't be your public, Potter. The best way I can repay you for what you've *really* done, and not what you've only pretended to do, is to refuse to acknowledge you at all. I'm not a pet. I'm not a toy. I'm not a *project.*"

He stepped away from Harry and stood with his arms folded, staring. Harry could have borne a look of loathing in his eyes. What he didn't like was the *contempt* facing him.

He opened his mouth, wanting to protest, wanting to say that he wasn't *like* that, even if he was doing this because he was bored—

Malfoy sneered at him.

And this sneer, Harry couldn't face. He turned and walked out of the house without glancing back, his heart galloping wildly within him.

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—Harry Is Repentant, Draco Is Unreasonable

Ron took a step into the office, then immediately backed out again. "Harry!" he said in a desperately cheerful voice. "What are you doing here? I thought you were, er, taking some time off to pursue that new pet project of yours. And no one deserves time off more than you, mate. After all, you've kept the wizarding world so safe that no Death Eater dares *squeak* now! Don't you think you should be home resting? Or at least in the Ministry archives, archiving—investigating something?"

Harry raised dull eyes. It took his brain a long moment, since it was still swimming with Malfoy's words, to focus on Ron's rambling and figure out what was wrong. Then he snorted and shook his head. "I'm not going to pick a fight with you, Ron."

"*That*," Ron said darkly, poking his head in, "is what you said last Thursday. And then when I

disagreed, you picked a fight about *that.*"

"I've got something else to occupy me now," Harry said. He sighed and stared morosely into his cup of tea. And he even *knew* it was morosely, and yet there was nothing he could do about it.

Malfoy—

Malfoy had a *point.*

Harry would have liked to be able to loudly and utterly deny that Malfoy had a point of any kind, but if that was true, he would have stayed there and *fought* the bastard, wouldn't he? He wouldn't have run away like his eleven-year-old self meeting Fluffy for the first time.

He didn't want to think of himself as a hero helpless without his cheering crowd. But it was true that he hadn't done anything good without receiving public acknowledgment for it in a long time. He was constantly honored as an Auror when he captured criminals. People treated his opinions on the issues of the day with breathless reverence. Harry had thought that was all right for a while. He'd got used to the press attention, and most of the time it made his job easier.

But then his superiors had stopped giving him the interesting cases. And then he'd needed a project, and—

Harry winced, his chest tight. That was the major thing bothering him. Malfoy had been right when he said he and his family were only projects to Harry, that he couldn't see them as people. And he *wasn't* doing this for a noble motive.

What really surprised Harry was that he cared about that. He'd been honest with himself from the beginning. When had that honesty, the fact that he was bored and doing this to give himself something to think about, become a bad thing?

Maybe it always was.

That was what he was really afraid of.

"I'm going for a walk," he muttered, and pushed himself away from his desk.

Ron immediately scuttled into the office and settled at his desk with a sigh of relief. "Oh, good," he said. "Maybe that'll clear your head, huh, mate?"

Harry paused and really looked at his best friend. The best friend whom he hadn't spoken civilly to in weeks, the best friend who really appeared utterly afraid that every interaction with Harry was going to turn into an argument.

"Yes," he said softly. "Maybe it will."

And then he ducked out of the office, and went towards the Atrium, so he could take a Floo out of the Ministry. He'd walk through the streets of Muggle London, where there was no one stopping him for an autograph or a handshake every five minutes. That might clear his head in more ways than one.

By the time his next visit with Pansy rolled around, Harry couldn't believe that he'd let Malfoy's words have such power over him. They were just *words*. And sure, they were the first contradictory opinion he had encountered in some time. That was the reason they'd crashed home so hard. But he'd *tried* in the week since then: given a few anonymous charitable contributions with only his conscience to congratulate him, and worked hard on making sure that there were no loose ends from the Malfoy case left hanging in the Ministry. He'd even considered staying away from the Malfoy house for the rest of the time it took to settle this, and just corresponding by owl.
But then Malfoy would think he'd managed to *scare* Harry. That couldn't be borne.

Pansy's tall and dignified house-elf opened the door again, but this time bowed Harry around the corner of the house. "Mistress is waiting in her garden," it said.

Harry blinked as the door shut in his face, then trailed around the corner, frowning. He hadn't thought of Pansy as someone who would venture outside the drawing room, lest her robes get mussed.

But there she was on a bench in the Manor's rose gardens, in yet more dress robes, these a brilliant green. She was bent down, talking softly to something in her lap. Harry thought it might be a cat or a young house-elf until he got close enough and recognized a small, dark, *human* head against her chest. He stopped abruptly.

Pansy looked up, smiling, apparently expecting him. "Hello, Mr. Potter," she said. She nudged the little boy in her lap and turned him around to face Harry. "This is my son, Edgar," she said. "Say hello to Mr. Potter, Edgar."

The boy blinked at Harry, then scrunched both nose and mouth up with a yawn. He was probably three years old, but unlike most children Harry had met at that age, he seemed drowsy and content. He wore blue dress robes that were a miniature of his mother's, and pooled and flowed around his legs and arms until he was quite lost in them. His hair was dark as Pansy's, but far curlier, and he had watery blue eyes that made Harry suspect he'd need glasses before he was much older. "Hullo," he said obediently, then cuddled back into his mother.

Pansy chuckled and patted his back. "I suspect not even a war hero can impress when it's near his bedtime," she murmured. Then she raised an eyebrow and added, "Do sit down, Potter, really. You could make anyone feel ridiculous standing in front of her and gaping like that."

Harry coughed and took a seat on a bench opposite Pansy and Edgar. It was almost absurd how peaceful the rose garden seemed. The sunset threw shafts of glinting golden light across them. Bees hummed over the flowers, drowsy as Edgar and as unthreatening. A small pond nearby had

a single swan gliding in it, backwards and forwards, neck bent as if to admire its reflection in the water.

"You've been to see Draco, I understand?"

Harry glanced at her sharply, but Pansy was busy arranging Edgar's limbs in a new pose and didn't appear to notice.

"Yes," said Harry. "He was—" He paused. Neither "astonished at my success" or "angry at my presumption" seemed to be the best response.

"Oh, go on." Pansy glanced up, eyes glinting. "He was angry, wasn't he? Appalled that you managed to succeed where he couldn't?"

"I, well." Harry didn't know why, but being around Pansy made his awkwardness and dislike of Draco's words come back to him. He had to ignore the temptation to stare at his hands and instead meet her gaze boldly. Meekness wouldn't win the Malfoy money and lands back. "Why would you have turned him away, anyway?"

"Because Draco never could provide me the amusement you can," Pansy said airily. "I know his anger too well, and his petulant pouts. Whereas *you*, I haven't seen driven to the edge of sanity yet."

"Is that what you meant about wanting me to be your jester?"

"Been thinking quite a lot about that, haven't you?" Pansy kissed her son on the top of the head, and whatever Harry had wanted to say was lost in the moment of shifting robes and sweetness. He had an ache in his heart. He didn't know why. He just knew that he had to look away from Pansy and catch his breath for a moment.

"Well, yes," he told a rosebush. "You have to admit it was an unusual thing to say."

"It was the truth." Pansy stopped shifting around, and Harry felt safe to look back at her. Once again, she was giving him that bright, thoughtful look from last week. "The jester was safe from kingly retribution for speaking the truth *because* he was a fool." She bared her teeth. Harry knew the difference between that and a smile thanks to long experience in the Ministry. "Now. Do tell me why you think the Malfoy family deserves their land and money back."

"They're not doing well," Harry said, eager to move on from the subject of himself. "Malfoy—Draco, I mean—is more pathetic than I've ever seen him. He looks *broken*. Like someone punched him in the stomach and he's still bent around the blow. I think he could have his pride back if his money and homes were restored to him."

"And his pride matters so much to you?" Pansy asked softly.

"Er. It might." Harry eyed the rosebushes suspiciously, wondering if they had been bred to exude some kind of drug in the place of fragrance. It would explain why his head was spinning, why he felt he couldn't catch his breath.

"You seem different from last week," said Pansy, who had no right to be that damnably perceptive. "Quieter. As though you went into Draco's house spouting this sort of nonsense and got your face slapped."

Harry started and turned to her. "I'm only telling the truth," he said. "I do think he would be better off if he got—"

"The houses and money back, yes, I know." Pansy waved a hand at the gardens and the Manor house. "What if I were to tell you that this was the only home Edgar had ever known? That he would be devastated to leave it?"

Harry narrowed his eyes a little. "I wouldn't believe you. When you have that much money, I'm sure he has more than one home."

Pansy laughed. "Oh, very good, Potter! That's the kind of truth-speaking I'm talking about. My employees can't do that." She stroked her son's hair and smiled at him for a moment, then nodded. "As a matter of fact, it's true. We could give up the Manor and Edgar wouldn't miss it very much. In fact, he doesn't sleep very well whilst we're here unless it's summer. He likes the noises of London during the winter." She cocked her head. "But you took the tack of believing me right away, without consulting your instincts. Even though Edgar is in front of you, cuter than a Crup puppy, if I do say so myself, and Draco isn't. You care about this for more than his pride. *Why*, Potter?"

Harry swore silently. He didn't want to discuss this. He didn't want to discuss this with *anybody*. But if it was a way to get Pansy to actually listen to him, then he couldn't afford not to have this discussion.

"He did say something to me," he admitted between clenched teeth. "It was—well, to do with my reasons for doing this. And he was right. I was treating him like some sort of object, or amusement, or toy. I don't want to anymore. I want to get him his home back, and I want to do it for unselfish reasons. If that means coming to you and acting as your jester, then that's what I'll do."

"An exquisite performance," Pansy said, rising to her feet and gathering Edgar up tenderly along with a swirl of her robes. "But not quite perfect yet. You can come and see me next week at the same time, Potter."

And off she went again, before Harry could even open his mouth to protest.

This time, when he was shown into the Malfoy cottage, it was to confront both Draco and his mother. Narcissa Malfoy sat upright as a Muggle mannequin in the middle of the brilliant green

drawing room and stared at Harry.
Harry checked the impatient words that wanted to spring to his lips. After all, Malfoy's mother surely had as much right to hear about his progress as Malfoy himself, though Harry doubted she would be more receptive to it.

"Pansy asked me to come back next week," he told Draco. His tongue was stiff in his mouth. He was trying to look at Malfoy and not see him as a broken beggar, or the git he had known back in school. It was extremely difficult. He had so many lines of strain around his mouth, after all. "And she admitted that she doesn't need Malfoy Manor for her son. That was the only concession she offered me."

He hoped Malfoy would yell at him, so that Harry could yell back and finally get rid of this lingering feeling of remorse and resentment. But Malfoy only raised his eyebrows and glanced at his mother, who said, "More progress than I expected, in truth. You will attend the meeting with her next week, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked briefly at Narcissa. She showed her age in a way she wouldn't have a few years ago, he thought; she looked as harassed as Mrs. Weasley.

And why shouldn't she? he thought. *Mrs. Weasley endured a lot more than she did, and still managed to be more kind-hearted.*

But the problem was, Harry couldn't be sure of that, because he didn't really know what the Malfoys had endured in the past few years.

"I'll attend the meeting," he said. "Until she tells me to go away completely, I'll keep talking to her."

"I'm amazed that you can't think of something she wants and give it to her," Malfoy drawled behind him. "You're good at that, aren't you?"

Harry controlled his immediate impulse to turn and snap. He would *not* snap. He would not show Malfoy that he had got through the way he talked about last week and made a mark on Harry's soul after all. "There might come a time when talking isn't enough," he continued. "If that's true, then I'll search through the Ministry again. Maybe there was evidence covered up that I overlooked. Maybe the Minister or some members of the Wizengamot could be counted upon to intervene if they were convinced it was worthwhile."

"Worthwhile," Malfoy said softly. "What would it take to convince them that a member of *our* family is worthwhile?"

Narcissa quelled him with a glance. Harry found himself, unexpectedly, aching with envy. He wanted to be able to do that, to look straight at Malfoy and dismiss him—make him dismiss *himself*. He used to be able to do it in school, where his ignoring Malfoy had frustrated him horribly. Why couldn't Harry do it now?

"I trust you to do your best, Mr. Potter," Narcissa said, pulling Harry's attention back to her again. "After all, you're repaying the debt that you owe me from the Forbidden Forest, where I lied to the Dark Lord for you."

Harry, who had felt his mouth working into a smile, felt it freeze again. Was that really the only reason that the Malfoy family would ever trust him? They thought he was paying back a debt, or they thought he was using them for entertainment? They could never trust *him*, Harry Potter, to be a good person and treat them the way he treated everyone else?

What indication have you given to them that you would?

But Harry pushed the thoughts away. He hadn't had any interaction with the Malfoy family in years. If they had changed, they should know he had, too. Didn't his reputation speak for him? Didn't his tireless work for the Ministry, work that other Aurors had abandoned in order to do something more profitable and less dangerous, matter?

After that, there seemed to be little more to say. Narcissa dismissed Harry with a regal nod and then glided up the stairs again. She wore pale blue dress robes, as if even in this shabby little house, the Minister might drop by and she wanted to be properly attired to greet such an important guest. But Harry couldn't be fooled, now that he knew what he was looking for. He could see the patches and ragged spots along the robe's sleeves and hem where the lace had torn away.

And he could see the defensive wards shimmering around the windows and doors and chinks in the walls—all the weak points of any attack. He could see the shadows in Narcissa's eyes. He could see the portraits on the walls and notice, if he tried, that they were usually marred by some defect, clumsy painting or torn canvas, meaning that these definitely weren't the best decorations the family could have hung.

"Have you lost your way to the door, Potter? I'll be more than happy to escort you." Malfoy's voice was perfectly polite and stung as hail stung.

Harry turned on him, more than glad to have the chance to exorcise the ghosts of last week's words. "You should know that I won't stop until I win *everything* back for you," he said. "Pansy must have a home of her own, one her husband owned. He wasn't poor. And she isn't poor. You'll have your Galleons back."

Malfoy watched him with a twisted half-smile. Then he said, "That still won't make me crawl at your feet like one of your grateful admirers, you know."

Harry snarled. He hated the anger that bubbled up in him now. It was too wild, too uncontrolled. No one should be able to *irritate* him like this. If he could hold his cool in front of newspaper reporters, he should certainly be able to hold it in front of Draco. "That's not what I want!"

"Ah, but it is." Malfoy glanced down, still with that half-smile on his face. He was twining one of his own hairs in and out among his fingers. Harry tried to think that he had ripped it out of his head in frustration, but he wouldn't have been satisfied unless he'd seen Malfoy actually do it. "Real philanthropists don't hang around demanding gratitude. They just distribute the good and go on their way." His eyes flashed up to Harry's. "It doesn't matter whether someone is *watching* them."

Harry snorted. At least he had a response this time, because he was over at the surprise that Malfoy still possessed a sharp tongue. "No one's that selfless, Malfoy. Someone will offer them gratitude, and they take joy in it."

"Ah," Malfoy repeated and came a few steps closer, his eyes brilliant. They made Harry uneasy. They seemed to suggest that, this time, Malfoy had a plan which would *work.* And he had made the Vanishing Cabinet work, hadn't he? It was always his most nefarious, serious plans that did. "But you like to *think* of yourself that way, don't you? It's the way you live with the praise and your inflated reputation. You tell yourself you deserve it because you're so noble. You don't take advantage of your fame the way some other people would—well, not *all* the time, anyway—and that's good enough. You can be noble because you still have people to despise, people who would do a lot worse with what you have." His mouth curved into a wider, more jagged smile. "People like me and my family."

"You're wrong." Harry had never heard his own voice sound so ugly.

"Oh, but I'm not," Malfoy said. "It's easy enough to see. You confessed the truth to me that first day you came here. Laughing at me with your mouth open, so sure that your *boredom* was more notice than we ever deserved." He gestured around at the house without taking his eyes off Harry. "Did you once consider that we might have more important things in our lives than you to worry about, whatever the capacity?"

"Since I have no idea what *happened*, Malfoy, I can't—"

"Oh, but you could have found out," Malfoy said. "You just wanted to hear it from my mouth or not at all, to prove to yourself that you could still demand, and win, regard from me. But I'm not telling you this because I want to fulfill your wishes. I'm telling you so that you understand how small a presence in my life you are."

Harry glared at him, his fists at his sides. Malfoy was so full of shit. Harry was sure Malfoy had thought of him every day in the last week since his scolding, just like Harry had thought of him.

Well.

Reasonably sure, anyway.

"Our neighbors tried to drive us out of our house with every hex known to wizarding kind when we first arrived." Malfoy's eyes were blank. "When we put up the wards so they couldn't, they

refused to sell us anything. We have to go to Diagon Alley for our groceries, and we have to go in disguise. That's *five years* after the loss of our money and houses, Potter. You'd think 'good wizards' could give up a grudge in that time, couldn't you? Oh, no, but it's only Slytherins who keep grudges that long.

"Meanwhile, we got Howlers every day until we set up spells that forbade us to receive owl post from any but a few specific people. The Ministry refused to assign us any daily protection. The Wizengamot 'lost' our paperwork asking for protection even on special occasions, such as when we go to Diagon Alley to retrieve money from what's *left* of our Gringotts accounts.

"A few of my friends tried to stand by me, but their parents threatened them into drawing back. None of Father's previous colleagues listen to him anymore. My mother had a few people she thought of as true friends, but they won't defy their husbands for her. We're *alone*, Potter, and we're at war. We were probably safer *during* the war, in fact, because at least then people were afraid of the Death Eaters." He laughed, but there was a sob in the back of his voice. "And we stand a good chance of being alone until we die. Do you think you can fix *that*? Against *that*, do you really believe your pathetic Gryffindor do-gooding makes a difference?"

"You could go abroad," Harry whispered, too stunned to think of anything else.

"Maybe," Malfoy snapped, his voice brittle and sloppy as thin ice. "If we could *get* out of the country. Apparition doesn't work that far. Thanks to a little law the Ministry passed the year after the war, International Floo is shut to everyone with a Dark Mark. They control the making of all Portkeys, too, in case you hadn't noticed. And we don't have enough money to buy tickets by Muggle transport and still set up a new home in a new country. We don't understand enough about the Muggle world to do that, anyway." He put a hand over his face and sighed. "Why am I even explaining this to you?" he wondered aloud. "You aren't capable of understanding it."

But Harry was, though for reasons he would never explain to Malfoy. He remembered all too well what ten years with the Dursleys had been like, convinced that no one would ever love him, convinced that no one would ever help him. Even when he was an adult, he would have to have money and friends to survive comfortably in the world, and he knew there was nothing coming to him by inheritance, no support from his relatives whilst they were still alive, no one he already knew who would trust him enough to recommend or hire him for a job. He had looked forwards to a dreary, poor existence with his own lack of experience cutting him off from everything. He knew the feeling of being battered and trapped into a corner, with nothing to do but survive when even survival seemed unendurable.

And if Malfoy knew that too—

"Malfoy," Harry said softly, and stepped forwards.

He wanted to tell the other man it was all right, that he *understood*, that he was willing to stand by and fight for them even after they had their money and houses again and were reestablished in wizarding society, that—

"I don't want your pity, Potter."

Harry stopped. There could be no doubting that the contempt in Malfoy's voice was real.

"It's not pity," Harry managed to say, whilst he tried to swallow with a dry throat.

"I don't *want* anything from you," Malfoy snapped, dragging his head around. He looked like some noble, bleeding wild animal held at bay by werewolves. A stag, perhaps, Harry thought. "Even if I *need* it."

And his eyes begged Harry so eloquently to go away that Harry had no choice but to bow his head and do so.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Harry Has a Cup of Tea, Draco Has a Point

A nice cup of hot tea didn't solve *all* the problems of the world. Harry knew that, even as he waved his wand to brew it and then heat it in a few moments. Hermione disapproved of such extravagance with magic; she said Harry ought to be able to wait for his tea to percolate like anyone else. But Harry had the magic, and, right now, he *really* had the need to feel a hot cuppa in his hand as soon as possible.

When he had not only that, but a burned tongue, a tingling throat, and a head focused on something else than Malfoy's parting words, he felt able to sit down and stare a hole in his wall as he thought.

But no matter how he thought, he couldn't find a way past Malfoy's final prohibition. If he wouldn't take anything Harry offered him, then how was Harry going to help? It wasn't as though he could leave bags of Galleons and Malfoy Manor on the doorstep of the cottage in Hogsmeade and wait for the family to accept them if they chose to.

Harry paused, his cup halfway back to his throat. Then he put it down, resting it absently on his leg and yelping. A jump nearly sent tea sloshing everywhere. He shook his head and set the cup on the table beside him, then cast a spell that cooled the pain of the burn.

There *was* still something he could do. And Malfoy himself had given him the clue in some of

his words—or Harry's reaction to his words. Harry could no longer remember which one it had been, and considering how clear every one of their conversations was in his head, that was troubling. Maybe his thoughts had taken on self-protective coloration to make him stop hunting them.

Harry snorted softly to himself and rubbed his face. The whole *point* was, he could help the Malfoys without forcing the family to acknowledge that *he* was the one providing the help. It wasn't as though Harry's friends talked to them—

Or much of anyone else, it sounds like.

-And they weren't receiving regular owls from Pansy, either. So it could look as though Harry had backed away and given up, but they would still receive what was due to them. Then it could be their free choice to accept or reject what he gave.

And meanwhile, he could look into giving them further help, easing their way back into wizarding society and lessening the hostility of their neighbors. That aid ought to be even easier to disguise.

Harry felt a moment's disquiet. After sitting and reflecting, he knew why. He was capitulating, his pride insisted. Just giving up and letting Malfoy have his way. He was admitting Malfoy's words were *right* without even trying to fight them.

But Harry knew it was the only thing he could do. Malfoy's words had an element of truth to them (though not *that* much, because he hadn't been around in five years and no one could diagnose a schoolboy rival accurately after that amount of time, much less on ten minutes' reacquaintance), or they wouldn't have stung him so deeply. And he couldn't go back and keep battering at someone who looked like Malfoy did. Who had suffered like that.

Like they all did.

In his own drawing room, sitting on his own chair, with no tragic broken-winged angels to confront him and rake him with words—

(And since when did he think of Malfoy as an angel? His mind had a lot to answer for).

And with a cup of tea in his hand made just the way he liked it, Harry had to acknowledge that he had become *different* in the last few years. Even before he'd started picking fights with Ron all the time, he'd found himself hungry. The Auror cases he worked on occupied him completely whilst they were open, but the very effectiveness with which he rose to the challenge ensured that they were done with all the quicker. And he'd devised his own methods of answering reporters, playing them for his amusement, perfecting *the smile*, flirting with people who didn't need to know they could never have him and who would do anything for a bit of attention from the famous Harry Potter.

Even considering that rationalization made him clear his throat and shift uncomfortably, then look over his shoulder to be sure Malfoy wasn't behind him casting an Imperius Curse and forcing him to think all this. Then he remembered that he was resistant to Imperius anyway, and swore crossly.

So he had changed. So he wasn't a very attractive person anymore, except in the most conventional ways. People liked the brilliance of his green eyes and the deep contrast of his dark hair with his pale skin. Harry was fairly certain of that, because he'd received compliments like that even when he covered his scar and went to Muggle clubs.

But it was a pretty damn small thing to be proud of.

So there. He wasn't doing this because he wanted Malfoy to be grateful to him (which would just make him the kind of berk Malfoy had rightfully accused him of being) and he wasn't doing it because of what Malfoy had said. God forbid. Harry Potter, whether or not he was a hero, didn't do anything at the bidding of his old school rival.

He was doing this to regain his pride, and be a better person, and maybe get along better with his friends, too.

After all, he would have to live with himself, and Ron and Hermione, long after Malfoy was a distant memory.

With a satisfied nod, Harry drank the rest of his cup of tea.

Harry stood opposite the Malfoys' house, under a Disillusionment Charm. He had observed for several hours, and each hour served to tighten his throat with outrage.
Everything Malfoy had said seemed to be true. The people walking past the house in the street gave it looks of contempt. Several boys—young enough that Harry wondered why they weren't in Hogwarts—had crept up to the wards and tested them with several small spells, then wandered away in disappointment when nothing happened. An owl winging to the house with a *Daily Prophet* nearly took a Blasting Curse; it dropped the paper on the porch and vanished as soon as possible. A hand opened the door and snatched the paper inside. The door had just closed when a blast of red light landed where the paper had been. Harry wasn't sure if the spell was just a Stunner or something more insidious, from this angle.

This was no life for anyone. Lucius might have deserved it—in Harry's opinion, he still deserved Azkaban; there was no excuse for giving an eleven-year-old girl an enchanted diary that had almost killed her—but not Narcissa, who had crouched beside him in the Forest, eyes wide and terrified but still alert, and lied to the Dark Lord for him.

And not Draco, whose image was in Harry's head every time he glanced at the house.

He settled back against the door he was leaning on; he knew that the owner of this particular house was out of town and wouldn't be back for some time. Auror stake-outs had taught him

patience, at least when there was the chance that he would learn something important. (His superiors had learned very quickly never to send him off on anything that looked useless, or Harry was just as likely to wander in through the front door and pick a quarrel with the suspect). He wanted to watch until nightfall. A small Tracking Charm, undetectable under the stronger magic of the Malfoy wards, encircled the foundation of the house; it would let him know when anyone left.

The Malfoy family still had *some* money, but Harry knew they couldn't have lived on any small amount in their vaults for five years, not with even the most careful frugality. That meant someone had to be doing some job. Harry wanted to see what it was.

He wouldn't put it past Draco, in particular, to be broken and *right* about Harry's project, damn him, but still doing something nefarious in order to earn Galleons. After all, the wizarding world had hurt him. He might consider that he had a right to hurt it back.

It was midnight, and Harry had eaten the last of the peanut butter sandwiches he'd brought along and was thinking seriously about giving up his post, when the front door of the house opened. It did so slowly, cautiously, and then a wand stuck out and defused several spells that had hung in waiting on the porch. Harry would have got rid of them himself, but the whole point of this exercise was *not* alerting the Malfoys that he was watching.

Draco stepped out and spent a moment gazing critically up at the moon, which was three-quarters full. Harry wondered what for. He did know Malfoy should cover up that ghostly, glowing white hair and face of his soon, or someone would step out of their house and see him looking all unearthly and beautiful, panic, and probably summon the Aurors.

Luckily, he'd covered them in the next instant and was walking rapidly away from the village, his strides sure and quick. Harry went after him, wondering at himself for finding Malfoy beautiful.

This is Malfoy, remember? The person who insulted you so badly? The man you don't even know is gay?

But Harry had to admit that it didn't seem to matter. He'd become so used to sharing nothing more than one quick fuck with other gay wizards—it was all they wanted, and Harry had taught himself not to want anything more—that he'd also got used to looking at physical attractions first and foremost. If he was only going to spend one night with someone, his personality didn't really matter as much as Harry's ability to go to bed with him without being nauseated. Or getting a sexual disease, for that matter. Some of the gay wizards he'd met had the *oddest* ideas about what magic would make them safe.

He was content with that hypothesis until he realized that he'd started feeling marked by Malfoy's personality *first*, and only then noticed his looks.

This was a problem. But since Harry was tracking Malfoy like one of the criminals he usually hunted, he was supposed to be thinking like an Auror, not like someone looking for a one-night

stand. He made his mind be Auror-like, clean and sharp and hard.

Then he cursed himself for his unfortunate choice of words.

Then he saw that Malfoy was turning into the Forbidden Forest, walking without hesitation between a pair of trees with arched branches twining together like the reaching limbs of an Acromantula, and Harry had to pause and seriously consider his devotion to duty. Did he want to help Malfoy *that* badly?

Well, yes, he did.

Damn it. This was *such* a problem.

Harry cast more spells that would muffle the noise of his footsteps to the sharp ears of the beasts living in the Forest, and some spells that hopefully would take the edge off his smell. Since humans didn't have much of a sense of smell, wizards had never really perfected olfactory glamours; even werewolves and Animagi couldn't *describe* the scents well enough to give an idea of how they should be defended against, though they could test certain specific spells.

Harry cursed himself for reciting useless facts as though he were preparing for an Auror exam when he realized he'd let Malfoy get quite a distance ahead of him. He entered the Forest with the quietest sprint he could manage.

He nearly stumbled face-first over Draco. He was bending down, gathering up a sprig of some herb and holding it up to the moon. Then he nodded and tucked it into a pouch at his waist before bending low and scanning the brush again.

Oh. Harry blinked. *Potions ingredients. He's obviously gathering potions ingredients. That must be how he lives. Either brewing the potions himself, or sending ingredients to those who want them.*

He doubted that he would see anything interesting, but he tagged along after Malfoy for a little while longer, watching him examine the trunks of trees and cut off moss, thrust his hand into a tangle of briars and extract a single night-blooming flower, and look above himself to catch a falling leaf. Sometimes his hood slid off, and then his hair would gleam, and he would look like the angelic apparition Harry had first considered him to be.

Not angelic. Damn it.

But he still looked damn good. And Harry was aware of a steadily growing feeling of relief as he watched Draco gathering his potions ingredients, at one point stopping to banish the full pouches with a flick of his wand—presumably he'd sent them home—and shake out some empty ones that he bound to his waist.

Relief that Draco's work wasn't degrading. Relief that he hadn't been reduced to something

illegal, or dangerous, in order to support his family and maintain at least a little independence from the philanthropies the Ministry ran, which probably wouldn't welcome them anyway.

Then something crashed nearby, and Harry was reminded that this work *was* dangerous, in its own way. He lifted his wand and aimed away from Malfoy, looking steadily into the tangle of trees that he thought the crash had come from. Malfoy had looked up at it, but then a small plant growing near the ground had distracted him. He was digging at it with a silver knife, but apparently the roots were proving stubborn.

Harry's attention snapped to the side again as he saw a creature shifting about in the shadows. It looked like a winged lion, or maybe a winged tiger. He couldn't see it clearly enough. He didn't recognize the creature, either, which probably meant it was one of the unique abominations the Forest bred—or one of Hagrid's new pets. It was eying Malfoy's back and licking its jaws hungrily.

Harry moved before it could. One spell bound its legs together, a second bound its wings as they thrashed open in instinctive panic, and then he Levitated it above the ground and hung it over the branch of a tree. Let it stay there until Draco was well away. By then, it would probably be hungry enough to seek easier prey.

Part of him wished that Draco would look up, recognize the spellwork binding the winged beast, and want to thank his savior. A kiss would be acceptable, Harry thought, just so he could see how that mouth tasted.

The rest of him was glad for what happened, which involved Draco tugging loose the stubborn plant with a grunt of triumph and continuing on his way into the Forest. Sometimes, Harry thought, trailing him, it was all right not to be thanked. It was okay if someone else didn't notice and laud him for every little thing.

It was all right, sometimes, to be part of the background and let someone else be the center.

"That's…a rather unusual favor to be asking, Harry." Kingsley Shacklebolt's eyes were narrowed shrewdly, and he surveyed Harry through his glasses as if Harry had come in to register as a treefrog Animagus.
"I know, sir." Harry made sure to keep his face respectful as he leaned in to show his earnestness. Shacklebolt had never let him get away with half as much as his other superiors. There were times Harry had resented that. Now, he was grateful. It kept him grounded, and he already knew that he could expect no particular special treatment. "But I think it's at least what the Ministry owes the Malfoys."

"Not what it owes you?" Shacklebolt asked. Harry had asked the favor in his name, after all, claiming the debt that Shacklebolt had told Harry he owed Harry, personally, as a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Well, that too, but the public face is going to be that of the Ministry reopening the Malfoy case

because they feel the punishment went too far," Harry said firmly. "And in the meantime, they'll be protected. All persons in a case still open are entitled to protection if they need it." It was a line from the Auror Code, repeated over and over to the trainees until it sank into their stubborn heads. Harry himself had had particular difficulty in learning and remembering it at first, because he'd had to serve as bodyguard to a bunch of people he *knew* had helped in entering Hogwarts and torturing students. But he had overcome his objections and obeyed, escorting them from the courtrooms to their cells and back, and never physically harming them. Now other people could learn to overcome their objections to the Malfoys.

"They never did anything that would warrant this," Shacklebolt said. "People will be suspicious."

Harry stared at him. "Narcissa Malfoy saved my life," he said. "Draco Malfoy did too. And Lucius stayed out of the Battle of Hogwarts as much as possible. I don't think they've done anything to deserve the kind of harassment they're getting over losing their case, either."

Shacklebolt sighed. "You've got to understand, Harry. There were an awful lot of Death Eaters people couldn't reach, either because they died in the Battle of Hogwarts or because they're in Azkaban now. The Malfoys have become the scapegoats for *all* the Death Eaters. People can take their petty revenges on them and feel content."

"You knew about this?"

"I suspected it," Shacklebolt corrected him, "particularly when I saw how they were treated immediately after they lost their money."

Harry stared at the man for a moment, then shook his head. "And you just let it happen?"

"Had we tried to contain it, something worse would have happened."

Harry made a frustrated noise and pounded one fist on the arm of his chair. "With all due respect, sir, that's nowhere *near* enough, and you know it."

Shacklebolt simply shook his head, looking resigned and infinitely weary. "Sometimes, Harry—no, all the time, probably—things are more complicated than you think they are. And less black-and-white than you think them, too."

"Well, this is a point where things get very simple," Harry growled. "You said that you owed me a debt. Repay it by opening the Malfoy case and granting them the protection they need for the moment."

"The Wizengamot already made their decision, and they won't reverse it. What do you think will happen after a few weeks of protection, a month at the most?" Shacklebolt raised his eyebrows.

"By then, I hope to have another solution to the problem," Harry replied, and stood up. He had an appointment to meet Ron and Hermione for dinner, and he actually hoped to keep it this time,

rather than skipping it because he had to work or wanted to find someone to sleep with.

"Potter!"
Harry turned in startlement. The last thing he had expected to see was Draco Malfoy trotting down a corridor in the Ministry towards him, red in the face, trailing two other Aurors behind him who were barely able to keep up.

Malfoy looked incredibly pissed off, deliciously hot, and much better than he had—in so many ways—when Harry had last met him in the drawing room of his home. Harry grinned and leaned against a wall, folding his arms in front of him as he waited.

Malfoy slid to a halt in front of him and announced, "I know you did this. And I *still* won't collapse at your feet with gratitude."

"I know that," said Harry. "Or I would know it, if I had the slightest idea what you were talking about."

"*This!*" Malfoy waved his hand at the Auror guards, who looked offended to be referred to by such a dismissive relative pronoun."We have protection when we go to Gringotts now. We have people watching our house so no one can curse it. My mother removed some of the wards, and we're getting regular post only, no Howlers. And our case has been reopened." He stopped, panting, and stared hard at Harry.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, cupping a hand around his ear. "I still haven't heard the actually objectionable part of this."

Malfoy leaned closer. "I *told* you I didn't have to take anything you offered," he hissed. "I meant it."

"Oh, I know," said Harry. "Jolly good thing it's the Ministry offering this, isn't it?"

"You can't—" Malfoy said, and then stopped.

Harry shrugged. "I have no power to open a case the Wizengamot has already decided, Malfoy. That was all the Minister's doing. He *does* have the ability to look around on his own, you know, and he can actually make a competent decision once in a while." Now the Aurors were glaring at him, but Harry didn't care. Shacklebolt knew perfectly well what Harry thought of his policies towards the Malfoys. "So I'm not forcing my way into your house and your life anymore. One might think you miss me."

Malfoy looked as if he didn't know whether to draw his wand and curse Harry, or simply take the shorter route of strangling him. Finally, he drew a long, hissing breath, and said, "I know this was your doing somehow. I'll prove it."

"Good," Harry said. "That ought to keep you out of trouble." He tipped his head mockingly to

Malfoy. "Now, if you excuse me, I have a meeting with Pansy Ambrosius that I don't want to miss." He turned his back and started walking away again.

"You're still playing hero!" Malfoy yelled after him. "You still want a cheering crowd bowing down to your every move!"

"Oh, not really," Harry said. "I won't intrude on you again." He glanced over his shoulder and winked. "Donating anonymously and using my name and power to do real good instead of entertain myself and earn applause has proven unexpectedly addictive. But that doesn't mean you'll ever have to *acknowledge* it."

Malfoy just stared hard at him. Harry shrugged once and slid around the corner, already mentally preparing the list of files he'd need to take home and review after his meeting with Pansy.

Then Malfoy came after him again, and blocked his way forwards with an arm. Harry looked at it pointedly. "There seems to be an arm in my way," he said.

Malfoy whispered into his ear, "The reason I wasn't so shocked by the little revelation you made the other week is that I'm gay myself. And you needn't think that doing this will let you get into my pants, Potter."

"Conceited, aren't you?" Harry asked, in a normal tone of voice. "You're assuming I'd *like* to, and I haven't given a single indication I would."

"I saw the way you looked at me back there," said Malfoy. "And during your little stalking episode in the Forbidden Forest, which I sensed you doing, thank you very much."

Harry blinked for a moment. He really had thought Malfoy hadn't sensed anything.

On the other hand, that he had and had managed not to betray it was just one more thing to like about him. Harry smiled, and Malfoy took a sudden, violent, springing step away from him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked in a broken, raw, new voice. "Stop looking at me like that. It hurts."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Harry told him softly. "If I want to like you, I will; that's my decision. And if I want to help you, I will; that's my decision, too. Your choice, still, as to whether to return the liking or accept the help. But you can't stop me from trying. You've opened my eyes. Don't think you can chain my limbs."

Victory, he thought, as his words evidently made Malfoy pale and falter the way his had made Harry hesitate. But he couldn't follow up on the victory. It would have to be Malfoy's choice to come to him. He was human, after all, and a big boy. Surely he could make his own decisions.

And then Harry turned, whistling, and went on his way to his interview with Pansy.

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Chapter: 5

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—Harry Is Patient, Draco Is Outraged

Harry shook his head as he came out of the Apparition near Malfoy Manor. It was raining in Wiltshire, which it hadn't been doing in London, and he had to cast a quick Impermeable Charm before he felt safe to stride towards the house.

He wondered idly if Pansy had heard what he had done for the Malfoy family. Probably. With or without a name attached to his activities, she wasn't stupid, and could figure out who would have that kind of power.

Then Harry made himself stop wondering what Pansy would think. He didn't *want* his name applauded, remember? (Well, that wasn't strictly true, but he was trying to pretend it was). And he doubted that this change would really affect her one way or the other, except maybe to show her he was serious. He lifted his hand to knock on the door.

The tall house-elf opened it before he could. Its ears were standing aggressively straight up, and it peered at Harry the way it might have a worm trying to crawl into the house. "Mistress is out now," it squeaked.

Harry cast a quick *Tempus* Charm to make sure he was on time. He was. He frowned at the elf for a moment. "Are you sure?" he asked. "This *was* the time I was supposed to call."

"I is quite sure." The elf's hand tightened on the door, and Harry thought only well-bred politeness kept him from slamming it. "Mistress Pansy and Master Edgar have gone to their real *home*, and Master Harry Potter will not disturb them at the former Malfoy house any longer!"

And then the door slammed, and left Harry blinking.

Maybe my helping Draco and his family like that pissed her off more than I thought it would.

Except he didn't know why it would. She ought to know that the chances the Wizengamot would decide to give the Malfoys their lands and money back were extremely small. And the longer Harry stood there, rifling through his thoughts, the more baffled he was that Pansy would have taken his actions badly, let alone personally.

So there was only one way to learn why she might have done it, really. Track her and Edgar down in their "real home" and ask her.

Harry muttered irritably over the stack of parchment in front of him. It seemed that trying to learn where Hector Ambrosius's "real" home had been was as trying as learning more about the cover-up that had deprived the Malfoys of their property. He'd been through three maps, nine files, and this enormous pile of loose paper—mostly statements by former employees of Ambrosius Holdings—and only managed to learn that the house was located in England and widely considered impossible to Apparate to.
We'll see about that, he thought, and shifted the interview on the top of the pile aside, resigned to the fact that it wouldn't help him.

"Potter."

Harry jumped and yelped a little. He'd deliberately come into the Ministry offices late at night on a Friday, when there would be no one to see him taking up official time with a non-official case and scold him for it. Harry might be bored, but he wasn't going to jeopardize his job and his ability to continue to work on this by disobeying too badly in public. His private confrontation with Shacklebolt had been bad enough.

Or so he had thought, until he saw Malfoy leaning against the doorway, staring at him, and then it occurred to him that things could always get worse. He held up his lighted wand automatically, but of course his Auror guards weren't behind Malfoy.

"Yes?" Harry said, as neutrally as he could manage. Who knew that not only moonlight but *Lumos*-light could make Malfoy seem angelic? His face didn't even look weird and odd in the sharp shadows the charm cast. Now *that*, Harry considered to be something unfair within the fabric of the universe itself.

"I wanted to tell you that it's over."

"Excuse me?" Harry pushed his glasses off his nose and tried to remember the confidence he'd felt when confronting Draco the other day. It was a little hard, but just because he was so startled, he reassured himself. Not because Draco looked stern and poised again, and definitely *not* because Harry's mind was full of all the hidden nooks in the Ministry where one might hide a body. "What's over?"

"This case." Draco waved a hand and paced a step clearer. Damn, his stride was like *gliding.* That was something the long robes he'd worn into the Forbidden Forest had concealed from Harry's appreciative eyes before. "We all know the Wizengamot won't decide in our favor. Pansy's moved beyond your reach. You've given it a good try, and if you'd had nobler motives, I might even applaud you. But you don't, and I don't have to, and you should acknowledge that everything is played out now."

Harry grinned and leaned his elbow on the desk, then his chin on his palm. "Oh, no, it's not.

Especially not when you've just played your hand."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I beg your pardon?" His voice was cold and aristocratic. Harry could admire it, when it wasn't shooting sharp words at him.

"I didn't owl you about Pansy moving," Harry said. "It certainly wasn't in the *Daily Prophet*, not even the society pages. I checked. How in the world would you know about it, unless she *let* you know?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. Then he sniffed. "Malfoys have sources you know nothing about, Potter."

"I might have been willing to believe that, five years ago." Harry stood up, his skin tingling with enjoyment. Facing Malfoy and dancing around each other like this was so exhilarating. He wondered if it would be so exciting when they closed.

Do you want to close?

Oh, yes, he did. A surge of something too hot to be called lust consumed him as he stared into Malfoy's eyes. He wanted to mess up that finely-groomed hair and see those cheeks stained with passion, yes, but he also wanted to see the reluctant half-smile he imagined Draco would give when he was taking a friend's teasing in good part. This was the longest courtship Harry had ever had, and, perhaps because of that, he was envisioning staying around for longer than he usually did, too.

"We do," Draco snapped, low and intense. He took a step towards Harry instead of away. Harry wondered if he was aware of that, and debated with himself over which way would be more exciting. "The story I told you of our sad and sorry lives was not the whole truth, Potter. We retain some contacts and friends we can trust."

Harry stared at him, wondering for a moment if he really could have been *that* taken in, if this had all been a Slytherin trick inspired by Draco's pride and determination not to depend on the Boy-Who-Lived.

And then Harry grinned. Draco stiffened, his head tilted back and his arms folded across the lower part of his chest, as though he'd started to raise them and then stopped.

"I haven't seen any evidence of that," Harry told him peacefully. "I *have* seen evidence that you live poorly and that you place your life in danger to gather Potions ingredients. You don't have house-elves, and that alone must have been a nasty shock. So I'll go on acting as if it isn't true even if it is." He looked at Draco hopefully. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to direct me to where Pansy's staying now?"

"Stop it, Potter," Draco said. "I know how it will end. You have an obsession for a few weeks or a month, and then it blows up into some grand and exciting adventure for you. Stopping

Voldemort from taking the Stone. Discovering the Chamber of Secrets. Succeeding in the Triwizard Tournament. Defying Umbridge. It was plain at school how much you enjoyed that sort of excitement, fed on it, even as you were saying you didn't care." He shook his head in disgust. "But this won't be like that. It'll be a hard and weary slog even if you achieve some temporary victories, like forcing the Wizengamot to consider our case. And you'll find that out, and *then* you'll abandon us. Why in the world would you stay? We can't provide you with anything to engage your interest."

"Oh, yes, you can," Harry said, and stepped forwards until his body hovered a breath away from Draco's. Draco stood still, glaring at him in confusion. Harry shivered. He thought he could feel, if he concentrated, the tiny hairs on Draco's arms brushing against his. The contact was better than if they had been touching, he thought.

"I won't lie back and spread my legs for you no matter how you help my family, Potter."

Draco's words broke the mood, but not in the way he'd probably intended. Harry laughed and leaned back on the desk. "I know that. Your words had some effect on me, and now I know I have to just offer you what you need without expectation of a reward or a return. It's still up to you whether you take it, you know."

"You're not really this way." Draco backed up a step now, and glared at Harry with outrage. "You're pretending. Pansy told me so."

"At least you're dropping the pretense that you haven't been in contact with her." Harry spread his hands. "And how in the world would Pansy know? She's met me just two times since our schooldays, each time for less than an hour. And she regards me as a court jester. Besides, she abandoned you for five years. Why should you trust *her* so much?"

"She's more like me than you are," Draco said quietly. "She shares memories with me that make me inclined to trust her—"

"And she currently holds your Galleons and houses and doesn't want to give them up. Yes, Draco, your choice to trust her over me is *brilliant.*"

"Don't say my name like that!" Draco snapped, and drew his wand.

Harry drew his, and for a moment they stood like that, staring at each other. Harry felt his lips lift into a smile without his permission. "Draco, Draco, Draco," he whispered.

Draco gave a hiss like a wounded snake, and flicked his wand in a complicated pattern. Harry ducked, but still felt something slash open his cheek next to his eye. He lifted a hand, found a thin wound, and nodded. "I consider that an acceptable price for getting to say your name," he murmured. "Draco."

"It won't work." Draco had frozen himself into stiffness again, though only one arm was wrapped

around his chest this time; the other pointed his wand at Harry, still. But his arm shook, and Harry felt a flood of compassion run through him.

"I don't think you really believe that," he whispered. "I think you're so *worried* this might not work that you're on the verge of terror. You're allowing yourself to hope again, and that's always painful." He paused, but Draco said nothing to confirm or deny his guesses. Harry could hear his breathing, shaky and anguished, like the breathing of a trapped and wounded animal. Harry went on after a moment. "And you hate me for bringing hope into your life again, and you'd rather trust Pansy because at least you can classify her as a traitor to your best interests already. You don't know *how* to classify me, and if you get it wrong it could cost you a lot, at least in emotional pain.

"I can only say that I'm trying my best. You're under no obligation to listen to me, or trust me, or let me kiss you, though it's what I would like right now." The sound of Draco's breathing stopped altogether. "But I'll keep fighting for you regardless. And at the end, when I lay the prize at your feet and hold out my hand, it's still your choice to choose to take it. It always was." He leaned forwards and looked Draco in the eye, as well as he could when several feet of space separated them. "It always comes down to extended hands with us, doesn't it? And even if I was an idiot when I refused yours, I ask you not to be an idiot about this."

A moment more Draco stood there staring at him. Then he broke and raced madly for the door.

Harry let him go. He had to find a good minor healing charm for his face, so that no one would know Draco had hurt him. The wound could condemn Draco in other people's eyes. Harry wouldn't allow that to happen.

It took him until Sunday to finally notice that the statements by employees from Ambrosius Holdings all pointed to one spot for the transfer of money in the organization, though not one spot where they all believed Hector Ambrosius had lived. It was easy enough to obtain Apparition coordinates for the tiny village next to which the house was located, if not for the house itself, and Harry appeared on a moor that made him wince. If Hector Ambrosius had really wanted to live *here*, he must have been out of his mind. And even though Pansy had said her husband was a good man, well, Pansy said a lot of things.
Harry walked with an easy stride down the path that led to the big house with three chimneys on the edge of the moor. The three chimneys had been the clue that finally allowed him to locate the building; several of the employees had loved describing them.

Halfway to the front door, he slammed straight into a set of powerful wards. Harry winced. The wards were of the kind that opened any recent injuries and renewed their pain. Luckily for his state of mind when confronting Pansy, that only included the slash on his face. Absently, he'd used the healing charm he'd found again, whilst studying the wards.

Ah-ha. The wards used the Gordian configuration, with a sharp knot of power tying them together in the middle. It was widely considered impossible to get rid of, unless one was the original caster. But then, the ordinary people of wizarding Britain who believed that didn't have

the inside knowledge of the Ministry's Aurors.

Harry murmured a common Cutting Charm whilst moving his wand in the pattern more often used for healing charms. The protective magic in the movement countered the offensive magic inherent in the incantation and reassured the Gordian configuration that the person trying to break through the wards just wanted to help those inside. The knot shivered and relaxed. Harry stepped through, though he conscientiously turned to repair the knot behind him. For all he knew, Pansy really did have enemies, and he didn't want to endanger her and Edgar.

Three more steps, and once again he met a ward with a Gordian configuration, this one designed to exacerbate any chronic illness. Again Harry cut through the knot and repaired it.

And then there was another set of wards. And another. And another. The remainder of the path was probably three hundred paces long, and the wards were set stubbornly every three steps from one another.

Harry gritted his teeth. Pansy had probably done this to test him. She expected him to give up and go away. Had she thought he would do the same thing when her house-elf refused him entrance to Malfoy Manor?

She had no idea how determined he could be. Nor could she know about his upbringing, any more than Malfoy did. Harry had learned to endure not only the loneliness and trapped sensation of his time at the Dursleys, but patient, repetitive, mindless tasks that were the only way to finish the chores assigned him.

So he did it now. He cut through the wards one by one, as he had once washed dishes and pulled weeds one by one. This time, though, instead of supporting himself with daydreams that if he could just do it right this *one* time, *then* his relatives would love him, he used the image of Draco's face, wounded and hopelessly dignified and not sure whether to trust.

Finally, he reached the end of the wards; they stopped at the doorstep. Swearing tiredly, he started to lean his elbow on the wall, then straightened up and examined it narrowly for more wards.

Laughter from above startled him. Harry tilted his head back, making sure he didn't step off the stoop into the wards he'd just repaired. Pansy had flung up a window and was resting an elbow on it, in the relaxed attitude he'd shown Draco the night before last.

"You are the most stubborn bastard I've ever met," she said admiringly. "I'm amazed that you didn't just *wear* the Dark Lord to death."

"There were a few more problems, with him." Harry gulped and massaged his arm. Each ward had taken only a small amount of magic and only one wand movement, but a hundred of them all at one time were enough to exhaust even an experienced Auror. "Now, are you going to talk to me? Or at least explain why you ran away?"

"Surely *that's* obvious," Pansy said. "Especially since you know I've been in communication with Draco. He never *could* keep a secret when he thought he had an advantage, silly boy. The only good thing about that is at least he told me right away, so I wasn't left thinking you were in the dark."

"It bloody well isn't obvious," Harry said. "And the blunt truth you love so much is that I'm going to sit down on the step and hold myself here with Alexander's Everlasting Chains unless you open the door and let me in."

"I do believe you would." Pansy clapped her hands, and the door opened, revealing yet another abnormally tall house-elf. "Wodget, a glass of butterbeer and a comfortable chair for Mr. Potter, please."

It was victory of a sort, Harry told himself as he passed into the house behind the bowing elf, even if he wasn't really sure what he'd won yet.

Pansy met him attired in a flowing set of dark blue robes, which looked as good on her as everything seemed to. Leaning back in her chair, she regarded him whilst Harry gulped down his butterbeer, then gave the tiniest of nods. "I do believe you've passed my test, Potter," she murmured.
Harry looked into his mug. "Testing a new poison for you?"

Pansy wagged a finger at him, but didn't seem that put out. "You see," she said, "that's the kind of comment anyone but a jester could be killed for, in a true court. Lucky for you that I'm so merciful."

"Those wards didn't feel merciful." Harry stared at her.

"They wouldn't have killed you," Pansy said. "They were just there to see if you could keep going past them, the way I fled to this house to see if you would manage to find me. I was testing your dedication."

Harry firmed his grip on the mug. "I really will keep coming and talking to you as long as you'll hear me," he said. "I want you to give their money and their houses back to the Malfoys."

"And if I contact the Wizengamot and demand an order that you aren't to approach within a thousand feet of me or my son?" Pansy's face was unreadable.

"Then I'll find some other way," Harry said. "I'll always find some other way."

"I really do believe you would." Pansy nodded to herself. "Quite a dedication to a project that began out of boredom, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, I would," said Harry. "But that doesn't mean that the project has *continued* as the result of

boredom, you know."

"Are you really that different?" Pansy's eyes were shadowed. "I don't think so. I think you'll continue this obsession for a few weeks, and then drop it when something new catches your fancy. That's the way you work with Auror cases."

The stupid words startled Harry into laughing. "It's not," he said. "Auror cases end, and they end quickly when I work on them, because I want to make sure that I'm giving the victims justice as soon as possible. And with one fairly ended, I can go on to something else. I know this would take more time and effort. I understood that as soon as I really sat down and analyzed Draco's first speech to me."

"I don't think you have any idea what it'll be like to squire a disgraced family back into pure-blood wizarding circles," said Pansy. "Particularly when you have no understanding of those circles in the first place."

"Then I can learn." Harry grinned at her and raised his mug. "You've given me the first lesson, you know. Playing the jester might carry me far. And if it would let me speak truth that everyone else would chuckle indulgently over and see things that no one will notice me noticing, it'll be better than my role as hero."

"You are *very* strange," Pansy said, her voice barely a breath. "No one makes a life's cause out of a few weeks' work. And you know it might take most of your life? People will still be sneering at the Malfoys twenty years later. Reputations are lost much more quickly than they're won."

"Then I'll stay," said Harry. He really meant it, at least at the moment. He thought again of Draco's terrified face. He'd made some attempts to run away from his fear—trying to persuade Harry to stop helping him, for instance—but he'd faced it head-on in Harry and Ron's office. And that courage called to Harry, spoke to him. It was a kind of courage he'd certainly never expected a Slytherin to have.

Which meant Draco wasn't a Slytherin anymore. He was human.

"If it comes into conflict with your Auror job?" Pansy asked.

"I'll make sure it won't."

"I don't see how you can do that."

"Just like you didn't see how I could cut through your wads and track you down?"

Pansy smiled a little. "And what if your friends disapprove?"

"Oh, they almost certainly will," said Harry. "Hermione was envisioning me adopting orphaned Kneazles, not helping the Malfoy family back into polite society. But I love them, and I know

they won't turn their backs on me. They can't dictate who I associate with. They understood that a long time ago."

Pansy exhaled sharply. "All right. You've passed the test I created the wards to measure."

"Which was?"

"How serious about this you were, and how much of a companion you might be for Draco." Pansy gazed at him with a faint smile. "He wrote to me first, you know, complaining about you. And he had reason. You were a stuck-up little pissant when you first made contact with me, and with him."

Harry nodded to acknowledge the truth of that remark. "So this is your way of making sure I'm good friend material?"

"Boyfriend, perhaps," said Pansy.

"You don't know—"

"Give me some credit for not being blind, Potter. You're gay, Draco's gay, and he writes about you too desperately. And your face is too soft when you talk about him. Besides, I think the relationship between you is too volatile to stay friendship. You'd become lovers or blow up at each other within a year's time." Pansy waved her hand. "So, yes, you have my blessing to pursue Draco, if you want to. But know that it's still his choice."

"Of course it is," Harry said. He knew he was beaming stupidly at her, but he rather didn't care.

"There was another reason I wanted to make sure you would be a good companion for him, you know." Pansy leaned her hand on her chin again.

"What?"

"To make sure he has a consolation prize to somewhat compensate him for his other losses. Because you still haven't convinced me to give back his money and houses." Pansy rose to her feet with a nod. "Until next week, Potter."

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—Harry Is Protective, Draco Is Evaluative

WIZENGAMOT DECIDES AGAINST MALFOYS

The headline screamed at Harry from the top of the front page of the *Daily Prophet.* At least, it did in the moment before Harry dropped the paper to the floor and began to stamp on it methodically. As he did, he began to scream the foulest words he knew at the walls.

Hermione would have been horrified at the display of temper. But as Harry had explained patiently to her more than once, doing extremely childish things in private kept him polite and smiling in public. He knew he could always go back behind closed doors and do *more* childish things.

This time, he doubted private action would be enough. The Wizengamot had arranged to close the Malfoy case again *long* before they could have given careful consideration to all the evidence. They usually judged for at *least* three weeks to a month, and it had only been six days.

No, Harry was just going to have to do something public.

"Uh, mate?"
"Yeah, Ron?" Harry didn't look up as he worked furiously on the report in front of him. He and Ron had been assigned a minor case that they'd closed the same day: finding out whether a group of wizarding children had *really* been pranking Muggles to believe they saw ghosts, or whether it was a case of mass delusion. Mass delusion had been fairly easy to prove, and now it only remained to file the paperwork that would convince *others* it had been easy.

"The expression on your face is scaring me."

Harry blinked at his desk for a moment, then blinked at Ron. His partner sat nervously on the edge of his chair, one hand braced on the desk as if he would shove himself up and away at the first sign of Harry's temper.

"Oh," Harry said. *I suppose he thinks I'll still pick fights with him.* "I'm not angry with *you.*"

Ron relaxed with a loud sigh. Harry was aware of his eyes this time as he wrote swiftly, only pausing to dip his quill in the ink when it *absolutely* needed it, but he ignored that. If Ron could ask an actual question, Harry intended to answer. Anything else would waste precious time.

"Well?" Ron said at last.

"They closed the Malfoy case." The report was finished. Harry tucked it into the appropriate folder and stood with a sharp snap of his spine. "Long *before* they could have finished deciding anything. The last proceedings are today. There's a period of about one hour when they're bound to listen to anyone who comes to them and asks to testify. That was instituted to satisfy poor wizards who might not have been able to stop working to travel to the Ministry any time earlier."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, then conjured a mirror to peer critically into. Let Hermione deride his vanity if she wanted to, but this time, his good appearance would benefit someone other than Harry. "I'm going to testify."

Ron whistled. Harry looked at him. "What?"

"You must be *really* far gone on Malfoy if you're going to testify for him," Ron muttered. "Hermione told me that you were, but I didn't believe it."

Harry opened his mouth to deny his affection for Draco, then shut it again. He really couldn't efface what he felt after their fight the other day. It felt traitorous, though Draco would probably never know. "Do you mind?" he asked instead.

"As long as you don't bring him over just to sneer at my family, it's fine."

"I don't think he would sneer," Harry said, remembering the way Malfoy's family lived, worse off even than the Weasleys. At least the Weasleys had each other, and friendly neighbors. Harry tried to imagine what it must have been like for Draco to be cooped up in his house with mourning, stressed parents, and his mind rebelled. He shrugged and checked his watch, then began to trot out of the office.

"Good luck!" Ron called after him.

Harry smiled back at his friend. Maybe he didn't deserve to have Ron, whom he'd so recently fought with, wishing him good luck, but the Malfoys certainly did, and it was for them that he'd gone to fight.

Harry had two surprises the instant he stepped into the Wizengamot's courtroom, two pleasant and one distinctly less so. The pleasant surprises were that the Wizengamot stared at him as if he had two heads, and that Draco was sitting in the section of the gallery reserved for witnesses. The unpleasant surprise was that behind Draco sat Lucius.

He was still the cold, haughty man Harry had seen on the day of the trial that narrowly avoided condemning the Malfoys to Azkaban, though now one had the sense his mask was more fragile. But his arrogance was probably greater, to think he could come here and be heard.

And he had been so frantic, so nearly mad, in those days when the case closed for the first time. Harry was cautious, now, of what he might say to the Wizengamot—as he would conceive it, his enemies, in close reach for the first time in five years.

Lucius continued staring forwards as if nothing less than the destruction of the world could shake him from his contemplation of those enemies, but Draco, alerted by the stares and murmurs from the Wizengamot, turned around. Harry felt a surge of painful, guilty delight when Draco's eyes met his. He really *hadn't* planned on meeting him here, since he hadn't been aware Draco would testify on his own behalf. But would Draco realize that?

He couldn't tell what Draco had realized. Shock had transformed his face into a blank slate, and he simply stared as Harry took a seat a few rows away.

An ancient witch Harry knew vaguely cleared her throat. "Mr. Potter," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for the testimony proceedings, of course," Harry said blandly. He paused a moment, then gave her *the* smile. It had an effect even among the male portion of the Wizengamot, who almost unwillingly relaxed. The witch blushed, surprisingly becomingly for her age and, in Harry's eyes, her sex. Harry leaned back in his chair and made a show of anxiously consulting his watch. "I'm not late, am I? I'll be happy to compress my testimony if—"

"Oh, no, of course not!" The witch clapped her hands. "Please, Mr. Potter, say whatever you want."

Harry had become accustomed to listening for faint emphases and insinuations in people's speech where he'd never heard any before. A lift of stress or the fall of a certain tone could tell him whether a man *actually* intended to sleep with him, or if someone was truly convinced by *the* smile. And this witch's emphasis on "you," plus a slight dart of her eyes at the Malfoys, told Harry the truth.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Malfoy are scheduled to speak first," he said, in a tone of polite chagrin that drew Lucius's eyes to him at last and made the witch flush again, not so becomingly this time. "I *am* sorry for being so rude. Please, let them go ahead." He sat back in his chair with a bow of his head to Draco and Lucius. If he showed he respected them, the Wizengamot was more likely to agree on their own respect.

"But, Mr. Potter—" the witch began.

"No," Harry said clearly, feeling Draco's eyes on him. "I acted on an impulse I felt was right, but I *also* intruded myself into a situation where I didn't think of the rights of others. I like to think I'm learning better than that at last, no matter how many mistakes I make."

Draco's eyes were practically burning into the side of his face. Or perhaps that sensation was only the desire Harry had to turn and look at him. He didn't look. He didn't want Draco pinned on the spot as he would be if the Wizengamot noticed Harry taking an interest in him. He kept his gaze intent on the Wizengamot instead.

The witch cleared her throat in bafflement. "If you're sure, Mr. Potter."

"I'm *more* than sure," said Harry, and winked, and turned up the light in his smile.

Flustered, the witch nodded and turned to the Malfoys. "Then if you would please go ahead with your testimony, Mr.—ah—Draco?"

Draco rose to his feet. Harry told himself it was permitted to watch him as he came forwards to the front of the witnesses' gallery, though perhaps his eyes shouldn't have lingered *quite* so long on Draco's arse. Then he closed his eyes and listened intently as Draco spoke.

His voice was quiet, simple, persuasive—at least to Harry. "For the last five years, my family has lived in not only poverty, but absolute isolation. Our neighbors are uniformly hostile to us. We have to use wards simply in order to retrieve the paper in the morning. We're forbidden from leaving Britain, so we cannot change our situation by departing into exile, as I know some people think the proper punishment for Death Eaters." He spoke the words "Death Eaters" without flinching.

Good for you, Draco, Harry thought, feeling a strong shiver of protective anger course through him. *I know some people in this room worked with Death Eaters during the war, even if they had no idea they were doing so. Don't allow them to see how the words affect you, if they do.*

"A serious assault on my mother's life occurred two years ago, when she went to Diagon Alley to draw money from what remains of our Gringotts accounts," Draco said in a soft, firm voice. "She was cursed in the middle of the street, in font of a pair of Aurors. Yet they insisted on 'detaining' her to make sure *she* hadn't cast the curse, whilst the perpetrator escaped. Meanwhile, she almost bled to death in front of them, as they shouted questions at her."

Harry wanted to spit, and his eyes flashed open. *Why didn't Draco tell me this story earlier? That would explain why he was so reluctant to accept Auror protection, and it would be another reason why he distrusted me.*

"Gentlemen, ladies." Draco lifted his head, once again reminding Harry of a stag cornered by werewolves. He hadn't chosen this situation, and left to himself, he probably would have avoided entering the Wizengamot's courtroom ever again. Yet he had made the best of it. God, the *bravery* it must take him to appear here…

An irreverent part of Harry's mind noted that, yes, it was definitely Draco's personality that was attracting him, before and even in opposition to his looks.

"I make no claims for our crimes during the war," Draco went on. "Those were decided to be not enough to imprison us in a trial by this same august body two *years* before our monies and lands were taken from us."

Uneasy shifting from the Wizengamot, as if they had forgotten that they themselves had decided to give the Malfoys justice when the question of Death Eater activity actually came up. Harry shoved his hands in the pocket of his robes, so full of pride he could burst. The temptation to stand up and stalk to Draco's side was very strong, but he wanted to keep still because this was also Draco's moment, Draco's alone.

"I do say that, whatever old grudges may have been left and whatever place we have taken

because others cannot reach the Death Eaters locked in Azkaban or buried in various cemeteries—"

Startled shifting from the Wizengamot.

"We have suffered enough." Draco bowed like an actor about to walk off the stage. "Please consider my words carefully, and look past my name and my face. Thank you."

He turned and made his way to his seat with fragile dignity. Or was it fragile? Harry thought, watching him, enchanted. Someone who could make such a speech after five years of loneliness and grinding weight had to have an inner core of solid steel, no matter how battered he might look on the outside.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," the witch who had spoken to Harry said, looking a little dazed. "Mr. Lucius?"

Lucius bowed his head to listen to his son. Draco was urgently whispering into his ear. Harry lifted his eyebrows in curiosity, wondering if Draco was giving his father certain words to say. At least that ought to prevent his testimony from sounding completely disjointed and rambling, as Harry had feared it would.

Then Lucius cleared his throat and said, "I have decided against giving witness of my own." His voice creaked slightly. Harry thought he sounded more like Sirius than the confident, drawling patrician he had heard speak on more than one occasion before the war. "My son said all that I wish to say."

Harry caught his breath. He was almost certain Lucius would not have thought of that on his own.

Then he saw Draco's eyes fixed on him, and he saw hope shining unshielded in them for the first time.

Draco had held Lucius back because he thought his father's testimony might damage their cause, and to give Harry a chance to speak the words that, unwanted or not, would probably prove most powerful with the Wizengamot.

Harry felt a little high as he got to his feet. What mattered most to him in that moment—far more than the chance to speak to the Wizengamot and play the hero for the Malfoys—was the fact that Draco was *trusting* him to help them. He couldn't have known Harry would be here and yet, in the space of a few minutes, he'd decided to trust him.

Of course, the shine in those eyes, as bright and cold as daggers, had its dangerous edge, too. This was a test harder than Pansy's wards had been. If Harry screwed this up, Draco was likely to decide that all offers of help were useless, and never see Harry again.

The thought made Harry squirm with pain.

He didn't allow it to show on his face as he swaggered to the front of the witnesses' gallery and looked the members of the Wizengamot square in the eye. He wore *the* smile, and he had all the persuasive powers he'd developed over the last several years at his disposal. Usually, they were aimed at getting people to give him something he wanted.

They would do the same thing this time, but the thing won would not be so selfish.

"I have been to the Malfoy house," Harry began in calm, ringing tones. "Not invited," he added, when frowns decorated several of the listeners' faces. "I forced myself into their home because I wanted to see for myself if the rumors of how they lived were true. They are.

"Their life is *not* normal. I have heard some people say that the punishment given them is right and just because they are finally seeing how the average wizard lives. But the average wizard has a job outside the house to travel to, friends and neighbors he can visit, public diversions to entertain him when he grows bored. The Malfoys have none of that. They cannot shop for the most ordinary things without being assaulted, as Mr. Malfoy's testimony should have revealed."

He leaned his elbow on the railing and scanned his audience with sharp, serious eyes. "Imagine living in a small house for five years, sirs, madams. Imagine that you could not leave except at high risk to your life. Even staying inside the house is not totally safe, as the malicious and the idle regularly test your wards just to see what will happen. You cannot leave Britain. You cannot take shelter in a friend's house, because the friends you thought you had turned their backs on you. You cannot be sure that you will wake up in the morning. Perhaps someone will succeed in setting the house on fire at last, or breaking through your wards and cutting your throat. Imagine wizarding Britain *rejoicing* in such an occurrence, rather than seeing it as murder."

He lowered his voice. "And this after you were *exonerated* for your crimes during the war."

Uneasy shifting.

"That has been the life the Malfoys have lived for the last five years." Harry tossed his head in the direction of the chairs where Lucius and Draco sat. "That they have retained the ability to do more than cower behind defensive spells is a testimony to their strength. That strength should be rewarded, not punished further. I ask that you keep the Malfoy case open and investigate it. Reopened cases are normally never closed so quickly. Ask yourself whether you are satisfied to shut this one now—now that you know the truth."

Anything more would have been dangerous, he knew, especially considering that he'd come close to accusing members of the Wizengamot of having some delight in the Malfoys' suffering. He bowed once and then sat down.

Once again, he did not turn to see how Draco was looking at him. It was too much of a temptation. He kept his eyes on the Wizengamot instead, and watched how they turned to one

another, noting the amount of indignant whispering, of hasty whispering, of shamed whispering. He itched to cast an eavesdropping spell and listen to their conversations more distinctly, but wards were set up in the courtroom against such things. Besides, all he needed now was for someone to notice him doing that and ruin the rock-solid integrity he'd just been trying to display.

Finally, the Wizengamot turned to face the gallery again, and the old witch cleared her throat uneasily. She avoided Harry's eyes, and her first verdict was delivered in a mumble.

"I'm sorry, madam," Harry said, and gave her a taste of *the* smile for her trouble. "I can't hear you."

"I said—" She coughed. "I said the Malfoy case will remain open for the present, whilst we investigate the mechanics of the transfer of the Malfoy lands and monies."

Harry could hear a rustle from the side, as though someone had fallen against his chair. He kept looking forwards with the same determination Lucius had shown a short time before, giving the Malfoys the privacy to recover from their weakness. He bowed. "Thank you, madam," he said. "I'm delighted that you've reconsidered."

The witch looked as if she might want to reassure Harry that it was *his* testimony and not the Malfoys' which had kept the case open, but Harry had already turned to slip out.

Draco caught him in the corridor to the lifts.

"Potter."

Harry turned, braced. He wasn't sure that he wouldn't see contempt on Draco's face. After all, Harry *had* swooped in and played the conquering hero after Draco said he hated that. Even if he'd done it less obnoxiously than usual, it still put the Malfoy family somewhat in his debt.

But Draco, who stood with his head cocked to the side and his arms folded in front of his chest like a protective barrier, ran a slow, appraising gaze up and down Harry's body. Harry licked his lips, his throat suddenly burning as if he'd swallowed an entire gulp of hot mustard, and shivered.

The shiver seemed to decide Draco. For all Harry knew, he might otherwise have departed without speaking a word, but now he came a few steps nearer. Harry locked his legs to keep from showing further weakness and met Draco eye to eye. Draco didn't *loom*, but he was effectively keeping Harry's attention pinned to him. He didn't even know where Lucius had disappeared to, and he didn't care.

"Why did you really come here this morning?" Draco asked, close enough that his breath caressed the side of Harry's face, yet far enough away that Harry didn't know what his breath smelled like.

"I saw the announcement in the paper," Harry said, unable to lie, unable even to make his words sound prettier as was now second nature around everyone but Ron and Hermione. "It made me so angry that I decided to come here and try to convince the Wizengamot to keep the case open."

"Did you know you would convince them?"

Harry frowned, beginning to recover his balance. Draco's question made no sense. "Of course not. How could I?"

Draco raised an eyebrow, which somehow made the appraisal in his eyes more cutting, and Harry was lost again. "I thought perhaps you had spoken to some members of the Wizengamot in private first."

"I didn't have time," Harry said. "There was a case I had to finish, and then I came straight here."

"Would you have?"

"If I'd thought of it, yes." Harry shrugged. "I really wanted to persuade them."

"Would you have told me about it?"

Harry bit his lip savagely. "I—I don't know," he said.

Draco tilted his chin at a precise, chilly angle. "Why not?"

"Because—because the balance is so delicate around you!" Harry burst out. It was such a relief to speak the words bubbling in his head at last. He had tried to talk about them a little to Ron and Hermione, but they hadn't understood, and Harry didn't trust the only other possible audience, Pansy, enough to confess this. "I don't want to offend you. I don't want to make you think that I'm trying to play hero just to impress you, and telling you about influencing the Wizengamot could be seen as that. But on the other hand, *not* telling you could be construed as lying. It's so delicate, offering my actions up for judgment and keeping myself on offer, yet trying not to press you to choose. I probably would have followed my gut on telling you. And I would have told you if you *asked*."

"You don't want to lie to me?" Draco asked.

"No."

"Why not?" Draco moved a step closer and lifted his hand as if he would cup Harry's cheek, but kept his fingers a few inches away from skin-to-skin contact. It drove Harry crazy, and he thought he knew, now, how Draco must have felt during the conversation in his office the other day, when Harry had been the one to control such a delicate touch. "You could tell me that your motives for pursuing this case are completely different now—not boredom any more—and it would make you look better in my eyes. Maybe I'd even believe you."

Harry met his gaze, and his answer welled up, born of frustration and want and Draco's gut-tingling, heart-clenching presence. "Because I want to have you on honest terms or not at all."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "And that means," he whispered, "that you don't want me to choose you simply based on gratitude for your actions towards my family."

"Never," Harry said, and managed to fold his arms and turn his head a little to the side. "I want you to choose me because you—" He laughed suddenly, and though the laughter was strained, it didn't make Draco back away. Harry was prepared to count that as a victory right now. "I can't even say why," he muttered. "Not without seeming to prejudge you."

"Say what you mean," Draco whispered.

"I want you to choose me because *you* want me," Harry said.

Draco smiled. Then he stepped away from Harry and made his way down the corridor, calling jauntily over his shoulder, "I haven't decided yet!"

Harry thought he should have felt angrier, to have such an intense conversation end in an answer so flippant. And there was no guarantee that Draco *would* choose him, after all, with Harry discouraging the strongest reason he'd have to do so.

But still, Harry leaned against the wall and smiled.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Harry Is Slytherin, Draco Is Slytherin Too

Harry sneezed mightily and sorted through the pile of papers in front of him. They wanted to cling together, and then fly in all directions when he parted them. Harry didn't allow that. Though his fingers were by now covered with multitudes of small paper cuts, he pried each sheet of parchment apart and stared at each in turn, squinting in the light of the small, powerful *Lumos* charm on his wand.

Several times, an archivist had approached him and asked, or demanded to know, what he was doing. And each time Harry had smiled and replied, "Research for a case."

Because that was the *purpose* of the Ministry archives, the archivists could hardly interrogate him on the subject. They simply found it suspicious—and said as much—that anyone would actually *use* them. But they went away with baffled frowns, and Harry smiled blandly in their direction and went back to sorting through the parchments again.

It had occurred to him that just because he couldn't find evidence of the transfer that had put the Malfoy funds in the hands of Hector Ambrosius didn't mean that he couldn't find evidence of *other* things.

"*Achoo!*"
Harry laughed as he swirled his cloak off his shoulders. "Sorry, Victoire," he said, and carefully cast a spell that removed the dust from the cloth. "I really should have done that before I came in the door, huh?"

Bill and Fleur's five-year-old daughter folded her arms and scowled at him. "Yes, you *should* have," she said.

Harry bent down and tickled her until she gave in and started giggling. He knew from experience that Victoire didn't mind sending other people tumbling into piles of dust and dirt; she just objected to it getting on *her.* Already she was a mastermind at getting her younger cousins Molly and Lucy, Percy's daughters, into trouble.

"'Oo ees eet?" came the voice from beyond the doorframe, and the next moment Fleur swept into the room with Dominique, the baby, on her arm. She brightened when she saw Harry and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "'Arry! We 'ad nearly given up 'ope of seeing you whilst thees case lasted!"

"It's easing off now," said Harry, guessing from what she said that Ron and Hermione hadn't told Bill and Fleur about the *real* reason he was spending so much time in the Ministry archives. That was all right. It *was* a case, in a way, and there would be plenty of time to get the Weasleys used to the Malfoys after Harry had arranged for the transfer of the money and houses back to Draco's family.

If Draco chooses to stay around.

Harry took a deep breath and told himself not to act like a sop. If Draco chose not to stay around, then he chose that. Harry wouldn't press him, no matter how much he wanted to.

No matter how bad he felt that three days had gone by without a single owl being exchanged between them.

"Good." Fleur somehow managed to clap her hands authoritatively even whilst juggling a sleepy Dominique. "Now, 'Arry will set the table and Victoire will go clean 'erself up."

"It was Uncle Harry who did this!" Victoire insisted, her voice going shrill. "Make *him* clean me up!"

"Why do with magic what can be done with soap and water?" Fleur asked, reasonably, Harry thought, and herded Victoire away.

Harry stepped through into the dining room of Shell Cottage and hesitated, then cast a location spell to tell him where the drawer with the cutlery was; it had been a long time since he'd eaten here, and Fleur liked to change her kitchen up regularly.

As he was fetching out forks, knives, and, after a memory of Fleur telling him they would have soup, spoons, Bill's voice said from behind him, "I didn't think we'd see you here tonight, Harry."

I deserve that, Harry reminded himself. For a long time now, he'd had a habit of breaking promises to have dinner with Bill, Fleur, their children, Ron, and Hermione in favor of working on cases—because that would keep him from being bored—or going out to dance and flirt with attractive men. He would try to be better about that from now on, just as he was trying to be better about the way he acted around Draco, but it would take a while to reassure his family that he meant it.

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. Bill had had his other ear pierced since Harry saw him last, and now a dragon's fang and a long chain of spiders both dangled almost to his shoulder. "I'm making more time now for the more important things," Harry said easily. He nodded to the spider earring. "I imagine that thrills Ron to no end."

Bill laughed, the curious, wary expression on his face relaxing. "I enchanted them last week and had them crawl after him. There's something entertaining about seeing your war hero brother who you *know* faced worse things than a bunch of spiders cowering in a corner and screaming like a girl."

Harry snickered. Ron hadn't told him about that incident, of course. Harry might never have known about it at all unless he asked Bill.

*See how many things you miss when you're too caught up in only chasing what's exciting?*he chided himself.

"Perhaps tonight you can hide them in his food," Harry suggested, snickering again as he thought about Ron leaping out of his chair and spitting frantically.

"Fleur would *kill* me," Bill said, probably having the same vision, but he looked tempted.

"Do it when she's out of the room."

Bill rubbed his hands together. "Done." He clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Don't go away again for so long, Harry. You were missed." Then he wandered out of the room, humming, and already

spinning the spiders on his finger.

Harry heard footsteps thumping down the corridor, and hurried to set the table. Victoire would give him hell if she found out that *she* had cleaned herself up, but Uncle Harry still hadn't managed to set the table.

More dust, more parchment, more minute paper cuts. Luckily, Hermione had taught him a charm that healed them, so Harry was at least not bleeding all over precious data. He'd also learned how to cleanse his glasses and stop himself from sneezing.
The archivists who approached him were beginning to look desperate now. They practically fawned on him, making a point of mentioning their expertise in looking through the files. Why didn't the famous Auror Potter return to his nice *clean* office and trust them to bring up files as he needed them?

And Harry would smile, and turn back to the folders and the loose stacks of parchment, feigning even more intense interest than he was feeling until they gave up, with muffled sobs, and went away.

Harry didn't have to feign *that* much interest. He knew every transaction had two sides. He just had to find the second.

In the meantime, what he was learning would make excellent blackmail material against some of the other Aurors.

Harry Apparated carefully to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He had received an owl earlier that day demanding that he come to the town but not let anyone see him. It concerned the Malfoys, the letter said, and the only thing Harry knew for certain was that the letter didn't bear Draco's handwriting.
If it was a threat against them, then Harry wanted to know about it. Besides, he'd back himself against any less well-trained person from the town—and if it were a fellow Auror, the contest would be too interesting to pass up.

For long moments, even as he looked cautiously around the small patch of trees his correspondent had described so that he could Apparate to it, he saw no one. Then a pale gleam of hair caught his attention from the other corner of the glade. Harry drew his wand as he watched a tall, slender figure stride rapidly towards him.

It was Narcissa, her face every bit as ghostly as her son's. Harry kept his wand up anyway; her lips were bloodless, and not because of the moonlight.

"What are your intentions towards Draco?" she asked, halting several feet away from him. One of her hands was clenched at her sides, hidden in her robes. Harry thought the chances she was holding her own wand were excellent.

"Has he complained about them?" Harry asked, shifting his feet to be in a better position if

Narcissa attacked. He didn't *want* to fight with Draco's mother. On the other hand, he was not about to stand here and let himself be cut to pieces. Narcissa had reason to be paranoid and curse-happy after the five years she'd spent under such close confinement. "Or me?"

"No." Narcissa snapped out the word. "He told me what you did for us in front of the Wizengamot a few days ago. But no one performs that kind of action without some expectation of a reward. What is yours? If it is ancient schoolboy revenge, you should know that I will cut you apart."

The threat was delivered in a flat tone, which made it all the more believable. Harry nodded in appreciation, then said, "I've explained my motivations to Draco. I like him, and want to be closer to him. Anything more intimate is between me and him, and it would have to be his choice to tell you."

Narcissa stared at him. Then she shook her head and said, "Draco is much poorer than he was five years ago."

Harry laughed aloud. "At the moment," he said, ignoring Narcissa's stiff tension, "I probably have more money in my vaults than your entire family does. Believe me, I'm not looking to profit from him."

"I cannot believe your stated motivations," Narcissa said quietly. "*Why* would you come to repay your debts now and not earlier? *Why* do you think we will be grateful enough for this to hand our son over to you? I would not do that for the Dark Lord, who was much closer to me in beliefs and ideals. I will not do it for the great Harry Potter."

"Draco's a big boy," Harry said. "I think he can make his own decisions about handing himself over."

"You have not answered my question." Narcissa was aiming her wand now, but it hadn't moved other than that. Harry kept one eye on her hand and one eye on her face. Even if she used a nonverbal spell, the accompanying gestures would still betray her. "Why did you not come to us earlier, when we might have believed you were helping us out of pure goodness alone?"

"I didn't know the situation was this bad," Harry said. "And frankly, I didn't care at the time."

"That is not a good enough answer."

"It's my answer," Harry said. "And the only one you'll get." He set his feet more firmly. He sympathized with Narcissa, he didn't want to anger her, but there was only so far he was willing to change, even for Draco. He wouldn't meekly agree with any evil assessment of his character, either. "I didn't know. I should have looked into the case earlier. But I didn't, and no one made any effort to inform me, either." He cocked an eyebrow. "You didn't call in the debt I owed you."

"You do not understand pure-blood pride." Narcissa did her best to turn into an ice statue. "You

do not understand how *lowering* it would be to beg for help from a half-blood."

"It would make you go lower than you've gone already?" Harry asked incredulously.

Narcissa froze even more. "You truly understand *nothing*."

"I understand that your blood pride is one of the stupidest beliefs I've ever heard of, and clinging to it when you realize blood makes no difference in how you've been treated by the Wizengamot is idiotic," Harry said. He ignored the way her chin trembled. "You won't matter to other people because of it. Hell, your pure-blood *friends* couldn't be bothered to help you for the past five years, even though they share the same heritage. So, yeah, I think it's valueless."

"And if I report this conversation to Draco?" Narcissa asked, barely moving her lips.

"Go ahead." Harry lowered his wand and tucked it away in a robe pocket, ignoring the threat implicit in her wand still being drawn. "If he lets this influence his decision, we're not right for each other anyway. He *has* to know we're going to disagree, and that I'll *never* think my mother was a lesser woman than you simply because her parents didn't have magic." Narcissa lifted her nose. Harry snorted. "If that's more important to him than having a partner who would like him and challenge him and try to help him hold his head high again is, then he's already made his decision, and good luck to him."

"I suppose you'll stop helping us if he decides against having you, too." Narcissa's voice was filled with masochistic pleasure.

"Of course not," Harry said. "His throwing himself at me was never a condition of my help. By the time I started really being attracted to him, I'd stepped beyond the stage where boredom was my only motivation for doing this."

"He may not see it that way. Or he may decide that appearing on your arm would make him too weak, too dependent on you."

"That has to be his choice."

Narcissa clenched her free hand, but the wand didn't move, which rather relieved Harry's worries. "I wish I *understood* you," she said, voice soft and frustrated. "You are not the hero that you were. You do not *seem* to be an enemy, but our family has had much experience with smiling faces suddenly turning hard."

"I'm Harry Potter," said Harry, and grinned at her. "Someone who can't be reduced to one of the shallow stereotypes you'd like to believe in. Not anymore, anyway," he added. "And for that, I have Draco to thank. If you want to tell him anything about this conversation, tell him I owe him as much as he would ever owe me."

"I could lie," Narcissa said meditatively. "I could tell him that you really admitted you only want

him for his good looks."

"And if he believed that lie, without making any attempt to contact me and see if it was true?" Harry shrugged. "Then he wouldn't survive half the things he'd have to go through as Harry Potter's partner anyway. Good night." He turned away.

"You act as though you wish for something permanent with him," Narcissa called.

"I do." Harry didn't bother to glance over his shoulder or slow his stride.

"Real lovers do not decide on each other in a few days."

"Maybe not the lovers you know," Harry responded, and vanished with a sharp crack. He was tired of people who wouldn't listen.

It was the morning of his meeting with Pansy that Harry found it. He turned aside one more piece of parchment, and there the evidence was, blinking up at him in black and white, as obvious as Victoire with the remains of a chocolate biscuit smeared around her mouth. Harry's grin made an archivist fall over as he took the parchment upstairs to be copied.

Here it is, Pansy. I wonder what you'll say to this evidence? I suppose you might have a backup strategy prepared, but it isn't likely; the simpler course if you knew about this would have been to destroy it.

"I need to talk to you."
Harry looked up, blinking. This time, Draco had come to the Ministry in full daylight and full sight of everyone else, too, including Ron, who sat slack-jawed at his desk. No Auror escorts behind him, Harry noted in annoyance. Had he slipped them, or had they decided that they didn't need to protect Draco within the Ministry itself? If the latter, Harry would be having a little talk with them.

"All right," Harry said, and signaled to Ron to continue working as he followed Draco out of the room. Ron gave him a disbelieving look, but bent over his paperwork again—probably, Harry thought, because Hermione had threatened to give him the silent treatment if he brought home one more report he'd "forgotten" to write.

Draco cast a swift privacy ward around them. Harry immediately cast his own privacy ward outside that. Draco raised an eyebrow. "You don't trust my casting?"

"Not that," Harry said. "Only Aurors can use those kinds of spells in the Ministry. Otherwise, it trips an alarm. But this way, anyone investigating will see my ward wrapped around yours and figure it's all right."

"Still protecting me," Draco said. His face was very blank, other than his eyes; they were sharply appraising. It was, Harry thought, the way he might look at a jewel or a fine horse someone was

offering him, though Harry didn't imagine he had many such offers these days. "What if I don't want protection?"

Harry drew a deep breath. His face was hot and he felt dizzy, but he made himself speak the words. "Then tell me to stop protecting you and go away. Tell me you prefer to get along on your own and I'll—stop."

Draco bowed his head. Then he said, "I don't want you to stop protecting me. It makes me feel like I'm worth something to someone other than my parents for the first time in five years." He looked up and eyed Harry again. "But I think I need you to."

Harry licked his lips; he couldn't really say anything, so he lifted his eyebrows, waiting.

"I would depend on you too much," Draco said, the words slow but determined, like the trudging of a man with a heavy load on his back. "I wouldn't *want* to, but that's what would happen. It's so easy to let gratitude dictate the kind of relationship we'd have. It isn't enough to make me go to you now, but who knows what it could become after a few months of seeing you every day and watching you help me and my family?" He laughed without humor. "I know myself very well, Harry. The last five years have taught me that, at least. I have a strength I never knew existed when I was just a scared little boy at Hogwarts. But I know the limits of that strength, too. It would be so *easy* to become what my father was: a scared slave waiting for a word from his master to make him feel good about himself—"

"I could *never* be like Voldemort," Harry said angrily.

Draco flinched, and then sighed. "I know," he said. "The fault is in both of us, but it wasn't the fault the Dark Lord had. You would shower me with kindness. And *that's* the problem. *That's* what I'd be susceptible to. I got through a year of the Dark Lord ordering me to torture people, and two years of believing my parents were going to die any second. I could get through it again." He shuddered violently. Harry stifled the immediate impulse to reach out and assure Draco he'd never have to suffer anything like that again as long as Harry was alive. "But I don't think I could get through a year of comfort and luxury and having someone who would always battle my enemies at my side without turning into a shadow of myself."

Harry nodded. He understood. He didn't want to, but he understood.

"You have the right kind of pride," he muttered. "Your mother came and talked to me out of the wrong kind."

Draco closed his eyes in exasperation. "Will you believe that my parents are good people, Harry?" he asked. "People who care about me and about each other? But they have that stupidity of blood pride in them, and God knows if they'll ever get over it. I know she won't understand my reasons for doing this; she'll think I'm just returning to the ideals she and Father share. But I have to stand and struggle on my own. That's another reason to start acting on my own, you know, so I don't become too much like them and stay in their shadow."

"Will you let me return your money and houses to you?" Harry asked. It was difficult to speak.

Draco frowned. "The Wizengamot investigation *can* continue without you," he said, with a hint of his old asperity.

"I don't think they'll find anything, or would let themselves see it if they did." Harry touched his pocket, where a copy of the parchment rested. "But I have evidence that will force Pansy to give you back your assets if she doesn't want to suffer a scandal."

Draco's mouth dropped open slightly. Harry enjoyed the look on his face for a moment. It made him look very young and very unguarded.

But then, I suppose he wouldn't really like that; he needs time to develop a guard again.

Draco then turned his dropped jaw into a small, evil smile. "I want to do the things on my own I *can* do on my own," he said. "But I don't think even I can convince Pansy. Yes, go and do that, Harry. Think of it as your last gift to me, since the second-to-last is letting me walk away."

"The last gift," Harry said, and licked his lips. "The final one?" He knew he was probably leaning a little too hard, but he needed *some* reassurance.

Draco gave him another small smile, lips closed. "Let's see how it goes," he said. "When *I* can reach out from a position of strength the way you've reached out to me, if that day ever comes, you'll know. In the meantime, please don't contact me."

The trust behind that statement reassured Harry even more than the faint brush of fingers against his jaw Draco gave just before he walked away. It didn't make things easy, nothing could, but it soothed the sting.

This time, when Pansy's house-elf showed him into the room where she waited, Harry didn't even speak. He simply bowed and held out the parchment to her. Pansy, a faint pucker of curiosity appearing between her brows, opened it, perhaps thinking it was a letter.
Harry watched her face change as she read. First the pucker deepened into a frown. Then her mouth opened slightly, and her eyes turned hard. Finally, with a wry chuckle, she lowered the parchment to her lap and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I suppose you have copies in other places?" she asked, idly, like someone not really interested in the answer to the question.

"Of course." Harry bared his teeth.

"And an alarm system set up to alert others in case you don't return from my house in a specified time?" Pansy's face and eyes were mild, now, her voice almost dreamy.

Harry had no such thing, but he didn't see any reason to admit it. He let his eyes and his body lie for him, the way he did when he wanted to make another man believe he was more attractive than anyone Harry had ever seen. "Of course," he repeated.

Pansy stared at him, then sighed and fell back against the couch, staring at the parchment in her hands. "Damn you, Hector," she said softly.

Harry said nothing. He knew too well what the parchment held. Whilst the evidence of the Ministry's taking the Malfoy vaults and properties away unfairly had been covered up all too well, the evidence of Hector Ambrosius *accepting* those vaults and properties still remained. In fact, that parchment contained a list of extensive assets taken from other families, mostly imprisoned Death Eaters or those who had been killed off so thoroughly no close relatives remained to object. Ambrosius's signature was on there, as well as his promise to remain silent.

He had no doubt thought it was safer in the Ministry archives than in his own homes, Harry thought. Or maybe he really hadn't wanted his wife to know about it. Either way, if the information came out, Ambrosius Holdings would lose what remained of its good reputation as well as most of its money. Pansy could keep the money she'd made selling house-elves, but *only* that. And the loss of the reputation was probably what mattered more to Pansy. She was still accepted into society, despite the money her parents had sent to Voldemort's cause, because she was the widow of someone who had benefited a lot of people in the wake of the war.

Pansy glanced up at him with veiled eyes. "What do you want in exchange for keeping this quiet?" she asked.

Harry came straight to the point. "You return the Malfoy lands and money. As many Galleons as were in their vaults when they were given to your husband—"

Pansy's mouth tightened. It *was* an awful lot of money to lose, Harry knew.

"*Minus* the expenses you've taken for Edgar's food and clothing and health care," Harry said.

Pansy blinked at him. Harry kept still. No need to tell her he was doing this to make the bargain a little sweeter in her eyes.

"And why that?" Pansy breathed. "And would you trust me simply to remove that much money and then *tell* you?"

"I'm sure you have records of how you've cared for Edgar," Harry said. "I'd like to see them. As for why? I don't think you should be punished for trying to provide for your child. And Edgar was born three years ago; Hector's only been dead for two, so you didn't begin breeding house-elves until *after* your son was born. I can't be sure you have enough of your own money laid by to support him completely."

Pansy nodded slowly. "What about the other families Hector accepted money from?"

"What about them?"

Pansy frowned. "You don't want to avenge them, too?"

Harry shook his head. "None of them are as badly off as the Malfoys. I checked," he added, as she started to open her mouth. That was true; most of his time between finding the parchment this morning and now had been occupied in laying copies of the parchment by and checking on the present status of the people whom Ambrosius Holdings had seized money from. "None of them lost their homes, for one thing. And none of them are hunted and persecuted. If you want to make gestures of reconciliation and good will to them, you can. I don't think I can get involved on their behalf without threatening you enough that you'll also fight to keep the Malfoy lands and money."

"Draco would be a fool to refuse you," Pansy mused. "You're just selfish enough to suit him."

"I need your promise that you won't take vengeance on Draco," Harry went on, ignoring her.

"What about on you?" Pansy leaned forwards.

Harry bared his teeth again. "If you think you can take me," he said, "come on."

Pansy leaned back with a little sigh. "You have my promise," she said. "I'll sign on Binding Parchment, if you like, so you can see I'm not lying. And—" She hesitated a moment, then continued, "I think I mistook you when I called you the jester. You're much more like the heir apparent."

Harry sighed, and stared down at the parchment in his hands, Pansy's binding promise against any vengeance on the Malfoys. She'd also signed another parchment promising to return the Malfoys lands and money, minus Edgar's expenses, within a week; that was about as long as it would take her solicitor to handle the matter.
Harry Apparated back to the Ministry, found an owl, and attached Pansy's parchments along with a small note of his own to Draco. *My last gifts. I hope you don't find them presumptuous.*

He hesitated over the signature, then, in the end, scribbled only his first name.

After the owl flew, Harry allowed himself exactly three minutes of sulking. Then he went home to Floo Ron and Hermione and see what they might have planned.

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Chapter: 8

This is the last chapter of *Harry's Project*. Thanks to everyone who followed along, and especially to those who liked this small story enough to review.

Chapter Eight—Harry Changing, Draco Shining

It wasn't easy to get along at first—to convince himself that Draco wouldn't really frantically owl him the next day and ask Harry to come rescue him from loneliness, boredom, the trials of fitting back into pure-blood society, or himself. At the same time, Harry knew he would have replied to such a message by asking Draco not to tempt him like that, and encouraging him to act on his own.

So longing for a message was useless, anyway.

Harry contented himself with observing the Malfoy family's progress from a distance. Pansy's solicitor did indeed surrender the vaults and the houses that the Malfoys had once owned, and the amount missing from the Malfoys' accumulated Galleons matched the amount Pansy had used to take care of Edgar in the past few years. Pansy assiduously sent him copies of all the paperwork, or her solicitor did. Harry spent a few painful nights working out the math and swearing to learn the counting spell that wizards used in place of a Muggle calculator.

All the numbers checked out.

Two months later, Harry stared at the photograph on the front of the *Prophet* and saw Draco, with his mother on his arm and his father striding behind him, openly entering a shop in Diagon Alley. The people in the back of the photo stared at them with hostile expressions, but no one attacked them. And though Harry followed the papers carefully thereafter, he never heard of an open assault.

There *were* pictures of Draco, of course, because the tale of an old, disgraced family clawing its way back into power was too interesting for the papers to leave alone. Harry collected them, then destroyed the collection, then built it up again, then destroyed it again.

Hermione told him he was being morbid. Harry agreed, and made himself get more involved in his friends' lives, in Auror cases that involved working with more people than Ron, in applying the information he'd acquired in the Ministry archives for the better.

He only wished Draco did not look so *happy* without him.

Would you prefer that he looked miserable?

At the moment he had the thought, Harry really would have. And he understood then why Draco had said the flaw was in both of them.

He threw himself further and further into the activities that had so far filled his time, and told

himself that it didn't hurt, it *didn't*, when the *Prophet* showed a photograph of Draco kissing an attractive blond wizard at the six-month mark.

He's moving on. You're just going to have to do the same.

That night, Harry conjured many small breakable items, locked the door of his flat securely, and threw an incredible temper tantrum. Then he got drunk and maudlin. When he woke up the next morning, he had to spend quite a bit of time drinking hangover potions and quite a bit more cleaning up the remains of his fit, but he did feel better.

"I don't see why you need more than this." Reynard Mallister, the wizard Harry had tried dating for the last month, backed away from him, shaking his head. "I mean, we've shagged a few times, but it's not like we'll move *in* together, you know? I think you're trying to make this into something it's not."

Harry leaned a shoulder against the door of the pub and stared at Reynard wearily. Reynard was black-haired, belying his name, with a single white streak down the middle of his scalp that followed an old scar. He had brilliant brown eyes, and he was nearly as intelligent as Hermione, though stocky and well-muscled from his work as a professional Quidditch Beater.

Harry had chosen him in part because he fucked very well, and in part because he resembled Draco as little as possible.

But Reynard was still interested in the casual, fun sex that Harry had participated in before he found Draco. And Harry had wanted—well, something else.

He just wished he could stop feeling like a failure all the time.

"Yes, you're right," he said. "I am. Sorry."

Reynard's face brightened, and he ruffled Harry's hair. "Not that much of a problem. I don't mind shagging you in a few days or weeks, you know? Next time you're in this part of London, look me up." He kissed Harry on the cheek and then ducked away, vanishing into the crowd clustered near the bar. Harry thought he was probably pursuing a wizard with unusual eyes, one green and one brown, whom he'd been staring at earlier that night. Reynard did love the unusual.

At least, Harry thought, he didn't feel a *lot* of bitterness as he Apparated home. How could he? Reynard wasn't Draco. He'd always known that.

And anyway, the solution when he saw yet another photograph of Draco on the front page of the paper the next morning locked in a clinch with yet another man was just not to read that article.

"You didn't hear yet, then."

Harry started badly. He'd thought he was alone when he stepped into his flat, and hadn't seen Hermione, sitting on a couch in the dark. He wiped mud out of his hair and raised an eyebrow at her. He'd just returned from a tough case in Scotland, chasing a thief who had escalated in fairly short order to murder, thanks to the urgings of a possessed artifact he'd stolen.

"Hear what?" he asked. "If something had happened to Ron, then I think you'd be at St. Mungo's, not here. Unless it happened a while ago." He'd been in Scotland for a week, moving so rapidly he usually outdistanced owls. He frowned worriedly at Hermione and lit the fire so he could see her expression better.

"It's not Ron," Hermione said, rising to her feet. And it wasn't. Her face was compassionate, but for *him*, Harry thought, not worried the way it would have been if Ron were injured. "It's Malfoy."

Harry took a deep breath and felt himself waver. He caught his balance with a hand on the couch and wondered if Hermione had noticed his weakness, then told himself that of course she had; this was *Hermione.* He looked her in the eye and smiled. "I can stand it," he said, answering her unspoken question. "What happened?"

The details trickled into his ears slowly, important, and yet difficult to focus on. Draco had been investigating Zonko's in Hogsmeade; it was slowly going out of business due to competition from the Weasleys' joke shop, and Draco was thinking of buying the building and turning it into a central shop from which to sell supplies useful to Hogwarts students, including potions ingredients. Someone had ambushed him there, and cursed him with a disease that made him progressively unable to breathe. Draco had recognized the curse, luckily, and managed to Apparate to St. Mungo's and seek treatment in time. The *Daily Prophet* had carried the details thanks to a witch from Hogsmeade who also recognized the curse. The Aurors were investigating, but still hadn't caught the person who cursed Draco.

Harry controlled the immediate impulse to go flying to St. Mungo's, and closed his eyes. Draco might not *want* to see him. And if his parents were at his bedside, they would be deeply upset over Harry's intrusion.

Yet Harry knew he wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if he didn't look in on Draco at least once.

"Yes," Hermione said.

Startled, Harry opened his eyes and looked at her. "What?"

"I said," Hermione murmured, smiling slightly, "yes. I'll help you sneak into St. Mungo's and visit him." She shrugged a little when Harry's jaw dropped open. "You would have asked me anyway, or taken risks that you shouldn't have in order to reach him. At least this way I know where you are and what you're doing."

Harry smiled wanly, and then let Hermione change his appearance until he resembled a thin, gawky teenager, whilst she aged herself to appear as his mother. Together, they Flooed to St. Mungo's and Hermione managed to attract the attention of several people who weren't actually Healers by pretending to have a mysteriously appearing and disappearing ailment. Harry slipped away in the confusion and aimed for the Spell Damage ward.

He caught a glimpse of himself in a reflective window along the way and nodded, reassured. His hair was the color of straw and stuck out from his head in every direction; his eyes were brown like Hermione's. And his vision was blurring, in fact, he realized. He removed his glasses and stuck them in his pocket.

A few Healers caught his eye, but each time he ducked his head and muttered, "Visiting," and they let him go, though with kindly reminders that visitors would have to leave in another half-hour.

Harry was lucky; he caught a glimpse of the dense cloak that Narcissa had worn to her interview with him in the Forest thrown carelessly over a chair. He crept softly to the door of the room behind the chair and peered in.

Lucius was asleep in one corner, his mouth open in so ridiculous and helpless a posture that Harry thought he could have liked him if he'd been meeting him for the first time. Narcissa hovered over Draco, her face strained but otherwise calm. Harry relaxed a little. Nothing *terrible* could be wrong with Draco, or Narcissa would have looked worse.

Draco himself lay propped up on several pillows, with an apparatus of several joined vials hovering at his lips, now and then giving a little whistle that stirred the blue liquid inside the glass. Harry squinted at it, and vaguely recalled seeing the same thing when he'd been brought to St. Mungo's with a punctured lung. It helped a severely wounded patient to breathe.

The blue liquid cycled regularly, and the whistling was soft. Loud whistling was a sign of distress to alert the Healers, Harry remembered. Draco was all right, or they wouldn't have trusted him to just the supervision of the apparatus and some visitors. He sagged against the doorway in relief.

The sag made his robe scuff against the doorway and caused Narcissa to glance up sharply. In moments she was between Harry and the end of the bed, her wand drawn. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. "Go look at something else!"

"I'm sorry," Harry babbled, stumbling away. "My aunt has a cloak like that." He pointed at Narcissa's cloak, telling the first lie that came into his head. "I thought this was her room."

Narcissa relaxed, but only enough to become frozen, rather than allowing herself to dismiss Harry as a threat. "You had best *go* now," she said. Lucius stirred in the corner and snorted into the slight beard he was growing.

Harry nodded and fled, picking up Hermione in the welcoming area. She had already decided that nothing was really wrong with her and was trading gossipy anecdotes with another old woman, presumably a real one. Harry clasped Hermione's hand and stood with his eyes shut for a moment.

He's all right. I'll just—I'll have to trust his parents to take care of him and the other Aurors to catch his assailant.

And Harry did. He forbade himself from visiting St. Mungo's again, even though he caught himself with Floo powder in his hand several times. He didn't ask to work on the case, though he burned to. He held his distance and let Draco stand on his own two feet, waited for the moment when Draco said it was all right to approach him again.

He never will, whispered the voice of doubt in the back of his head. *He's forgotten about you.*

Harry shut his ears to the voice as best he could, and endured. He slept better at night after they'd caught the attacker, a man with a grudge against Lucius, and imprisoned him.

And from then on, somehow, things *were* easier.

Harry could get through the day, sometimes, without thinking of Draco. He never quite stopped thinking of jokes he'd like to tell him or looking at the sky in hopes of an owl, but they became occurrences that slowly decreased in number. He started going out with other wizards, flirting for long periods of time, not sleeping around as much. The time he spent with his friends became valuable in and of itself, rather than just a desperate attempt to fill what he felt as a void.

Probably, he thought one evening as he leaned back on the table in Percy's kitchen and watched Victoire attempt to explain how Lucy and Molly had wound up with mud smeared over every inch of their bodies whilst she was clean, he owed Draco himself, for teaching *Harry* to stand on his own two feet.

"And that was almost the moment when I punched him." Christopher winked and threw back the Firewhiskey he was holding, a skill that made Harry wince even as he admired it. "But not quite!"

Harry laughed. Christopher had been telling the incredibly convoluted story of what had led up to his punching his boss in the mouth and being sacked from his latest job for an hour now, and still he hadn't reached *the* moment. Harry was willing to wait for the climax a while longer. No one could say Christopher wasn't an entertaining talker.

He *wasn't* a lot of things. Draco, for instance. But Harry had come to accept that Draco wasn't ever going to contact him again. It had been a year and a month now since the Malfoys got their property back. Draco had either moved on with his life and realized he didn't really want Harry,

or he'd simply been unable to stand on his own feet yet. And maybe he never would be ready for close contact with Harry.

Meanwhile, Christopher was the longest-lasting boyfriend Harry had ever had: a skilled and thoughtful lover, interested in *other* things than sex, an eternally cheerful optimist despite all the mistakes he made and the jobs he kept losing. Harry liked him a lot. If the like hadn't approached love yet, well, they'd only been together three months. They had time.

Christopher had opened his mouth to continue the story when someone cleared his throat and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me," said a voice Harry had resigned himself to only hearing in dreams. "I think this seat is mine."

Harry stared up at Draco. Draco cocked an eyebrow at him, and then at Christopher, as if to say that the merits of his claim to that particular chair should be obvious.

Christopher turned and blinked at him. "Hey, I know you," he said. "You're Draco Malfoy."

"Obviously." Draco narrowed his eyes. "And, as I said, this seat is mine."

Harry exhaled hard. His heart was beating so fast in his ears that he heard only a faint ringing. He struggled to concentrate on Draco's voice, not to make too much of that intense gaze traveling to him now and then, and to swallow his Firewhiskey.

Christopher shook his head. "You must be confused," he said, ever ready to be helpful. "I've been sitting here for an hour. I haven't even left to go to the loo." He turned and beamed at Harry. "So, as I was saying,*then* the pink elephant stepped backwards—"

"I was hoping to avoid rudeness," Draco interrupted. "I've had enough rudeness to last a lifetime. But since you won't listen—" He raised his wand.

"That's quite enough of that," Harry said hastily, staggering to his feet. He didn't know whether to laugh or shout or lunge at Draco. Conflicting impulses to do all three struggled in him like a disturbed nest of hornets. "I—Christopher, I'm sorry, but it would be best if you went away."

Christopher blinked up at him, eyes dim with incomprehension.

"Oh, for God's *sake*, there are some people who won't *listen*," Draco snapped, and took one long stride around the table. His hands came up to clutch Harry's face, and he yanked him into a kiss with a growl.

At least, Harry thought it was supposed to be a kiss. Since their teeth clicked together and Draco's actually cut Harry's bottom lip, that was a good guess. But Harry reached out in the next moment and put a steadying hand on Draco's shoulder, and then he readjusted the position of their heads, and then it was quite a good kiss.

It no longer filled a gaping hollow at the center of Harry's life, as it would have done if he'd retained a lot of hope about Draco's coming to him. It*added* to the richness of the life he had already, and that made it so much better. Harry sighed into the kiss, and then used his tongue in a little swirling motion he'd learned from Christopher, because Draco was being far too silent for his taste. Draco snarled and bit his tongue, then sucked it soothingly.

Harry pulled away at last, dazed and aroused and aware of the angry, incredulous, frightened, amused stares coming at them from every direction. The only thing he actually felt *bad* about was the hurt on Christopher's face.

"You've never kissed me like that," Christopher whispered.

"I know," was the only thing Harry could think of to say, ludicrous as that was. He could feel Draco's hands tightening on his shoulders, his body vibrating with the urge to speak, and Harry knew he only had a few moments to get rid of Christopher politely. "I'm sorry. I'm—with him."

Christopher stood, eyes darting back and forth between Harry and Draco. "You've been cheating on him with me?"

"Until now, we weren't together," Draco said, and stepped closer to Harry. Harry couldn't quite figure out whether he meant to protect Harry or stake his claim. Well, either was fine with him, really, Harry thought, and licked at the bleeding cut on his tongue again.

"That doesn't make sense," Christopher said.

"It would take too long to explain," Harry said quietly. "I just—I was waiting for him, but I didn't know if he'd come." He cast a glance at Draco, and felt a thrill of pride down his spine. Draco stood in the middle of this very public setting as if he had every right to be there. He held his head high as he would not have dared to do the last time Harry had seen him. Well, seen him awake, anyway. His eyes were cold and deigned to notice no one except Christopher, whom they did not *want* to notice.

"Fine," Christopher said, in a mutter that told Harry, too late, that Christopher might have liked him more than he knew. "If that's the way things are, then that's the way they are." He cast a few Galleons in the middle of the table and stalked off. Harry blinked at his back for a moment.

Then Draco turned Harry to face him with one palm on the back of his skull. "I came," he said, as if he expected praise for the fact.

Harry grinned. He felt as though he were made of air. "In one way, yes, you did," he said. He slid his right hand down Draco's body until he was touching the edge of his groin. "In another, you didn't. Shall we cure that?"

"I don't mind at all," Draco whispered, and pulled him close, and Apparated. Harry closed his eyes, finding the Apparition as exhilarating as broom flight, his heartbeat like a song in his ears.

It went very fast, that first time.

There were hands and teeth and lips and arms, tongues and feet and cocks and hips. Harry never knew how he got Draco out of his clothes. Draco claimed to remember that, but had to admit that he *didn't* know why there was a long slash down the middle of his favorite robe. He made Harry pay for it.

There was a moment in the middle of it where they rolled over twice, and then Harry was kneeling above Draco, staring down at him. Draco was extremely red, his pale skin flushed, his lips bitten and covered with blood—or maybe that was Harry's blood—his cock engorged to the point where it looked painful. Harry reached down, and Draco flung his head back with a sigh that quickly became a scream as Harry's fingers twisted. Then they rolled, and Draco arched and wriggled in a delightfully obscene way. Then they twisted again, and Draco was coming in his palm. Harry would have teased him about his endurance if Draco weren't already rolling him over to return the favor.

There was a search for lost lubricant, which Draco claimed to have left in the bedside table but which Harry couldn't find when he wanted to use it. They looked through three drawers, under the bed, inside the closet, and under the bed again, keeping the mood alive with nips on each other's ears and busy, wandering hands. They finally found it wedged into a corner of the room between dresser and bed. Draco grunted with satisfaction as he pulled it out and tossed it to Harry, nodding with approval as he caught it in a neat Seeker's catch.

There was the moment when Harry paused, half-in and half-out of Draco, deliciously unsure whether he wanted to continue or just linger here until he came. Draco panted beneath him, so soaked with sweat he looked on the verge of collapse. The sight made Harry's decision for him, and he pushed forwards, purely for the pleasure of seeing Draco's eyes fly open and more sweat roll down his forehead.

There was the long, torturous slowness with which Draco seemed intent on making love, pushing so slowly into Harry that half the time Harry felt the teasing strokes of his hands up and down Harry's ribs more than he felt his cock. The final push that settled Draco fully inside Harry for the first time was as satisfying as arriving home after a tough case, and Harry's hands scrabbled frantically across the sheets as he tried to lift himself and push back.

There was the moment when Draco mouthed words against Harry's cheek, and Harry mouthed the same words back, before they fell asleep tangled with each other, sheets, pillows, and the half-open jar of lubricant, which had added to the sticky mess on the bed by the time they woke.

When Harry *did* wake, he found Draco watching him with his hands folded behind his head and his elbows resting on the too-large pillow he used. Draco smiled, very slowly, when he saw Harry looking.

"There were times when I thought I wouldn't come back," he said, softly.

Because he obviously had come back, Harry did nothing but curl a hand around his shoulder and listen. Both he and Draco bore scratches and bites from the frenzy of their lovemaking, he noted distantly. And one didn't make love like that with a lover one intended to abandon.

Draco nodded as though the gesture had been an answer to a question. "I kept taking other partners, looking for someone who would complement me the way you might," he said. "I didn't *know* you would, remember. I thought you could, but that could have been my own hopeful delusion. That was another thing I had to do during the past year. Destroy all my delusions." He looked away for a moment. "I would have been back for you long since if there hadn't been so damn *many* of them."

"It's all right," Harry whispered.

"Oh, you didn't take that for an *apology*, did you?" Draco demanded, one eyebrow rising so that he briefly looked the way he had when confronting Christopher last night. "I won't apologize for taking as long as I needed over something I needed to do."

"I know," Harry said. "But I just want you to know that I do agree with your taking as long as you did. I didn't at first."

"You had no say in it." Draco's eyes flashed.

Harry met his gaze and permitted himself a half-smile, certain that Draco could understand now. "I got used to that, yes."

Draco relaxed and moved back towards him, draping himself half over Harry's flanks. "But none of those wizards quite answered the need," he mused. "None of them were strong enough to stand up to me. Or they were too weak to hold themselves in check the way you did, once they saw my weakness, and they tried to dominate and overwhelm me. I couldn't*stand* it." He gave a little shudder. "You gave me more pleasure in the few weeks of our closer acquaintance, even as exasperating as you were, than they did. And finally I'd finished facing my delusions, and going through partners in the futile hope of finding someone suitable if I just changed them often enough, and I went for you. And then I saw you sitting there with that *insipid* little—"

"Christopher wasn't insipid," Harry interjected, because he didn't want to hear his own choices disparaged.

"Next to me?" Draco turned the full force of his attention on Harry.

Harry shivered. The dignity and the strength that Draco had shown under the pressure of the Wizengamot's decision were fused, now, with a confidence in himself that made him shine like a tempered sword. He'd fought his own battles and won. He never would have done that or known

he could if Harry had stayed with him.

"Next to you," Harry said faintly, "yes, he is."

Draco relaxed. "And so I realize what I want," he said. "And you've realized what you want, I hope?" Again the challenging glance.

Harry reached out and took his hand. "I have," he said. "I have to admit, I'm looking forwards to this just because it's so *new.* You're not a villain and I'm not a hero, and I'm not bored and you're not pathetic, anymore." Draco squeezed down hard. Harry bore the grip without a murmur, but he did grin at him. "Do we even know how to relate to each other outside those things?"

"I," Draco said, "am damn well going to try, because I think I'm in love with you, Harry, and I damn well fight for the people I love."

He had been the first to say it aloud. Harry could not say how much that meant to him.

He could not say how much it meant to him to lie in bed here next to the man he loved and wanted, with that man shining like the sun.

He leaned in and kissed Draco until Draco was tugging impatiently at his hair. "So do I," he said. "So am I."

End.