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Chapter 1 to 20

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Chapter: 1

Title: Bloody But Unbowed

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

Rating: R/M

Pairings: Harry/Draco, Lucius/Narcissa (past Harry/others).

Warnings: DH Spoilers, but ignores epilogue. Profanity, sex, blood, and angst.

Summary: Nothing in Harry's life since the war has gone the way he expected. And now he's the mediwizard assigned to take care of Lucius Malfoy, of all people. But he's Harry; he grits his teeth and endures. He won't allow even Draco Malfoy's flirting, which he knows is just a joke, to disconcert him.

Author's Notes: This will probably be a medium-length chaptered fic, probably 8 or 10 chapters, but I won't rule out going longer. The title of this story comes from a line in William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus":

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Bloody But Unbowed

Chapter One—The Patient Is a Person

"Potter! You're needed on the Spell Damage ward."

Harry had just opened his mouth to object that he already had more than his share of poisoning cases, but he shut it again when he realized that the person shoving the folder towards him was Healer Virgo Emptyweed. Harry bowed his head and took the file, sure the Healer could feel Harry's flinch of revulsion when their fingers touched. Emptyweed, of course, only contorted his pursed-up lips—like Umbridge's mouth on a bad day—into a further sour ball and turned away.

Harry looked down at the name on the file. The handwriting was little more than chicken-scratch; Harry sometimes thought no one who could actually write legibly was likely to be hired by the hospital, or at least not as a record-keeper. But over two years' experience in St. Mungo's, he'd learned to read it, and he stared as he realized what it actually *said* this time.

"Healer!" he shouted after Emptyweed. No doubt he hadn't managed to put the proper amount of respect in his voice and would get yet another reprimand, but at least he'd remembered to use the title.

Emptyweed turned around looking so pleased with himself that Harry shuddered. He was a tall man who'd gone completely bald years ago, perhaps because none of his hair wanted to remain close to the fermenting barrel of rottenness that was his brain. Now his large blue eyes peered out of the hollows of his face like those of a pig who had heard it was about to be slaughtered. Unlike the pig, he didn't have the good grace to collapse squealing. "Yes, Mediwizard Potter? Is there a problem?"

"If I'm not mistaken," Harry said, "the name on this file is Lucius Malfoy." He took a step closer to Emptyweed. They were the only ones in this corridor, and perhaps on the whole of the third floor, for all Harry knew. Emptyweed tended to work long hours because he wanted the credit that came of seeming like a dedicated public servant, and Harry tended to work long hours because Emptyweed made him.

"Yes, it is," said the Healer indifferently. He wasn't very good at hiding his glee, though, and Harry was glad of it; it had allowed him to avoid some of the more unpleasant consequences of Emptyweed's plans in the past. He had a feeling, like scalpels digging in under his heart, that he wouldn't be able to avoid this one. "What of it? He's been cursed with a Dark and extremely dangerous spell, and it wouldn't do to have the ordinary run of mediwizards and Healers near him. I would be deeply worried that they'd try to take revenge on him during his convalescence, or even not treat him very well, as they would believe he deserves his fate, whatever that may be. But I know your compassion and your courage, Mediwizard. I know you will do an exemplary job in treating Mr. Malfoy."

Harry stared at Emptyweed for long moments. The Healer looked back, a faint frown on his face, as though he couldn't imagine what objections Harry might have to his assignment, but the smug

smile still threatening. When Harry still hesitated, he mouthed the words, "Potions scores."

He'd learned that little tidbit about Harry's score on his Potions NEWT—that it hadn't been high enough to let him become a Healer—the very day Harry had submitted his application to work at St. Mungo's. Unluckily enough, he'd been the one who had to approve that application. And he had been delighted with the notion of assigning Harry to work under him and continually reminding him just why he'd never achieve the Healer's coveted rank.

Harry could have given it up and gone somewhere else. The problem was, he genuinely enjoyed helping people and was fascinated by what little he'd been permitted to learn of advanced medical magic. And his Potions scores weren't high enough to give him employment as an Auror, either, the only other career he'd ever been interested in.

Better to put up with Emptyweed's idea of a joke, and even his claiming credit for the patients Harry helped to cure, than to sit on his arse and do nothing, or do only boring scutwork.

"Yes, sir," Harry said between gritted teeth, and turned for the stairs that led to the Spell Damage ward. Behind him, Emptyweed chuckled and strode away. Harry took a glance back, as always hoping to spot the Dark Mark on the man's left arm and learn the source of Emptyweed's enmity towards him.

As always, he was disappointed. Emptyweed wasn't a Death Eater; he just didn't like him, and that was the way it was.

Harry hesitated outside the room the folder said held Malfoy, and took a deep, calming breath. He was usually nervous when he went in to deal with patients who'd fought on the opposite side of the war, but he'd never had to work with someone who'd personally threatened his life.

Don't worry about that, said the voice of Healer Pontiff, the witch who trained all the new mediwizards and one of the few staff Harry genuinely liked because she had never let his name or his scar make a difference to her. *Treat the patient as a person first. We see the human body in the most pathetic and disgusting conditions possible. We work without letting beauty or power or money make a difference to us. If you can't bring yourself to do this job, there is no one else who can.*

Harry smiled a little. Certainly, if he wasn't the one to do this for Malfoy, it was unlikely that anyone else would. He lifted a hand and knocked, trying to imagine what would await him. Probably a scowling younger Malfoy, ready to complain about the abysmal quality of care in St. Mungo's, and a cold-faced Mrs. Malfoy, who would look as though the bad smell were coming from Harry—

But he couldn't picture Lucius. The folder was annoyingly vague about what the curse cast on him *was*, exactly. Of course, Emptyweed had the charming habit of leaving off details on his own reports, which in turn encouraged those who passed the files to him initially to be lazy.

Ready for anything from a second head to a smoking gut wound, Harry opened the door when a minute had passed and no one had responded to his knock. Probably they were too busy planning the deaths of Muggleborns to pay attention to such unimportant details.

Lucius Malfoy was lying on the bed in the center of the room, and he had a hand over his chest, wincing as blood seeped around his fingers. His wife stood next to his pillow, talking quietly and urgently. A quick glance around the pale blue room revealed no trace of their son, which Harry was privately grateful for.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Harry waited until his patient's gaze centered on him—more difficult than usual, since it was cloudy with pain. "I'm the mediwizard assigned to your case. Harry Potter."

"Mr. Potter." Malfoy's lips formed a brief, painful smile, and it had no trace of a sneer. Well, Harry thought after his initial surprise, the elder Malfoys were pathetically ineffective, not stupid. He must know that it wasn't in his best interest to alienate his caretaker thirty seconds into their first meeting. "We are together under more—auspicious circumstances than last time."

"Yes, we are," Harry murmured absently, taking a step towards the bed and casting a simple diagnostic spell, even as he used his eyes to judge the visible symptoms. Pallor, difficulty breathing or at least forming words, circles beneath the eyes that argued the curse's effects had continued for some time, a weak convulsive grasping movement in the fingers that might be pain or simple nervousness. The diagnostic spell manifested as a series of small silvery frogs that hopped on and over Malfoy's body. Malfoy stared at him. Harry shrugged. Since the magic got the job done, he wasn't prone to ask Healer Pontiff just why she taught it to them as a series of frogs. "What is the curse? Do you know who cast it, and do you know what must be done to reverse it?"

"Obviously we do *not* know the latter, or we would not have bothered coming here," said Mrs. Malfoy.

Harry looked at her briefly; the diagnostic spell would take most of a minute to work. She had no trace of softness or gentleness in her face now, such as he imagined had been there when Voldemort told her to check Harry's state of health in the Forbidden Forest. She was graceful and proud as any queen. "I meant no insult to your spellcasting skills," he said gently. "Sometimes the patient does know the cure for his condition, but is prevented from using it himself thanks to a lack of power or ingredients for a potion—"

"In this case, we don't know," Lucius said. "We do know who cast the curse, and he is now in Auror custody. But he destroyed the book from which he took the spell, and he cannot be legally forced to take Veritaserum, so he yet retains the secret to the cure. If he knows of it, which I doubt." He raised his hand from his chest. "As to the spell's effects, see for yourself."

Harry blinked. Beneath Lucius's hand was a single bleeding slit, long and narrow, as if cut into his flesh with a rapier. As Harry watched, it twitched and widened. The upper portion closed to a

thin scar a moment later. The lower end stretched forwards until it touched Lucius's breastbone, then stopped.

"They open throughout your body?" Harry asked softly, holding out his hand as the silver frogs of the diagnostic spell reappeared and coalesced into one great frog, which leaped across the space between Lucius's bed and him. He caught it in his palm and it melted into a pool of clear water. Harry swallowed it and closed his eyes, listening to the cool voice speaking in his head and Lucius's information at the same instant.

Dark magic, highly sophisticated, certainly powered by blood. Hatred component. Buried malice component. Immediate attention needed to stabilize malice field. Long-term identification of survival: Not good.

"The wounds have been appearing since yesterday," Lucius said stiffly. "On my chest and my legs so far. They have always healed without leaving more than a scar behind, and the scar itself heals within an hour." Harry opened his eyes to see him tracing the puckered line of flesh on his chest. It was already becoming fainter, Harry thought, squinting at it. "You understand my reluctance to allow the curse to continue when it may open a wound through my heart at any second."

"Yes," Harry said, and lifted his wand, aiming it at the center of Lucius's body. It was important to protect his vital organs and his intestines first. "*Defendo contra malitiam!*"

The spell showed itself as a silvery whirlwind this time. Harry frowned and forced more power into it; it ought to be clearer than it was. Of course, he'd stayed up late last night, talking longer with Ron over Firewhiskey than was good for him. After a few moments of wobbling and swaying back and forth like a tower about to topple, the whirlwind turned transparent and draped itself like a sheet over Lucius. Harry immediately cast a nonverbal spell that would enhance his eyesight, and nodded in satisfaction as he saw the separate crystalline glows above the vital organs and intestines.

"I am accustomed to having warning before foreign magic is cast at me," said Lucius in a cool voice. Harry looked up, blinking, and saw that Narcissa had backed away a step and drawn her wand. "What was that?"

"The spell has a buried malice component," Harry explained as he cast the spell again, this time on Lucius's head. Lucius held remarkably still as the second crystal tent collapsed over his face, which Harry admired. The one drawback of the spells that stabilized malice fields was their tendency to startle patients. "It ensures that you'll go on getting sicker—in this case, the wounds will be worse than they would otherwise. It also picks up on your worst fear. Because you said the spell would open a cut through your heart eventually, it makes it all the more likely to happen."

"Ah," said Lucius as Harry moved on to protecting his legs. "That would make sense. This man believes I raped his daughter."

"Did you?" Harry asked in interest.

"Mr. Potter." Narcissa would have made an excellent candidate for speaking Parseltongue herself, judging by her hiss. "Cease your offensive and baseless insinuations against my husband this instant, or I will find someone genuinely competent to treat him."

Harry flicked her an amused glance as he stabilized the malice field above Lucius's arms. "You're welcome to try, but unlikely to find someone," he said. "The case was passed to Healer Emptyweed, since he's known to have a reputation for curing—ah—difficult patients. And he passed it on to me, because not even *he* wanted to touch it. At the moment, I'm probably the only mediwizard or Healer in hospital who will help you."

"And why would that be?" Lucius asked. Already his breathing was easier, as if knowing what the spells Harry had cast at him was all the cure he needed. "The entire Malfoy family was exonerated, and I have made charitable donations to St. Mungo's several times." He spoke as if decades had passed since the war, instead of only seven years.

Harry grinned at him. "Yes, but most of the Healers here have treated at least one patient that Death Eaters cursed, or lost a family member to them," he said. "Not enough time has passed for people to forget, and some of them think the donations were simply an attempt to buy your way back into the public's good opinion."

Once again Narcissa stiffened, but Lucius shook his head and laid his hand on her arm. His wife relaxed with a little huff. Harry was glad. He hated dealing with a patient's panicking relatives more than the patients themselves, no matter how hysterical. The relatives were well enough to demand reassurances rather than simply an end to the pain, and most of the time Harry didn't have reassurances to give them. He had learned not to look too far ahead or demand achievements of himself that he couldn't fulfill.

Nothing in his life had gone the way he planned after the war. By now he was supposed to be a successful Auror and married to Ginny, with at least one child and another on the way. And whilst Harry couldn't say that he regretted that not happening each and every day, he was still somewhat *bewildered* it hadn't happened. Sometimes he woke and wondered if he was really living his own life, or one he had rented by mistake.

"Well, I can see the advantages of that perspective," Lucius said, drawing Harry's attention back to the immediate present. "What do you believe you will need to restore me to health?"

"As many details on the crime as you can give me," Harry said simply. "The details the Aurors have collected from the prisoner will be useful as well, but I have contacts in the Ministry who can obtain them for me." Of all three of them, Hermione alone had gone on to work at the Ministry, and she had risen like a small but determined comet up the ranks of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "Dark Arts references; those, I have."

"I may be able to help you with yet more of them, Mr. Potter." Lucius's eyelids had drooped, shielding his eyes as though he were dreaming.

"*Lucius*," Narcissa protested in another one of those hisses.

"That's generous of you," Harry replied. "If they're nothing that would be interdicted through owl post—no?" he added, as he saw Lucius's head shaking.

"So far as I know, it is not actually illegal to post them," Lucius said dryly. "However, Aurors watch the Manor still, for the same reasons as the Healers here generally have for not wanting to treat me. I think it would be better if Narcissa carried them to you. Or my son." He fixed Harry with a sharp stare, as though he expected him to flinch at the mention of Draco.

Harry looked back with a faint smile. No, his life was not what he had dreamed it would be, but he was damned if would allow anyone to shame or intimidate him over it. *Everyone* knew who his lovers had been and when he had broken up with them, and which people had taken a dislike to him in the years since the war; Draco Malfoy had not been in either category.

"By all means," he said easily. "I have a small cubicle on the second floor. If I'm not there, there's a secure trunk outside the door in which anything may be placed, though not so easily retrieved again."

Lucius nodded as though to say he was entirely unsurprised, and then began to describe what he knew of the effects of the spell and the circumstances of the casting. Harry flicked his hand and conjured a parchment. When he pulled the Replication Quill—a more honest version of the Quick-Quotes Quill—out of his robe pocket and placed it above the paper, it began to copy Lucius's words just as he spoke them.

Lucius had barely finished the story when the door banged open. Harry whirled around, his wand at the ready. It wouldn't be the first time someone had broken into the room of a "difficult" patient with the intent to make the problem still more difficult for the attending Healer or mediwizard.

Draco Malfoy stood there instead, his pale green robes swirling dramatically around him as he came to a stop in front of Harry and stared. Then his eyes went to his father and he strode past Harry as if he didn't exist, except for a quick flickering glare of loathing. He laid a hand on Lucius's shoulder. Harry tensed in spite of himself; the spells that stabilized the malice field would react badly if the person touching the patient wished him harm.

But evidently Malfoy wasn't intent on seeing his father die so he could take over the ancestral home and money just yet. In fact, his face was carved with lines of a pain that was genuine as far as Harry could tell. He whispered in a half-broken voice, "Father, what happened? I came as soon as I heard, but—what *is* this?" He was staring at the bloody line on Lucius's chest, which Harry thought must have expanded again under his eye. "Dark Arts?" His wand appeared in his hand. Harry spared an irritated thought for the Welcome Witch, who was obviously not making a

good try at persuading visitors to leave their wands downstairs.

"A curse, my son," said Lucius, with exactly the same tone that Harry thought he would discuss breakfast. "Healer Potter here—"

"Mediwizard Potter," Harry said, with a small bow as apology for the interruption. Malfoy's eyes burned at him further, as if he saw a calculated insult in Harry's title. "I never achieved full Healer's rank."

"Why not?" Malfoy asked snidely. "Too busy running off to have adventures in the middle of treatments?"

"A lack of proper NEWT scores in Potions, actually," Harry said, and had to suppress a snort when Malfoy goggled at him. *Honestly, has he never left Hogwarts behind?* He turned to face Lucius again. "I have some ideas about how to handle the curse, and the stabilization spells should protect you from permanent damage for a few days before I have to renew them. But I'll be honest—"

"You seem to be nothing but," said Lucius, barely moving his lips.

Harry smiled agreeably. *The patient is a person,* Pontiff's voice chanted in his head. A stubborn person, in this case, but that didn't mean he owed him any less treatment. "A Healer would have access to more medical texts than I do," he said. "I may be able to find you someone who won't care about your reputation, Mr. Malfoy, and who can command the attendance of several mediwizards or mediwitches. Would you prefer that I do this?" He was thinking of Pontiff. Though she had become dangerously exhausted on the last "difficult" case Harry handed off to her, it had been for the best; the little girl's lungs had been infested with spiderwebs, and she had stopped breathing several times during the long and delicate procedure to remove them. Harry would have panicked. Pontiff, who had more confidence in the control of her magic, had poured her power steadily into the spell, and saved Melissa Small's life in the end.

"You said you were unsure that anyone in hospital would endeavor to treat me fully." Lucius's voice was without emphasis.

"Yes, sir, that's quite true." Harry sighed. "I trust my willingness to do so—"

"I don't," Malfoy said.

Harry ignored him. He wasn't the patient, he was just a concerned relative, and therefore prone to be hysterical and make silly threats. "But not necessarily my skill. You might be better off with someone who would become interested in the challenge even if he or she didn't like you personally."

He peered at Lucius keenly as he finished, but Lucius's face was cold and closed. At one point Narcissa leaned in as if she would whisper in his ear. Lucius reached up and clasped her wrist.

Though Harry didn't think he squeezed that hard, her face went white and she retreated with a small nod to the edge of the bed.

At last, Lucius said, "I prefer that you work on me until we have seen your skill is insufficient to the task."

Harry bowed again. "Thank you for trusting me, sir. Allow me to revise these notes." He held up the parchment filled with Lucius's words. "I'll return tomorrow for the books you promised and to give you my preliminary diagnosis."

He turned away and walked from the room, certain the family would wish to meet in private so that Lucius could explain matters fully to his son and everyone could panic. A Healer would have had the authority to call in attendants so the patient would never be left entirely alone when the relatives departed, but Harry didn't. The best he could do was cast a few alarm spells that would let him know if anyone who *wasn't* a relative, Healer, or mediwizard approached the room, and bargain with one of the mediwitches not working under Emptyweed to make rounds to the room once or twice during the night.

To his surprise, Malfoy came out of the room just as he finished casting the last of the alarm spells. Harry lowered his wand. "Yes, Malfoy? Can I help you?"

Malfoy leaned closer to him. Harry stared at him in puzzlement for a moment, then snorted inelegantly as he tried to swallow his laughter. He was a few inches taller than Harry now, and was trying to use his height to intimidate. The technique was clumsier than Harry would have expected of someone his age. Yes, he really was still back in Hogwarts.

"If you don't cure my father," Malfoy whispered, "what that curse does to him will seem like *nothing* beside what my curse will do to you."

Harry put aside several pertinent observations about the inadvisability of threatening the man who probably held his father's life in his hands. "I look forwards to your demonstration of competence," he said gravely, and bowed to Malfoy just as he'd bowed to Lucius. "You can only have improved since last I saw you."

He turned away and walked down the corridor. The hex Malfoy sent after him in retaliation bounced off the reinforced back of Harry's robes. Emptyweed had been fond of setting "harmless" minor hexes and jinxes on Harry, but the robes bounced them back at the caster almost as effectively as a Shield Charm, whilst still letting healing charms and other helpful spells through. From the squalling sound that erupted behind him, Harry learned two things: Malfoy now probably had a stung hand, and he could give a stepped-on cat lessons in the voice department.

Harry grinned. Malfoy wasn't his patient, only a relative to be danced around and soothed whilst Harry got on with his *real* work. Harry could handle him.

He'd handled worse things, far worse things, during the last seven years. The disappointment over his job was only one of them. So far he'd had six serious relationships, and every single one of them had dissolved—the last violently enough that Harry didn't feel like dating much at the moment, and probably wouldn't for another month or so.

But that was the point, that month or so. He always stood up again and struggled on. He'd had to learn to fight battles on a smaller scale, that was all.

And to learn which ones I can't win, he thought, as he caught a glimpse of Emptyweed ahead of him. *Malfoy is a minor annoyance compared to that learning process.*

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Chapter: 2

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Calmness Is a Virtue

"Um. Ginny?" Ron shook his head a moment later, however, and crunched through the chicken and ham sandwich he was eating, vigorously enough so that small bits of meat flew in several different directions. "No, it can't be. I would have had a letter from Mum wailing that I needed to come down to St. Mungo's before now." He swallowed, stood up, and reached to take another sandwich from the plate that was poised precariously on the nearby table between two red candles with bright golden tassels. "So I reckon you're right, mate, and I give up. I don't know which patient you could have and not want to treat."

Harry leaned back against the wall, nursing his single sandwich and trying not to grin at the way Ron was contentedly plowing through his second one. This room behind Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes was the testing and storage room for products that weren't ready to release to the public yet, and it was so filled with candles, biscuits, powders, vials, and jars of threatening shapes and sizes and colors that Harry was just waiting for the day when Ron bit into one of his products into his lunch. "Lucius Malfoy," he answered.

Ron inhaled a large chunk of chicken and began coughing. Harry flicked his wand and cast a handy charm that he'd used more than once when a patient was startled by news of what disease he had just as he was drinking a potion. Ron sighed in relief as the chicken dissolved into thin liquid and ran down his throat, but demanded immediately, "What? And you didn't refuse?"

"The man's in pain from a dark curse that he knows the origin of but not how to cure," Harry said. "What was I supposed to say? 'This is my chance for revenge ten years too late?'" He envisioned Lucius standing in the Department of Mysteries, but the thought of Sirius could only

bring him a dull ache. He'd had his share of nightmares and mourning, but he had to get over that, just as he'd had to get over losing Ginny. The day when he looked at her and realized he couldn't be passionate about her unless someone else was chasing her was a dull ache, too. "I'm a mediwizard, and—"

"Should have been a Healer," Ron said stubbornly. He eyed his sandwich mistrustfully, then took another bite. He mumbled through the resulting mouthful, but Harry had some experience in understanding that language. "You know more about how to heal nicks and cuts and spattergroit and poisoning than half the Healers in hospital."

"They did allow me to sit the NEWTS a second time," Harry reminded him, smiling a little at the look of indignation on his friend's face. Ron's fundamental character trait was an inability to get over *anything* he felt was morally wrong. Harry was glad he had a friend whom rage didn't exhaust. "And I only got an Acceptable on the Potions practical that time, too."

"A Healer isn't all Potions skills."

"But it's a big part of the job. And that exam tests other skills, too, like your concentration." Harry rubbed his face; he'd been up late last night listening to Emptyweed's complaints and threats about the Malfoy case, and in a short while he would have to go back to that. The man was tireless in the worst way. "I'm still best when I can attend to my patients in short bursts of time and attention rather than spending hours with them."

"I'd want you to treat me before that horror you're saddled with, mate."

Harry clapped Ron's shoulder and ate the last bit of his sandwich, then took a swig from the glass of pumpkin juice standing beside him—first taking a careful glance to make sure it hadn't picked up any yellow or pink debris from the stack of pastilles on the other side. "Thanks. That means a lot." And it did; Harry sometimes doubted he would have got through the last few years if not for his friends. He swallowed the last of the pumpkin juice and stood up, dusting off his cloak.

"Did you see the ferret?" Ron asked.

"Yes." Harry rolled his eyes. "It's still Hogwarts as far as he's concerned. He wants me to cure his father, but he thinks I need to be threatened into it, and he doesn't seem to understand that throwing a hex at my back is not the best idea these days."

"Which one did he get stung with?" Ron looked as gleeful as a second-year.

"Just a simple Stinging Hex, I think." Ron made a face. Harry clapped his shoulder again. "I promise, if he does anything else amusing, I'll tell you, but I'd rather focus on treating his father."

"A pity he couldn't have been swallowed up by that diary," Ron said, eyes hard.

Harry nodded. Like Ron, he found it harder to forgive Lucius for hurting Ginny with the diary

than for being in the Department of Mysteries when Sirius was killed. What kind of man would hand a Dark artifact to an eleven-year-old girl, even the daughter of a family he didn't particularly like? Mr. Weasley had never had a good word for Lucius Malfoy that Harry had heard, but he couldn't imagine him attacking Draco.

As a child, at least. He might be fair game now.

"I'll have all the horror stories you could wish for in the next few weeks," he said, and waved to Ron as he walked towards the door from the storage room.

"It'll take that long to cure the bastard?" Ron's voice was filled with revulsion.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder and nodded. "I think so. I recognize the general outline of the curse—it's a combination of a Cutting Curse and a Permanency Spell—but that combination shouldn't open cut after cut and then heal portions of them. It should simply keep on tearing wider and wider wounds until the victim drops dead, but that would take a long time, thanks to the Permanency Spell."

Ron shuddered and turned green. "Someone has to know about these things, I reckon," he muttered. "I also reckon I'm glad that it's not me."

Harry waved as he slipped out the door. His watch said he would be late if he didn't hurry, as much as he would have liked to stay and tease Ron about his skittishness with medical details. "Give my love to Hermione, and tell her that Kreacher will be cooking our dinner tonight."

"Harry, you *know* she hates that—"

"Sorry, what was that, Ron?" Harry asked, over the din of customers in the outer part of the shop. "I didn't quite hear you." He shut the door, grinning, and threaded his way to the front, nodding at George on the way. George nodded back without taking his eyes off the red-haired toddler in front of him who was making a top spin. It was amazing to Harry that George could run the shop and take care of Bill and Fleur's son Louis at the same time, but Bill and Fleur trusted him, and there'd never been an accident.

Besides, it was good for George's mind to be as occupied as possible.

Harry closed the door softly behind him, checked his watch one more time, cursed beneath his breath, and Apparated.

"I doubt you can tell me anything about Mr. Smythe I do not already know," Lucius remarked, leaning back on his pillows. Harry hid a smile. The man already looked better—it was probably easier to sleep and eat when one didn't have to worry about a cut opening through one's heart at any moment—and of course that meant he sounded more arrogant. "He accused me of raping his daughter. That is patently untrue, but he believes it, and it gives him motivation to work extra

malice into the curse."

"Why is your raping his daughter impossible?" Harry asked as he checked the notes Hermione had owled. She might have come to visit him herself, but work at the Ministry was keeping her as busy as always. "Because you can't rape the willing?"

There was a pause. Harry knew Lucius was staring at him. He failed to see why this should make him look up, especially as he had studied these notes late last night, just before he fell asleep, and he wanted to make sure he was remembering things correctly. Both Lucius and Emptyweed would make him pay for a mistake. At least neither Narcissa nor Malfoy were here to badger him further.

"Because I have never had sex with anyone except my wife," Lucius said at last, in a chilly tone.

"And she's probably never had sex with anyone except you," Harry said, and clucked his tongue as he looked up in mock concern. "Both of you virgins the first time? That's always painful, and never fun."

"You speak from experience, I trust." Lucius hissed out the words, leaning forwards in his bed, his hand twitching. Harry could read his wish for a wand as vividly as though he had actually mastered Legilimency.

"Oh, yes," Harry said, stepping forwards and frowning down at the cut on Lucius's chest. It had continued to expand, though slowly, and though thanks to his stabilization spells, he knew it would only cut through flesh and muscle and not through a vital organ. "Try being a virgin the first time you have sex with your girlfriend when your notion of sex is still vague enough to be 'feels good' and her notion of sex is vague because everyone thought she didn't need to know, as the youngest girl in a family of boys. Both embarrassing *and* painful."

Lucius was silent for some time. Harry kept his eyes off his face as he studied the dimensions of the cut. A new hypothesis occurred to him, and he nodded to himself. The expansion of the cut didn't make much sense if it was only the combination of the Cutting Curse and the Permanency Spell as he had thought it was, but a third spell could easily have been cast, masked under the first two. Lucius would have dismissed any effects he felt from it as further side-effects of the first unknown curse. Now Harry only had to discover what that third spell was.

"You are quite an unusual mediwizard, Mr. Potter," Lucius said at last, in a voice drained of all expression. "Do you have conversations like this with all your patients?"

"No," Harry said, meeting his eyes this time. Lucius's were narrowed, studying him as if he were looking down a Muggle microscope. "Only the ones who need it."

"I have no need to be insulted." It was only too obvious what tone Malfoy had been trying to imitate in school, Harry thought. He'd never heard so much cold, curdled pride tucked into so few words.

"It takes your mind off what you're suffering and finds a target for your anger and frustration," Harry said. "That's especially important in a situation like this, where otherwise you might spend too much time thinking about your helplessness and stress yourself further—or do something desperate. If you can be angry with me for petty insults, it might also prevent you from thinking too much about our shared past."

Lucius was once again silent whilst Harry tested his pulse, listened to his breathing, and cast the diagnostic spell that was a series of silvery frogs. This time, when the large frog turned into a pool of water and the cool voice spoke in his head, the news was more cheerful. *Malice field stabilized. Pain lessened. Chances of survival increased.*

"You could not have known me well enough to realize I would need such a thing," Lucius said at last, his voice muffled.

"I have known people like you," Harry said. "I haven't had to treat someone who tried to kill me before—" he smiled serenely back at the look of outrage on Lucius's face "—but I've had to treat people who thought I was mad, or on the way to becoming a Dark Lord myself, or who despised me for not doing something more with my celebrity. The combination that suits you is absolute honesty about myself, so you can despise me if you like, combined with petty stings that keep your mind focused on the present."

"Clever," said Lucius. His tone was utterly inflectionless, and Harry couldn't tell if it was sarcasm or not. He decided to accept it as a compliment, since he received few of those on a day-to-day basis.

"Thank you," Harry said, and glanced one more time at the notes Hermione had sent him. "Smythe did refuse Veritaserum, but one of the Aurors presented himself as a scholar in esoteric magic and pretended such admiration for the spell he cast that Smythe talked to him." His smile would have twisted if he was having this conversation three years in the past. He knew exactly how well Julius Adoranar could lie. "The curse is one he took from a book but modified extensively, which makes this harder. And the Auror who questioned him reported that it didn't have exactly the effect he intended. He wanted it to open multiple painful wounds, including ones through your major organs, but keep you alive. That was part of the point of the malice field."

"And why did it fail?" Lucius still spoke without emotion.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Harry spoke without fear. He'd had a few patients he couldn't give any bad news to because they would immediately panic and injure themselves with their flailing about, but he knew Lucius had endured worse things. "My best guess at the moment is that Smythe also cast a third spell buried under the two that seem obvious, and that spell didn't go exactly as he planned."

"Your best guess," said a voice from the door.

Harry glanced that way, glad he hadn't been holding a delicate potions vial, but more irritated with himself for not hearing the footsteps than at the person who spoke. He *ought* to be more watchful. Some of the tactics he used to handle such patients as Lucius could get him sacked on the spot if the wrong person overheard. "Yes," he replied. "I can't be sure as yet, and I won't commit myself to some definite claim without proof."

Malfoy swaggered into the room, his gaze fixed on Harry. That gaze was more calculating than it had been last night, and Harry wondered if he had seen the man's worst face then. Harry doubted he would have been a model of calm and graciousness himself if he had just seen his father cursed. If he had a father, anyway.

"I thought you would have made the claim by now," Malfoy continued. "I've been talking to some of the other mediwizards. They say it's almost supernatural, how swiftly you make a diagnosis."

"In most cases where I can do that, I'm dealing with known spells or diseases," Harry said. *Calmness is a virtue,* said Healer Pontiff's voice in his head. *It encourages your patients to remember they are real people, not simply victims, and it keeps you grounded.* Harry was determined not to lose his temper with Malfoy again, especially a Malfoy who had managed to speak four sentences without saying something *actively* offensive. "In this case, there's a modified spell plus—I believe—a third one. It will take some time to figure out what has gone wrong and what consequences that wrongness will have. It would take some time even with the book in front of me."

Malfoy stared at him, then snorted and turned away from Harry as if he didn't exist, gazing at his father. His face softened when he did, Harry noted. That satisfied Harry. He didn't have to fear that Malfoy's visits would only be a source of extra stress for Lucius. "And how do you feel?" he asked quietly.

Harry moved towards the door of the room so that they could have some privacy for their conversation. Then he wished he hadn't, because he caught a glimpse of a white robe and realized Emptyweed had been lurking in the corridor, waiting for a chance to speak to him.

No one ever got anywhere by hiding from their troubles. That wasn't Healer Pontiff's advice, but a bit Harry had come up with on his own. He stepped out and shut the door. "Yes?" he asked simply. Hard for even Emptyweed to find much disrespect in a single word.

"How are you progressing with the case, *Mediwizard* Potter?" Emptyweed demanded, leaning near enough that Harry suffered a momentary delusion the man's eyes would leap at him like the frogs of the diagnosis spell.

Harry hid a sigh. Of course Emptyweed had found the disrespect in the single word after all; Harry had forgotten his title. "I've identified a potential answer for the strangeness of the curse's effect, Healer," he said, and didn't even give the word much more emphasis than it deserved. "A

few more days' study should enable me to identify the third spell involved, and a few more days after that will tell me how to part the Cutting Curse and the Permanency Spell that, intertwined, are causing most of the trouble at the moment."

"A week, perhaps?" Emptyweed leaned nearer, and Harry had to work to keep from reaching up and turning his nose aside simply so it wouldn't poke him in the forehead. "I could give you a week."

"*Give* me one?" Harry asked. Even Emptyweed didn't normally try to hurry the speed with which Harry worked; if he wanted to take credit for the healing Harry performed, he needed good results. "This will take as long as it takes, Healer, as it does with all the cases we have on the Spell Damage ward."

"There are elements in hospital who want Lucius Malfoy gone *now*," Emptyweed said, and leaned even nearer. Harry canted his head to the side so that the dangerous nose would pass him by; he was not about to take a step backwards when Emptyweed would make capital out of it. "Some of them believe he should never have been admitted. I can give you the week I told you about. After that, I can't promise your patient's comfort *or* safety."

Harry grimaced. In part because of all the other cases Emptyweed had piled on him, in part because of his social life, in part because he still tried to study when he could and learn about the more complicated spells and tricks Healers used, he relied on other people to bring his patients food, enforce visiting hours, and clean their rooms. Anxious, angry attendants could make things more uncomfortable for Lucius than a Healer could.

"Tell me who they are, Healer," he said. "I think I can—dissuade them."

Emptyweed stepped back, his arms dropping to his sides and stiffening. "I don't know what you think this place is, Potter," he said with great dignity. "But to *me*, it is St. Mungo's Hospital, and I won't have you lording your name over other people simply to get your own way."

"Protecting a patient—"

"Is a task for a full Healer, and not a mere mediwizard. You have a week," Emptyweed repeated in flat tones, and swept off up the corridor.

Harry contemplated throwing away his loose black mediwizard's robe and storming through hospital shouting obscenities. That ought to get him sacked fairly quickly. Or perhaps he could do himself in by banging his head against the wall and somehow manage to place the blame on Emptyweed.

But as always after his first seconds of violent fantasy, he pulled himself back to the present. He was a mediwizard, and that was an honor, if not as much of an honor as to be a full Healer (as Emptyweed would remind him). He had overcome worse things than this before. He was not a helpless child, and he was not a sulky teenager anymore, who screamed and threw accusations

because not everything went exactly his way. He would *make* things work, because that was possible if you wanted them to badly enough.

He stepped back into the room. Malfoy flicked him a hostile look. Harry ignored him and spoke directly to Lucius, who was sitting up and scanning him gravely. "I just received a warning from my immediate superior. There are certain people who don't want you here and might well attack you."

"And you'd simply let them, is that it?" Malfoy's hand dropped to his robe pocket.

"Don't be more of an idiot than you can help," Harry told him. Yes, calmness was a virtue, but better he vent his feelings with a petty insult than explode from trying to keep them in. "This is a matter of practicality, Mr. Malfoy," he said, turning his head towards the bed and making it very clear that he was addressing Lucius and not his son. "I have other patients and can't spend every hour here with you. I also can't guarantee that I'll have the curse reversed in a week, which is the time span of safety my superior gave me. I won't hurry it and possibly hurt you. Nor do I have the authority to set up wards around your room. If I tried, someone would find out and use that as an excuse to have me removed from your case."

Lucius nodded shortly.

"What do you think the best solution is?" Harry finished. "Can you arrange protection on your own? Is there someone you want me to contact?"

"I can take time away from my training," Malfoy said softly. Harry shot a look at him and saw his face open, his hand almost trembling as he rested it on his father's shoulder. "I'm still a year away from my mastery, you know that, and I'm at a point where pausing my studies won't hurt me."

"I would not want you to have to live in hospital, Draco, when *I* am the one who is sick," said Lucius.

"I want to," Malfoy said earnestly, and Harry felt his throat close up. This scene wasn't very different from some of the ones he'd seen play out in the Burrow, especially just after Fred died and everyone was volunteering to sit up with George, to play chess with him, or to walk with him and make sure he didn't go near brooms or high cliffs. "Please say you'll allow it? You know Mother isn't as good with the sight of potential death as I am."

Harry frowned—mentioning potential death was not something he would have done, at least not without more details to comfort his patient—but Lucius had already nodded.

"I have one condition, then," Harry said. Malfoy sneered at him; Lucius looked politely attentive, which was enough for Harry. "I insist on some respect from you, Draco." Malfoy looked a little startled that Harry had dared to address him by his first name. "If you're continually questioning me in the midst of delicate operations and insulting me, you'll take up valuable time I could be

using to cure your father."

Malfoy opened his mouth. Because Harry was watching closely and thought he had some idea of how their family dynamics worked, he saw the warning finger Lucius pressed into his son's wrist.

Malfoy bowed his head a moment later. "I don't promise not to ask questions at all," he muttered sulkily.

"Reasonable questions are fine," said Harry. "Unreasonable ones can wait." He smiled at Malfoy. Why not? He had got what he wanted.

Malfoy's mouth dropped open, and he blinked. Harry raised an eyebrow. *He obviously doesn't see enough sincere smiles directed at him. I wonder why that could be?*

He turned to Lucius. "Combined with what you told me yesterday about Smythe and the Aurors' report, I'm confident his motive was revenge. We know he wanted your death to be painful and lingering. That gives me a few ideas about what spell he could have used. I'll return tomorrow and let you know what I've found."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Lucius murmured. He was using the same keen gaze he had when Harry insulted him. "You have proven yourself more competent than I could have dreamed."

"You dreamed about me often?" Harry raised an eyebrow at him, grinned, and then turned away.

Malfoy's face had darkened into a scowl again, he noted on the way. He probably thought any flirtatious remarks addressed to his father entirely inappropriate. As long as he kept his promise not to interfere in Lucius's treatment, Harry didn't particularly care.

He could acknowledge that they'd got off on the wrong foot yesterday. Malfoy had been concerned about his father. Harry had judged him more than was warranted; he was a worried idiot, not an idiot plain and simple. Worried idiots, he could work with.

If only because they don't receive their fair share of pity.

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—Distractions Do Not Exist

Harry swore softly and pushed the book away from him, letting the cover shut with a bang. No one else but Kreacher lived in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place now; he could make as much noise as he liked.

Though if Xavier was here, there would still be noise, just of a different kind.

Harry rolled his eyes and stopped himself from thinking of it. His relationship with Xavier had ended badly, just like all the others had, and he knew the cause: himself. Yes, Xavier had behaved like an arse at the end, but when he'd been dumped by six people, it was more likely Harry had the problem than all of them.

Distractions do not exist when you are tending to a patient, Healer Pontiff murmured in his mind. *They are the most important thing to you—the only important thing. If you let your attention waver for a moment, then your patient may die.*

Harry nodded in determination and opened the book in front of him. He would find a solution to the riddle of the third spell under the Cutting Curse and the Permanency Spell cast on Lucius, because Lucius was his patient, and he deserved all the time and attention and care Harry could lavish on him, which was considerable.

Harry had once done his best all the time because he thought it might persuade the Healers to relent, look past his two failed attempts to take the Potions NEWT, and let him become a Healer. But now he tried to do his best from the sheer love of a mediwizard's job. He wouldn't want someone combating Dark magic cast on him or poison in his veins with half a mind and half a heart.

And if he wanted to forget about the dinner at the Weasleys' that evening, where Ginny still looked away from him with disappointment in her eyes and tried to avoid being left alone with him, the books were his best chance to do so. He'd never acquired Hermione's taste for studying; he still had to beat his mind into being disciplined about it when it would rather wander off to do something else.

Ginny had been badly, deeply in love with him. How deeply, Harry had never realized, until she had been forced to call a halt to the relationship and tell him it wasn't working. Harry could live happily enough with her as a friend, but he never felt passion for her except in the moments when someone else showed interest and he suffered from jealousy. Sometimes he wondered if he would have noticed her at all during his sixth year if she hadn't been dating Dean Thomas.

She was back with Dean now, and he loved her truly all the time and would take care of her. But the sight of Harry was still painful for her six years after their parting, and Harry doubted she would become comfortable around him until a few more decades had passed.

You'll have *those decades with the Weasley family,* Harry told himself, rubbing his forehead and making himself concentrate on the cool touch of his own palm for a moment, *something that*

looked decidedly uncertain when Voldemort was still around. You have enough happiness in your life. Eventually, this pain will pass, just like the pain over Xavier will. And now, pay attention to your work.

He glanced down at the page, and concentrated on distinguishing between one Latin incantation and another. Why did the book insist on differentiating between the *Mansuefacio* and the *Mansuetus* spells? The first was the verb and the second was the adjective; he'd managed to trickle some rudiments of Latin grammar into his brain through the cracks in his thick skull. But why would that make such a difference to the effect? Couldn't you just use one of them if you couldn't remember the other?

Quickly he found out that you couldn't. The *Mansuefacio* spell needed an object; it was supposed to be cast on a person or animal to make them tame or gentle. The *Mansuetus* spell was a general spell that could be used in lieu of a Calming Draught, and would affect several people at once.

More than that, he discovered as he read on, *Mansuefacio* was actually a variant of the Imperius Curse, just mild enough not to be illegal. It tranquilized a part of the mind, instead of the whole thing, and gave a vague command over the victim's body to the caster. The book told Harry it had been used in the past to take over the part of the brain that commanded another person's hand and cause him to turn his wand on himself—and sometimes it had been used for a more severe purpose, such as to make another person forget language. The writer admitted that he didn't know of a case in which it had been used to slow healing, but said that was possible. And there were some criminals who might favor *Mansuefacio* for such a purpose, because it could be easily hidden another spell, its effects not being dramatic, and it was little-known, so searchers wouldn't immediately test for its presence.

Harry grinned. He had a suspect for the mysterious spell, and that was more than he'd had an hour ago.

See? he thought, as he stood up and stretched, preparing himself for a few hard hours of sleep before he returned to St. Mungo's. *Your life is getting better and better all the time.*

Harry paused outside Lucius's hospital room. He'd had word already from Flora Helford, the mediwitch who passed news to him as a favor, that Lucius had slept well last night and no one had threatened him. But there were three voices in the room now, one Lucius's, one Malfoy's, and a third Harry knew, though he had tried hard enough to forget it.

He allowed himself a moment of weakness to brace his hand on the wall and think wistfully of coming back later. Then he smiled wryly to himself. Healer Pontiff would frown at him if she saw him standing like this, catch his chin, and tilt it up to its proper position. *No skilled mediwizard has cause to stare at the floor in the presence of any man, woman, or magical creature,* she had told him the first time she saw him doing it.

Harry stepped into the room and caught Lucius's eye, nodding to him. Malfoy fell silent at once,

looking disgruntled at having been interrupted. The third man in the room turned and stared. Harry ignored those two. Neither of them was his patient. "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy," he said. "I have a suspect for the third spell Smythe might have cast under the Cutting Curse and the Permanency Spell. If I'm right, it gave Smythe control over your body's healing, but little enough control to frustrate his purpose of opening constant bloody wounds in you."

"How interesting," Lucius said. "Please proceed."

Harry stepped forwards, but the third man barred his way. Harry looked up at him. Auror Julius Adoranar had never had a problem with height, or with commanding someone's attention either, for that matter. His hair was dark, his eyes a warm and brilliant gray, and there was something pleasing about everything from the way he moved and smiled to the arrangement of his face.

It was no wonder he had married a wealthy woman, and done it young, when he'd barely left Hogwarts. What Harry found surprising was how long it had taken him to suspect the marriage after Julius became his lover.

"No word of greeting for me, Mediwizard Potter?" he murmured now, voice husky and intimate, eyes warm.

"Greeting," Harry said mildly, and stepped around him. He came up to the edge of the bed, Lucius studying him as if he had seen Harry begin bleeding before his eyes. Well, Harry had had no real hope that he'd be able to hide his past entanglement with Julius from someone like Lucius, though he could have done without the further humiliation in front of Malfoy. Then he pushed the distractions firmly into a locked chamber and focused on his patient. "The spell is called *Mansuefacio.* Have you heard of it, Mr. Malfoy?"

"You were so courteous once," Julius told his back. Malfoy's eyes were moving rapidly back and forth between Harry and the Auror as if he were watching a game of Muggle tennis. "I cannot believe you would snub me now."

"I have heard of it," Lucius said. "I believe it commands mental processes. Why should my unfortunate enemy have cast it on me, if he desired a physical effect?"

"Your education has been lacking, I see," Harry said. "A pity, though not astonishing by now." Malfoy made a wordless noise; Julius fell silent in astonishment; Lucius gave him a smile like winter sunlight. "The spell commands *parts* of the brain, not mental processes. It also touches on the body. The book I read last night—"

"Which one would that have been?" Malfoy demanded.

"*Bryony's History of Spells Marvelous and Depraved,*" Harry said. "Do forgive me. I ought to have included that in the sentence, for the sake of the specificity mediwizards are trained for. Said book suggested that the spellcaster might have seized control of a rival wizard's hand and thus his wand, by seizing control of the part of his brain that commanded the hand."

"And in this case, he would have gained control of the part of my brain that regulates the body's healing." Lucius had a deep line between his brows. "Could he still have it? Could he use it from a distance? The Imperius Curse, at least, has the advantage of the caster needing to be close when he gives his orders."

"I would question how such a worthy man knows the secrets of the Imperius Curse," Harry said, "but I forgot that you were under it for some years when the Dark Lord first rose." He looked at Lucius with his eyebrows raised; Lucius looked back, and let the irony hang glittering and spinning in the air between them. "And the answer is that I'm not sure whether Smythe could still have such control," Harry continued after a moment. "I need to test for the presence of the spell first."

Lucius nodded. "By all means."

"Father—" Malfoy began.

"Do you have reason to distrust me?" Harry said, spinning on him. Julius was best ignored, because nothing so infuriated him, but Harry was growing tired of Malfoy's attempts to interfere with his treatment of Lucius.

"Call it, rather, distrust in your education," Malfoy said, taking a step forwards and folding his arms. Harry wondered if he knew he looked like a prig when he did that. "You lack the ability to become a full Healer, or you would have become one."

"I am glad to see that *your* education has imbued you with the ability to make such stunning leaps of logic," Harry snapped. Then he wrenched his temper back under control. Healer Pontiff would have been disappointed in him for rising to such obvious and childish bait. "The final decision, as always, rests with the patient," he added, and turned back to Lucius. "Mr. Malfoy, do you wish me to fetch a full Healer who might treat you?"

"Would they be as committed to my physical safety?" Lucius asked. "Or as willing to be in the same room with me?"

"The only one I can think of is already overloaded with cases," Harry admitted. "It would be trading your current physical safety for the *possible* attendance of a Healer more skilled in potions than I am."

"Then I decline such attendance," Lucius said. "My son is studying for his mastery in potions. He can surely supply any knowledge that you lack."

Harry nodded. He would have liked to ask, wide-eyed and innocent, whether he had the permission of both Mr. Malfoys before he continued, but he had already allowed himself to be provoked too often, and he'd also already left the decision up to Lucius once. Appealing to Draco's judgment now would be specious at best, and at worst, the idiot would decide to take it

seriously and refuse permission.

He cast the nonverbal spell Healer Pontiff had taught him that would test for the presence of foreign magic in the body, and oriented it so that the soft blue tendrils extended from the end of his wand and curled about Lucius's head. A few sneaked beneath his hair, whilst Lucius watched them with a blank mask of calmness. They flared in a sudden corona, and Harry nodded in satisfaction. Yes, a spell had reached up to Lucius's brain.

"I always did like watching you work," Julius said from behind him, so close that Harry could feel his breath on the back of his neck. "Such grace, such skill and power!"

There was a time when Harry might have screamed at him for interrupting when he was in the middle of a procedure like this. Times had changed. He planted his elbow smoothly into the middle of Julius's solar plexus—long familiarity with his body was a help there—and Julius staggered off, arms clasping his belly, hacking horribly. Harry thought he heard Malfoy chuckle.

Then he flung himself straight into the middle of the spell that would detect whether it was, specifically, *Mansuefacio* that was present in Lucius's brain. It was a delicate task that required both strength and finesse, and thus was one of those spells that Harry tended to avoid unless he had no choice. His concentration still wasn't good enough; he preferred to hand tasks like that over to Healer Pontiff, or even Emptyweed, who had at least proven he had concentration enough to sit a bloody Potions exam.

Now, there was no choice, and so he answered the challenge with the same determination that he had brought to the sacrifice of his life when he wanted to defeat Voldemort for good and all. He pictured each word of the incantation in his mind, a glittering barrier, and then pictured himself soaring over them on a hippogriff. The hippogriff had to clear each word as he spoke it, and with enough space to spare; that was his breathing room in case something went briefly wrong. All the strength had to flow into the words and make them shine, but not escape beyond the boundaries; that would be applying too much magic.

Harry flew at the first word. *Probo*, it said, and the hippogriff cleared it easily. The word began to shine with radiant blue light. And then Harry couldn't think about it anymore, because they were on the ground and cantering towards the next word.

Mansuefacio, and this would be harder because it was not a word he had learned until last night. Harry hauled himself up and poured his magic forwards in syncopated pulses, forcing himself to use just enough to power the beats of the imagined hippogriff's wings and nothing beyond that. He came down hard, exhausted already, fighting against the terrible fear that the power would escape from him and damage Lucius's brain.

Aevitatis, said the third and final word, and Harry's mind tried to distract him with the knowledge that this was bastard Latin, an incantation put together by someone who didn't know or care about what the graceful, correct words should be, someone who only wanted them to work—

Someone like me, Harry thought, and used the thought to guide himself back to the correct task before his mind could go wandering. He jumped, and the word turned as yellow as sunlight. He whirled around and took one last glance back; was the word *Mansuefacio* glowing white like quartz?

It was.

Harry opened his eyes and slumped against the bed, watching as a whirl of shapes like falling leaves, blue and white and yellow, swarmed into Lucius's brain. He had cast the spell correctly. He knew it, and he let the pleasure of the knowledge run through him like strong wine, followed by the swifter pleasure that was the common knowledge he had helped someone else.

Lucius looked a bit nonplused when the leaves funneled out through his ear and formed an intricate pattern like a garden in midair, spelling out the word *Yes.* Harry threw back his head and laughed.

"I am glad to hear that the news is good," Lucius said dryly. "At least to you."

"Smythe did cast *Mansuefacio*," Harry told him. "As soon as I can find a counter to it, I can—"

His eyes narrowed. He had cast the spell better than he knew, because the magic continued to pour out of Lucius's ear. It had not only identified the existence of *Mansuefacio*, as the words Harry had woven together asked it to do, but had gone further to detect any oddities of magic in Lucius's brain. Harry winced just imagining what Emptyweed would say about that. This time, the strange result had been good, but who knew what the spell might have turned into, pushed beyond its boundaries?

A fourth spell, the leafy words said.

Harry cursed, and looked at Lucius, who had an inquiring eyebrow raised. "Smythe wove a construct of spells, not just one," he said. "*Mansuefacio* is tied to a fourth spell, and the fourth spell may be tied to a fifth one. I wonder if he cast them on purpose, or in a panic, one after another, when he realized the first few weren't working the way he intended them to." He turned towards Julius. As the Auror who had questioned Smythe, he ought to be able to tell them which suspicion was likelier. "Auror—"

His voice died when he realized that Malfoy stood behind him, back to Lucius and Harry and the bed and arms folded. Julius stood in front of him with his hands raised.

"What happened?" Harry asked. It seemed Malfoy and Julius had managed to get into a row in the short time he was paying attention to other things. Harry couldn't imagine what it would be about. Julius had never mentioned Malfoy being a friend during the seven months he and Harry had dated before Harry found out the truth about his marriage and Julius dumped him for "not understanding the way normal people lived."

"He was about to interrupt you again whilst you cast, the brainless idiot," Malfoy said, voice heavy as an iceberg. "He doesn't seem to have considered the harm unrestrained healing magic could do to my father's body and brain." His shoulders shook slightly, as though he were holding himself under intense strain, and Harry supposed this was the way Malfoy looked when he was furious.

"I merely wanted to ask you a question," Julius said, the picture of injured innocence. The softness of his downcast eyes had got him out of trouble many times. Harry hadn't let them affect him in five years.

"As it happens, your question will have to wait, because I have more important ones," Harry said. "What degree of planning does Smythe appear to have brought to this? Did he speak of plotting carefully and calculating the effects of each spell, or might he have cast recklessly, wildly, trying to snatch back control as each piece of magic went awry?"

Julius sighed and took a step back from Malfoy so he could drop his hands and straighten into a more flattering posture. "You know how poor my memory's always been, Harry, and how much I dislike speaking in front of crowds. If you would come into the corridor with me for a moment, I'm sure we could have a more fruitful discussion."

Fruitful was Julius's favorite word to use right before he had sex with someone; he claimed it was seductive. For a moment, Harry was so filled with rage that he couldn't speak. Julius really thought Harry would spend a night in his bed simply to gain the answer to a question?

"Pardon me for asking the question. I *do* remember how poor your memory is, Auror Adoranar," he said, when he recovered his breath and tongue. "You forgot your wedding ring at home for seven months whilst you visited my house."

Malfoy laughed, a sharp, cold laugh that went into Julius like an arrow, from the way he suddenly stiffened and took a step backwards. Lucius did not speak, but raised an eyebrow again.

"Well, I really can't say what Smythe had planned or hadn't planned," Julius said, in the tones of an injured child. He was at his least charming immediately after he'd been taken off his guard by someone he'd thought would never have the power of hurting him. "We had no reason to suspect multiple spells, so I didn't ask about them, or listen for clues that might have confirmed their existence."

"Thank you, Auror," Harry said, and turned back to Lucius. "I do apologize, Mr. Malfoy It seems my investigation will be still more prolonged. Perhaps I could simply cast as many *Finites* as there are spells and end them that way, but without knowing how they are joined—whether simply piled one on top of each other or joined together in a net—doing so could damage you. And I suspect the solution is more complicated, in any case."

"Competence can take as long as it needs," Lucius murmured, and closed his eyes. Harry heard a light footfall behind him and glanced over his shoulder to see Narcissa Malfoy entering the

room; Julius had already departed. Well, he'd never had a taste for standing over battlefields he'd lost on. "Now, Mr. Potter, is there anything else you need to discuss with me, or can I converse with my wife in private for a time?"

"Nothing else," Harry said, and bowed as Narcissa stopped beside her husband and stroked his hair back. "I shall continue reading, and hope to bring better news the next time I come."

Lucius murmured something which Harry rightly took for a dismissal, and he slipped out of the room, checking his watch as he went. There was a half-hour before his attendance was required on his next patient; he had planned to spend more time with Lucius this morning, hopefully undoing the *Mansuefacio* spell. He could use the extra time to retreat to his cubicle and relax, he thought, perhaps taking one of the headache potions that Healer Pontiff brewed for him.

A hand touched his arm, making him spin around and straighten automatically; Healer Emptyweed sometimes announced his presence that way. But it was Malfoy, regarding him with brilliant eyes and a kind of forced half-smile.

"Since my mother is sitting with my father, I have some time to spare," he said. "Would you mind if I accompanied you to your lunch? I'm rather a stranger to this part of London and don't know the best places to eat." His face softened and his smile became more genuine. "And I do want to thank you for trying to save my father's life."

Harry stared at him, puzzled. Malfoy could have told him that last without trying to accompany him to a lunch Harry was sure he had no desire to share with his schoolboy rival, and which Harry wasn't going to take anyway. In fact, the way he leaned towards Harry, smiled, and lowered his voice was just on the edge of flirtation.

The most sensible explanation occurred to him and made him smile back. Malfoy's breath caught, which amused Harry. That was taking a joke rather *too* far, wasn't it? He was certainly overacting. And of course it was a joke of Malfoy's, something to take his mind off his father and torment Harry whilst still being able to persist in a guise of respect, as Harry had demanded.

"I didn't thank you for preventing that prat from interfering with my spell, either," Harry said. "So you've done as much to preserve your father's life as I have, this morning. By the way, thank you." He offered a little bow to Malfoy in turn, disengaging his arm with a gentle pull. "I'm afraid I can't oblige you, though, since I'm not going to lunch."

Malfoy blinked at him. "But it's almost noon," he said, as though only savages from Venus took their lunch at other times of the day.

"I know," Harry said, "but most days I simply don't have enough time. I won't today, either, before my attendance is required on the third floor in—" He checked his watch, and swallowed his irritation as best he could. Malfoy was being civil, and Harry liked him better that way, even if he was only acting to relieve his own boredom. "Twenty-five minutes. I'll have enough time to go to my cubicle, relax for a few minutes, and swallow a potion I need, but that's all."

"What potion do you need?" Malfoy immediately asked, his voice becoming brisker. Well, he was getting his mastery in potions. It must be professional interest. Still, Harry had no intention of confiding matters that were purely personal and had nothing to do with his father's care to Malfoy.

"Oh, a common one I have on hand," Harry said. He gave Malfoy a meaningless smile and turned away, but the man insisted on walking right beside him.

"A headache draught?" Malfoy asked, actually sounding knowledgeable. Harry shot him a startled glance before he could control himself, and Malfoy gave him a still more genuine smile. "I saw you rubbing your forehead earlier. And I know another cure for that," he offered, voice low, and raised his hands as if he would press his fingers into the sides of Harry's temples.

Yes, and what would he do once he had them there? Harry ducked his head and stepped away, shoulders stiff. He could feel irritation bunching in his muscles. Of course, once he rejected Malfoy, the prat would become repulsively snappish again, but that was better than allowing him to channel magic into Harry's brain for his own amusement.

"Potter!"

Healer Emptyweed had never appeared as a miracle before, but he did now. Malfoy jerked to a halt, his lips curling. Harry gave him an apologetic smile, not caring how fake it looked, and strode towards his superior, nodding in respect. "Healer," he murmured.

"One of your former *partners* is downstairs again, insisting on seeing you," Emptyweed said, his voice dropping to a disapproving hiss.

Xavier. Harry felt his chest tighten. There would be no headache draught today; Xavier was rather like a hurricane, in that ignoring him and outrunning him were equally impossible.

Resigned, he hurried down the corridor behind Emptyweed. When he neared the stairs, a feeling of eyes on his back made him glance over his shoulder. Malfoy stood with his arms folded near his father's room, lips downturned in a sulky pout.

Harry turned away, relieved. At least Malfoy's flirting had disappointed him and probably contributed to his boredom, which meant he was unlikely to try it again. And Harry could *use* one less problem right now.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Maintaining Health Is a Matter of Balance

"And I want to see him *immediately*." There was no mistaking Xavier Brandeis's voice, even from up an entire staircase. "Do you have the slightest idea who I am, or what he did to me? I'll tell you. He lied to me, betrayed me—"

Harry cursed under his breath, which made Healer Emptyweed stare at him indignantly, but he didn't really care. He just wanted to prevent Xavier from telling all the secrets that should have remained private in front of half the sick people in London. He leaped over the last few steps and landed at the bottom, casting a wave of golden sparks that would attract Xavier's eye at once.

He'd been leaning on the Welcome Witch's desk, but he straightened up and smiled when he saw Harry. The face was handsome, undeniably; he'd caught Harry's eye without trouble when Harry first met him at a party celebrating the launch of several new Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. He had pale gray hair even though he was in his early twenties, shoulder-length and almost silvery. His eyes were large and blue-green. Somewhere in his background, he'd told Harry, was an infusion of siren or merfolk blood. He held out a hand with lengthy, polished, granite-gray nails to Harry.

"I thought perhaps a threat would bring you more quickly than coaxing," he said. "Never mind that it didn't work once. We always deserve second chances, you and I."

"I know as well as you do that it isn't second chances that brought you here today," Harry hissed at him. He still had his wand drawn, and he moved it now in a small jerk to remind Xavier of that. "Why are you here?"

Xavier pressed a hand dramatically over his heart. "Why, Harry, aren't I allowed to try to help my lover advance in life?"

"I'm not your lover."

"No," said Xavier, and leaned towards him, dropping both the smile and his voice. "And I'm going to make you regret that for the rest of your life."

Harry hissed at him, but inaudibly, because Xavier would surely make some remark about Parseltongue if he heard Harry. Unlike Julius, who still wanted Harry back because he didn't understand his moral objections to adultery, Xavier disliked who Harry *was,* and he was extremely quick with comebacks. Harry didn't want to get into a row that would expose all those secrets to St. Mungo's.

He could try reason. Xavier had sometimes responded to it. "You know I'm perfectly happy being a mediwizard," he said. "Surely someone with your intellect could have understood that."

"But you *should* have been a hero," said Xavier, and his smile returned, brittle. "No matter how poor your qualifications for it are."

Harry concealed a groan, which Xavier would also have mocked. Xavier had decided that Harry's deplorable lack of ambition must be cured, so he had arranged to have himself "kidnapped" by several of his friends and left evidence as fragmentary clues. His idea was that Harry would easily follow the clues, find him, and resume his supposedly natural place as a hero on the front pages of the papers. Instead, Harry had gone to the Aurors. Xavier had dumped him the next day, declaring that Harry had lied to him about being a hero.

Life with Xavier had never been boring, but it had also been utterly without relaxation, something Harry *needed* in his life at the moment.

"Tell me, Xavier," Harry murmured as he leaned closer still, "have you ever killed a Dark Lord? Do you know what qualities it needs?"

"Yes," Xavier said. "A sheep-like willingness to sacrifice yourself, as you've told me multiple times—"

"No," Harry said, raising his voice to invite the rest of the raptly listening hospital into the conversation. One of Xavier's flaws was that he lost track of single ideas very quickly and latched on to new ones. If Harry could make him re-argue an argument they'd had before, he might be able to distract Xavier from telling their secrets; Xavier would be determined to win *this* time. "It also took courage to walk to my death. No one else who was still alive knew I'd have to sacrifice myself to kill Voldemort." And that name *still* made people flinch, even though it had been seven years since the war. "I could have run away and denied my destiny. I didn't. And then I still faced Voldemort afterwards, when he had the Elder Wand and could probably have destroyed me.

"And it's courage that leads to my going in among patients every day and facing diseases and curses, magic gone awry and poisons, that you'd never be able to stomach. You're more comfortable with the idea of a hero who comes home with his own blood on him than you are with the idea that I've got the blood plunging my hands wrist-deep into someone else's wound."

Xavier had gone pale and stepped back from him. Another reason he'd wanted Harry to stop being a mediwizard was pure selfishness, Harry knew. He hated hospitals, hated sickness, and hated the thought that Harry thrived in that environment.

"I never was what you wanted, Xavier," Harry said, and pasted a sickly sweet smile of sympathy across his face. "But maybe you'll learn to appreciate me for what I am, if you come watch me perform surgery and—"

Xavier turned and stalked away with what dignity was left to him.

Harry sighed and stood up, only to find Emptyweed at his elbow.

"I've never seen someone who's as much a disgrace to St. Mungo's as you are, Potter," he murmured, as he turned Harry with a steel grip on his elbow back towards the stairs. "Showing off like a child by jumping down those steps and casting that spell. Rowing with a lover whilst there are patients who need care. Bragging about yourself when the whole world has already honored you. You could be sacked tomorrow and the whole hospital would be calmer and more peaceful."

Harry bore the lecture in silence. He'd had to bear worse, especially immediately after Xavier's false kidnapping, when he'd come storming into hospital and interrupted Harry's treatment of a woman with Runespoor venom in her veins.

As he began to mount the stairs, he saw Malfoy lurking in the shadows on the first floor, staring at him with folded arms and intense eyes. Harry was too tired to care what the idiot was thinking. Probably still trying to find some way to prove that Harry's skill was "insufficient" to take care of his father. He raised an eyebrow at Malfoy in challenge.

Malfoy only nodded back, as if he and Harry had been the ones to share a secret, and then vanished. Harry's windy sigh of relief began Emptyweed's lecture again.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Harry muttered under his breath, leaning down until his nose almost touched the diagram of interwoven spells on the page. They formed a pattern the book called the Locus Maze, for reasons Harry hadn't bothered to divine yet. But the spells were folding and bending back on each other in a way that Harry's mediwizard training told him should be impossible. The slight shimmer of magic above the parchment showed that the illustrator had had to use a spell to make the maze come out right.

"Curses *can't* tie into a knot like that," he told no one. "What is this author—"

"Harry James Potter!"

Harry yelped and jerked back from the reading table in the library, dropping the book on his toe. Whilst he hopped on one foot, gripping it in his hands, he glared at Hermione, whose head had appeared in the fireplace. She and Ron were the only people who could Floo him at any time, even if he had a block up. Hermione abused the privilege shamelessly.

"I told you not to do that," he said, scowling at her as he gingerly put his injured foot back down. "I think you're the ghost of my mum when you do that."

Hermione only grinned at him, a savage grin of the kind she'd used in Hogwarts when she came up with a new study plan. Harry surveyed her warily.

"Tell me how much you've had to eat today," Hermione said, with an air of triumph.

"Um," Harry said. "Two cups of coffee and a full dinner."

"What did the dinner consist of?"

Harry scowled at her, unable to come up with a lie on the spot. It was eight-o'clock; he really didn't think Hermione wouldn't firecall this late.

"Um-*hm*," Hermione said. "And how many hours of sleep have you got this week?"

"Why does that matter?" Harry knew he was whinging, and he didn't care.

"Maintaining health is a matter of balance," Hermione said sanctimoniously, quoting Healer Pontiff. Harry scowled harder. He never should have confessed to Hermione and Ron how much he relied on her advice. Hermione was prone to use it against him at the slightest excuse. "*Your* health as well as the patients', Harry. What good can you be to them if you're dropping of exhaustion?"

"It's a long way between 'dropping of exhaustion' and just being a little tired, Hermione—"

"How many hours," Hermione said, and he saw her put a hand on her hip, "this week?"

"Seventeen," Harry muttered.

"And it's Thursday."

Harry folded his arms and looked away. His foot was still throbbing.

"I believe I win our bet, then," Hermione said. "You have to come over and listen to stories from me and Ron that have absolutely *nothing* to do with mediwizard training. You have to eat a full meal with us. And you'll need to sleep at least nine hours before you go in for work tomorrow."

Harry cursed under his breath, which made Hermione look more smug, instead of scolding him as Emptyweed had. Each week, he and Hermione made a bet that was meant to keep them both from exhausting themselves—Harry with spending too much time on his patients' health and not enough on his own, Hermione from spending too much time and energy on her Ministry work. If Harry got less than six hours' sleep a night and didn't have at least one full meal a day, he lost the bet, just as Hermione lost the bet if she spent any full night reading, and the loser had to perform whatever "punishment" the other deemed fitting. Hermione had lost two weeks ago, and Harry had made her go to her job in the morning with a sign on her back that said I'M WEARING THIS BECAUSE I STUDY TOO DAMN MUCH.

"This case is really important," he tried. "I think several different spells are linked together in Lucius Malfoy's mind, but I don't know how many there are or what the pattern is, and I can't cure him until I do—"

"Harry," Hermione said softly. "At some point, you have to stop thinking about him and start thinking about yourself. And there's to be no mention of Lucius Malfoy tonight, or Draco Malfoy, or why you need to spend five hours a night studying this in *addition* to all the extra learning you already put yourself through."

Harry looked at the floor and nodded. In truth, he was longing to rest his brain and relax in the company of his friends, but guilt flared up every time he thought of it. What if he could discover the answer to Lucius's problem if he read just a *little* more? The man was depending on him.

"But perhaps," Hermione said, "there might be mentions of the theory behind linked mazes of spells at the dinner table. As a purely abstract concept, of course."

Harry looked up with a smile. This was the reason he and Hermione had made their bet in the first place. They prevented each other from going too far, but they also took care of each other.

"Let me get dressed—" Harry gestured at the slimy, singed mediwizard's robe he wore.

"Come as you are," said Hermione, and held her hand out of the fire to pull him through.

Harry took it and went, grateful beyond words to have such wonderful friends.

Harry was halfway up the corridor from Lucius's room, still checking one of the diagrams of linked spells he'd made this morning and reluctantly admitting to himself that nine hours' sleep had been good for him, when a scream of pain and panic broke out from ahead of him. Harry jerked up his head and, without thinking about it, Apparated, despite the anti-Apparition wards scattered along the corridor.

He reappeared at the foot of Lucius's bed and took in the problem at a glance. Multiple shallow wounds were opening along Lucius's arms and legs. A deeper cut was ripping and bubbling in the center of his chest, slow as yet, because it was fighting the especially thick stabilization fields Harry had cast above his internal organs.

But someone had dispelled the fields that had protected his limbs.

Harry didn't pause to curse, though he would have liked to. He also didn't let himself respond to Lucius's screams with panic. He aimed his wand at the man's limbs instead and chanted, "*Defendo hostiam cum corde meo!*"

Brilliant sheets of red light broke from his own chest and hands, assuming the forms of galloping riders. Harry braced himself against the spell's drain, shivering as for a moment a cold hand closed around his heart and squeezed. But then the magic surged outwards, and he had the pleasure of seeing it wrap Lucius's arms and legs in what looked like a shield of glittering crimson tinsel.

The cuts closed at once. Harry stood still, letting Lucius adjust to what he knew was the sudden and unsettling feeling of good health. Healer Pontiff had used this spell on Harry when he unwittingly channeled poison from a patient into his body instead of into the waiting vial. Lucius stopped screaming and lifted his head, staring at Harry. Then he looked down at his chest. The cut there had closed as well, though a thick knot of skin showed where it had been.

"What happened?" Lucius whispered.

"Someone *took off* the spells that protected you," Harry said. He was so angry he was choking. Emptyweed had guaranteed a week of safety, and he couldn't even keep *that* promise. "The curse immediately tried to return. I'd protected your chest better, and your enemy couldn't have removed that magic without awakening you, so the curse wasn't as severe there."

"And the spell you used to defend me?" Lucius was propping himself up on the bed with one arm, though he looked so weak and shaky Harry thought he should have been lying down. "I thought I caught a phrase referring to 'heart,' but that was all."

"Your education is not lacking in Latin, at least," Harry murmured mockingly. Lucius caught his lower lip between his teeth, but said nothing, and Harry relented. It was perfectly clear that Lucius was not going to rest unless Harry told him the truth. "*Defendo hostiam cum corde meo.* 'I defend the victim with my heart.' Known as the Heart's Blessing in some circles."

"It sounds intolerably twee," Lucius said coldly. "What does it mean?"

"I'm sharing my life force with you," Harry said. "So long as my heart beats, you cannot die."

Lucius went very still, his eyes freezing along with the rest of him. The next moment, he was staring at Harry as if Harry were not only a person but a kind of creature he'd never seen before. Harry shrugged. "I'm young and healthy, and I stand a better chance of recognizing the medical curses that someone in hospital would probably use. They'll have to go through me to get to you from now on. I would have used this spell from the beginning, but it *is* risky and requires concentration and power I don't usually have access to. Probably only the fear that you were going to die immediately could have pushed me to get it right."

"I know what it means to share life force with someone," Lucius said at last, his voice quiet and strangled.

Harry frowned. Some wizards and witches had extremely odd beliefs concerning the Heart's Blessing spell, another reason it wasn't used often. "You won't be able to feel my thoughts or my bodily sensations, Mr. Malfoy, no matter what your friends might have told you when you were a teenager. When the connection can be cut with safety, I'll do it. We won't be bound for the rest of our lives—"

"My father means something else," Draco Malfoy's voice said from behind him, incredibly gentle. Harry hadn't even realized he was in the room, so intense had his concentration on

Lucius—by necessity—been. Now he turned and saw Malfoy stepping out of the corner of the room, his movements slow and exaggerated as though he were trying to reassure a wild beast. Harry scowled at him, not liking to be coddled, but Malfoy only smiled back. "When a wizard sacrifices part of his life force to save another, it creates a wizarding debt between them, just as saving someone from certain death does. My father's simply shocked that you would do that for someone whom you barely know and have reason to hate."

"I—it 's the right thing to do," Harry muttered, flushing. He wasn't sure if Lucius's stare or Malfoy's made him more uncomfortable. "Most other Healers in St. Mungo's would have done the same. And—"

"Most others would not have done the same, given what has happened to him from the moment he arrived here." Malfoy took another delicate step towards Harry. Harry was momentarily startled that Lucius was letting his son speak for him, but maybe he really was too overcome by the notion of his danger. "And you swore that you would protect him, and you've kept that promise, up to lending him your life force so he can survive. That's not a light gift, Potter."

His face was so *odd*, Harry thought uneasily. Softened, eyes bright and full, mouth trembling on the edge of a smile—

And then Harry wanted to groan. He knew what was happening. Malfoy might have given up the flirtation out of boredom, but now he would be grateful to Harry for saving Lucius's life, and think he had to be nice to him because of that.

Harry gave Malfoy a quick, tense smile, then turned to face Lucius. "Our first priority must be finding out who removed the stabilization fields," he said. "You were asleep?"

Lucius nodded. "I heard nothing. And our first priority must be making sure that you're safe, Mr. Potter. You're young and healthy, as you said, but even you could be killed by a curse or an accident." He shifted his eyes to his son. "I think Draco should take over the duty of protecting you."

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Malfoy's face brighten out of all proportion to the assignment. *Really. He can't be that desperate for company that he's willing to solicit me. He's handsome enough to catch whoever else he wants.*

"No!" Harry said sharply. "There has to be someone here with you at all times—"

"My wife will come," Lucius said quietly. "We did want to spare her, as she is not at her best with hospitals, but she would bear worse for me." He said that with utter trust in Narcissa, Harry thought enviously. He couldn't say he'd had the same kind of trust in anyone he'd dated or fallen in love with, even Ginny. Ron and Hermione were a different matter, a different kind of bond. "She also knows spells, thanks to several days of study now, that should help to protect me and still be undetectable by the wards of the hospital and by your Healer friend who dislikes me so much."

"Mr. Malfoy—" Harry didn't know how the man could be so unconcerned about the unknown enemy who'd almost murdered him.

"It's for the best anyway, Potter," Malfoy said, stepping up beside him. "I was awake and alert, I must have been, when that spell to remove the fields was cast, but I didn't know anything had happened until Father started screaming. Then all I could do was step back out of the way when you arrived and let you work. Mother is better at noticing small changes immediately. I'm better, I think, at keeping up with you."

Harry shot him an irritated glance. Not even that melted the smile Malfoy was now wearing. The smile made Harry's insides squirm. It was warm, gentle, respectful, and inquiring, as if Malfoy really *wanted* to know more of Harry than he'd seen so far. Harry hadn't been looked at like that in—a long time.

Nonsense. Gene did, he told himself, and shoved the comparison out of his mind. Malfoy was not a potential romantic partner no matter what happened, and Harry couldn't think of dating when he was in the middle of a mess like this. He looked doubtfully at Malfoy. "I'm afraid much of the day will be boring for you," he said. "I've got other cases in hospital to attend to, and I never spend much time having fun."

Malfoy laughed softly. "Then I'll just have to teach you, won't I?" he said complacently.

Harry stared at him, then at Lucius. He couldn't believe Malfoy would flirt with him in front of his *father.* But Lucius was looking at the door, and Harry turned swiftly in case a threat had arrived. It was Narcissa Malfoy, however, who stepped into the room and spent a moment studying her husband before she turned to Harry.

"I recognize the Heart's Blessing spell, Mr. Potter," she said, and gave him a full curtsey that made Harry's cheeks burn. "Thank you for saving my husband's life."

Harry licked his lips. He didn't understand how Lucius or Malfoy could have summoned her so quickly, unless they'd decided to do it before the attack on Lucius—but why? He also suspected he wouldn't get an answer if he did bother to ask.

"You're, ah, welcome, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, and had to look away for a moment as she stepped up to the bed and took Lucius's hand. Lucius looked up at her with an expression that should be private. Harry hoped fervently no one else would interrupt them. He still had to say a few things before he could leave, however.

"I spent some time last night researching linked spells, Mr. Malfoy," he said. "I'm afraid I still can't tell what kind of maze may exist in your mind, or your body, or how to dispel it."

"You've bought us time for you to do the research," Lucius said, with a faint tone of warmth that Harry imagined his wife must bring out in him.

"And what happened today may have given you more clues." Malfoy leaned towards him and nodded.

"I—yes," Harry said, startled Malfoy could be so sensible. He looked suspiciously at the man for a moment, but Malfoy continued to regard him with that softened expression, and Harry reminded himself that he hadn't directly saved Lucius's life at this point in time yesterday. Not that he wanted any flirtation at all, much less flirtation that came directly out of some silly gratitude for a task Harry did because it was the *right* thing to do. "I'll still have to do more research, of course."

"Can you give me a room in your house?" Malfoy asked as they started towards the third floor. His voice was so innocent it prickled Harry like an ice cube pushed down his robes.

"It won't be my room," Harry said, turning and glaring at him full-on.

"Oh, I know that," Malfoy said, and stepped past him as if he knew where Harry's next patient was, brushing a hand against his shoulder on the way. "I'll leave it up to you to change your mind on that." He winked over his shoulder. "Not that I won't try to give you a little help."

Harry ground his teeth. A glance up and down the corridor showed no one coming towards them in either direction, so maybe they could have this out quickly. "Listen, Malfoy," he said, striding up to him. "You don't need to—act like this. I'm not going to abandon treating your father even if you are rude to me."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Harry said, relived he appeared to be getting through to him. "I would have wanted you out of the room whilst I was there, but you showed today that you can get out of the way when a trained mediwizard or Healer needs to work. You didn't try to distract me, unlike that bastard Julius." He hissed between his teeth and shook his head, still unable to believe that Julius would have been so stupid as to interfere in the middle of such a difficult spell. "You even protected me from his interruption, and I'm grateful for that. So I won't impose conditions on your presence from now on. You can sneer and insult me all you like. You probably need the release because of all the stress that Lucius being sick piles on you."

"My father's not sick, he's cursed," Malfoy said calmly. "You reminded me yesterday of the importance of specificity. And you're right, I am stressed. So are you, obviously." He ran his gaze up and down Harry's body. "Do you think we might be able to help each other? I *like* being helpful."

Harry laughed in spite of himself, and again Malfoy's breath caught, as it had when he looked at Harry's smile yesterday. Harry shook his head. "I don't want a boyfriend at present, and I think it would be a distraction I could ill afford if I did have one."

"You need someone to help you," Malfoy said, speaking without a smile now. "That's plain. You need someone who doesn't get on your nerves like Adoranar and who accepts and celebrates your abilities, unlike that fool Xavier. You need someone who can give you what *you* need, as well as getting what he needs from you." He took a step closer. "I can give you all that."

"I don't understand *why*."

Malfoy shrugged. "Because I want to."

Harry stared at him a moment longer, then laughed. Malfoy's spine stiffened. Harry turned around, still chuckling. Malfoy couldn't possibly be serious, not when he was under so much stress from his father nearly dying. He was choosing flirtation as a means to distract himself, but Harry couldn't allow it to continue, not when it would distract *him* in turn. What he would have to do was handle Malfoy with the same kind of teasing insults that he did Lucius, offering him a way to release frustration without—well, offering him some other way of releasing frustration.

"You might regret your willingness to help when you're handing me vials and asking incessant questions about healing that I won't answer," Harry said, and then began to stride down the corridor, forcing Malfoy to run to keep up with him. Harry glanced sideways at him when he was at Harry's shoulder. His face bore a faint flush of irritation.

Good. It's right that he, and I, both keep our minds where they belong.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—Even Relatives Can Be a Help

"You're going to be fine, Mary." Harry brushed the hair out of his youngest patient's eyes and smiled at her. She blinked at him and nodded, but didn't speak. The venom that had placed her in hospital in the first place—from a magically modified tarantula her father had been breeding—rendered her mute. Other than that, it was a perfectly normal poisoning case, and Harry had high hopes of her voice returning within a few more days.

Harry asked her a few more questions, always making sure to phrase them so she could give a nod or shake of her head, and was satisfied with the answers. The attendants had brought her her meals on time and made sure her bedding was changed. When she fell down due to a particularly strong convulsion last night, almost the last side-effect of the poison other than the muteness, someone had come to help her up within a few minutes. That let Harry know the charms on the

room to monitor his patient's health were still working. She was content and wanted for nothing right now, other than to go home and to have someone sit with her. Her father was up on charges for violating the Ban on Experimental Breeding, and her mother divided her time between trying to free her husband and consoling her daughter.

"I'll come back and sit with you for an hour this evening," Harry told her, and made a few rapid mental calculations. He wasn't expected for dinner at Ron and Hermione's; Hermione had satisfied herself last night that he'd actually listen to her and attempt to get a reasonable amount of sleep. He had to visit patients until four-o'clock, and then he would need two hours, at minimum, to get Malfoy settled into the house at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and reconcile his best friends to his presence. He should probably add an hour to that total just to be safe, on the chance Emptyweed came up with another case for him and because he wanted a second visit to Lucius. "At seven, all right?"

Mary beamed at him and squeezed his hand. Harry squeezed back; he would have liked to kiss her forehead, but any behavior that could be interpreted as romantic between mediwizard and patient was very much out of favor. *Patients find the distance between us and them to be comforting,* Healer Pontiff had told him in his third lesson. *They often want, when weak or sick, the sensation that someone knows what he's doing, even if that person isn't them.*

"Can you afford the time?" Malfoy asked from behind him.

Harry shot the idiot a tight glance. Malfoy didn't appear to realize he had just implied that Mary's comfort was less important than Harry's busy schedule. He leaned against the wall with his arms folded and a supremely bored look on his face. He did straighten and blink when he saw Harry's expression, but he'd probably only done that because he thought anger would keep him from getting into Harry's pants.

"Yes, I most certainly can," said Harry. "And so can you, if you're so intent on trailing after me."

"I'm accustomed to relaxing before the fire by then, Potter," Malfoy said. His voice had softened, but had a tinge of a puzzled tone to it. He raked Harry with his eyes for a moment, pausing on his face. "And you look like you could do with an hour when you're not worrying about that nasty superior of yours or all the noble self-sacrifices you like to make."

"If you think you can change my routine to suit your self-indulgent notions," Harry said, softly and through a smile for Mary's sake, "you're wrong." He turned back to Mary and nodded firmly. "I'll be here at seven," he repeated.

When he left the room, Malfoy trailed him. At least he wasn't all but breathing down Harry's neck the way he had been before Harry snapped at him that he was *working* and liked some room in which to move his elbows. But he was still present, and Harry was irritatingly, constantly, aware of him, except when he could actually focus on a patient.

Even relatives can be helpful, he thought, applying another bit of Healer Pontiff's advice. *When*

you can get them to tell you details about the patient, for example.

"Do you think Mr. Smythe honestly believes that your father raped his daughter?" he asked abruptly. "Or is that a cover story for something more sinister?"

From the soft choke Malfoy gave, Harry had surprised him. Harry kept his gaze straight ahead and his stride brisk, but a smile he couldn't help touched his lips. It was unworthy of him to enjoy surprising Malfoy like this. He would probably try to do it again anyway.

"The Death Eaters wore masks, Potter." Unexpectedly, Malfoy sounded weary, as if this were a question that he had answered many times before. "Nor did my father always wear his hair uncovered. Just because a masked Death Eater hurt a member of someone's family—and I'm not denying that many of them *did* hurt quite a few people—doesn't mean it was my father who committed the crime."

Harry paused and glanced back, his hand on the turning of the corridor that would deposit him near his next patient's room. Malfoy looked at him with a raised eyebrow, his mouth firm, but there were shadows behind and under his eyes that Harry knew too well. He looked that way when someone tried to question him too closely about the war, especially about whether he thought he should have defeated Voldemort earlier to try and spare others pain.

This is a grieving man, Harry realized suddenly, with a force that was like a branch springing back into his face. *This is a man who's had to confront demons in the years since the war, even if he does look as though he's had it all his own way. It can't be easy to know that his father is hated and a target, and that he doesn't have the choice of spending all his time comfortably at home anymore, far from labor. Or maybe he chose to work for a potions mastery because he wanted to, but that sill brings him into conflict with people.*

"I can promise you," Malfoy said, voice gentler than it had been yet, "if you like the expression I'm wearing now, I'm more than willing to present it to you as often as you wish." He wore that softened half-smile again, and his eyes were eager.

He doesn't really want to know about me, Harry told himself, to kill the hope that suddenly began to flourish in him. *He wants to evaluate me for weaknesses so he can get me into bed.*

"There is something I'd like to see more of from you, Malfoy." He made his voice more intimate than normal, and the man responded to it like a bird lured with a handful of seed, moving towards him with a single nervous stride.

"What?" he breathed.

"Your back," Harry said, and then continued on his way. It was one thing to offer sympathy to Malfoy, to see him as a patient in need of healing. But the moment he had achieved that perception, Malfoy *had* to challenge it and try to appear as someone intent on playing a role in Harry's life.

He could never be that. He would demand too much, or at least demand the impossible. Harry had enough demands to put up with, and only half of them were those he would have chosen. Why should he offer charity to a man who would whisk out of his life soon enough, the moment Harry had cured Lucius?

"I can't believe you live *here*."

Harry glanced over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow. Malfoy was standing in the entrance to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and staring about as though he could count the worth of every single Dark artifact Harry had removed from the rooms downstairs simply by looking at the entrance hall. "My godfather left it to me," he said. "I'm afraid your mother didn't impress him as a trustworthy custodian."

Malfoy focused on him again, and his expression settled into one of honest disgust—or at least disgust that *seemed* honest. Harry warned himself that he didn't really know and certainly couldn't trust it. "You think I'm angry because the Black house didn't pass into my hands?" he asked. "Good God, Potter. I wouldn't live here if you paid me."

"And no one is paying you to dance attendance on me." Harry rested a hand on the banister, to prevent it from shaking with joy at the thought of getting rid of Malfoy so easily. "You might as well leave now."

Malfoy chuckled. "I was using the word 'live' in a more permanent sense," he said, stepping past Harry and regarding the spot where Mrs. Black's portrait had once hung on the wall. "Once you've come to your senses, I'm sure I can help you find a house you needn't be ashamed to have company in."

"I would be ashamed to associate with anyone you thought of as suitable company," Harry said, and stepped into the kitchen. Kreacher, he was grateful to note, had sandwiches and tea already waiting. It was Harry's standard meal on a night like this, when he planned to go back to hospital later. He picked up the nearest sandwich and took a large bite of it, sighing in happiness as cheese and meat slid down his throat. He had never known how hungry he could be until he came home after long hours of caring for patients and dealing with nonsensical demands on his time. He expected the Healers to know more than he did, he would never dispute their superior skills, but *really*. Just because Emptyweed could get away with dumping his extra cases on Harry didn't mean that Healers Delart and Juno could.

"You live a cramped life, don't you?"

Malfoy, of course, was lounging against the doorframe and probably regarding the kitchen with disdain. Harry didn't bother turning to look, only devoured his sandwich and reached for a second one. "As before," he said, "you're welcome to leave and go back to St. Mungo's if you like. Or Malfoy Manor."

"You have no idea what a sacrifice of life force means either."

Harry turned around then, eyes narrowed. Malfoy had the weary tone in his voice, and Harry wanted him to stop it because he was harder to deal with when he was like that. "I know life debts can endure between wizards who neither trust nor like each other," he said. "I can't believe that you would insist on its importance the way you're doing."

"It's more than important," Malfoy said. "It's almost—it means—" He broke off and made a small frustrated noise in his throat, shaking his head. Harry hoped he would shake it so hard that it would fly off his neck and smash into the wall. "I don't have the words to explain it. This would be *so* much easier if you were a pure-blood," he finished, sounding plaintive.

"I've made your life hard from the day I appeared in it," Harry said. "Why ruin a fine tradition?" He finished his second sandwich, picked up the third, and wandered away from the kitchen towards the stairs, Malfoy in tow. The house they climbed through was less gloomy than it had been, with a few open windows and lamps lit and shining on the walls, but nothing could destroy the casual air of darkness that hung around it. At least, nothing could for Harry; knowing Malfoy, this probably felt like home. "You'll have a bedroom near mine, the better to hear me if I scream for help. I hope you won't be too bored."

"Listening to you scream for me could *never* be boring."

Harry's lips twitched without his permission. Really, why should it be so hard for him to ignore Malfoy? He blamed his mediwizard instincts. He was used to reaching out to people in intense pain, cursed people who no longer trusted anyone, and those with injuries so great or diseases so chronic that they had given up the notion of anyone being able to help them. When Harry saw the signs of suffering in Malfoy's face, he reached out. Not his fault, he hastened to reassure himself, just a trained response he was neither to blame nor to celebrate.

Like so much of my life, really, he thought, but in that direction lay self-pity, and that was one emotion he tried never to entertain. "You shouldn't lack for comforts here," he went on. "Kreacher's kept up all the bedrooms, and there's a great deal more furniture in storage. He can prepare any food you like—"

"I wouldn't have known, from that plate of sandwiches in the kitchen."

"That's simply what I like to eat." Harry paused on the top step to shrug at Malfoy, who had followed him less closely than Harry had thought he would. A moment later, he realized Malfoy was at the perfect height on the stairs to appreciate Harry's arse. Harry fought a blush away. Nothing would come of it. If anything, Malfoy should be the one embarrassed for seeming so desperate. "You needn't feel bound by my tastes."

"If your taste runs to bondage—"

"You're quite certain your mastery isn't in innuendo?" Harry snapped back, and stepped onto the top stair, gesturing Malfoy towards three of the shut doors. "All those rooms are fitted as bedrooms. Choose which one you like."

"I decided to take a mastery in potions partially in remembrance of Professor Snape," Malfoy said he opened the first door. "But soon enough I realized a passion for the art that I hadn't had in years. It reminded me of simpler times, before I had to make decisions that could have meant life and death for my entire family." He shuddered like someone with a deep chill. "I recaptured some of that whilst I worked on the earlier stages of my mastery. It was as if I were growing through a childhood and adolescence I'd missed into a stronger person. Now that I'm working on the more stringent potions, I can finally feel like an adult."

Harry halted himself just in time. He'd been about to step forwards and rest a hand on Malfoy's shoulder. He shuddered as Malfoy had and leaned against the wall instead, as if it were nothing to him why Malfoy wanted to study potions. This was exactly how he'd been attracted to Gene and Jennifer, and though those had been the strongest and healthiest of his relationships—he still received post from them on occasion, and they'd parted good friends—he'd learned he couldn't be what they needed. Gene had needed someone who could give him more individualized attention than a mediwizard would ever be able to spare. And Jennifer had told Harry, as gently as possible, that he'd been coddling her a bit and she had to face the world on her own two feet.

Even if he had good reason to feel sorry for Malfoy, that wasn't a good enough reason to sleep with him.

"I'll take this one."

Harry looked up. Malfoy had opened the door of the second bedroom and now stood looking in with a satisfied half-smile. He turned to glance back at Harry. "Unless you meant the offer of sharing your bed with me, of course," he added.

"There is nothing I want to do less right now," Harry said, lying effortlessly. He could do that to people who weren't Hermione, when he had enough warning. "Except possibly explaining your presence in my house to my friends."

On cue, he heard the fire flare to life in the study. He sighed. "Stay here for a few minutes," he said. "Come when I call you."

Malfoy bowed. In his grace, Harry saw the strongest impression of Lucius he'd encountered yet. "A skill I haven't yet had the pleasure to learn, but would be more than happy to master for you," he murmured.

Harry turned abruptly on his heel and stalked towards the study. Malfoy had changed his tactics since they entered the house, he thought. Now he was flirting more subtly and skillfully, and offering Harry exactly the tidbits about his life that Harry could sympathize with. Harry was worried that came from an afternoon of observation. Or, even worse, he could have realized why

his earlier flirtation hadn't worked and decided to shift to something that would.

Harry couldn't afford the distraction. He—

He paused for a moment between one step and the next. Then he snorted and continued walking.

Both Lucius and Malfoy had taken care to emphasize the similarity between the Heart's Blessing spell, or at least what it meant to them, and a life debt. If they were so similar, surely Harry's sacrifice could be paid back the way a life debt would be? If Malfoy saved his life, would that cancel out the sacrifice?

Harry would try to find out.

Meanwhile, he would try to soothe Ron and Hermione.

"I still don't think I've understood," Ron said ten minutes later. "Maybe if you use smaller words, mate?"

Harry, leaning on the mantle, smiled. "I don't really understand it myself," he admitted. "No one else ever offered me a bodyguard because I'd done the only right thing I *could* do. Granted, the situation with Lucius is extraordinary, but—"

"Now you sound like Hermione." Ron tapped the side of his head. "I've spent most of my day being deafened by the newest Fwooper Charm George designed. Then what was left of my brain dribbled out my ears when I visited Percy and had to listen to him crooning baby talk to Lucy." Lucy was Percy's daughter, of whom he was so protective that Harry expected the girl to grow up with a morbid fear of breathing. "Small words, remember."

"Lucius is an unusual patient," Harry said.

"You got *that* right," Ron muttered.

"And it seems that he wants me alive so I can heal him." Harry shrugged. "What Malfoy's interest in the matter is, I'm not exactly certain." Of course, he did know that, but Ron would probably have a heart attack if Harry told him, and that would be of no use to anyone. Besides, whilst Harry might know what the *interest* was, he couldn't count on any of the *motivations*. Malfoy was probably doing this simply to relieve stress. At the outside, he thought making Harry his lover would bind him more closely to his family's cause. Harry was at a loss as to how he would show much more devotion to Lucius's well-being than he had already. "But he's serving as honor guard until we can find out who tried to kill Lucius by removing the stabilization fields, and it's not impossible that that same person might try to remove me as well."

"To think I thought being a mediwizard was a peaceful career."

Harry laughed. Before he could say anything else, Ron's head abruptly vanished from the flames. Hermione shoved him out of the way and knelt down to stare at Harry with bright eyes.

"You have Malfoy living in the same house with you?" she demanded. "Sharing your meals, sleeping across the corridor?"

As it happened, the bedroom Malfoy had chosen was directly opposite Harry's, but he doubted Hermione had meant it that literally. She simply had a genius for right guesses. "Er, yes?" he replied, not understanding her interest.

"And he wants you healthy so you can heal his father?" Hermione continued.

Harry stood up straight. *Now* he understood. Hermione was thinking that with a live-in baby-sitter, even a spoiled one, Harry wouldn't spend as much time working and would go to bed at what she called "a reasonable time" and Harry called "three hours too early." "That's right," he said. "But he's not in charge of *maintaining* that health."

"I beg to differ, Potter," Malfoy said behind him, and then he walked in range of the fireplace and nodded quite casually, as if he and Hermione passed each other in the street every day. "Once again, we use widely varying definitions. I did think you looked too peaky when I saw you come into my father's room this morning."

Harry opened his mouth to protest this, only to have Hermione say, "I made sure he rested nine hours last night."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Well, quite obviously that wasn't enough, Granger."

"And you think you can get him to sleep longer than that? When he'll be worried about having you in his house?" Hermione rested her chin on her fists and snorted. "Good luck with *that.*"

"Am I the only one in the room who realizes how bizarre this conversation sounds?" Harry asked the wall.

"I'm here to help him, not trouble him," Malfoy said. "Let a few days pass and he'll be so used to me that he might want me around all the time." He folded his arms and tilted his chin up, staring at Hermione haughtily down the length of his nose.

Hermione laughed shortly. "But I'll bet not even *you* could make him eat a regular meal. He doesn't, you know, most of the time. It's 'gulp a headache potion and continue working until I wonder why I'm fainting,' with him."

"I'm not sure I appreciate my father's care being in the hands of a mediwizard who can't even take care of himself," Malfoy said coldly, spinning towards Harry and eyeing him as if he had just admitted to drinking Felix Felicis before a Quidditch match.

"My patients are important." Harry couldn't help the way his body had stiffened. He would *never* neglect his patients, but the mere rumor that he had might be the thing that would finally get him sacked. Emptyweed would certainly pay Galleons to hear it. And Harry was not going to let Malfoy cost him his job, his sanity, or anything else he valued.

"And you're not?" Malfoy clucked his tongue. "Well, much is now explained. Your horrendous taste in furnishings, for example. Of course you can't choose the right ones if you never take the time to pay attention to them."

"I'm important, too!" Harry burst out, and then caught sight of Hermione grinning smugly. He glared at her. "You needn't think you've won the bet forever," he said. "Or lost it." He paused for a moment, confused; he was used to thinking that he had won the bet when Hermione took care of her own welfare, though the punishments she imposed on him often made him feel like a first-year all over again. "I mean," he said, "you know that Malfoy won't be a permanent house-guest, and you would hate it if he was."

"As long as he's here," Hermione said with contentment in her voice, "he might as well do you good." She leaned around him and scowled at Malfoy. "If I hear that you've hurt him, you'd better be on the other side of England from me."

Malfoy smiled slowly, a smile that made Harry want to put his head under a pile of blankets and never raise it again. "You don't need to worry about that," he said. "Hurting him would be counterproductive to my plans in more than one way." He gave Harry a speculative glance. "Unless, of course, he likes that."

Hermione's head vanished from the flames just as quickly as it had appeared, and Ron's returned. He had his hand over his eyes. "You know what, mate?" he said in Harry's general direction. "I'm going to close the Floo connection now, and we're going to pretend that this conversation never happened. All right?"

"Ron, it's really not what you think—"

"I'm sure something can happen that's worse than what I think," Ron said. "I'm trying not to think about it at all. Just tell me when the ferret's gone." And there was a large puff of green flames, after which the Floo closed.

Harry sighed. Well, he reckoned that was one way to reconcile Ron to Malfoy's presence. If he never visited Grimmauld Place whilst Malfoy was there, then Harry didn't have to worry about them fighting.

"Your friends are more amusing than I remember them being from school," Malfoy said reflectively. "But that doesn't mean you get all the food or rest you need. You *need* a full-time watcher."

"Fuck you, I don't!" Harry snapped, whipping around to face him. He could accept teasing like

this from Hermione because he knew that genuine concern underlay it. Here, where the only concern Malfoy could have for him centered in what good he could be to Lucius, Harry found himself unable to bear the condescension. "You don't *need* to be here. You don't need to be afraid that I'll suddenly lose interest in Lucius, or turn against him the way the Healers have, or expose him to danger just because I'm tired. You don't need to have *anything* to do with me. I—"

Malfoy leaped at him.

Harry dodged, snarling and certain this was some stupid ploy to wrestle him to the floor and snog him, but something struck him in the middle of the back. Harry felt a burning sensation spread up his spine, and his limbs lost all their strength. His eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped, his arms flying up.

Malfoy rolled him onto his stomach and fumbled in his pockets for a moment. Then Harry heard a cork being popped from a vial. The burning in his back faded so suddenly that Harry blinked and frowned. Malfoy had poured some sort of cooling potion on it, he thought, which explained why he felt as if he might be able to stand up again.

"Thank you," he mumbled and forced an arm beneath him. "That's the debt your father owed me canceled, isn't it?" He managed to turn his head and see that one of the windows was broken; the curse had come through it. "You saved my life." His own voice sounded oddly dull in his ears.

"I did," Malfoy said, forcing him flat again with an effortless push, "and the debt isn't canceled because it's not that kind of debt, and you're going to *rest.*"

"I have to sit with Mary." Harry had never known that his own legs could go so rubbery.

"I'll make your excuses to the charming young lady."

"I was on the verge of figuring out the maze of spells on your father," Harry muttered. His head was lolling, and he had the distinct impression Malfoy had picked him up, which was wrong for many reasons. He'd step on Malfoy's foot any moment now, see if he didn't.

"It can wait."

"Can't."

"You're as stubborn as a child when you want to be." Malfoy laid a hand over his eyes, forcing them shut. "Go to sleep."

Harry came up with many excuses as to why he couldn't do that before he realized, to his annoyance, that he had fallen asleep whilst doing so.

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—An Open Heart Can Heal an Open Wound

Harry knew, from the lack of stiffness in his limbs and the tingling, cooling pain in his back, that he hadn't had his eyes closed for long. He opened them at once and sat up, then barked in pain as his head collided with someone's chin. The other person staggered away from him, swearing, and Harry recognized Malfoy's voice.

He remembered that he'd fainted, then, and Malfoy had curled an arm around him as if he thought he could lift Harry to bed by himself. Of course, if he used a Lightening Charm, then he probably could. But either Harry had awakened before they reached the bed, or Malfoy had been leaning over him and watching him sleep.

Harry shuddered. He hoped it was the first. The second was simply *creepy*.

He looked around, and was relieved to see that Malfoy had carried him into the bedroom he'd chosen, instead of Harry's. At least he had enough courtesy not to intrude into the one place where Harry had told him explicitly he wasn't welcome. Or had he thought that having Harry in his bed was better than—

Harry shook his head briskly and swung himself off the bed with one hand placed flat on the covers. His feet hadn't touched the floor yet when Malfoy came swarming up to him, face bright with false concern and voice dripping sickly-sweet condescension.

"Oh, Potter, you can't get up yet, of course not. First, I think your friends would murder me. And second, we need to find out what that curse is and who cast it. I won't allow you to risk your health whilst you're still treating my father—"

"I know exactly what that curse was and who cast it," Harry snapped irritably. He glanced at the watch on his wrist and was relieved to see that it wasn't six yet. He still had a chance of going to hospital and keeping his promise to Marry by seven, though he would have to give up the second visit to Lucius that he'd decided on. "You must not have associated with many mediwizards before, if you're used to people who are unable to recognize spells when they feel them."

Malfoy stared at him for long moments before he snapped his mouth shut. Then he hissed, "And you're doing such a marvelous job with the curses cast on my father."

Harry assumed a haughty, frowning mask. "Are you *really* still questioning my competence?" Inwardly, he was rejoicing. If Malfoy went back to insulting him, that must mean he no longer

desired Harry. Or, at least, he'd decided such a troublesome partner wasn't worth the bother he brought along with him. "Then you should be fighting to get another Healer assigned to the case."

Malfoy shut his eyes and massaged his forehead. *A headache already,* Harry thought cheerfully. *Excellent.* He pushed away the inevitable guilt that always showed up when he caused someone else pain, at least since he'd got his mediwizard's training. Malfoy was likely to cause pain to Harry and to other people, his father included, if he was allowed to go on "admiring" Harry.

"That was unfair of me," Malfoy said quietly, opening his eyes. "I keep forgetting—sometimes I think you're the boy I knew at school, because you don't *look* that different. But if I can change in the years since then, surely you can. You have. I—" He gave a weak smile and gestured with one hand. "I don't usually lack eloquence like this," he said. "I think it's because I know I'm strongly attracted to you, but you're not someone I can flirt with the way I usually would. You want different things. I'm still getting used to providing them."

Harry stared at him. He tried to remember the last time someone who wasn't Ron, Hermione, or another Weasley had apologized to him, and he couldn't.

But Malfoy's last words just proved the entire point. Malfoy saw sex as an exchange of favors. He would do things for Harry, perhaps including the apology, and Harry would take him to bed. That wasn't the way it worked, and Harry had neither the time nor the energy to explain it to him. He had *other* things to do.

"The important thing," he repeated, "is that I know that curse. I've seen patients come into the Spell Damage ward suffering from it. It's called the Beetle's Bite, apparently because there's some magical beetle in Germany or the like that spits acid—"

"*Acid*?" Malfoy was on him in moments, wrenching him around and staring at his back in horror. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Not actual acid," he said. "The shock and the burning sensation combined feel like a bite from the beetle, that's all. You took care of it with your cooling potion. Thank you." He kept his voice frosty and formal, and leaned away from Malfoy's hand. It took an effort to keep his temper around the man. If he *knew* that his attraction to Harry was unusual and inappropriate, why was he having so much trouble not acting on it? "And as for who cast it, it was either Xavier or someone who had Xavier's help. The house is warded, but Xavier is still keyed into the wards."

Malfoy stepped back and stared into his eyes. "Pay close attention, Potter," he said gravely. "There are points where courage becomes stupidity. This is one of them. Keep it in the back of your head for all future references, and perhaps you won't have to actually *experience* one of them again."

"It was easier to let him have access to the house to take his things back than to deal with his whinging when I kept him out," Harry said patiently. "Besides, I have a house-elf. Kreacher

keeps him from stealing anything, setting traps, or poisoning the food. I never thought about his attacking from the outside, through the wards, because I never thought he'd actually want to harm me physically." He gave Malfoy a wink. "He rather *likes* me physically. On the other hand, that didn't prevent him from leaving me." There. That ought to serve as a clear warning of the way Harry regarded attractions that originated below the belt.

Malfoy didn't seem to think so. He was frowning. "And is this Xavier likely to prove a threat to my father? My first thought was that someone had tried to kill you to harm him."

"The Beetle's Bite doesn't kill, though it can render those who are more sensitive to it in enough pain to go to St. Mungo's," Harry said. The words slid out of his lips without his thinking about it; they were the exact ones that Healer Pontiff had used to him when she taught him about the curse. "Xavieris unlikely to prove a threat, no. He just wanted me to know that he was annoyed with me."

"He *hurt* you."

"And so what? I'm used to pain, and there was no lasting damage. If anything, I owe it to him, as a reminder to tighten my wards and stop allowing him access to my home." Harry held up a hand when Malfoy opened his mouth. "Before you can ask, that doesn't mean I like pain. I tend to squirm and kick when someone tries to bind me, and you wouldn't want a bruise disfiguring that pretty jaw of yours, would you?"

That supposedly pretty jaw dropped further open, and Malfoy made some kind of incoherent sputtering noise. Harry figured that made it a good time to hop to his feet and start towards the door. He stumbled on the first few steps, but by the tenth, he was walking steadily. Malfoy's potion had gone a long way towards combating the effects of the curse and calming the tremors that otherwise would have had his limbs vibrating like a toy's, he thought. Maybe he would let Malfoy know that, if he behaved himself.

But he was constitutionally incapable of doing so. He caught Harry's arm just as Harry was about to enter the library where he'd been attacked and tighten the wards. "Potter, you should be resting," he said.

"A hint," Harry said, and elbowed Malfoy in the ribs; the only reason it wasn't the solar plexus was that he moved in time, doubtless because he'd seen how well the tactic worked on Julius. "In general, I'm not fond of lovers who sound like my mum."

Malfoy let him go so he could fold his arms defensively, which was perfectly fine with Harry; it meant he could reach the window and examine the hole in the glass the curse had made in coming in. He raised his eyebrows. Well. Xavier had been cleverer than he'd imagined. Instead of simply taking advantage of the holes in the wards that existed for him because he'd once been welcome in the house, he'd bounced a second curse through one of those holes and then off a weaker part of the wards, which had an effect like untying a knot in a taut rope. The whole of the wards over the window had relaxed, and the curse had come through without effort.

"*Defenso,*" Harry murmured, tracing his wand above the gap in the wards, and they repaired themselves obediently. He stepped away, nodding, and turned towards the door of the room.

Malfoy stood with his arms extended and his wrists braced on the sides of the doorframe. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing.

"Did you know the adult human male arm is not actually strong enough to resist the determined charge of another adult human male?" he asked conversationally. "Xavier found that out the hard way. He really should have taken a course in mediwizardry before he started dating me. It would have prevented a number of unpleasant surprises from affecting him the way they did."

"You were just *wounded*, Potter," Malfoy said, who seemed to have decided to ignore reality in favor of sticking to the course of sheer stubbornness. Harry knew a lot of people like that. "Pardon me for being more concerned about that, and for thinking you should be flat on your back—"

"Not with that curse," Harry pointed out sweetly.

"It was just an expression." Malfoy was definitely speaking from between clenched teeth, now. *Excellent.* Harry didn't think he was someone who could stand much aggravation, and if things went on like this, Harry might manage to get him to give up the notion of guarding Harry as well as flirting with him.

"But we've had the discussion before, about how important it is to be specific." Harry regarded him severely. "You don't know about specific wording, you don't know about the specific strength of arms, and you can't find the words to tell me exactly why a spell that shares life force between two people is so important. I'm afraid that you must excel rather more at the practical part of your potions mastery than the theoretical one."

Malfoy dropped his arms from the doorway to fold them again. That was exactly what Harry had been waiting for, and he slipped by whilst Malfoy was beginning a little speech about Harry's lack of gratitude. He was downstairs before Malfoy caught up with him, and Harry had time to thoughtfully flex his back muscles and decide he would be better off carrying a book for Mary under his arm rather than in a satchel slung over his shoulder before Malfoy started speaking.

"You are the single most stupid person I know," Malfoy began.

"Does that mean you want someone else treating your father?" Harry raised an inquiring eyebrow.

Malfoy's face grew darker and darker. Harry carefully concealed his triumph. He had discovered already that Malfoy took triumph as a personal invitation to try and change the mind of the person who felt that way.

"It's not—it's not *traditional* stupidity," Malfoy said. He was struggling for words, practically fuming, his face red, and Harry felt a cheerful sense of anticipation. He would probably still be staring at the walls and fumbling after words when Harry had Flooed from the downstairs library on his way to St. Mungo's. "You have knowledge of mediwizardry that I never will, that's *more* than plain." He snorted. Harry smiled and Summoned the book of Muggle fairy tales out of which he intended to read to Mary; since she'd been reared in the wizarding world, she would never have heard most of them before. "But you can't care for yourself in the most basic matters, where even Goyle would have no trouble—Potter, are you *listening* to me?'

"Every overdramatically emphasized word of it," Harry said, and marched out of the room to the Floo with Malfoy trailing behind him.

"You can't—"

"No legal authority prevents me," Harry said.

"Then let common sense have some authority!" Malfoy had got hold of his arm and seemed disinclined to let go, even when Harry tapped his hand with his wand to teach him a lesson. Harry sighed and let loose a stinging spark that made Malfoy yelp and jump back, shaking his fingers as he examined them for signs of split nails.

Harry tossed a handful of Floo powder into the flames and prepared to step into them.

"I have a good mind to stay here," Malfoy snarled around the fingers in his mouth. "You'll run into trouble without me. That might teach you to reflect on what I've done for you and be grateful."

Harry sighed and looked back at him. God knew why he was taking the time, but he would try honesty once more. "Malfoy, don't you understand? I didn't ask for this protection. I didn't *want* it. Your father isn't different from any other patient to me."

"I *know* you dislike him." Malfoy took his fingers out of his mouth and scowled at him.

"I won't let that dislike prevent me from treating him," Harry said precisely. "It doesn't matter when I'm his mediwizard and he's my patient. You don't need to stick to my side. You don't need to honor me. You don't need to think the Heart's Blessing spell was an extraordinary thing to have done. It's not. I've done the same thing for a few other people before, and I'll do it again in the future. Taking care of your father is mundane for me."

Malfoy stared at him.

"And that's why you don't need to offer to protect me," Harry finished, "or offer me potions, though I'm grateful you did. And that's why I don't find it necessary to accept your companionship in bed, either. That's my personal life, outside of the interactions of patient and mediwizard, and I get to say what I do with it. Don't rely on the Heart's Blessing spell or my

position as regards your father to soften me. If you and I ever were lovers, it would have to be because I liked you, not simply because we were in close proximity." He hesitated, then added, because it was true and cost him nothing, "And you're handsome and witty enough to find someone who actually likes you as a person, rather than chasing futilely after someone who'll always reject you."

He turned around and whirled into the flames with a call of, "St. Mungo's lobby!" Behind him, he thought Malfoy was standing still, with his jaw probably hanging somewhere in the vicinity of his knees.

An open heart can heal an open wound, Healer Pontiff had once told him, when Harry had expressed frustration at how many people he had to deal with who blamed him for not ending the war sooner. *If you confess your own reluctance and confusion about the end of the war, you might soothe their anxieties, and make them realize you're as human as they are.*

So, now, Malfoy understood exactly why Harry didn't want to date him. Maybe that would soothe his hurt pride and let him move on.

"Mediwizard Potter."

Harry didn't let himself sigh as he laid down the book he'd been reading to Mary from. She'd fallen asleep ten minutes ago as she listened to a story about a bird who had to go on a quest for three golden feathers, and Harry had half-whispered the concluding words, then watched her sleep. Of course this was the moment Emptyweed would choose to appear and disturb him—the one moment of the day Harry had achieved something like relaxation.

"Yes, Healer?" Harry said politely, rising and moving towards the door. He didn't intend to remain in the room where his raised voice might wake Mary.

Emptyweed didn't respond immediately, which was unlike him. Instead, he stood fidgeting and staring at Harry. Harry stared back stoically, though he had to clench his jaw to prevent an unfortunate outburst. Emptyweed had acted like that in the past when he'd failed to prevent some other Healer from dumping a case on Harry, or when someone had gone over his head and countermanded whatever orders he wanted to give Harry.

I'll say this about Emptyweed. At least he stops others from taking advantage of me most of the time, because he wants his control over me to be absolute.

"Mediwizard Potter," said Emptyweed, and that was also unusual, because he didn't often repeat himself. "You are henceforth removed from the Malfoy case."

At first Harry thought he must be dreaming. Those were the words he had hoped Emptyweed might say the first day he gave him the case, after all.

He kept his voice calm as he said, "I'm sorry. I must not have heard you correctly. Someone else has been assigned to treat Lucius Malfoy?"

"You've never had problems with your hearing, Potter." Emptyweed folded his arms and scowled past Harry. "That's exactly correct."

"I had thought I was the only one in St. Mungo's who would agree to treat him, given his past," Harry said. "Sir."

"They found someone else."

"Who?" Harry could feel his patience sliding away from him. He put up with Emptyweed most of the time because the man *could* sack him if he wanted, and he at least gave Harry the opportunity to help people by his unwillingness to do his own work. But he would *not* stand to see someone else abused because Emptyweed lacked the will or the spine to confront the prejudiced bastards and bitches in the St. Mungo's hierarchy.

"That's not your concern now."

"It is," said Harry, controlling his voice with an effort that made sweat start on his forehead, "because I'll need to meet with the new Healer, or mediwizard, and give him or her the notes I've made so far about the curse on Mr. Malfoy."

"Your research skills have never been exceptional, Potter." Emptyweed swiveled to face him, looking down his nose in an ordinary way. "I'm sure that whatever you've discovered, the new Healer can find out more quickly."

"But it would save time if I let him know—"

"Potter, do not presume to *row* with me." Emptyweed's voice was loud and incredulous. He leaned forwards, as if he could bear Harry down by his sheer weight. "Do you really think yourself the best researcher or caretaker in this hospital? Do you think you have skills that Healers twice your age with three times your natural talent at potions don't have? The new Healer will take excellent care of Mr. Malfoy, I'm certain."

"Tell me who it is." Harry had never stood up to Emptyweed like this before, and he thought the Healer was just as shocked as he was by it. But this wasn't some petty matter of precedence or an insult delivered when he was tired. This concerned someone else's safety and well-being. One reason Harry had become a mediwizard was that nothing else had mattered to him so much after the war. He couldn't bring back the people who had died in those battles—a fact that had taken him a long time to accept—but he could do his best to prevent anyone from succumbing to diseases or spells that only needed a quick eye to detect.

"I would almost think you're begging to be sacked."

"If you prevent me from doing my job," Harry snarled softly, "then perhaps I should go into private practice. It couldn't make me less money than this, and it would mean I had the final say about who gets helped and who doesn't."

Emptyweed began to protest, but Harry overrode him. "I don't think you know who will take over Lucius's care," he said.

"On first-name terms with a patient, Potter?" Emptyweed mustered his most impressive glare. "You know what comes of that."

Harry flushed hotly. He'd first met Francis, another of the lovers he'd failed, as a patient, though they hadn't started dating until more than two months after Francis had been released from St. Mungo's.

But his present, and not his past, was the important thing now. "You don't know," Harry continued. "Perhaps no one will. Perhaps those people you warned me about, the ones you could only give me a week of safety from, have maneuvered things such that the one mediwizard who would risk his life for Lucius's own—"

"You're being melodramatic now."

"Am I? When someone removed the stabilization fields and tried to set the curse to work on him again?"

From the way Emptyweed took a step back, Harry was confident he hadn't had anything to do with that attack, at least. "Impossible," Emptyweed muttered after a long moment. "You mustn't have cast the fields properly. We all know your magic tends to fail at unpredictable moments."

"Not this time," Harry said. Yes, he would fight those battles on Lucius's behalf that he wouldn't fight on his own. "They vanished abruptly, not deteriorated over a few hours' time. I had to use a risky spell to save Mr. Malfoy's life. I'm sure he won't like it if he has to deal with someone else in the middle of a treatment like this."

"The decision's made, Potter." Emptyweed backed further away from him, as if Harry were some sort of angry god, though Harry, as far as he knew, had no weapon but the fury on his face and in his voice. "You will turn over your notes on the various curses plaguing Mr. Malfoy to me tomorrow, and then you will cease to visit him."

And he turned and fled.

Harry stood where he was for some minutes, breathing steadily and fighting the urge to pound a fist into the wall and scream aloud. Then he stiffened his spine as another bit of Healer Pontiff's advice came back to him.

In times of emergency, do what you can, when you can.

He Summoned the book from the chair he'd been sitting in, not opening the door so he wouldn't wake Mary up, and then headed for Lucius's room.

Lucius was sitting up in bed, finishing the last remnants of a meal that looked as if it had chicken in its ancestry somewhere and talking quietly with his wife. He looked up when Harry burst through the door and pushed the tray away from his lap with a neat, economical motion. The better to spring up and out of the bed if he needed to, Harry noted distantly.

"Mr. Potter," Lucius said, and his eyes flickered to the door. His mouth grew tight and chill. Harry reckoned he thought Draco ought to have followed him. "And where is my son?"

"Back at my house," Harry said distractedly. "There was a bit of excitement and he had to think over whether he really wanted this position, after all." He shook his head and plunged right into the story of how Emptyweed had removed him from the position of Lucius's mediwizard. Narcissa leaned forwards until she was literally perched on the edge of her chair, but Lucius listened without moving. Harry wasn't sure he even blinked.

At last, when Harry finished the story, Lucius gave a short nod. "It is utterly clear what we must do," he said.

"Do you know a way to find out who your enemies in St. Mungo's are?" Harry ran a hand through his hair and began to pace. He hated to show this much distress in front of a patient he was trying to reassure, but calmness would be an outright deception now. "I don't have contacts among anyone who really *runs* the hospital, just a few ordinary Healers and mediwizards trying to do their jobs. I don't know how to guarantee your safety."

"Mr. Potter." That was Narcissa, her voice so thin and faint Harry had to stop pacing in order to hear her. From the way Narcissa's voice immediately grew stronger, that had been her intent. "My husband is no longer safe here. We will be removing him from St. Mungo's."

Harry stared at her for a moment, but he could see the sense in what she said. He nodded. "I know the names of a few Healers who left the hospital when Emptyweed and idiots like him started becoming prominent," he said. "I can give you their names. Two of them will attend anyone, and won't care about your past. One of them will do anything if you give him enough money, although—"

"I intend to retain your services," Lucius said. "Competence is not easily discovered, and I would be a fool to surrender someone as dedicated as you are." He settled comfortably back against his pillows, as though matters were all settled.

Harry felt a tight surge of dread across the middle of his stomach. "I don't think I could Floo or Apparate out to Malfoy Manor every evening," he said lowly. "You wouldn't be getting the best of me when I'd dealt with other patients all day."

"I was not thinking of that," Lucius said.

Harry frowned at him, baffled now. "You want me to consult from a distance? I don't think any of the Healers I mentioned would like a mere mediwizard taking on so much of their work."

Lucius watched him with a faint smile, though Harry didn't understand what there was to be so happy about. Then he began to speak in a normal voice on a completely unrelated topic. Harry did his best to calm his impatient urge to fling about the room and listened instead.

"The Heart's Blessing spell, and others like it, are valued for the same reason a friend's surrender of his money to another to pay debts is valued," Lucius said. "Imagine a man who was willing to beggar himself so that a friend might not go to jail. That is true friendship. The friend might not ever be able to pay back the money. And yet, knowledge of the debt remains between them, unforgotten but honored, and thus the money is *shared*, in the truest sense. The Heart's Blessing spell is not an action performed once and forgotten, but a shared drawing on the same life force. My heart beats because yours does." Lucius laid a hand over his chest. "Your blood, in essence, flows in my veins. That explains the color of the red light when you first cast the spell. Some small portion of your blood passed into mine."

"And?" Harry asked impatiently. He had never paused to wonder about the color of the spell. If anything, he had thought it was red because it involved the word "heart."

"If the person given such a gift *does* have the means to repay the debt," Lucius said, eyes piercing, "he always does. Or—and this was more common in the age when such spells also were—he shares something else. His home, perhaps; the friend who shared his money would have free right of access there. There is no simple cancellation of such a spell, Mr. Potter, but only a building of more bindings, more links. You are welcome into my home, and I will pay you all the money you could desire to continue attending me." He bowed his head. "I hope the connection may continue into the future."

Harry found his mouth hanging open. Narcissa made a discreet motion that he was to close it; he did so. Then he said, "I—surely too much lies between us in the past for that to happen?"

Lucius shook his head. His gaze literally hurt to meet now. "Not at all," he said with awful gentleness. "You have proven yourself a person with great honor. That is not the impression of you I had before. I thought you more lucky than anything else. It has been, traditionally, pure-blood wizards and witches who achieved such sharing, not half-bloods." Harry glared. Lucius did not deign to notice. "Now you have shared yourself with my family outside the bounds of war, and in spite of our being on opposite sides then. I would welcome you among the Malfoys." He showed his teeth suddenly. "And hopefully I can cure that disgraceful lack of ambition you seem to have, to lift you to a position more deserving of your talents."

Harry placed a hand on his forehead, dazed. He couldn't leave his patients at St. Mungo's like that. He couldn't leave his job. He couldn't change his whole life about to please the Malfoys.

On the other hand, there was no doubt that Lucius Malfoy was the most vulnerable of his patients right now, the most in need of special care. Harry had been assigned other, far more ordinary cases in the last few weeks. Others could take over his burdens if he removed.

I can't believe I'm mad enough to be considering this.

And then the solution occurred to him. Harry relaxed and lifted his head. "I'll stay with you in the Manor until we find a cure," he said. "Then I'll ask you for enough money to set myself up in private practice." He would be more comfortable with an equal exchange like that than with this talk of continuing obligations.

Lucius smiled and bowed.

Later, Harry was to wish he had looked a little more closely at the edge on that smile.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Comfort Is Part of Survival

"And so you are really leaving us, Harry?"

Harry leaned back and smiled, a little uncomfortably, at Healer Emily Pontiff. He hadn't gone to fetch her. He'd merely started to clean out the desk in his cubicle, and somehow she had known and floated over to him.

He couldn't help being a little in awe of her, even when he wasn't watching her save lives with her finely controlled magic. She had a face like a stone angel's in a Muggle graveyard, and wispy gray hair floated around that face like a maze of cobwebs. Her wand, birch wood, hardly rivaled her skin in its pallor. She had pale gray eyes, but kept them half-shaded with lowered lids that had fooled patients before into believing she was asleep or meditating. Harry felt himself falling silent, his muscles relaxing, in the intense aura of peace and serenity she carried about with her.

Now, for the first time, it struck him as he gazed at her that this was how Narcissa Malfoy would look when she was older, if her hair lost some of its color. Frowning, Harry glanced down at his desk again and slid several headache potions into a satchel. He didn't want to think about the Malfoys in that way. They seemed to blithely assume that they could become more important to him than anyone else simply by striding into his life. But *Harry* knew the association would only

be temporary; he could heal Lucius and go back to his daily routine.

Except that that routine won't be at St. Mungo's, anymore.

"Healer Emptyweed told me you were leaving because of a disagreement over who should handle Lucius Malfoy's care," Healer Pontiff continued, and leaned against his desk. "Is that true?"

Harry nodded, still staring at his desk. Was that a bit of parchment he needed crammed into the back of the drawer? No, only a scrap on which he'd once played a game to amuse himself. He shut the drawer with a bang and lifted the satchel to his shoulder, grimacing as the sore place in the center of his back pulled. "It's true."

"Harry." Pontiff's voice was gentle as she stood and came around the desk, holding out her wand towards his back. She murmured a charm, and the place where the Beetle's Bite had hit him began to glow blue. "You would leave the rest of your patients, and the good you are doing here, because of an argument over a single one?"

"He couldn't tell me who would replace me," Harry replied, bowing his head. The next spell Pontiff used spread warmth like massage oil through the sore area, and he sighed in relief. "And someone had already threatened Mr. Malfoy's life twice, once by canceling the stabilization fields I'd cast on him. I couldn't take the chance that the new caretaker—well, wouldn't take care, and that he would end up dead. I've had enough people dying on my watch."

Pontiff placed one hand on his shoulder. "No one sane who thinks about the war thinks that," she reassured him.

Harry smiled ruefully back at her. "I know that, but *I* still think it." He turned away before she could scold him and rested the satchel cautiously against the middle of his back again, nodding when it brushed the former sore spot with perfect comfort. "Thank you."

"It looks like someone may have threatened your life as well."

"The Beetle's Bite doesn't threaten life," Harry said. "Xavier was annoyed at me, that's all." He knew Healer Pontiff would know who he was talking about. Somehow she had managed to quietly inform herself on every aspect of his life even when he kept silent out of shame or frustration.

Pontiff sighed. Then she said, "Comfort is part of survival, Harry."

"I know," Harry said, glancing back at her and smiling. He was grateful that she had passed to generalized healing advice instead of the uncomfortably personal comments that Hermione would have tried to make. "The patient heals better when he can rest on a soft bed, look out a lighted window, and eat good food."

"You mistake me this time," said Pontiff. "Comfort is part of *your* survival too, Harry. I have watched you with growing distress these past few weeks. You cast yourself into work as if it were a remedy for a bruised heart or smarting pride. It is not."

"I've done the best I can to heal all my patients," Harry said stiffly. When Emptyweed doubted his abilities, he thought it one more part of the man's stupid attitude concerning him; when Healer Pontiff did the same, it actively hurt. "I don't think I've neglected them just because I broke up with Xavier."

"And again you mistake me," Pontiff whispered. "You have not neglected your patients. You *have* neglected yourself."

Harry shook his head impatiently. Not even from Pontiff could he accept coddling. Various people in his life seemed to take turns acting as if he needed to spend months on a tropical island "recovering" from what Harry knew were perfectly normal occurrences in everyone's life. He snapped back, didn't he? He managed to heal every time. Just because he had broken up with everyone he'd dated so far didn't mean he would always do so. He brooded for a while, but that was only normal. He hadn't let his bad luck sour him on life or love.

He failed to see what Hermione, or Healer Pontiff, or Ron, wanted for him other than that.

"I'll be fine," he said, and offered her a grin and news that he thought would distract her. "I'm going to Malfoy Manor to serve as private mediwizard to Mr. Malfoy for a time, and after I've solved his case, he'll give me enough money to set up my own practice."

Pontiff smiled, but it was an abstracted expression, as if her thoughts were elsewhere. Harry didn't mind. Her thoughts were elsewhere most of the time. "The Malfoys are one of the old pure-blood families," she said.

"I know that," Harry said patiently. Sometimes the people in his life acted as if he didn't know the most basic facts about the wizarding world, either.

"They think of debts differently," Pontiff said. "They think of connections differently. Because someone else so rarely does something they can acknowledge as worthy of them, or does something for them at all, they tend to seize anyone who does and hold him or her close." She looked him in the eye. "I would see that you know what you are getting into, before you go traipsing off to the Manor."

Harry stared at her incredulously. "Do you believe Mr. Malfoy would keep me prisoner in the dungeons until I used healing magic to torture his worst enemy for him or something?"

"I fear that you are no longer as independent as you would like," Pontiff told him. "A Malfoy's gifts are not poisoned, but they *are* heavy."

Harry shrugged. "I'm only interested in their Galleons."

Pontiff gave him a light, amused smile, of the kind that he almost never saw on her face, and reached up to touch his cheek. "You never could have been, Harry, or you would not have made a good mediwizard."

Harry flushed and clasped her hand for a moment, squeezing, before he stepped away and strode down the corridor. "I won't say goodbye," he called over his shoulder. "The next time you hear of me, I'll be a private mediwizard with my own name and reputation!"

"That you already have in my eyes, and the eyes of anyone else who truly knows you." Pontiff smiled at him again, this smile more of her usual kind, distant and mysterious and filled with starlight, and then turned and wandered away. Officious Healers like Emptyweed had tried to accost her before for not maintaining a brisk stride in the corridors, but not even the St. Mungo's administration would listen to them when she had so many successful healings to her credit.

Harry shook his head and walked back down to the lobby and the Floo. He did like Healer Pontiff, but sometimes she was *too* distant from the world. She didn't understand the realities of a deal like the one Harry had made with Lucius Malfoy. There was no reason that it should last longer than the healing would take, because there was nothing else Harry and the Malfoys had to offer each other.

Really, Harry asked himself*, could they want me for friendship? Companionship? Someone to argue the finer points of blood prejudice with?*

No. He snorted. The only thing he might have been able to offer them was the "glory" of a close association with the Boy-Who-Lived, and not even the Malfoys were stupid enough to exploit such a faded and worn thing.

I made a good bargain.

"Stay there for a moment."

Harry, just climbing out of his own fireplace, paused and raised an eyebrow. Malfoy stood on the far side of the room, his hands clenched at his sides and his breathing so fast that Harry wondered absently if he had been running about the house in pursuit of Kreacher.

"Don't tell me you're a painter and you need me to model for you," Harry said, tilting his head back and striking an absurd pose. "I haven't seen any sort of a palette or eye for color. Mind you, you've got the air of pretentious importance down *pat.*"

"I want you to stay there," Malfoy said between clenched teeth, "because then I might not kill you. Do you have any idea how stupid that was, running off to hospital without a bodyguard when someone just threatened your life?"

"I thought I explained about the Beetle's Bite." Harry deliberately stretched, letting Malfoy see that he didn't wince from the place of the spell's impact. No need to tell him that it *had* hurt and Healer Pontiff had removed the sting. "And can I be blamed when my 'bodyguard' refused to come with me?"

A dull flush climbed Malfoy's cheeks, and he took a step closer despite his own injunction. "You act as if you despise your own life," he said in a low voice. "What would you tell a patient of yours in the same situation who insisted on climbing out of his bed and rushing off to do emotionally intense work, no matter what the spell he'd been hit with was?"

Harry frowned and turned his face away. He was bored of the conversation. "We have more important things to talk about," he said.

"We don't—"

"Someone tried to remove me from your father's case," Harry said briskly, moving past Malfoy to the door of the library. "I informed him of this, and he's decided that St. Mungo's isn't safe for him anymore. He's going home to Malfoy Manor. I'm to follow him, and stay there until I've cured him."

Malfoy froze. Harry grinned and walked up the stairs, listening. He counted to ten before Malfoy came scrambling and racing after him.

"*What*?" he demanded, sounding out of breath, when he reached the top of the staircase.

Harry turned around to look at him for a moment. His face was flushed with his sudden run, and his hair had become disordered and floated around his head rather like Healer Pontiff's. Harry was surprised when heat swirled in his groin. He apparently liked the softer, more surprised Malfoy, if only because when he was surprised it was easy to take him off-guard.

And the existence of attraction doesn't mean you have to act on it, he reminded himself as he opened his bedroom door and began Summoning his robes, textbooks, a few completed potions, and pillows. They went into a traveling bag like the one Hermione had used to carry their necessary items during their flight from the Death Eaters. *That's the lesson Malfoy has yet to learn.*

"I'll stay in the Manor with you for a few weeks," Harry went on, casually leaning against the wall as the bag packed itself and glancing back at Malfoy. "Your father has agreed to set me up in a private practice as soon as I've cured him."

Malfoy continued to stare at him. Harry grinned. "Just because you were in the House of the Snake doesn't mean you have to forget you possess eyelids," he said.

Then Malfoy did something disturbing. He grinned too and leaned forwards, resting his hands on the door on either side of Harry's head. So close, Harry could smell his slightly sour breath and

feel the drifting hair tickle his cheeks. He felt every muscle in his body come to attention, and shivered in irritation. He didn't like responding this way. Yes, Malfoy had the kind of physique that Harry usually admired, and he was certainly handsome enough, but his mind wasn't at all attractive.

"Good," Malfoy whispered. "I know what went wrong, now."

"What went wrong?" Harry frowned, his mind pulling out of the haze into which it had started to drift. "With your father, you mean? You have some idea about the linked curses? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Not about that." Malfoy laughed softly. "Why would I know about healing when I've never seriously studied it? Besides, I have absolute faith in your skills, and I know you'll return my father to normal without help. No. I meant I know why my attempt to seduce you went wrong."

"I should hope you would," Harry said, ignoring his pleasure at the declaration of faith, "after I told you in great detail." He shoved at Malfoy's shoulders, trying to make him step back. He leaned in again further and breathed gently on Harry's ear instead. Harry shivered and leaned his head back on the door before he could stop himself. His ears were one of his sensitive places.

"It's a challenge," Malfoy said. "I haven't had to seduce anyone the way I'll have to seduce you." He sounded delighted. "It'll involve more self-control than I've had to use before. But I'll have you in my bed at last."

"You wouldn't like me in bed," Harry said dryly, and finally got an ankle behind Malfoy's left leg and twisted. Malfoy staggered away from him, graceless and nearly falling before he got a hold on the wall. Harry straightened up and pretended to be very occupied in adjusting his robe. He was disappointed in himself. A few flattering words and a few breaths on his ear, and he was about to curl up and let Malfoy do whatever he wanted? He would have to be *very* careful when he lived in the Manor. Being on his own ground would give Malfoy confidence.

"I can't imagine you being anything but graceful and passionate in bed," Malfoy said.

Harry gave him an irritated glance and heaved the full bag. He'd just made the idiot flail about. Did that not *count* with him? "I'm not," he said. "I'm very boring. Just ask Francis."

"Francis?"

"The fifth person I dated," Harry murmured as he snapped his fingers to summon Kreacher. The little house-elf appeared and bowed. Harry nodded to him. "Would you make sure Ron and Hermione learn that I'm gone to Malfoy Manor and that I'm perfectly safe?" he asked.

"I don't know about *perfectly*," Malfoy said in a thoughtful tone.

"Shut up," Harry advised him, and looked back long enough to catch Kreacher's nod. "Good." He

hung the bag over his shoulder and looked at Malfoy. "What Floo address do you use for the Manor? Just 'Malfoy Manor?'"

Malfoy opened his mouth for a moment. Then he shut it and swallowed. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Is it under the Fidelius? Your father didn't mention that."

"No," Malfoy said, in a calm tone. "It's Malfoy Manor, as you surmised. I need to go ahead to open the connection for you, though. It automatically responds to someone of the blood, but it would simply bounce you out if you tried to enter it without an invitation."

Harry rolled his eyes as Malfoy left the room. He suspected he would be hearing phrases like "of the blood" quite a bit in the near future. It was the way pompous pure-blooded idiots apparently talked.

But Malfoy seemed to have taken a hint and retreated a bit. Perhaps he would remember, as Harry had told him, that he was attractive to *other* people and there was a whole wizarding world of them out there.

"Mr. Potter. Be welcome to our home, as one who shares our blood and has our good will in mind."

Harry bowed to conceal the impulse to drop his jaw. He had expected to enter a large room covered with snobby portraits who would whisper about his Muggleborn mother as he went by, or maybe a small and shabby anteroom where they put visitors who were not worthy to enter through the front door. Instead, he had come out of the fireplace in what *had* to be the receiving hall of the Manor. Who they received there, Harry didn't know. Probably dragons.

The room was enormous, made of white marble, but faintly and warmly lit by star-like sparkles in the distance on the upper part of the arching walls and the ceiling. Closer at hand, red carpets and soft green ones warmed the marble in a way that Harry wouldn't have believed possible. Tapestries and landscapes, rather than portraits, covered the walls and surrounded him with a myriad of colors, gentle curves, and graceful magical creatures. Here and there, a candle glittered and caught on a shine of gold, or silver, or ivory. But none of it was overwhelming, and none of it screamed ostentation as Harry had imagined a Malfoy home would inevitably do.

Narcissa Malfoy stood in the middle of it all, clad in a red gown that softened her features and cold expression as the carpets did for the hall. And instead of regarding him with a face to rival a disgusted queen's, as he had been sure she would, she was reaching out to him with both hands, a faint smile on her face.

Harry remained bowed a moment longer than necessary, to stuff his surprise away, but then he had to raise his head and clasp her hands in return. He was sure his smile was strained, but they'd probably like that, he told himself. They would still want a visitor to the Manor to be impressed, though they might choose different means to make that impression than the traditional ones.

"I—thank you, Mrs. Malfoy. Of course, maybe I should say that your husband shares my blood rather than the other way around." Maybe she would take offense at that, and then he would be back on familiar ground.

Narcissa's smile widened. "When someone has done as much for us as you have, Mr. Potter, how one speaks of the sharing does not matter as much as the fact of that sharing." Before Harry could protest that she'd taken the trouble to welcome him to her home with ritual words, she lifted her shoulder, and a floating candle came up to offer them both illumination. "If you will follow me? I chose your room, and whilst it is magnificent, it is also some distance from the entrance."

So Harry had to follow her up a sweeping staircase—less like a staircase than the terraced entrance to a temple—that blue-green tapestries along the wall made into a kind of underwater tunnel, and which, on a turn, became so encircled by green that it seemed to run through a forest. He looked around constantly for Malfoy or Lucius, but didn't see them. Maybe it was part of Narcissa's duties to welcome him to the house, he thought, and if she chose his room, it was only fair that she should escort him to it. And Malfoy would probably want to be with his father, to talk to him about strategies for keeping him safe from any further enemies.

Harry smiled suddenly. That was an advantage he hadn't thought of. Malfoy would have the opportunity to spend time around his father at home, and in more comfortable circumstances than he would have in hospital. That should coax him to stop paying so much attention to Harry. Maybe he would even decide that Harry was less interesting than Lucius, which was what he *should* have thought in the first place.

They passed into a third turn of the staircase, and now they seemed to parade across a beach, given the soft yellow color of the tapestries and the faint flickering veins of gold in the marble. Harry stirred uneasily, and tried to imagine what the room Narcissa had chosen for him would look like.

"Really, Mrs. Malfoy," he blurted out as they finally reached the top of the staircase, "I don't need a *magnificent* room. A comfortable one will do fine."

She glanced over her shoulder and gave him another smile, this one stronger. "I'm afraid there are no rooms in the Manor that are not both, Mr. Potter," she said cheerfully. "You will simply need to tolerate it."

And she turned and walked on, leaving Harry blinking and gaping. Had she just made a *joke?*

They reached the room at last, and Narcissa touched a bronze knocker on the wide expanse of the oak door. At least, Harry thought it was oak; he had no eye for such things. He put his hands behind his back, irrationally afraid that he would stain the knocker or bruise the door if he touched them.

Oblivious to his discomfort, Narcissa said, "This knocker is the center of your wards. It will

secure them across the door so that no one but you can disturb them whilst you're in the room. When you come out, only touch the knocker if you wish to change them—to allow others to have access to your room when you're elsewhere, for example. Of course, the house-elves have access no matter what the settings of the wards." She flicked her fingers towards the knocker and murmured something under her breath, and the door swung open at once. As Harry passed through, he felt the flickering net of wards settle over his head and slide around his shoulders, apparently memorizing the contours of his body.

If the door had been intimidating, the room took his breath away. There appeared to be three of them, linked together: a loo off to the left side with a tub whose size Harry was afraid to contemplate; a room to the right that had enough bookshelves and wide windows he assumed it was a library; and a bedroom that shimmered with living green. The carpet was a deep green, the tapestries various shades of it, spinning out in blue and yellow towards the ends. Harry caught an occasional glimpse of polished wooden paneling between the tapestries, as brown as the trunks of trees. The doors of discreet cupboards opened here and there. In the center was what he took for a mound of moss at first; only when Narcissa moved towards it and his perspective shifted did he realize it was a *bed.* It looked as if it curved and dipped in all the right places, and the pillows were fluffy combinations of brown and green and pale blue that made Harry's head ache just looking at them and trying to reckon their softness. Sleek satiny curtains that could be pulled shut around the bed hung from poles carved to look like branches.

"I do hope you appreciate it," Narcissa said, turning towards him. The tone of her words was gentle, not insulting; her voice carried the anxiety of the hostess who wanted to make sure her guest was not uncomfortable. "Some of the other rooms are larger, but they don't have attached libraries. The house-elves have brought up all the books we have on healing, and of course there are spaces for any you brought with you."

Harry lowered his eyes for a moment. He was heartily ashamed of half the thoughts he'd had since meeting the Malfoys. People who could do this for him were neither as grasping nor as cold-hearted as he'd thought they must be.

And what do you really know of them? he asked himself. *A few experiences during the war and some second-hand truths from the mouths of those who hate them. And meeting Draco nearly every day during school, of course, but he was a child then.*

"Mrs. Malfoy," he said quietly, looking up.

"Please call me Narcissa." She smiled and stepped back so he could approach the bed, carefully guiding the floating candle away from the bed-curtains. "That's a privilege that family members have."

Harry shook his head helplessly. "I—you've done *too* much for me," he said. "I appreciate this, of course, but I don't deserve it. I'm only the mediwizard who's treating your husband. Not even a full Healer! You don't need to—" He paused. He had been about to say, "You don't need to bribe me to do a good job," but only now did he realize how insulting that would have sounded. "You

don't need to put yourself out for me in any way," he ended up saying.

Narcissa took a step towards him, not smiling now. Harry held his breath, wondering if he would find out what lay behind the polite façade.

"Harry," Narcissa said when she was a pace or two away from him, "do you know how many people have ever saved my husband's life?"

"Er." Harry didn't want to speculate about what might have happened among the Death Eaters, but on the other hand, they had been in battles before. That had to mean someone had shoved Lucius out of the path of a curse, at least. "Two? Four?"

"One," Narcissa said. "And that was years ago, and the man who did it probably did it for his own reasons." Her mouth tightened with what looked like remembered pain. "You have done it twice in a few days, and for reasons that we now know are not self-interested. You will excuse me, I hope, if I honor you as I think you deserve."

Harry looked away, insides squirming. If Lucius had said something like that, Harry could have responded with an insult so his patient wouldn't be so stressed. If Malfoy had said it, he could have laughed. But it was different when Narcissa said it, in her grave, patient, sweet voice.

"Thank you," he whispered at last.

She stepped towards him and held out her hands again. Harry shifted his bag awkwardly to his shoulder and took them. Narcissa leaned in to lightly kiss his cheek.

"Be welcome to our home, Harry," she said. "Everything you may need or wish for is at your disposal. Including the good-will of everyone who lives here." She stepped back, curtsied to him, and swept out of the room. The door shut behind her, and Harry could see the brilliant sparkle of the wards engaging.

Only then did he realize that the Malfoys had trusted him with a room he could ward against *them*, if he wanted to.

Of course, there's probably some secret entrance or something, he thought, and let the bag drop awkwardly to the floor. It made a thump that sounded too heavy. He winced. Looking around again, he shook his head.

He could try to appreciate and be grateful for everything the Malfoys had done for him, but he didn't *belong* here. It was too bloody large, too luxurious, too graceful and gracious. Quite a different order of life than he was accustomed to.

He would have to steel himself against giving in, though. It would be easy to let the comfort tempt him, the same way it would be easy to let Malfoy's flirtation tempt him if he had no commitment to his job.

Harry smiled, then. The one thing no one had ever been able to fault him for, Emptyweed aside, was his commitment to saving lives.

And he would remember Healer Pontiff's warning, and not let himself expend too much strength carrying the Malfoys' heavy gifts. For example, he was going to spend most of the night studying, rather than resting in that decadent bed. The sooner he solved the mystery of Lucius's curse, the sooner he could escape from this overwhelming place.

He dug the books he'd brought out of his bag and hurried into the library.

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—The Healer May Become the Patient

Harry raised his head slowly and then groaned. The most *incredible* pain was lancing through the back of his neck, and the inside of his mouth felt dry and sticky at the same time, as if he'd spent the hours before he slept trying to swallow crushed velvet. It took him long moments to summon his mind out of the sweltering chaos of weariness it was traveling through.

He'd fallen asleep with his forehead leaning on the table in front of him and his neck sharply bowed, he realized at last. He massaged the aching muscles with a sigh. He knew a few charms to remove such pains, but they all required a level of concentration that was usually beyond him—and he was especially reluctant to try when he'd spent the night sleeping in a chair instead of a proper bed.

But then he began to grin as he remembered how adroitly he'd avoided the temptation that bed represented, and what he'd found in one of his own books and then confirmed with two from the Malfoy library.

Harry sat back in his chair and stretched, wincing as that bent his neck the wrong way again. The library loomed around him, sober enough that Harry could approve of it, reluctantly. The dark bookshelves were all made of the most expensive wood, though, and the chair had shifted to mold and cradle him better when he sat down. Harry frowned at it disapprovingly. Really. Why would the Malfoys waste magic on such a thing? Yes, they'd wanted to make the best books available to him so he could treat Lucius's condition, but the chairs must have been sitting in the same room for years, visited only by house-elves.

They could explain it to me for years with informative diagrams, and I still wouldn't understand them. We live in such different worlds.

No matter. He'd achieved the goal he'd stayed up half the night for. He had a good idea, now, what sort of pattern of linked spells occupied Lucius's mind, and how he might destroy that pattern and free Lucius from the curse.

Harry stood and strode towards the loo. He wouldn't use that luxurious tub—the thought of it made his flesh creep—but he could do with a short shower and some Refreshment Charms to remove the pattern of ink and wood oil he was sure was imprinted on his cheek and forehead.

Only when he reached the central bedroom did he hear someone knocking on the door. It sounded like a polite, almost timid knock, though Harry thought the strength of the wards would reduce any noise to a faint vibration.

Suddenly annoyed, he crossed the room to the door and laid his hand on a seam in the wood to unlock the wards. Suppose he had missed vital news about Lucius during the night because he hadn't heard the messenger sent to convey it to him? It was all very well for the Malfoys to be concerned about his comfort, but Harry didn't want the gifts they handed him if they interfered with practicality. Healer Pontiff had warned him those gifts were heavy; she'd said nothing about how useless they were.

And uselessness, in Harry's opinion, was much the greater sin.

He flung open the door as the wards crumbled into glittering powder, and found Malfoy waiting on the other side, impeccably attired in forest-green robes that he seemed to have chosen to match Harry's bedroom decor. He blinked a little when he saw Harry, but didn't make one remark on his disheveled state.

"I've brought you breakfast," he said, gesturing to a silver tray supported by a house-elf behind him. "And a few more books from the downstairs libraries that I thought you might need. And a map to my father's room." He unfolded a piece of parchment from his pocket, about the size of the Marauders' Map. "I understand the Manor can be a little overwhelming for someone not used to it." He grinned suddenly, which gave his face the same softened look Harry had admired yesterday from up close. "I wouldn't want you to get lost down in one of the cellars and starve. Imagine me trying to explain *that* to Granger when she came hunting for you!"

Harry blinked at him suspiciously, but Malfoy remained calm and polite and helpful, even gazing at him with one eyebrow lifted, as if to ask why Harry didn't invite him in. And Harry remembered the thought he'd had last night, about how little he really knew the entire family, even the son.

He could make an effort to be gracious, since they were so obviously doing the same for him. And it would be more pleasant if they managed to coexist in the same house instead of being at each other's throats all the time. Besides, maybe Malfoy had realized he couldn't successfully

win Harry by flirting and wanted to move on to being friends.

"Please come in," he said, and stepped out of the way. The house-elf scurried in first and floated the tray towards the end of the bed. Harry's puzzlement lasted only until the elf grasped hold of a handle projecting from beneath a fringed green coverlet and pulled. A flat surface slid out, and magical legs immediately materialized from the bottom and sagged to the floor. The elf laid the tray triumphantly on the tabletop and whisked the cover away. Harry's mouth watered as he caught sight of sliced fruit, small bowls of butter and cream, and several pieces of steaming toast.

When he recovered from that and turned towards Malfoy, he realized he should have cast some rumpling charms on the bedcovers. Malfoy was facing him, leaning on the side of the bed and frowning in concern.

"Were the pillows not to your liking?" he asked. "Or the colors, perhaps? Whilst my mother chose a room she thought you would appreciate, we don't at all mind if you alter the colors of the covers and pillows. This is your room for the duration of your stay in the Manor."

Not "for the duration of my father's illness," Harry thought. *Well, it's a relief to know I won't be kicked out the moment I finish healing Lucius. I might need some time to get my money affairs in order and decide on the location and name of my practice.* "It's all beautiful," he said. "As it happens, I fell asleep in the library, working on several clues that I think might give me an insight into the curse plaguing your father."

Malfoy gave him a direct look that made Harry squirm a little, though until he heard the words that followed he wasn't sure why. "So you would rather sleep in a library chair than in a bed my mother offers you?" Malfoy asked softly.

"I—" Harry stopped short. The rationalizations that sounded so convincing in his head or in a conversation with someone who had the otherworldly sensibility of Healer Pontiff sounded rather stupid when he tried to voice them aloud. He cleared his throat. *How can I say that I'm afraid the bed would corrupt me and not have him burst out laughing?*

"No, I think I understand." Malfoy had the same faint smile as his mother did, Harry noted dimly, except that his had a tinge of bitterness. "You can't believe we would give you something like this, can you? You're looking for the trick, the trap, the poisoned half of the apple. And my mother makes a convincing evil queen." He ran a hand over his hair and sighed.

"You've read Muggle fairy tales?" Harry blurted before he could stop himself.

"Let's say that even a book of those looks good when it's within reach and you're trying not to wake a sleeping baby in your lap." Malfoy continued before Harry could dispute the amazing implications of his words, which seemed to indicate that Malfoy had visited Andromeda and Teddy. "I'll swear any oath you like that we're not trying to hurt you, though. What you did when you shared your blood with Father—it's special."

"I still don't really understand why." Harry folded his arms and tried to shake off the persistent sense that he must look ridiculous confronting Malfoy, who was as neatly attired as a statue the house-elves had just polished that morning. "If I'd used another spell that transferred my blood into his veins, would you have acted this way? Or is it only the Heart's Blessing Spell that's so special?"

Malfoy bowed his head and smiled. "It's the blood," he said simply. "It's a symbol we can respect and appreciate. Without it, you can offer us many other favors and we would still have to keep you at a distance."

"Who says that?" Harry asked irritably, though he suspected his life would have been easier if the Malfoys *had* kept him at a distance. "The Special Committee to Make Sure All Pure-Bloods Follow the Rules?"

"You would be surprised by the attempts there have been over the years to create organizations that approximate that one," said Malfoy wryly. "But no, we're acting in accord with a sense of tradition. Stupid, perhaps, to not be able to respect ourselves without a sharing of blood, but there you have it.

"We're embattled in wizarding society, Potter, and have been for years." He shook his head when Harry opened his mouth to protest. "I know it seems otherwise, but a few powerful individuals placed in the Wizengamot and the Ministry are only enough to mask the reality, not change it. We have fewer and fewer families we can safely marry into if we want to keep our bloodlines pure. Many of the classes that taught our children what we needed them to know have been dropped from the Hogwarts timetables. More than the fair share of pure-blood criminals occupies Azkaban, when you consider what a minority we are in wizarding Britain. So we have to treat our homes as fortresses, and the rest of the world as enemies, or at best tentative allies."

He looked directly at Harry and gave a dazzling smile that left him blinking and dazed. It was as though a miser had just ushered Harry into his private treasure vaults and told him to make free with the money there. Come to think of it, Narcissa had acted like that, too, Harry thought. He envisioned an invisible weight swinging on a cord above his head for a moment, poised to descend and crush him. Weren't treasure vaults always trapped?

"You broke past those barriers in one of the few ways you could do so," Malfoy said, "by mingling your blood with ours and defending our family at the same time. The second says that you're a possible ally; that in combination with your blood makes you a part of the Malfoys."

"But look," Harry said as patiently as he could, "that doesn't make sense." He might not understand a lot outside of basic mediwizardry training and how to stay friends with Weasleys, but he did know that one's life didn't change overnight because of casting a spell he'd cast half a dozen times before. "You can't—*adopt* someone because he offers you his blood."

"Yes, you can," Malfoy said. "In the old days, it was how pure-blood families conducted all adoptions. A freely-given gift of blood was precious, considering how much effort each family

went through to keep the line pure and ensure that enough children survived for long enough to produce the next generation."

"But I did it accidentally."

"That makes it better still. We can be sure you weren't scheming to win a place in the house or come closer to our fortune."

"But you don't really know me."

"We know what you did." Malfoy cocked his head to the side. "That's enough. That's all that's important." He gave Harry yet another smile, this one slower and warmer and exposing as many possibilities as it did teeth. "And perhaps you don't know us all that well either, hmmm?"

Since that was the conclusion Harry had come to last night, he couldn't really disagree without lying. He smiled reluctantly back, and Malfoy's face softened still further, until Harry thought it might be no great hardship to call him Draco after all.

"At any rate," said Malfoy, briskly breaking the mood between them, which Harry was grateful for, "I'll escort you to my father's rooms after you finish refreshing yourself and eating. Are your notes available in the library?" He turned towards the room, but paused courteously, as if the place really belonged to Harry and it were *his* privilege to say who entered the library and who didn't.

Harry wanted to gape, but he shut his mouth and swallowed hard. "Some notations in the margins of the three books there, but I don't know how well you can understand them," he warned.

Malfoy smiled again. "I'll still make an effort. I *should* know more about healing than I do, given that I'll be a Potions master and healing potions are the largest percentage of any brewer's stock." He stepped into the library and left Harry alone with the tray of steaming food, the anxious house-elf, and the temptation of the loo.

Harry paused for long moments, trying to calculate how much time the shower would take him. Could he just use a few Refreshing Charms and get away with that? He wouldn't want to keep Lucius waiting.

"Master Harry Potter is bathing now."

Harry jumped. The house-elf was glaring at him sternly, arms folded and enormous eyes blinking. Harry shook his head and leaned nearer. "What's your name?" he asked as pleasantly as he could.

"My name is being Rogers. And your name is being *dirty.*"

Harry reared back, blinking himself. He'd never heard of a house-elf having a name like Rogers, or using sarcasm on a wizard. "Er," he said. "Look, Rogers. You want Master Lucius Malfoy healed, don't you?" The elf nodded at once. "Quickly?"

"No. *Well.*"

Of all the problems Harry had thought he might confront in the Malfoy house, an emphatic house-elf who wouldn't let him escape some of the temptations was not one of them. He pondered, scratching at his hair. Rogers watched him with a mutinous expression. From the library came the sound of softly turning pages. Any moment, Harry thought, Malfoy was going to notice that he hadn't gone into the loo.

He scratched at his hair again, and felt grains of something crunch beneath his fingernails, and sighed. One shower couldn't hurt.

"Will you keep the food warm for me?" he asked, turning towards the loo.

Rogers gave him a horrified look and waved a hand. Steam immediately began to rise from the toast again and from a mug of some hot drink that Harry hadn't noticed before but which smelled wonderful. "Of course! Rogers is not letting food get *cold*. Nasty icky cold food would be making Master Harry Potter sick."

Harry shook his head and retreated into the loo.

The tub took up a third of the room, an enormous dark green basin that could have been made of jade, set into the floor so that its rim was flush with the tile. The faucets were shaped like dragons, Runespoors, Ashwinders, wyverns, and other variations on the theme of snakes. Harry wondered for a moment what would happen if he talked to them in Parseltongue, and then shuddered. They would probably answer, that was what, and given the temper of this house's servants so far, they would insist on helping him scrub his back.

He worked his way carefully past the tub and towards a whole row of showers, all of them with gleaming silver faucets and glass doors that could be drawn shut against water escaping into the room. Harry relaxed. Take a few fixtures away and these weren't so different from the showers he'd used after Quidditch games.

That relief lasted until he opened the glass shower door and realized that, in fact, the door was a folding one sculpted to *look* like it was made of many individual panels. Why, Harry didn't know. It was yet another aesthetic effect that was lost on him. He stared at the shower thus revealed in consternation. An army could have bathed here, or one of those dragons that the Malfoys regularly invited if their entrance hall was anything to go by, and not have noticed any crowding.

Sighing, he stepped into the shower, and immediately his clothes disappeared. Harry yelped and tried to clasp his hands together over his cock, but the showerheads had already oriented on him, and presumably whoever was behind them got a fairly good look in the instants before they

sprayed him.

Not only jets of hot water descended, but also fragrant smoke—presumably to make the bathing experience more pleasant, Harry thought with furious resentment—softly bubbling soap that smelled sometimes of lavender and sometimes of apples, something rough that felt like blowing *sand*, and a heavy spray that flicked apart into five streams of water when it was still some distance from him and raked through his hair like fingers. Harry had never felt so thoroughly scrubbed in his life. He wriggled and ducked and dodged, but the sprays followed him, and when he finally stood still and tried stoically to let it wash over him, he discovered just how *pleasant* it was.

His eyes drooped shut, and he moaned. Then he slumped against the glass door. The motion of the water through his hair alone rendered him half-drugged. The alternations of water and soap and sand against his skin made him feel luxuriously clean without feeling either scoured or left with particles of dirt and sweat clinging to him. (Harry was quite sure particles of dirt and sweat would never survive this assault). The smoke curled and eddied in his nostrils, making him smell roses and hyacinths and spring leaves and other smells he couldn't identify.

In short, the Malfoys knew how to shower.

The Healer may become the patient. Healer Pontiff's voice sounded in his mind suddenly, like silver ringing off glass. *We sometimes suffer as we seek to restore the balance of another's health. Stretch ourselves too far, and we can collapse. That is one reason you must take care of yourself, Harry, even when it seems unimportant. You would not want to put the further strain on a sick person of making him watch you collapse.*

Harry opened his eyes, which wanted to stick shut, and looked suspiciously at the showerheads. Was he sure the smoke didn't have any drug-like properties? Perhaps it was meant to trigger certain memories in his mind, memories that would make him more susceptible to obeying the Malfoys' will.

Yes, outwardly it sounded ridiculous, but then outwardly the Malfoys bringing him here because he had contributed blood to Lucius and for no other reason sounded ridiculous. And yet Malfoy claimed it was the real reason. Harry frowned and shook his head, moving towards the folding glass door. Maybe if he got out of the shower and away from all the—stimuli—he would be able to think more clearly.

But the door wouldn't open, and the next moment, a gentle wash of warm air traveled over him. Tiny individual breezes plucked at the water droplets and stole them from his body. Harry knew without looking to confirm it that they would leave his body's natural moisture alone, to avoid drying him to a dangerous extent. He sighed and stood as patiently as he could whilst a dedicated wind blew his hair up and down, chasing the water that might be hiding in his scalp, and a brisker wind cleared the air of the scents he'd been smelling during the shower itself.

Long before the glass door opened and released him back into the loo, Harry's fingers were

drumming impatiently on it. How could anyone put *up* with this? If it was ridiculous to suspect the Malfoys of trying to corrupt him, it was even more ludicrous to think that they'd waste all this magic on *him* and not expect some kind of return. Maybe not an evil return, but a return nonetheless. If he was part of the family, did that mean he had family obligations? Would they expect him not to speak ill of them in public, or look the other way if Lucius did something despicable? Would they expect him to break off his association with the Weasleys?

Would Malfoy expect Harry to climb into bed with him and comfort him, because that was what "family" did?

But then Harry paused. This "adoption" Malfoy had told him about might have one unexpected good consequence. The other man's behavior had changed almost completely since last night. What if he thought of Harry as his brother now? A brother could not be a lover, of course.

Of course not. Harry relaxed and tapped the glass door again. This time, it folded outwards and let him escape. *I was worrying about nothing. And even if they tried to keep me here and make me do certain things, I only have to refuse them. I can even refuse the Galleons, if I have to.* He had never tried to set up his own practice because, though he might have the money to begin it, he was not at all certain he had the money to purchase healing potions, plasters, soothing plants, and the other resources of St. Mungo's, or the books that would let him continue to expand his knowledge. But he would be able to call on his friends and other patients; some had even encouraged him to do so. It was only his hatred of favors, his desire to be independent, that had kept him at hospital so long.

And your desire to do good to the people there.

Much more cheerfully now that he had some reminder of his own power, Harry stepped into the loo and found a new set of robes reappearing on him the moment his foot connected with the tile. Of course the robes were much too rich for him and that same deep shade of green that his bedclothes were, but that was inevitable. Harry settled for rolling his eyes and continued into the bedroom, where Rogers had drawn up a chair for him at the table fastened to the end of the bed. Harry tried to recall whether the chair had been in the room before, and couldn't. He could easily have missed it in the overwhelming mass of other furnishings, in any case.

The hot drink tasted of several of the flowers he'd smelled in the shower, but for all that, it wasn't disgusting. Indeed, the tastes were fleeting and then would vanish into the background of the drink again, which was a kind of thick tea. Harry poured butter on the toast and watched it melt instantly. Then he took a bite of the fruit smeared with cream, which included several round red berries of a kind he'd never met before, and nearly went over backwards in his surprise. The berries were sweeter than the fleeting tastes in his drink, and had a lingering tartness under the surface that made him try to picture how Lucius would eat them without success. No one could keep a straight face when devouring food like this; one would be compelled to sigh and blink in surprise and pause with eyes closed whilst one savored.

Harry began to alternate bites of hot buttered toast and berries with cream, and was so occupied

that he never noticed when Malfoy stepped out of the library.

"Enjoying yourself?"

The words were soft, not mocking, and Harry opened his eyes and stared without understanding at Malfoy for a long moment. The other man had his finger resting in one of the books Harry had been studying last night, his glance amused as he surveyed the remains of the breakfast. Harry colored and wiped his mouth on the napkin at the edge of the plate, knowing he had berry juice and cream all over his lips, and convinced he must look like a rabid animal.

"No, no," Malfoy said. "Your expression is so much more open when you're enjoying something."

Harry paused, eyes narrowed. The compliment sounded different, more sincere, than most of the ones Malfoy had given him, and he didn't follow up on it. Instead, he sat down in a chair that Rogers might have conjured out of thin air and tapped the book he'd carried out of the library.

"Your thought is that it's the Mirror Maze, right?"

"Not—exactly," Harry said, and regretfully pushed the rest of his breakfast away from him. He had to concentrate on work, not on how good the food tasted. The Malfoys might interfere with his job without even knowing it. "The spell I cast looking for *Mansuefacio* might have revealed the presence of that Maze, and certainly would have found the presence of that same spell reflected, as the Mirror Maze ensures."

Malfoy frowned and shook his head. "I don't understand. I thought the Mirror Maze was just a group of spells woven around a person in a certain pattern and designed to trigger one another when the right commands were given."

Harry grinned, delighted with the temptation to show off his superior knowledge for once. This was of course information that Emptyweed and most others in hospital had mastered long ago, but it was new to Malfoy. "No, that's the definition of a spell maze in general. There are different patterns. The Mirror Maze is named because it uses the same spells reflected and repeated rather than completely different ones. It can be devastating when the command to trigger is issued, because the victim receives double the power of that particular curse."

"I've never encountered anyone who could explain that so clearly."

Harry blinked suspiciously at him, but Malfoy was looking at the book, and once again he went on after the compliment, if it was one, without trying to press his advantage. "What do you think it is if not the Mirror Maze, then?"

"The Mirror Maze turned sideways," Harry said. "That would conceal the presence of similar spells in your father's mind. And it would explain why the Permanency Spell on those particular wounds he had is so strong. I've been thinking about it, and it doesn't make sense that he should

have severe injuries all over his body, even if part of the Mirror Maze's purpose is to hand control of his body's healing over to an enemy. At most, the ordinary maze should have reflected damage onto one particular part of his body, say the heart, like a lens focusing sunlight. Instead, we have wounds of almost equal severity all over the place. That would reflect a Mirror Maze turned sideways. There are similar cases in the literature."

"And that's more dangerous?" Malfoy's voice had grown tense. Harry reminded himself forcibly that Malfoy might be annoying and given to flirtation in inappropriate circumstances, but that didn't mean he felt indifferent towards seeing his father die. He was to be pitied.

"Yes, it is," Harry said quietly. "It means that the maze can be bent in several directions at once, not only one, like a flexible lens. And until I can be sure of what the other spells in the maze are, I can't dissipate it."

Malfoy closed his eyes, and all the lines in his face went tense. Harry had seen the look before, on the faces of people trying desperately not to give in to tears or pain. And in that moment, Malfoy became a patient to him, and he reacted without thinking.

He reached out and put his right hand over Malfoy's, then stood up and laid his left hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "It's all right," he whispered. "It's going to be all right. I'm certain I can figure this out."

Malfoy opened his eyes and stared steadily at him. "I want to believe that," he whispered, "but I find myself faltering."

Harry smiled at him. "I know. It's because I'm not a full Healer, and I used to be your enemy. But I promise—"

"That's not it at all!" Malfoy snapped. "I just feel this way because he's my *father*, and someone *cursed* him, and we don't know *who*. You're part of us now, and that means I can believe you'll do a good job better than I can believe it of anyone in the world." He stood up in the circle of Harry's arms and leaned towards the right side of his face. Harry expected a whispered admonition in his ear to heal Lucius or else.

Instead, Malfoy brushed a delicate kiss against the skin beneath Harry's ear, and then grabbed him and embraced him tightly. Harry blinked and tried not to squawk, and held him back.

Malfoy stepped away at last, gave Harry another faint smile without a trace of embarrassment, and then picked up the parchment map he'd shown Harry earlier. "Shall we?" he asked. "I thought I'd escort you to visit Father the first time. And he'll want to hear from both you and me how you've spent the night."

"Why?" Harry asked, turning his head self-consciously away, as if that would keep Malfoy from seeing his blush. The place beneath his ear that Malfoy had kissed was burning like pale fire.

"In case I've noticed an addition to your comfort that could be made, which you haven't noticed yourself," Malfoy said gently. "We treat members of our family well, Harry. Now. Shall we?" He held open the door.

Harry took a deep breath and followed Malfoy. He wished his head wasn't whirling and his feet didn't feel fit to stumble, but he was sure he would manage to act professional. He always did.

If not for the sidelong glances Malfoy sent him as they went along—admiring, but not trying to press the point, exactly the sort of looks Harry would have hoped to see from someone who liked him in a situation like this—he might even have convinced himself.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—Panic Is Not Permitted

"What's the matter?" Malfoy spoke low and warm next to Harry's ear, exactly as if he had the right to do so. "You look a little overwhelmed, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I am," Harry said bluntly, and tilted his head back to try and find the ceiling. He couldn't see it. "I've never been in a house like this before."

"Or certainly not this part of it, anyway," Malfoy said in a light voice, as if he wanted to both invoke and banish the memories of Harry's brief stay in Malfoy Manor during the war.

Those memories helped to clear Harry's head. He frowned and stepped away from Malfoy. They were in a large corridor now with no side turnings. He didn't think it was as easy to get lost, and besides, he'd seen a long straight line that had to represent this place on the map to Lucius's rooms.

Unless the Manor had multiple places of this size…

Harry decided he was going to do his best not to think about it.

The corridor was, of course, beautiful. Harry hadn't seen a place since he'd come to the Manor that wasn't. Unlike the soothing colors of the staircase and his bedroom, however, this place was meant to possess the hot, harsh dignity of a desert. The walls glowed as golden as sandstone; the floor beneath their feet contained a restrained blood-warmth. And there was no ceiling, no matter how many times Harry stared upwards with his eyes watering. Instead, high arched

windows—probably enchanted; Harry refused to think the Manor had the blessing of that much sun—and mirrors bounced shimmering glare off one another, capping the room with nothing but a clear shine. Harry had to admit it was the way a desert sky would probably look at noonday if one tried to stare directly into the sun.

Of course, he didn't really understand why anyone would be *interested* in constructing a room that looked that way.

"Well," Malfoy said, when he had paced at Harry's side in silence for a few considering moments, "there's a difference between being overwhelmed and being uncomfortable."

"Assume it's the latter." With relief, Harry saw the doors loom on the far end of the corridor. Of *course* they loomed, and of course they were shaped and carved like red sandstone cliffs, but at least they led out of this place.

"Why?" Malfoy reached out and placed a hand on Harry's arm, halting him. When he turned to face him, Harry saw him frowning, his eyes almost wounded—a vulnerability he never would have shown outside the Manor.

"What have we done wrong, to make you fear and distrust us so much?" Malfoy asked quietly. "We assumed our gifts spoke a universal language. You might not understand the significance of the Heart's Blessing spell to pure-bloods or the way that blood adoptions work, but we had thought you would know we wouldn't give you these things unless we wanted you to feel at home."

Harry ground his teeth together. He could have snapped an accusation back if only Malfoy had spoken those words in a haughty tone, looking down his nose and damning Harry for his lack of gratitude. But oh no, he couldn't be that obliging. Instead, he had the nerve to look like a child whose offer of friendship was refused, or—

Or a host whose guest wouldn't sleep in his bed and had to be convinced to accept the bedroom.

Harry shivered under the weight of the shame that crashed into him, dousing his anger. He bowed his head. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I suppose I can't set aside the old enmity between us as easily as I thought I could. But the gifts do make me—uneasy. I've received gifts before that turned out to be attempts to buy my favor, or simply to put me into a position, by accepting them, from which there was no escape."

Malfoy studied him for long moments, his eyes burning like the desert. Harry flushed more and more deeply. He wanted to insist that they should go on and reach Lucius's rooms so Harry could start taking care of him, but he knew obscurely that that would be part of the same pain he'd caused Malfoy by refusing to accept his gifts. So he stood still, and after long moments Malfoy reached up and clasped the back of his neck, pulling him closer.

From a shorter distance than anyone save Ron and Hermione had tried to speak to him in years,

Malfoy whispered, "I understand that, and I forgive you. But I think we'll get tired of repeating this before long, so you need to *listen*. The gifts we give you are meant to make you feel like part of the family. We wouldn't think twice of giving such things to one another." He paused significantly. "Of course, we would hope that they were appreciated, and expect at least polite thanks."

Harry swallowed. He felt so painfully *lost.* And he still wanted to protest. The Weasleys managed to make each other feel appreciated, and make Harry feel like part of the family, without giving each other expensive toys all the time, and they were pure-bloods, too.

But then he remembered the first Christmas he'd spent at Hogwarts, when he received gifts from the Weasleys and Hermione, and how good it made him feel. Maybe gifts weren't everything, but he'd let himself be touched by the ones his friends gave him. Would it really make such a difference to let himself relax and accept what the Malfoys were willing to offer?

"All right," he said. "Thank you for the shower and the bedroom and the map and your friendship."

"More than just friendship," Malfoy said, his voice smooth and tinged with amusement, even though he had let Harry step away from him within the circle of his arms.

Harry stared at him. *Well, he's being honest, or what sounds like honest, with me. Maybe he wants me to talk honestly to him, too.* "But—if we're family now, doesn't that mean we're brothers?" he asked. "So you wouldn't be interested in dating me?"

Malfoy's eyes seared him for a moment; then Malfoy lowered his lids over them. Harry blinked, shaken. He'd never been looked at with such desire as Malfoy had just shown him, and yet Malfoy's touch on him remained calm and gentle.

"There are other kinds of family love, Harry," Malfoy said. "My father and mother are part of the same family, and yet they aren't siblings." He gave him a sudden, flashing smile that made Harry wonder fleetingly if he coordinated his expressions to the part of the house they were in, and then stepped away and gestured to the doors. "Now, my father awaits, and I'm sure he's wondering if we got lost after all. I can't know as much about this house as my parents do, since I've only lived in it twenty-six years."

Harry followed, dazed and more certain than ever that he didn't belong here. He was breaking a social code he didn't know about and willingly subjecting himself to living with people who had been his enemies a short time ago. And Malfoy continued to flirt with him, though Harry was sure he had seen every single unattractive facet of Harry's character by now.

But that desire was restrained. He wasn't breathing down Harry's neck about it the way he'd been doing only yesterday. He acted as if he wanted Harry to know that he liked him but also that he was willing to be patient until Harry was ready to return that liking.

Harry tried to remember a lover he'd had who was like that, and came up with no names.

Of course, maybe that was a good thing. More casual relationships enabled them to move on with their lives when they realized I wasn't what they needed. Harry eyed Malfoy's back dubiously. *Does he have the least idea what loving me would entail?*

"And how are you today, sir?" Harry said, endeavoring to keep his voice as cheerful and quiet as it would have been if he were meeting Lucius in hospital. Never mind the bedroom decorated in intense red and blue, so that it looked as if they met in the middle of a stained glass window. Never mind that the bed had numerous tiny hands that made patting motions as they adjusted Lucius's sheets and pillows, and that the mattress itself rose and fell, adjusting itself for Lucius's comfort. Never mind the tables attached to the sides of the bed that moved smoothly out of the way when Lucius only gestured, bearing cool drinks, books, small platters of food, or complicated game boards.

"Very well." Lucius stared at Harry. "I understand that you have some doubts as to our hospitality."

Harry paused in the act of spreading his notes out on a gleaming mahogany table. He wondered who had told Lucius that: Draco or Rogers. Then he shrugged and went on with what he was doing. He had always been blunt with Lucius, and he intended to continue the habit, although Malfoy had gone to hover unobtrusively in a corner and it would have to be in front of him, too. "Not as to your hospitality," he said. "I'm quite sure that all the luxuries you've chosen to offer me are genuine and made of real glass and crystal and gems. I have some doubts as to the *motives* behind it, of course."

"Motives may be double," Lucius said.

"Exactly what I'm afraid of," Harry muttered back, and then lifted his wand, concentrating as he chanted a spell under his breath. The spell was not one in the approved catalogue of magic mediwizards were supposed to use, but he was no longer among people who would realize that. The air in front of him turned clear and flat and white, cleaner than any piece of parchment had ever been, and then glowing colored lines appeared on it, forming the Mirror Maze Harry had researched in the library last night. Harry smiled. The spell was a special modification of Hermione's, which would take the image in his head and transfer it perfectly to the paper, and he always appreciated how well it worked.

"Motives may be double with hurting either party involved," said Lucius. Glancing back at him, Harry realized that his eyebrows had risen to his hairline.

"I am less convinced of that," Harry said. "And in any case, we're supposed to discuss your health, and not a philosophical debate." He nodded to the glowing lines. "Do you recognize this, sir?"

"One may do more than one thing at once, as you have just demonstrated." Lucius pretended to ponder for a moment, then laughed shortly. "You mean to insult me by suggesting I will not recognize a Mirror Maze, Mr. Potter? And so far, you had been so careful never to seem insulting."

"Not insult you," Harry said. "There's a difference between an insult and a direct question that simply asks for information. If I had said that I suspected you of trying to trap me, get me used to luxuries, draw me into admiration for your way of life, and only then reveal the hook behind the rich bait, then I would be insulting you. But I haven't said that in a definite declarative sentence, have I? Those words exist only in a hypothetical one."

Lucius gave a brief, fierce, joyous smile. Then he was wearing his cold façade again. But Harry, smiling at him in relief—at least one person hadn't changed incomprehensibly between St. Mungo's and the Manor—froze when he realized that, no, the façade wasn't quite the same. For one thing, Lucius never would have revealed his emotions like that in his smile before.

Harry coughed and glanced back at the parchment. "I believe that you have a Mirror Maze on you," he said, "but not the traditional one, or the damage would have been severe on only one part of your body, as it was not." He flicked his wand, and the imaginary parchment turned sideways, bearing the Mirror Maze with it. "This is what you have." Another flick of his wand and the Maze lifted off the parchment into the third dimension, flexing back and forth with graceful changes of its lines. "Unfortunately, I still can't dissipate it until I know for certain what spells compose it."

"Do you have any more ideas, Harry?" Lucius's eyes were piercing. "Given your skill, I expect that you should."

"I do," said Harry, glad he could keep his voice steady. Lucius was testing him like a son and heir now, he thought, or at least like someone who needed to perform to a high level in order to make his family proud. The thought sent waves of tension racing through Harry. He did best when he had to react suddenly, not when he sat down to a situation that was like an exam—protracted, intense, and warned of beforehand. "I know that *Mansuefacio* is part of it, and the Cutting Curse and the Permanency Spell. Probably also a Replication Charm, to make the same wounds appear in many places at once. And a spell that maps your body, so that whoever controls the maze can study it at all times and know your vulnerabilities at a glance."

Lucius's eyebrows rose. "I have never heard of such a spell."

"I've used it several times." Harry sighed. "Whoever made this maze has Healer training."

"Ah." Lucius flexed his hands thoughtfully on his blanket. "Then perhaps the mystery of your stabilization fields disappearing is not such a mystery after all. Could the person controlling the maze have dissipated them from inside me?"

Harry shook his head. "If they could, they would also have removed the stabilization field on

your chest," he said. "I think that was an attack from outside, but I'm afraid I have no suspects yet."

"Mmmm." Lucius was staring at him now as if he could see Harry's every thought. "Suppose that you perform a spell which will enable you to see the magic making up the rest of the maze?"

Harry blinked. "Such magic exists, of course," he said slowly. "But it's classed as an invasion of privacy."

"By whom?"

"The St. Mungo's authority, and independent Healers, and everyone who teaches mediwizardry," said Harry, his uneasiness growing. He stared at Lucius. "We're taught the incantation for use in emergency situations, but we're not supposed to—"

"You're my private Healer now," Lucius said.

"Mediwizard."

"Such distinctions matter less than usual when we are talking about family," Lucius said. "You are a Malfoy. If you would consent to change your last name, you would be one of us perfectly." He looked wistful for a moment, but said, as Harry was opening his mouth to protest, "Cast the spell, Harry. I wish to see what it reveals."

Harry licked his lips. "I might get it wrong."

"Have you got anything else wrong so far?" Lucius lay there on the pillows and studied him as if this weren't his life they were talking about.

"You don't understand," Harry said helplessly. No one really understood this part, not even Ron and Hermione. "I'm not good at spells that require intense concentration, unless fear pushes me the moment when I'd hesitate. I'll fumble and mess it up. It would be better if I just went on studying until I could recognize the spells that comprise the maze from watching their effects on the spells I already know."

"You *do* have a self-confidence problem," Lucius said. "How fortunate that I have the cure for such a problem in my possession, and have used it several times over."

"If it's a spell—"

"Of course not," Lucius said, but gently, not as if he were scolding a child for being stupid. *No, this is more like scolding me for ignorance,* Harry thought, scowling at him. "It's the doing of things that you don't think you can do, and doing them well. Now. Cast the spell. You know the incantation. Do you think you'll mess up the incantation?"

"No!"

"Do you think your magic isn't powerful enough?" Lucius sounded like Professor McGonagall now. Harry had never thought *that* was a comparison that would occur to him.

"No!"

"Then what do you think is the problem, precisely?" Lucius gave him a leisurely look from head to toe. At least Harry knew he was married, so the motive behind that scan couldn't be the same one his son would have had.

"You're trying to heal me," Harry snarled, aiming his wand, "and I'm the one who should be healing you. *Patefacio omnium!*"

Only as the blue light surrounded Lucius in a darting aura like streaks of lightning did Harry realize the man was wearing a self-satisfied smile. He had fallen for one of the older tricks in the book. Harry took several deep breaths to calm his anger and forced himself to watch the pattern the blue light was sketching next to Lucius. That would show any magical weaknesses he had—not only the Mirror Maze.

The pattern was also blue, and brilliant, and Harry had to squint a bit. But he nodded reluctantly as he recognized the Mirror Maze turned sideways, and saw the names of the spells that composed it appearing beside the strands. Yes, a Replication Charm, and the Healers' spell that mapped the body. There were also several words that he created another piece of imaginary parchment to record. They were certainly Latin, but not words he recognized. He would have to look them up, or, more likely, to ask Malfoy.

"*Volnero*," said a voice in his ear, so gentle that Harry couldn't even jump. "That's 'I cause pain' or 'I wound.' A more complicated and nastier version of the Cutting Charm, which can also be used on objects instead of people. *Hebeto*. Dark magic, plain and simple. It's meant to imitate a death caused by wasting disease." His voice grew cold. "I don't understand why they would bother with that one, when they meant to kill my father in an obvious way."

"It'll have something to do with the way it's bound into the other spells," Harry murmured. He reached out, not quite daring to touch the strand marked *Hebeto.* "See the way it thickens at the end where it runs into the Body-Mapping Charm? I wouldn't be surprised if that means—"

"It's meant to deaden areas of his body, instead of the whole thing," Malfoy said slowly. "Another meaning of *Hebeto* is 'I deaden.'"

"Exactly," Harry said, stifling his surprise that Malfoy had managed to learn so much from the Healing books. *Or is that just the wonderful education he no doubt had in Dark magic?* "And in turn that might make the detection of small wounds or vulnerabilities more difficult. I wonder—"

Lucius screamed.

Harry whipped back towards the bed at once. Lucius was arching off it, clawing at the air. Then his arms froze, and a bloody whip wrapped them, a wave of arching crimson that traveled quickly downwards towards his chest. Cuts were opening there, too, in a pattern Harry recognized. It was as though an invisible *Sectumsempra* spell had been used on Lucius.

At the same time, curving red lines opened around the edges of his face. And *that* one, Harry knew, was the Scalper's Curse, inaccurately named. It would tear a victim's entire face off in a bloody mask.

The enemies who cast this *had* been clever. They had buried spells that were no doubt designed to react this way on the discovery of the Mirror Maze. Rather than risk that whoever was looking at the maze could cure Lucius, they would forego their lingering revenge for a more direct attack.

Harry knew how to stop the curses, but it required the abilities of *two* Healers. A single lone mediwizard wouldn't stop it.

Unless—

Harry gave an impatient little shrug. *Panic is not permitted,* Healer Pontiff murmured to him, *not when you could be saving a life.* Ron and Hermione would understand. He pointed his wand at Lucius's neck, halfway between the spell cutting into his torso and his face where the Scalper's Curse operated. "*Sacrifici—*"

A hand slammed into his, knocking his wand away and ruining Harry's concentration. He turned on Malfoy with a scream of frustration. "What the fuck are you *doing*?"

"Not like that," Malfoy said, and his eyes were wild and staring. "Family members save each other. They don't sacrifice their lives for one another unless they can't help it, because that diminishes the size and power of the family."

"That's the only way to stop this!" Harry whirled around to face Lucius again. He had meant to transfer the spells clawing their way across Lucius's body to himself, and then tug the whole Mirror Maze after him if he could. He started to perform the spell again, and this time Malfoy seized his wrist in a crushing grip. Harry tried to shake him off and couldn't. The Scalper's Curse was rounding Lucius's mouth now and heading for his forehead, where it would meet up with itself and slice his face off. The *Sectumsempra* on his chest was taking longer than it usually did, which Harry blessed; it seemed that Lucius's enemies couldn't quite give up their notion of slow and painful revenge.

"Not like that," Malfoy hissed into his ear. "Like *this.*"

He wrapped his arms around Harry and bowed his head.

And a pulsing crimson glow flooded the room, originating around Harry's heart and Lucius's and,

from the shine behind him, Malfoy's as well.

The light washed back and forth for a moment, as if uncertain of its target. Malfoy pulled Harry still closer and he felt his mind awash with Malfoy's thoughts, as if he had just used Legilimency on Harry. He could feel the insane determination to heal his father, at least. Then Malfoy's hands closed more crushingly across his chest, forcing the breath out of him. The breath joined the crimson as a glittering silver cloud, and then the cloud flew straight towards Lucius.

Harry watched as it settled on his face and chest like a fall of snow and rose petals, and began to pull. The wounds contracted, throbbing like the light. Harry opened his mouth to protest that this wouldn't work, because Lucius had already lost so much blood that he was in danger of also losing his life, and then he realized the wounds were closing in *reverse*, the blood that had risen from them flooding back into them, the scars undoing themselves. The magic Malfoy had somehow summoned was not pulling them closed, but sucking the Dark magic out.

Now *this* was a piece of magic Harry could get behind, even if he wasn't exactly sure how it was done. He reached down, let his hands rest on Malfoy's arms, and pushed more of his own magic into the healing.

Malfoy gasped, and so did Lucius. Harry had only a moment to worry he had done something wrong before a wild galloping wave of power swept him up and swirled him into a dazzling red and silver place.

He was touching Malfoy's thoughts and Lucius's too, and he could feel their dazed wonder at his magic, and their greed for it, and their stubbornness to outface their enemies and survive, and so much else he was sure they would never have shown anyone willingly that he was awed and humbled. He had no idea what they were seeing from him that he hadn't already demonstrated, but Malfoy's arms tightened possessively around him and Lucius's satisfaction dripped over everything, almost obscuring the crimson and silver brightness.

He whirled twice and descended like a top, and then the Dark magic was gone, absorbed into the current of blood and magic and love that connected the Malfoy family. Harry could hardly believe it was possible; every healing spell he had heard of like this worked by transferring the physical damage to the bodies of others. But instead, the Dark magic was pushed into that crimson and silver place, where, Harry dimly understood, it would be torn apart by the intense protectiveness that the family felt for each other. It was as if evil had been exiled from the world and love had replaced it.

"You should be familiar with the process," Malfoy murmured into his ear. "That was the way your own mother saved you, wasn't it?" His hands were lightly stroking Harry's waist, in a way that made it clear he could break free at any time.

Harry didn't think he wanted to break free right now. He leaned his head against Malfoy's neck and closed his eyes. He didn't need to open them to know that Lucius had healed completely of the Dark magic the Mirror Maze had tried to inflict on him—though the Mirror Maze itself still

remained, so deeply anchored in his body there was no simple way to rip it free.

Harry had never had a lover who could *help* him this way. Most of his lovers had simply been unfamiliar with Healing magic and hadn't wanted to learn more about it, and Xavier had actively despised his career for taking away from Harry's capacity for "real heroism." But Malfoy had tried to learn more about the process, had asked questions, and then had shown Harry how to succeed in a situation where he would have been lost without the help. Harry couldn't explain how much that meant to him.

He opened his eyes and saw Malfoy smiling down at him, his hair gone flyaway, his face bright and soft. He reached up and trailed his fingers down Harry's jaw, and Harry heard his breathing quicken. Yet the hold on him remained light. He could step away if he wanted to.

Harry had never had that, either. He'd been the one to cling and adore and hope for a relationship after the problems had appeared. Even with Julius, he'd entertained a mad hope for one day that Julius would leave his wife for Harry. But this…

This…

And he understood now what Lucius had meant when he said double motives could exist without harming either of the people involved. Lucius wanted to have some sort of tie to Harry, but he also wanted to help him advance, solely because he had done things for the family that no one else ever had. Malfoy—Draco—wanted to seduce him, but he *also* wanted to help. Harry could avoid the seduction and still have the help, if he wanted.

He didn't know what he wanted yet.

He stood up with a small shake of his head and looked at Lucius, because Draco's presence confused him more than was helpful right now. "How did you do that?"

"How did *we* do that," Lucius said, softly but insistently.

Harry hesitated, then inclined his head. Yes, it had to be. He would still retain a sense of caution towards some of the things they might ask him to do, but he couldn't pretend to an emotional distance he didn't feel after that experience.

"How did we do that?"

Lucius smiled at him approvingly, and Harry was startled to realize how good that made him feel. "Blood magic," he said. "We pay a large price for our intense devotion to family before all else, but we receive a few gifts from it, too. Our blood can hold and contain foreign danger, just as it can embrace the foreigner when it's shared. And in this case it pushed the Dark magic out of the blood—out of the body—into a place where it can be destroyed more easily. Our magic and our minds, if you will." He frowned and made a small movement with one hand. "The parallel is not exact, but it is roughly true."

Harry nodded. And then he blinked, because suddenly every muscle in his body seemed weighted with stones and his eyes were falling shut of their own accord.

"Why am I so tired?" he muttered, his head lolling back on Draco's shoulder. Draco's hold on his waist firmed a little.

"I don't know," Lucius said, sounding concerned. "That magic should not have been a drain on anyone who got a full night's sleep."

"He didn't," Draco said sharply. "He slept in a chair for most of the night, and only a few hours at that. He was up most of the night researching. He neglects his own health most disgracefully, Father. We shall have to do something about that."

Harry wanted to argue, but he was already sinking.

And, try as he might, he could not muster concern at falling asleep in the presence of two people who would have been enemies only a day before.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—The Healer Is Not Always Right

Harry didn't want to open his eyes. His body was utterly relaxed for the first time in what felt like years. He splayed his arms open and stretched, and still his hands didn't bang into his headboard. He must have arranged himself just right so that he had what seemed like endless space.

But of course he would need to get up soon. He never slept that long on most mornings, given what strange hours the cases Emptyweed gave him had. He probably had a patient waiting for a stabilization field, or reinforcement of a binding spell on a limb, or a dose of Skele-Gro. He sighed and wrinkled his nose, opening his eyes.

The first sight that met them was Draco Malfoy, smiling. Harry stared for a long moment, then shook his head. "What kind of potion did I take last night?" he muttered. He'd occasionally done himself harm by grabbing what he assumed was a headache potion from his shelf and instead ending up with Dreamless Sleep or a potion intended to calm hallucinations.

"No potion, actually," Malfoy said softly. *Why was his voice so soft?* Harry wondered, and nearly looked around for an audience. "That was the effect of natural sleep, the first you've allowed yourself in—months? I would say so, given some of the diagnostic spells the books have taught me to use on you. And it was only this morning, not last night. Though it's evening now. I didn't think you would wake up inside the day."

Finally memory returned to Harry. He could feel his face flush so brilliantly he thought he would set the sheets on fire. And of course he was lying on the thick green covers of the bed he'd refused last night, with his back and legs cradled by softness like clouds. He cleared his throat and started to sit up.

Draco—Harry had no choice but to think of him like that after the closeness of their shared magic—stretched an arm across his chest to keep him from rising. Harry stared at him in confusion, then lowered his eyes a little and realized Draco wasn't sitting in a chair next to the bed, as he'd first assumed. Instead, he was sprawled at his ease on the blankets beside Harry, his elbow holding him up.

Fury burned away the last of Harry's embarrassment. "What did you think you were doing?" he snapped, and hurled the restraining arm away. "Sleeping with me without my consent?"

Draco's smile widened. "It did you no harm," he said, "and I wanted to." Harry had no doubt which part of that sentence mattered more to the git. "In fact, several times during the past few hours you sighed and cuddled up to me. You're used to sleeping with someone else in your bed, aren't you? At least your body seems to have missed it."

"You're mistaking the source of my displeasure," Harry said coolly, restraining his temper. Getting himself thrown out of the Manor for calling Draco names was not in the plan. Finding out what was wrong with Lucius and then leaving the Manor with dignity and Galleons intact was. "It's not that someone was in my bed, it's that someone I didn't invite and in fact have explicitly refused several times was."

Draco's smile only widened. Harry had the feeling it was the smile he might have given a kitten trying earnestly to catch a moving light. "You want to row with me over something that's not worth a row," he said, and his voice was still soft, and so was his face, and his hair hung in a mussed soft tangle around it. Harry felt his body stirring in response to that look, and he promptly pictured Emptyweed finding him in such a state to calm it. "I didn't take off my clothes, or yours. I didn't hurt you. But I did want to see what kind of sleeper you were, for…future reference."

Harry shook his head and swallowed more fury. "You've seen," he said. "Now. If you'll excuse me, I should eat something and start studying again. That those Dark spells were buried under the Mirror Maze implies either a conspiracy of casters or—something else. And I have to find out what the other thing is."

There. He'd admitted he was uncertain about something. That ought to be enough to make Draco

rant about what they were paying Harry for, if he didn't know the first thing about what was actually wrong with Lucius.

But though Draco's smile vanished and his eyes narrowed, he didn't rise from the bed. "I've seen," he said. "And I want to see more. Only then can I fully judge how much you've been neglecting yourself."

"Neglecting myself?" Harry ran both hands through his hair, a common gesture of his when he was frustrated. This time it wasn't enough, so he dug his fingers deep and yanked. "You don't know the first thing about Healers, Malfoy—"

"Draco." Draco reached up and put his hands on top of Harry's as he spoke, lazily massaging them with his own. Harry took a long, long breath, and his fingers relaxed. He didn't have much choice. "And I know a thing or two from studying your books. But as you keep telling me, you're a mediwizard and not a Healer, so I feel freer to listen to my instincts and my observations."

Harry tried to rear up. The hands on his head suddenly descended onto his shoulders and pulled him close, and Draco's face had gone stern.

"And what my instincts and my observations tell me," Draco murmured to him, "combined with what I learned of you when we mingled our power under the blood magic, is that you're trying to compensate for what you see as your weaknesses or deficiencies by driving yourself to the edge of madness and exhaustion. Tell me, Harry. Who do you think is going to be impressed by that? Will you save one more person because you're so tired you're stumbling? Or will you be better able to brew a potion that will ease pain because you've missed a meal?"

"I don't brew potions, as you know very well, *Malfoy*." Harry bristled with irritation, but he thought the only way to make his point was to insult Draco and get him to back away. Hermione had given him similar lectures about the same subject, but she'd never done it in this quiet and serious tone, a tone that made Harry think Draco might actually win. Harry could turn aside most of Hermione's concerns with a little reassurance and a joke. "I'm only a mediwizard, and that's because my poor skills at Potions followed me from Hogwarts into my career. You ought to see it as justified revenge, if anything," he added, when Draco just stared at him.

Draco shook his head, but not as if in denial of Harry's words. This time, Harry thought, it was a helpless shake, as if Draco's thoughts behind his face ran to the tune of *What am I going to do with you?*

And isn't it worrying that I know him this well?

Then his hand rose and cupped the back of Harry's head, fingers feathering lightly through his hair. Harry closed his eyes in pleasure, even though he knew it was only a prelude to some nonsensical statement that would probably involve blood.

"Harry," Draco whispered, "when you became part of the family—"

See?

"I gave up laughing at such things. I might joke with you, I might think your foibles are funny, but I don't despise you." Again Draco touched the back of his head, but timidly, as if he thought Harry might throw his hand aside. "It's a source of pain to me that you would drive yourself like that because you're not good at Potions."

"That's not the only reason!" Harry opened his eyes and stared at him incredulously. *Is his hobby attributing motivations to people?* "I also can take more punishment than most people. I'm still young, whilst most of my patients are children or people at least as old as your father. I can miss some sleep and some meals now, and that means I'm doing better, faster work. Missing those meals and sleep is not going to *kill* me, but sometimes it would kill *them* if I delayed."

Draco sighed deeply. "It's perfectly clear now why you really refused this bed and stopped eating the moment I teased you. Sleep and food have never been sources of pleasure for you, have they?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest that he liked treacle tart, and then realized how ridiculous that was. Draco made it sound as if it were some sort of crime not to wallow in bed in the morning. Harry knew it wasn't. "They're necessities," he said. "I can survive as well on porridge and orange juice as on the fruit you served me this morning. Why would I go out of my way to seek something richer?"

Draco pursed his lips. "I see," he said.

"Do you?" Harry leaned forwards. "It's not that I'm not grateful for what you've tried to do for me. It's just that I don't *need* these gifts, and I won't appreciate them properly. Keep them for yourselves. At least that way you know they aren't going to waste."

"Going to—" Draco closed his eyes.

"Would you really want to give someone a crystal pendant, for example, if you knew they didn't value crystal pendants?" Harry wondered that something that seemed so simple to him would be a source of trouble for Draco. Of course, perhaps it would be a source of trouble for anyone raised like this. Draco probably not only appreciated crystal pendants, he could tell them apart at a hundred paces and give you a long, complicated story about where the crystal had come from. "It's better if I have what I need to get the job done and nothing more. In this case it's Healing books, and if you were keeping a book about that back from me I would be upset. But I don't need books about magical creatures, no matter how beautiful the books are, because they're not relevant to my job. Do you understand?" he added wistfully. It was a view of life that Ron agreed with, since he'd spent so much of his life with only the necessities.

"I understand you," Draco said, and opened his eyes. Harry faltered a little before his look. Draco was glaring at him in what was almost disgust. "I understand that you aren't thinking about the

consequences of your own actions. What would happen if you didn't treat a patient right, or missed a detail that would reveal their disease, because you hadn't slept enough? What if you fainted from hunger in the middle of an important procedure?"

"That wouldn't happen. I always get enough food and sleep to prevent that."

"But someday you won't, with as little attention as you pay to it." Draco leaned forwards. "I had thought you would take care of yourself because you wanted to practice your job, but no, you don't even do that, do you? Otherwise you would have slept in this bed last night and attempted to eat as full a breakfast as possible."

Harry flushed, feeling cornered in a way he never had when Hermione or Healer Pontiff spoke to him about the same subject. The difference, he thought, was that Hermione knew how far she could push as his friend, and Healer Pontiff understood the determination to rescue his patients and sympathized with it. Draco looked as if such knowledge and sympathy were beyond him, which made Harry uneasy.

"Listen," Harry said, "you can't—you can't set a bedtime for me, as if I were a little kid, or force food down my throat."

"Why would I?" Draco asked calmly. "That would make you angry with me, be a time-consuming and disgusting task, and accomplish nothing. And besides, there's a limit to how far family members can force each other."

Harry relaxed.

"So I'll have Rogers do it," Draco said, and snapped his fingers. The house-elf appeared at the foot of the bed. Harry was silent with astonishment, and so Draco had the chance to say, uninterrupted, "Rogers, from this moment on and until we tell you otherwise, you're Master Harry's house-elf. You're to make sure he balances his studying and his working with attending to the basic necessities of life. You'll give him basic instruction in being a Malfoy, too. Obey his orders, but only within reason."

Rogers turned his head with impressive, terrifying slowness and fixed Harry with his large eyes. The bow he gave was equally slow and full of dignity. "It shall be as you say, Master Draco Malfoy."

"If I'm a Malfoy, too," Harry said quickly, "I ought to be able to countermand those orders. Rogers, leave me alone."

"That order is not being within reason," Rogers said gravely. "Master Harry Potter will swiftly learn reason, with Rogers as his house-elf."

Harry snarled and turned on Draco. "You can't do this to me," he said.

Draco raised his hands in mock fear, but his eyes were glittering. "I'm not doing anything to you," he said. "Rogers is doing it."

"You know very well what I mean, and this is ludicrous!" Harry snapped. "Do you want your father healed or not? I have to be free to work, and—"

Draco leaned in, using the same slowness as Rogers had, until his nose was touching Harry's. Harry fell silent and swallowed. He told himself it wasn't Draco's closeness that did it, only his own sudden sense of having gone too far.

"Of course I want my father healed," Draco whispered. "Never dare to ask me that again. And what's ludicrous is your insistence on acting like a *child*. Any halfway sensible person can keep himself fed and rested, even if he doesn't have all the advantages we have here." He slid out of the bed in one swift movement, his eyes on Harry. "You're part of the family," he said, "and I want you rather badly. Neither of those means you can get away with everything."

He strode to the door and started to open it, but by that time, Harry had managed to find his voice. He swallowed. "I'm sorry," he said.

Draco didn't need to ask which part of it he was sorry for. He glanced back with a faint smile. "I know you are," he said. "And maybe when you've worked out why you ought to be sorry for everything, I'll be ready to accept the apology."

He shut the door. Harry closed his eyes and calmed his breathing.

The Healer is not always right, Healer Pontiff's voice said in his head. *Sometimes the patient can tell you information that you need to know and never would have thought to inquire after because the patient has unique allergies or reactions. Sometimes the relatives can tell you secrets the patient would prefer to have hidden but which cannot be because they affect treatment. And sometimes a certain case is beyond the skills of the greatest Healer and the best thing one can do is to acknowledge that and surrender.*

Harry shrugged uneasily. None of those things applied just now, except perhaps the last. And as yet, he didn't have any suspicion that he couldn't help Lucius. In fact, Harry thought he could help him quite well, except that people would not get out of his way and let him *work.*

He started to go into the library.

The moment his foot touched the floor, he was Apparated back into the bed.

Harry stared. His first thought was that Draco had set up some kind of enchantment around the bed to produce this unusual response, but the second thought was the right one. Rogers had already said, "Master Harry Potter is not to be going anywhere until he eats something. Studying on an empty stomach makes the brain less absorbent."

And a plate hovered in front of Harry. Harry glared at it. It was a fragrant meat covered with some sort of golden sauce that probably contained butter and certainly contained garlic. Arranged around the meat were small piles of orange and green vegetables, a cup of the sauce, and more of the red berries he'd eaten that morning, with an invisible magical barrier protecting them from brushing the other food and getting the sauce on them. A fork, knife, and spoon appeared not far from Harry's hands, lying on the bedcovers.

"That's not true," Harry said.

"Alas," said Rogers, and bowed to him, "Master Harry Potter is swiftly learning that truth is flexible."

Harry edged around the plate, careful not to hit and spill it, and tried to get out of bed again. This time he was Apparated back into the middle with blankets tucked around his legs and the plate firmly on his lap. Rogers was staring at him mournfully and shaking his head so that his ears flopped against the sides of his face.

"Master Harry Potter should not be wasting good food," he said. "His mother did not survive long enough to teach him that, so Rogers will. Many, many lessons await."

Harry seized the sides of the plate, thinking that Rogers might be so busy cleaning it up if he threw it that he would let Harry escape from the bed.

His hands lost all strength the moment they came within a few inches of the plate. Rogers shook a finger at him. "Do not be touching the hot plate!" he said. "It is *hot*."

Harry clenched his hands in frustration. He couldn't believe Draco would condemn him to this, after what they'd shared and learned about one another under the blood magic.

Then he paused. It was possible Draco and Lucius had learned less about him than he'd learned about them. At least, it seemed so, from the way Draco had acted. Harry could understand, dimly, why some of his actions had exasperated Draco, but not why Draco expected Harry to understand and agree with all of his decisions.

So he might have an advantage, if he complied long enough for Draco to relax and forget about him. And then he could begin doing things his own way, and show Draco how much better his way worked than the way Draco had tried to impose on him.

He relaxed and began to eat.

"Master Harry Potter is learning sense without having sense beaten into him," Rogers said approvingly. "Perhaps Master Harry Potter is not altogether stupid."

Harry ground his teeth, only then remembering that he would need to cheat the vigilance of a house-elf as well as Draco Malfoy.

Harry balanced himself with a hand against the bookshelves of the Manor's immense library and sighed in annoyance. He had slept so long and so deeply last night that he'd awoken with a headache. He *needed* to move about and awaken sometimes, or this always happened. But he suspected Rogers had enchanted the bed so that it would soothe him back to sleep whenever he started to stir.

He wasn't going to tell anyone about the headache. Some things about his body should remain privately, frankly.

But it *was* inconvenient. When he squinted at the titles on the shelves, the pain intensified, pounding across his forehead and down his neck in a tight thorny crown.

"Harry," Narcissa's voice said from behind him, "why didn't you tell me you wanted more Healing books? I would have had the house-elves bring them to you."

Harry braced himself with one hand on a chair this time as he turned and bowed. His head pounded so badly when he straightened that he thought he could hear his brain uttering an audible wail of pain. But he'd dealt with worse when Voldemort was alive and his scar was active. He smiled at Narcissa, who stood in the arched doorway that led into the library and looked at him curiously. "I didn't think of it," he replied smoothly. "I'm not used to dealing with house-elves. And you've already done so much for me." He produced a blush. "Besides, I'm afraid I wanted to see more of this house."

The library was beautiful, of course. (Harry thought the Manor should contain a little ugliness just for contrast, but perhaps Lucius found enough in contemplating the deeds he'd performed as a Death Eater). Glowing blue stretched across one wall, reflecting the sky in Italy, as a small legend near the bottom of the wall in dancing letters explained. Another bore a common gray English sky, and the third a shimmering golden sunset above the Pacific Ocean, and the fourth a dawn in the Black Forest. The ceiling, of course, was not sky but enchanted grass; Harry hadn't come close enough to see the legend explaining where it was. And the floor beneath his feet was glittering glass tiles that seemed to cover a fall into crystal infinity. That the cherry wood bookshelves managed to look normal in the middle of all that was the oddest thing, to Harry.

"No need to apologize," said Narcissa. She took a few steps closer to Harry. This morning she wore a blue robe, a match for the Italian wall, that rustled behind her until she stepped from the carpet of the corridors to the tile, where it moved as soundlessly as an owl's wing. "But I do wish you had felt free to call a house-elf for help. That would have found the Healing books for you more quickly than this search would have."

Harry smiled tightly. Summoning a house-elf would inevitably have called Rogers. And after Harry had taken all the trouble of casting Disillusionment Charms on himself to sneak down the staircase, he didn't want to attract the elf's attention.

"I fear you are in pain."

Harry immediately attempted to widen his eyes and smile, but when he shook his head, the pain flared up so badly that he nearly fainted. He caught himself from slumping just in time. He couldn't catch the curse that escaped his lips.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Malfoy," he began at once, mortified. A pop off to the side told him Rogers had appeared.

"I am more sorry, for not noticing the curse on you at once," Narcissa said. "As the guardian of this house, I should have noticed anything on my guests that might cause them harm." Her fingers rose and pressed against his temples, ten points of welcome coolness. Harry still winced. Hermione had tried a few times to make his headaches go away by massaging various places on his skull and forehead, and it never worked.

But this time Narcissa held her left hand steady and pressed down whilst her wand waved as she murmured something. The pain vanished so suddenly that Harry reeled again. This time, large slick hands grabbed his elbow and held him up, whilst Rogers muttered dolefully, "Master Harry Potter has not learned what sense is yet. Rogers did so hope he would have."

"I—I don't know what you did, but thank you." Harry raised his head with a shaky smile. "No magic has ever affected them before. Even headache potions only help for a while."

"I should think they do," said Narcissa, and frowned at him so severely that Harry wanted to stammer another apology. "There was a *curse* on you, Harry, one that made you suffer devastating headaches at random intervals. I haven't seen it often, which is the only excuse I can give for not banishing it the moment you stepped into our home."

Harry stared at her. Then he swallowed. "Would a Healer have known that spell and how to apply it?" he asked.

"Oh, surely." Narcissa twitched her head in a quick toss. Her eyes were shining like the eyes of a spirited horse who had just had someone attempt to climb on her back. "The reverse of that spell is a charm developed by Muggleborns to cure migraines. It would be easy enough to turn it back and use its opposite."

Harry hissed between his teeth. He knew at once who had probably applied the spell to him: Emptyweed, who wanted to see Harry struggle even if he didn't want to stop him working completely.

And of course, because Harry was only a mediwizard, he'd had no idea such a spell existed, much less how to cure it.

"Thank you," he whispered again.

Perhaps it was a wise thing that I left St. Mungo's when I did. What would Emptyweed have done when he realized I was learning to work through the headaches?

"You need not thank me," said Narcissa. "As I said, I keep this house. I am in charge of making sure our guests are comfortable—in all ways. And my not noticing the curse at once, and letting you suffer through it for a day, is inexcusable." Her foot beat a tattoo on the tiles, as soundless as the sweep of her robes had been, and then abruptly she sank into a curtsey. "Can you forgive me?"

Harry swallowed and closed his eyes. He couldn't look at her stooping before him as if his forgiveness mattered. "Of course," he whispered. "I had no idea it was there, how could you?"

"It has to do with the duties of a pure-blood family and a pure-blood hostess," said Narcissa. "And a pure-blood lady of the family." She reached out and laid her wrists on Harry's shoulders, staring into his eyes. "There is so much you have been deprived of," she murmured. "I bless your mother for dying for you, because she saved us all."

Harry looked at her in wonder. He had not found many people who agreed with his insistence that it had been Lily's sacrifice that defeated Voldemort, and not his actions.

"But I wish she had lived, to provide you with those things you had missed." Narcissa's cool fingers touched his cheek this time. "You are noble and self-sacrificing, we have seen that, but those virtues have overgrown the other virtues you might have developed. I hope that we can teach you to explore other possibilities than being a flawless hero at all times." She smiled at him. "Now, tell me the Healing books you're looking for."

"Any that reference Dark magic," Harry said, confused, as always, about how to refuse Narcissa those things he would have cheerfully denied to Lucius and Draco. "And any that might explain why the blood magic worked to heal your husband yesterday."

Narcissa paused, then laughed fondly. "Ah, you should have asked me about that," she said, and stroked Harry's cheek again. "It works by the combined efforts of the family, a commitment of as much of themselves as they can safely give."

Harry shook his head. "But how could it not have healed the curse Lucius was under? Why did you come to St. Mungo's in the first place?"

"We can only heal damage we see and understand," said Narcissa quietly. "We did not know the Mirror Maze existed, or even that the wounds opening on my husband's body were the result of a combination of curses. And besides, we can only commit as much of ourselves as is *safe.* Our priority is the survival of the family. If it turned out that the wounds run so deep we might destroy two family members in healing one, we would pull back."

Harry nodded slowly. Though he didn't really agree with the reasoning, he understood now why Draco had prevented him from sacrificing his life for Lucius's yesterday. He had been unable to

bear the thought of a family member dying for Lucius, even if it would solve all his problems including the Mirror Maze, when there was a way to heal the immediately life-threatening wounds with only an expenditure of energy.

"You still have much to learn," Narcissa continued gently. "We will not punish you for your ignorance. Come and speak with me if you cannot bear the thought of asking my husband or son." Her face went remote and cool. "And now, if you will excuse me, I am going to seek out a Pensieve."

She swept away, leaving Harry blinking after her. At last he turned to the library shelves, only to find an enormous stack of books hovering in front of Rogers.

"Here is being Master Harry Potter's books," the house-elf said proudly.

Harry opened his mouth to complain, then thought hard about what Narcissa had done for him, and how Draco had saved his life yesterday, and how good he had felt this morning—bar the headache—after eating a few full meals and sleeping most of the night.

He said, "Thank you, Rogers."

The house-elf examined him for a moment, then nodded. "Master Harry Potter is very common," he said. "But he will be learning that politeness never is common."

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eleven—Flexibility and Patience Are the Greatest Tools

"Rogers!"

Harry judged he had sounded sufficiently peremptory in his call, because Rogers appeared in the library before he got halfway through the name. Harry still finished speaking it, because stopping would have made him look and sound stupid, and then leaned forwards to fix Rogers with a stern eye. The house-elf's ears twitched a little. Good. Harry wanted to keep him off-balance.

He had been the one off-balance since he came to Malfoy Manor. It was time to cure that. Perhaps he was only a mediwizard and not a Healer, but some aspects of the training were the same between the two professions. Harry needed a certain amount of authority, or his patient might doubt whether Harry had the skill to cure him.

"Draco said that you were to give me basic instructions in being a Malfoy," Harry said.

Rogers bobbed his head. "Master Harry Potter is wanting these instructions now?" he asked, the slightest tinge of a hopeful tone to his voice. "Master Harry Potter's sense is improving hour by hour."

Harry gave him a tight smile. It was late afternoon, several hours after the elf had fetched him books on Dark Arts from the library downstairs and Narcissa had cured his headache. Harry had learned enough about Dark magic to concern him, but also enough to give him a good idea of why the Mirror Maze binding Lucius was so complicated and what that might indicate. He could pause in his research to attend to his uneven footing.

How could I ever be Draco's lover if I'm only a child to him?

"Being a Malfoy is at once the simplest and the noblest thing you will ever know," Rogers began. Harry was slightly shocked to realize his voice had changed. It had the timber and cadence of a human voice now, and a sharp drawl about the vowels that made Harry sure he was imitating a Malfoy, though not one of the three now alive. "The first law is family. Honor your friends, do what you can for your allies, and hold your enemies in holy hatred, but remember that family is the source of all obligations. When no one can shelter or protect you, family will. When you lose love in other places over disagreements or fundamental incompatibility, the family waits with open minds and walls. When the world batters and beats against you because you are a Malfoy and they do not understand this, then remember that you are the strength of others and they are yours. You will earn support by offering support. There is no place for selfishness in family, except for one.

"The earner of that selfishness is also the family. Never risk your life, unless doing so would save the lives of other members of your family. Never sacrifice your life, unless you would save more than one of your relatives by doing so. Give up honor and give up pride and give up freedom before you put the Malfoys at risk. If you are the last Malfoy left alive, your duty is to flee and find sanctuary where you may sire, bear, or adopt children to come after you and continue the blood."

Harry felt himself twitch. It must have shown on his face, because Rogers paused and then asked in his own voice, "Is Master Harry Potter misunderstanding something? Shall Rogers be explaining it again?"

Harry took a deep breath, and then realized he didn't even have the words to express his disgust. Wordlessly, he gestured for Rogers to continue. Rogers bowed, and his voice once again assumed the aristocratic Malfoy tones. Harry decided that he would think of that voice as Abraxas Malfoy, Draco's grandfather, until it was proven otherwise.

"The second law is beauty."

Of course it is, Harry thought, and barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. *I knew there had to be a reason they were obsessed with it.*

"Whilst the family must sometimes be reduced to the most basic level in order to survive, when we are above that level, we should be able to afford beauty in our lives. As food nourishes the body, beauty nourishes the soul, and makes us more refined and responsive, traits I should not need to explain the usefulness of. Within the walls of the home, gather what beauty you can. When you have guests, introduce them to the treasures of your heart and soul that you feel will best benefit them and at least not endanger you. Rejoice in as many different forms of beauty as possible—in knowledge, in wisdom, in art, in color, in sound, in form and feature."

Harry barely concealed a snort. *Does Draco realize he's breaking the second law by associating with me?*

"The third law is strength. Never willingly introduce weakness into the family, except in obedience to one of the first two laws."

Another rule Draco hasn't obeyed, Harry thought, and idly tossed his wand from one hand to the other—beneath the table, so that Rogers wouldn't notice. *He might argue that I am family now, but his first loyalty should have been to Lucius and Narcissa.*

"Bow and bend when necessary, so that you will not break and thus leave a hole in the wall of your family. Glide in harmony with the world, in harmony with the great laws and changes that sweep across you. Amass wealth, magic, connections, and talents so that you will have many different sources of strength. If the family survives in power, we can afford to lose our pride."

And Lucius isn't a very good Malfoy, either, considering how he tried to stand against Dumbledore and with Voldemort. Harry sighed and laid his wand down.

"Master Harry Potter is being tired?" Rogers lifted a hand—to Apparate him back to the bed, Harry thought.

"No!" Harry said hastily. Rogers looked at him with narrowed eyes. "I, ah, I'm fine. But I need time to think about what I just heard."

Rogers examined him closely, even taking a step nearer the table, as if that would reveal secrets about Harry he hadn't noticed before. Then he inclined his head gravely, said, "Master Harry Potter is thinking swiftly," and vanished.

Harry clasped his hands behind his head and did indeed start thinking swiftly. There had to be some way that he could use the knowledge he'd just gained to hold his own among the Malfoys. Narcissa would be harder to deal with than Lucius or Draco, but put that aside for now, he thought—just as he'd had to put aside the idea of disappointing Healer Pontiff before he took the Potions exam, for fear that that one worry would consume him. *Think.* Family, beauty, strength. He'd seen displays of all three in the Manor. What attack would they not be expecting?

The truth came to him, and Harry shifted in his chair and grumbled under his breath. They expected defiance from him, a childish, sulky resistance to their gifts and attentions and care. If he yielded for a moment, he might take them off-guard for long enough to gain back his self-respect.

The tactic didn't appeal to Harry. He preferred honesty. But he'd been as honest as he could and got nowhere. In fact, Draco appeared to frown harder when Harry told him the truth about the way he thought and felt.

He half-closed his eyes and tightened the grip of his hands to his head. And then he started grinning.

Well, let's see the way they react when I tell them what I've learned about Lucius's chances for surviving, in a perfectly Malfoy fashion.

Harry knocked briskly on the door of Lucius's rooms. Though Rogers had offered to escort him, Harry had politely put him off. The elf looked as if he didn't know whether to approve of the way Harry was becoming at home in the Manor or worry that Harry wouldn't have proper attendance. Harry had reminded him that the bed in his rooms should be made, though, and that he didn't have the first idea about how to do it, which made Rogers give him a withering look. Presumably at the idea that a human should make a bed at all. He'd hurried off to do it with his ears flapping against his cheeks.

And Harry had managed to find his way to Lucius's rooms with only a wrong turn or two along the way. Well, why not? He'd learned Hogwarts quickly, and St. Mungo's. And whilst he might not be able to remember every corridor and every turning, he could remember the impressions the rooms left on him. Thus he knew he was on the right track when his eyes stung and burned in the corridor that resembled a desert, and next he plunged through a study that, merely by being filled with the smell of dampness and a rustling green quiet, suggested a forest where no humans had ever walked. And in the end he recognized the glossy window, blue as sapphires, that was set in the wall across from Lucius's door.

No one answered his knock for long moments, and Harry tensed, wondering if he had chosen the one afternoon that Lucius had decided to walk about in the gardens or some such thing. Or maybe he was lying helpless on the floor, bleeding from another of those strange wounds, reaching desperately towards the door—

Harry was about to draw his wand and try to dissipate the wards covering the door when it swung open on its own. Lucius, his wand in his hand, lay propped up on his pillows. Draco stood on the right side of his bed, Narcissa on the left. Both were staring at Harry with identical startled expressions; Harry had never realized before how much Draco looked like his mother. Lucius had the same smile he'd shown Harry during his previous visit.

The first show is in front of all three of them? Wonderful.

But Harry put up his chin and stepped into the room as though he had expected nothing less, and in fact as if he were fully prepared to deal with this. *Strength,* he reminded himself as he nodded to Lucius. *Beauty*, and he made a graceful bow to Narcissa, the kind he had once practiced sarcastically in front of Emptyweed until the man had noticed it was sarcastic and made him stop. *Family*, and he gave a temperate smile to Draco. He found Draco much more attractive than he had a few days ago, since he seemed willing to spend time on Harry instead of fading into the background the moment he realized he couldn't get Harry promptly into bed. But in the end, Harry wasn't in the Manor to ensure they became lovers. He was here to cure Lucius.

"Lucius," he said, though the name tasted strange on his lips. *Strength,* he reminded himself. At least he could see the surprise openly on Draco's face; Narcissa had already covered hers with a warm smile that she could pretend came from Harry choosing to address Lucius by his first name. "I want you to try and remember if any of the Death Eaters you worked with had Healing talent."

Lucius's face went blank. Draco blinked at Harry as if he couldn't believe the words he'd just heard. Narcissa chilled her smile a touch and looked back and forth between her husband and Harry.

"Rodolphus Lestrange did," said Lucius, and cleared his throat. "But I think you will find that he is firmly in Azkaban, and unlikely to be in a position to curse me. My visits to Azkaban have been of long duration, but few in number."

Harry found himself grinning. He liked it that Lucius could still respond with dry humor even after being startled.

"I didn't plan to accuse Lestrange," he said. "But I wanted to know if someone *could* have known both several spells that a Healer would and also the *Sectumsempra* curse, the spell that almost cut your heart out of your chest the other day. A Death Eater seems the likeliest candidate. At least, I know a Death Eater invented that curse."

"Who?" Narcissa demanded.

"Severus Snape," Harry answered, and saw her flinch. More untold story, no doubt. He wondered for a moment how many blanks they left in their conversation to him even now, when they considered him family. They hadn't tried to mention the Death Eaters since he'd been in the house, for instance.

"You intrigue me, Harry," Lucius murmured. "Please do tell me what made you think of my old associates."

"The *Sectumsempra* curse was the first clue," said Harry. "And then I realized that various parts of the Mirror Maze do require knowledge of Healing magic—but most of the spells that compose

it are reversible." He nodded to Narcissa. "I actually owe my realization to a comment Narcissa made about the headache curse she found on me."

"Headache curse?" Draco spoke as if someone had driven a needle into his arm.

Harry turned and stared at him for long moments. Draco looked back, his face white and his mouth pinched. The pain Harry had suffered seemed to hurt him.

A guard Harry hadn't realized he was keeping up relaxed. *Yes*. He could accept, now, that Draco's motives for courting him were deeper than they had appeared, even if Harry didn't really understand them yet. Draco could feign coolness, helpfulness, maybe even lust, but Harry trusted his own estimation of pain. That on Draco's face was real.

And maybe it wouldn't be so bad to get to know him better, Harry reflected. He'd always stood up again from the ruins of his relationships and gone on; it seemed stupid to him to mourn what could have been for years and years. And Draco was, at the very least, different from Xavier. *I could try it and see what happens. And I could always leave it behind if it didn't work out.*

"Someone had cast a headache curse on Harry," said Narcissa, her voice soft and sweet and not fooling Harry for a moment. "I should have banished it the moment he stepped through the Floo. I can only attribute the fact that I did not to the excitement over his arrival."

No mention of an apology this time, Harry noted. Well, good. Apparently the forgiveness he had given her laid that to rest. He relaxed and continued, looking at Lucius. "So your enemies don't have to have a Healer to cast that particular Mirror Maze. They only need someone who can cast the curses, the harmful magic, that's beneficial if reversed. Looking up the reversals would be easy enough for anyone with a modicum of talent at research and access to some books about the Dark Arts." He cast Hermione's modified spell, and the image of the sideways Mirror Maze once again appeared on the parchment hanging in midair. "For example, the spell that maps your body and exposes vulnerabilities? That's the one Healers use. It's considered a benign spell because it only creates the map to tell them where a disease or curse could spread next. But it exists in the opposite form as the Hunter's Curse, *Aucupo.* That greatly increases the chance of something going wrong at the weak points of the body. Dark wizards like to use that one to soften up their enemies before attacking from ambush."

"I have heard of the Hunter's Curse," Lucius said. "I did not realize its connection to the body-mapping spell. But, as you said, it would not be difficult to discover that."

"Have you used it?" Harry asked.

Lucius looked at him without flinching. "Yes."

"Did other Death Eaters?"

Lucius gave him a smile that had a tinge of approval to it and moved the sheet out of the way, so

that the dark skull and snake on his arm showed obscenely. "Yes."

Harry nodded. "That what we want to look for are connections to the Death Eaters and uses of their research, rather than the involvement of Death Eaters themselves. No insult intended to present company," and he raised an eyebrow at Lucius, carefully not looking at Narcissa and Draco, "but I think if any of them were actually involved, they would have revealed their presence by now. Patience was never their strong suit."

"They would have the more reason to destroy me, because it is mine," said Lucius. "Very well, Harry. I assume you'd like to know where some of the refuges were?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Along with a list of what you think might have been stored there—books, wands, weapons—and the people who frequented them, so we can learn who had a chance to pick up on the knowledge .I'll also need to know how to secure records of visitors to Azkaban. It's possible someone spoke to Lestrange and gained the knowledge he or she needed to cast the curse that way."

"Almost certain." Lucius was looking at him with a new respect and an interest that Harry hoped was for his ideas and not for him. "Very well. I didn't leave Azkaban without making a few friends. If they remember the obligations of friendship—and very few forget such things when it comes to a Malfoy—then I should have the records of visitors to all former Death Eaters' cells within a day. In the meantime, I will make lists of the information on the refuges."

"You're well enough to do so?" Harry asked, remembering now what he thought he should have from the beginning, that Lucius was sick and perhaps in no condition to stand this much labor.

Lucius smiled at him, and this was a softer and warmer expression yet. "Thank you for your concern," he said. "You are behaving just as a son should to a father." Harry eyed him, but detected no sarcasm in the words. "But I can sacrifice a small bit of strength in the short term for a more secure footing in the long term."

Harry studied him critically, and had to admit that sounded like the truth, rather than mere obedience to the Malfoy laws. He had color back in his face, a more relaxed set of lines around his eyes, and less abrupt movements when he Summoned a house-elf and ordered an owl and a stack of parchment sent to him. Harry cast a few surreptitious spells, but they revealed no new wounds and no new complications from the Mirror Maze.

Speaking of which, I should study the way the spells connect again, Harry thought, and nodded to Narcissa as he stepped out of the room. She was watching him with a speculative expression that could have related to the headache curse, the way he'd explained what he thought the connection of the Death Eaters with her husband's condition might be, or a million other things. Harry would be obedient to the tenets of his new family and not waste strength trying to figure it out.

He had meant to nod to Draco and leave him behind, too, but instead he found himself with company as he walked towards the far side of the house where his rooms were. Draco seemed

content to confine himself almost to silence, only murmuring a few words of advice when Harry started to wander out of the true path. On the other hand, his eyes almost never left Harry, and there was in them a warmth to match Lucius's smile. Harry turned when he was at the door of his bedroom and asked, "What?"

"May I come in?" Draco asked quietly.

Time to test whether they meant it about respecting my privacy, as the wards seem to imply. "What can't you say to me here in the corridor that you can say in my room?" Harry challenged, emphasizing the possessive pronoun just to see what Draco would do.

Draco gave him an encouraging look instead of reacting with either anger or hurt, as Harry had expected. Then Harry remembered that Draco had wanted him to take possession of the rooms and treat them as his own. He scowled and folded his arms across his chest.

Draco put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Nothing," he said. "But I have a fairly lengthy speech to make. It's easier to do that sitting down in your library."

Harry hissed under his breath. He felt much less out of his depth than he had—if nothing else, Draco was treating him like an adult now—but he still thought he was losing their private contest. He couldn't think of a good reason to refuse.

When in doubt, try to take them by surprise, he thought, and stepped out of the way, gesturing into the room. "If you will," he said.

Draco laughed, a quick delighted sound that Harry thought he hadn't meant to let escape, and moved past him, giving him another look of brilliant desire from under lowered eyelids. Harry smiled without realizing he would and found himself watching the way Draco moved, his body in perfect balance, his arse swaying enough to attract attention but not to seem blatant.

And why shouldn't I enjoy myself? he asked himself as he shut the bedroom door. *Flexibility and patience are the greatest tools, Healer Pontiff says. I've been practicing too much of the latter and not enough of the former. I kept my personal life and my professional life in balance when I dated Xavier and Jennifer, and they were the ones who consumed the most of my time. Why couldn't I do the same thing whilst dating Draco?*

Harry frowned as he followed Draco into the library, trying to decide if those thoughts were more practical or more self-serving. He took the chair behind the desk piled high with books and raised an eyebrow that Draco could take as encouraging if he wanted to.

Draco sat with a nod and appeared to spend a moment inspecting the library, though Harry thought everything looked more or less as it had the last time he was present. Then he sighed deeply and stared into Harry's eyes.

"Don't let me force you to tell me anything," Harry said. It was the sort of thought he wouldn't

have voiced a week ago, but a week ago he hadn't been living in Malfoy Manor and continually mystified by Draco's flirtation tactics.

Draco looked down with a faint smile. "Being honest is harder than I thought it would be," he said. "And yet you did it all the time in school." His voice sped up, and Harry could hear the sharp edges of discomfort on his words. "I was attracted to you at first only because you were there, and fit, and it's been a while since I shagged. The pressures of work, of studying." He gave a shrug that he stopped halfway through, because, Harry thought, he'd started it as a casual gesture and then it acquired more weight than he'd meant to give it. "You know what it's like."

Yes, I do. I didn't expect to date anyone else who did. Harry shifted his weight and reminded himself that a similarity in their goals wasn't a good enough reason to like Draco, just as his taking the trouble to learn something about Healing wasn't. But Ginny hadn't had a job whilst Harry dated her, and Francis had never taken his seriously, and Julius weathered the pressures of being an Auror with casual grace, and Xavier had never chased an idea to its conclusion…

"But I saw—I saw that you were what you always presented yourself as." Draco tried to wave a hand, but it dropped limply to his side. He looked away, and Harry wondered if he was seeing the far wall. "The hero. The noble and self-sacrificing man who would do anything for anyone, even a man he hated."

"I wasn't that way when I was a teenager," Harry began. He'd met many people who'd thought he was a hero from the time he could walk, and the speech was automatic by now. "You were righter about me than I like to think, when we were both teenagers. I only started learning dedication and real heroism when I became a mediwizard."

"But you know it now," Draco said quietly, and turned back to him so slowly Harry thought he was struggling with pride that would have made it easier for him to avoid Harry's eyes whilst they talked. "And that's what I decided I wanted for myself. I wanted to bind you more closely to the family, in case you got tired of taking care of Father whilst he was still sick."

Harry stared at him. "It's not flattering to hear that I was *right*."

"You were right then," said Draco. "But your speech the night you were taken off the case, before you left for hospital, convinced me. You wanted someone you could like. That made sense to me. And so I tried to become the kind of person you would like. Softer. More open with my emotions. That was easier when you were family and I didn't have to assume I was teaching one of our enemies curses that could be used against me later."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, a bit overwhelmed. Draco spoke the truth as simply and naturally as he had spoken the orders to Rogers, forcing him to watch Harry.

The memory roused his anger again. Harry narrowed his eyes and said, "And you thought ordering a house-elf around after me would make me like you more?"

Draco didn't blush. "You need help, and that must balance indulging you," he said. "No one can pour their strength, their courage, their being, down a well forever without encouragement. You need replenishing. You look the way I did when I was studying for the first exam that would advance me in my mastery. I made myself sick and nearly failed because I was so certain I could pass it if I only stayed up and studied for a few more hours."

Harry ignored the familiar reasoning. "I don't have an exam to pass."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "From what I've seen of you, you treat every case you take on as an exam you'll be killed for failing."

Harry folded his arms and glared at him. "Do you have anything pleasant to say? First you assure me my suspicions of you were correct and then you claim I'm in so much need I have to be coddled and taken care of like a child."

"Only because you were acting like a child," Draco said. "You obviously haven't been in the past few days. You let my mother take away your headache curse. You've talked to Rogers about how to behave as a Malfoy. You found out the information you'll need to cure Father without insane amounts of time spent studying." He smiled smugly. "And you've got the correct amounts of food and sleep. You feel better, don't you?"

"It's not about what I feel," Harry said. *He seemed to understand about the studying, about the drive to achieve more than mediocrity. Why is he contradicting himself now?* "It's about what I can accomplish."

Draco leaned forwards and caught his wrists. The gesture reminded Harry of Narcissa once more. Uneasily, he tried to free his hands. Draco wouldn't let him go, instead staring into his eyes.

"You're more than a hero," Draco said fiercely, but softly, in a voice Harry didn't think someone would have heard if he was on the other side of the room. "You're more than a mediwizard. I'm attracted to those qualities, of course I am, but if you were a self-sufficient monolith, I wouldn't be. I want to be useful to *you*, too. I want to give you what *you* need. A day ago that was better physical health. Now I think it's a sense of greater self-worth." He released Harry's right wrist, but only to fold two fingers under his chin and tilt his head to the side. His eyes were worse than Lucius's as far as piercing quality went, Harry thought.

"You're still family even when you don't end the day with some daring achievement," he said. "I still like you even when you're at your most exasperating. I can live with your affection for Weasleys and Grangers." He spoke those words with a faint smile. "I'm sure we'll argue, as we've already done, but I'm prepared to put up with that. And I can't wait to bring out more of those parts of you I've only seen in passing: your sense of humor, your cleverness, your quickness at improvisation when something goes wrong. Though I hope to train you out of sacrificing your life at the first chance," he added dryly.

Harry shook his head.

"What now?" Draco asked. His voice was gentleness itself.

Harry looked to the side. There was a horrid stinging about his eyes, but when he concentrated, it went away. "This is mad," he whispered. "People's lives don't change like that, this suddenly. You couldn't have formed an attachment to me this deep over a few days, and if you did, it was only because of gratitude, because I saved your father's life. It won't last."

"You haven't been a Malfoy all your life," Draco said. "You still don't understand what we see in blood. Ask Rogers to tell you about that. He's a good source of information, because he's served several generations of the family and understands us well." He paused reflectively. "Not like that son of his, that Dobby."

Harry turned back so suddenly a faint tinge of headache returned to haunt him. "Dobby was Rogers's *son*?"

"Yes," Draco said, and frowned at him. "Don't tell me you never wondered where little house-elves came from."

"I put the question aside as not worth reconsidering," Harry snapped, and returned to the main subject of the conversation. "You can't—"

"The first time my life changed suddenly was when you rejected my friendship," said Draco. "Then my father went to Azkaban. And suddenly I was forced to save my family because the Dark Lord would kill them if I didn't. After a long year of terror, I discovered I couldn't kill and had to flee Hogwarts. Then there was another long year of terror, punctuated by constant little revelations, like the fact that my aunt was *mad* or the fact that I didn't want you to die. And then I decided to be a Potions master overnight, and that turned out to be the best decision I could have made. And then Father got sick, and you saved his life."

He paused for effect. "My life has been all sudden choices for the last few years, Harry. Most of them related to you in some way. If I hadn't developed the ability to adapt to those choices, and accept that the feelings born of them were lasting and real, I never would have survived."

Harry worried his lip. He was sure there was a flaw in Draco's logic somewhere, but damned if he could see it.

"Stop that," Draco whispered. He leaned in and pushed his thumb against Harry's teeth, urging them backwards and off his lip. "If you want it bitten, let me do it."

And then he brushed his mouth, open to expose his teeth, against Harry's lips. Harry swallowed and sat still, not giving in to his first impulse to gape. Draco would probably have seized the chance to snog him (unless that didn't fit with the Malfoy code), and Harry didn't think he was ready for that yet.

Draco's mouth didn't taste supernaturally sweet. His kiss didn't inspire Harry to fling himself to the floor and beg for sex. But he kept his eyes open as he kissed, and the intense, burning stare he used pinned Harry in his seat even after Draco had pulled away and strolled towards the door.

Draco paused with his hand on the doorframe where the library became the bedroom, and murmured, "I'm going to have you if you'll have me. I'm going to do my best to help you and show you why you should like me. I've made that as clear as I know how." His smile deepened. "Any other questions?"

For some reason, Harry could only think of what Lucius had showed him earlier. Perhaps his mind had fled in self-defense to the memory he could conjure up on a moment's notice that was most opposite the kiss.

"Do you have a Dark Mark?" he blurted.

Draco reached slowly towards the sleeve of his robe. Harry found himself sucking in his breath and leaning forwards.

Then Draco's hand dropped, and he winked. "I think," he said, "that this is something you should find out for yourself, when you have occasion to look more closely at my skin." And he bowed and left the room without looking back.

Harry glared after him. There was something cosmically unfair about the existence of a person who managed to turn a reference to the Dark Mark into flirtation.

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—Make Good Use of the Unexpected

"Master Harry Potter is dining with the family tonight."

Harry, who had escaped from the monster loo earlier than usual—the shower seemed to think he had warranted less scrubbing today—found that the towel he held had dropped uselessly from his hands. The next moment, he hissed under his breath and picked it up again. Rogers watched with his arms folded and his head cocked to one side. Harry wondered for a moment why he hadn't offered to help, and then decided that he was probably judging Harry's worth as a Malfoy based on his reaction to the news.

"Who decided that?" Harry asked when he straightened again. He made sure to keep his movements slow, his voice calm, and his eyes untroubled as he toweled his hair dry and cast a few glances into the mirror Rogers had hung on the far wall of the bedroom, next to the door to the library. He hadn't asked Harry's permission before hanging it. Of course, Harry suspected that the general prohibition against anyone interfering in the decoration of his rooms didn't apply to house-elves. After a few moments of staring, Harry determined that his wet hair was as tame as it would get, and threw the towel away, shaking his head irritably. "I hadn't thought Lucius was well enough to dine outside of bed."

"Master Lucius has had no attacks for a few days," said Rogers. "He is very strong."

"Yes, he must be," Harry said. "I just don't want him to overstrain himself."

"The elves always are keeping a close watch." Rogers's chest inflated, and Harry thought for a moment that he would float off his toes. "And of course Master Harry Potter has helped, too. He has a true Healer's hands."

Harry paused in startlement. However true the compliment might be—and he didn't think it was, very—he hadn't expected to hear it from Rogers.

"Rogers was being doubtful at first, because Rogers is impertinent." The elf stepped past Harry and smoothed out a nonexistent wrinkle in the bedsheets. "He was not thinking that Master Harry Potter could become a true part of the Malfoy family or be making a contribution. But Master Harry Potter is better even than the last adoption made two generations ago—and Miss Eliza Malfoy was a diplomat and a genius."

Harry swallowed. It was hard, because his throat had gone dry. "That's very generous of you to say," he murmured. "But I'm not a Healer—"

"And Master Harry Potter would be fitting even better into the family if he were not constantly deprecating himself," Rogers told the bed. He spun around and pointed a finger at Harry, making him feel uncomfortably like a butterfly on a pin. "He is a Healer and he is being good for Master Draco, who looks happier than potions make him."

Harry opened his mouth, then reminded himself how useless it was to argue with a house-elf. And if Rogers had been Dobby's father, he probably had given his son all his stubbornness and insistence on being right.

"Thank you for saying so," he said instead, and moved on. "How formal is this dinner? I didn't bring dress robes when I packed for the Manor."

"Rogers and the lesser house-elves shall be modifying appropriate clothes of Master Draco's," said Rogers. "Master Harry Potter is not to be worrying himself. Master Harry Potter is to be eating a good breakfast instead, and to work on healing Master Lucius." He paused significantly.

"And he is to be studying."

"Well, of course," Harry said. "I always study." He caught another glimpse of himself in the mirror as he reached for the robes he'd laid on the bed for that morning and looked away, scowling. Asking Rogers to take away the mirror would smack of ingratitude; Harry had no doubt it was a human member of the Malfoy family who had asked for it to be placed in his rooms in the first place, or rather, one specific human member of the Malfoy family. But he didn't have to like it. Looking at himself had never been his favorite pastime.

"Master Harry Potter is concentrating on those things he did not study so well before," Rogers said with iron inflexibility. "If Master Harry Potter was not passing his Potions exams, he concentrates on potions."

Harry laughed, and then stopped. The laughter had a trace of bitterness. *What happened to not arguing with house-elves?* "That's done with now," he said. "I've accepted my natural limitations."

Rogers stared at him so piercingly that Harry had to look at him at last. "Malfoys," Rogers said in the same tone he'd used to tell Harry the laws of the family, "have no natural limitations."

Harry rolled his eyes. *No arguing, no arguing,* he chanted to himself mentally. It would do no good anyway, and Harry tried to expend his energy on actions that would be of use to *someone*. "Good for them," he said. He dragged the robe on over his head, not particularly caring that it made his hair spring up again like the quills of an offended peacock, and then stepped towards the library.

Rogers waved a hand, and Harry was sitting on the edge of the bed. A tray of finely cut ham in a richly-smelling gravy was on his lap the next moment. "Master Harry Potter is to be eating a good breakfast," said Rogers. "Studying comes later."

Harry picked up the fork that lay on the edge of the tray and started eating, because the food smelled delicious and he wasn't going to argue.

And, he had to admit reluctantly, Draco had been right. The better the food he ate, the better Harry seemed to feel. He still held there was no inherent reason for that. Sure, some patients needed a strict diet, but they were recovering from spell damage, or poisoning, or a long bout of illness. Harry was young and healthy. He ought to be able to subsist on anything, including Chocolate Frogs, and still wake up on time and do the work well. But instead his body preferred this refined diet.

God, I hope sharing Malfoy blood didn't change my tastes as well, Harry thought, and choked as he shuddered. Rogers was beside him in seconds, eyes anxious and hand poised to clap him on the back.

"Master Harry Potter is well?" he asked.

Harry stared at him, and suddenly understood why he found that behavior so very alien, almost suffocating. He had never had anyone to *care* when he choked before. The Dursleys were indifferent as long as he didn't actually die on their kitchen floor or vomit on their good plates. Ron knew he would be all right, and pounded him on the back companionably, not because he fussed. Hermione would go off to find a book about choking, and Harry had the comfort of knowing that half the advice she gave him would be from a section of the book she had found interesting on its own. The people dearest to him had led lives connected with his own on the grand levels, like life and death, but not nearly as much on the small ones.

Maybe there is a different way to live. Harry licked his lips thoughtfully. The intense thinking seemed to have eased the passage of the food down his throat. He nodded to Rogers. "I am," he said. "Thanks."

Rogers at least didn't have Dobby's extreme reaction to being thanked. He stepped away with a small nod. "Master Harry Potter is being more at home now," he said. "He will continue being at home." His voice had the calm certainty that made the words more of a command or a prophecy than a simple statement.

Harry raised an eyebrow. Rogers smiled, a sight that nearly made Harry drop his plate. "Master Harry Potter is even learning Master Draco's gestures," he said happily. "Master Harry Potter will be happy here, and will make Master Draco more happy." He practically bounced as he took the empty tray away from Harry.

Harry glanced over his shoulder a few times as he retreated into the library. Rogers whistled cheerfully for a full minute before he Apparated, and Harry knew how much the house-elf was against wasting time.

The thoughts pursued him into the library, and wouldn't be left outside.

Is that true? Can I be more than the passive recipient of their charity, more than Lucius's mediwizard? Can I make other people happy?

Rogers was probably mistaking Draco's increased gentleness towards Harry, which he himself had admitted was partially a tactic to make Harry like him more, for increased happiness in general. But still Harry had to allow himself to turn over the possibilities in his mind for five minutes before he could push them and get down to serious studying of the connections between the spells in the Mirror Maze.

He didn't understand when the possibilities had become so delicious.

Harry pulled at the collar of his robes. He was certain he looked like an idiot, and not even the knowledge that the house-elves had chosen this set of dress robes could content him. After all, the house-elves had also thought it was a good idea to hang the mirror in his rooms.

The robes were a soft, shadowy gray color that probably looked good on Draco, given his gray eyes and the pallor of his skin and hair. But Harry had given one disgusted glance at himself in the mirror and tried to take them off again. They made him look wasted and pasty and gaunt and altogether too much like a ghost. And whilst he might have welcomed that idea a week ago, now he didn't want Draco to look at him and wrinkle his nose.

He also cared, though to a lesser degree, about what Lucius and Narcissa might think when seeing him. If they believed the house-elves had some reason to resent him, would they resent him too? Would they reconsider the idea of accepting him into the family?

Then Harry forced himself to stand still and draw in a breath so deep it made the robes balloon around him and fall back with a gentle rustle. He stood in the middle of the staircase that Narcissa had guided him up on the way to his rooms, in the section that looked like a forest.

You're a Malfoy, but you don't have to be paranoid like the rest of the family, he thought. *If the elves made a mistake, Lucius or Narcissa will speak to them about it quietly. Probably Narcissa, since she seems to be in charge of guests' comfort. And Draco might wrinkle his nose, but I doubt he'd give up on pursuing you, when he's come this far.*

There. He'd made good use of the unexpected, which was another of Healer Pontiff's tenets. He smiled and resettled his shoulders, then restrained his hand when it would have risen to dash through his hair. The house-elves had done something to it that managed to make it *behave* for once. He'd only ruin it.

The dining room was the most sober room he'd seen in the Manor so far, and the most like what he would have expected the first time he stepped through the doors. A symphony of silver, white, and gray, it seemed to absorb the brilliant light of the chandelier in the middle of the ceiling and release only a quiet glow. Harry's first thought was that he would have liked to study here. His second was that the soft light made the long oak table in the middle seem even more imposing. And for some reason, the plates clustered all together at one end of the table. Narcissa sat at the head, with Lucius on her left hand and Draco on her right.

Harry couldn't see a place set for him. He lifted his chin. Well, if this was some sort of test to see what he would do, he intended to face up to it. He marched towards the table, and didn't allow a flicker of uncertainty into his expression.

Draco rose to his feet when he saw Harry. Harry looked for some sign of revulsion or a raised eyebrow that would ask who he had allowed to *dress* him, but he looked deeply content. He smiled and drew out the chair beside his own, watching Harry carefully all the while. His reaction was an important part of what would happen next, Harry thought. Would he accept the small kindness, revolt against it, or reject it in some unexpected and ironic way?

The one choice Draco probably hadn't expected Harry to make was to accept it in some unexpected and ironic way.

Harry smiled and reached out to clasp and shake Draco's free hand. "Thank you," he said clearly. "I'm not used to treatment like this, but in trying not to take it for granted, I think I went too far in the opposite direction." He bowed his head, keeping his eyes fixed on Draco's the entire time, and flicked his tongue lightly against the back of the hand he held.

Draco's pupils dilated, and his excitement obviously increased until his hand on the back of Harry's chair had a slight tremor. The one in Harry's clasp remained steady, however, as if he thought a tremor would make Harry turn away from him again.

"You're welcome," he whispered, voice breathy.

Harry smiled at him again and sat down in the chair, which Draco promptly pushed in with just the right amount of speed. Then he sat down himself, face turned towards Harry. His hands automatically flicked among the confusing arrangement of forks and spoons next to his plate, which gave Harry the clue as to which of them he was supposed to pick up first when his own plate and cutlery appeared.

The first course was a thick yellow soup with small bits of herbs floating in it that Harry hadn't tasted before, but which were sweet or lemony depending on how much soup he took in with them. Seeing how intently Lucius paid attention to his plate, and the surreptitious but noticeable eye Narcissa kept on her husband, Harry suspected the reason for the lack of conversation at the table during this course. Lucius didn't yet trust his strength, and he would do almost anything rather than have his hand or voice shake and betray his weakness.

He should have stayed in bed, Harry thought, but he found the lapse from perfect observance of the Malfoy laws rather reassuring than otherwise. It would have been intimidating to try and fit into a perfect family, when Harry knew himself to be so flawed it was a wonder he hadn't shattered into small pieces along the cracks long before this.

Next was a salad with strips of chicken wound like braids among the vegetables, and then pieces of bread that seemed to be more butter than anything else. Harry scowled as a string of gooey butter fell on the right sleeve of his robe and tried to mop it off without catching anyone's attention.

Draco caught his hand and turned it over to expose the butter. "May I?" he whispered.

Harry flushed. Draco grinned suddenly, wickedly, with a careless ease that Harry found shocking when they were sitting at table with his parents. But Lucius and Narcissa still attended to each other and their meal. Maybe they wouldn't interrupt the privacy of a courting couple any more than it would occur to Harry and Draco to interrupt theirs by speaking, Harry thought.

"Oh," Draco said, voice softer than before, "I can't do what I'd really like to, not in company. But that doesn't matter." He drew his wand and trailed it softly up the sleeve of Harry's robe, as if he wanted to learn the shape of the bones and the veins through the cloth. Behind the tip of the

wand, the butter vanished as neatly as if Draco really had licked it up. And Harry needed to stop thinking about that or he was going to burn a hole in his own clothes with his blush.

"There," Draco said, and managed to tilt his head and brush the cloth with his cheek before he let Harry go. "All better."

"You approve of the robes, then?" Harry murmured before he could stop himself. He had almost forgotten his nervousness when he saw the way his proximity affected Draco, but now Draco was paying attention to his clothes again instead of his face and his general presence.

Draco's eyes flickered. "You have no idea how you look, either," he said. "I'll help cure that, don't worry."

He looked briefly to the side. Harry followed his gaze and saw Narcissa holding out her fork for Lucius to take a delicate sliver of fish from. Harry coughed and hastily looked back at his plate.

Draco bent down until their eyes and faces were close together, and flicked out his tongue, just brushing Harry's lips. From the angle at which Lucius and Narcissa sat, Harry knew, it would have looked as if he were merely licking his own.

"I'm learning how you taste," Draco whispered. "I hope you don't mind my going slowly. I prefer to appreciate the favors individually."

Harry swallowed, and his blush grew fiercer. He concentrated exclusively on his food for a few minutes after that. He needed to get his mind in order for when the conversation began. Lucius hadn't yet given him the information about the visitors to Azkaban or about what he remembered form the Death Eater refuges, which he had promised to produce quickly. That had to mean he would do it at this meal.

Fish and meat and another soup passed. Harry was amazed at his ability to eat most of it. Usually he grabbed a quick meal, swallowed it in a few snaps, and felt full enough to attend to his duties again. But something about the richness of the food here tempted him to take portions to taste, whilst not consuming enough to fill his stomach. By the time they reached glazed lumps of fruit that filled his mouth with crumbling sugar, he felt lazily content, and had to keep himself from stretching like a cat as he picked up a candied chunk of apple.

"Harry."

He looked up at Lucius. He had once thought that Lucius's voice sounded much like Draco's, but whether it was getting to know Draco better in the past few days or the newfound resemblance he'd noticed between mother and son, he could tell the cool tones of the elder Malfoy at once now. "Sir," he said, automatically. Lucius gave him an annoyed glance, perhaps the most emotional expression Harry had ever seen from him, and Harry smiled. "Lucius," he amended. "You have the information you owled about?"

"Yes." Lucius's mouth grew tight as he clapped. A house-elf appeared beside Harry's chair, bowed, and handed a series of letters to him ceremoniously. "And I must admit, what I learned disturbed me."

Harry quickly discovered that the signatures on the letters meant nothing to him; he'd never been familiar with Azkaban's guards in the way he would have become if he'd taken up Auror training. He ignored them and concentrated on the content instead.

Six visits to Rodolphus Lestrange in the past year, always from the same woman, a small one cloaked in a dirty gray cloak. The guards had assumed she was an aunt of the Lestrange family, a *few* members of whom hadn't been Death Eaters. The next letter noted eleven visits by the same woman, spaced a month apart, but lasting several hours each. The next letter stated categorically that the woman had been visiting for more than a year, and that she'd bribed several of the guards to make sure she saw Lestrange regularly and to give him better food and clothing than normal. She wanted him alive to make use of his knowledge, Harry thought, and shivered convulsively. He didn't like to think of even a Death Eater being used that way, though after listening to a long list of Rodolphus's crimes during the post-war trials, he couldn't deny Lestrange belonged in prison.

No one who had written Lucius had any idea who the woman really was, or if her claim of being related to the Lestranges was true. But they all agreed that the few conversations they'd overheard her having with the prisoner were technical, containing Healing terms as well as terms that they assumed referred to Dark magic. She might have been persuading him out of using it, though, so the guards hadn't seen it as their place to interfere.

Harry swept a hand through his hair, annoyed. "I see the Ministry's tradition of corruption marches on unchecked," he muttered.

"Then all the better that we'll bring justice where they've failed to," said Draco.

Harry glanced at him. He was leaning back in his chair now, his hands folded behind his head and his eyes cold. Harry was half-amused and half-dismayed to find that he liked the sight of this calculating Draco quite as much as the one who watched him with warm eyes and crowded him with attentions.

"What specifically do you find disturbing?" Harry asked, glancing at Lucius. "Do you have any idea who the woman might have been?"

"No," said Lucius. "And that is the first worrisome thing." He leaned heavily back in his own chair, his brow bearing a faint sheen of sweat. Narcissa scrutinized him with a narrow expression that relieved Harry. Surely she would insist her husband go back to bed if he was really taxing his strength beyond bearing. "The second is that I never once thought about someone visiting Lestrange in prison, or about his having knowledge dangerous to me. Someone has outthought me. I do not like that."

Harry shivered at the precision and the emphasis in those last words. He wondered for a moment if his conflict with the Malfoys would come over their sense of justice. Certainly, if they tried to hurt the person who had cursed Lucius or helped to curse Lucius instead of giving her a free trial, Harry would have to intervene.

"Do you have the information about the Death Eater refuges?" he asked.

Another elf appeared with another stack of parchment on Lucius's nod. Harry suppressed the immediate irritated thought that it was wasteful to have two different elves doing the same task. Hermione must have rubbed off on him more than he realized. Of course, perhaps the best tactic was to insinuate himself further into the family and *then* start trying to change those habits of theirs he didn't like.

Harry ran quickly down the lists. Occasionally the name of a weapon appeared, but beside almost every one Lucius had made a notation of "destroyed during the last flight" or "not dangerous." Harry memorized the names of the few that didn't bear those notes. The rest was fairly standard equipment, wands or the Dark magic books that Harry had already looked through. He also reminded himself to look up wands, though he had never heard that another wizard's wand could offer a magical advantage when casting a curse that one's own couldn't. Perhaps he should owl Ollivander. The old wandmaker had remained fairly friendly to Harry after Harry had rescued him from the Malfoy dungeons during the war. Of course, it would be better not to tell him why he was making the request.

There had apparently been seven Death Eater emergency strongholds, two of them closer to Hogwarts than Harry liked to think about. Lucius had described the general location of each as well as the name that the Death Eaters used for it. So far, Harry hadn't seen anything that made him think he would have to visit them—

And then he sat up, his heart banging so hard he couldn't hear anything else for long moments. His eyes were fixed on an innocuous name second from the bottom on the last list Lucius had assembled. It was barely scribbled in, as though Lucius had hesitated to add it and then done so with a shrug.

Dreambane.

And that was all. No note next to it, no explanation of how much had been at the refuge. Lucius must be unfamiliar with its effect, or perhaps he had only seen it used beneficially. Harry was surprised Draco hadn't realized the danger it could pose, though, since he was a Potions master.

"What is it, Harry?"

Lucius sounded as if he had been repeating the words for a few minutes. Harry looked up and realized that Draco's hand was on his back and he was leaning near, as though he thought Harry would require support to keep from fainting. Harry swallowed and let himself lean against Draco's shoulder for a moment. Surely it was all right to show weakness when the others did, as

long as he didn't do it for long.

Draco's hand rose and combed through his hair, then tugged him in so that Harry's forehead rested against his. "Tell us," he murmured. "No burden is so terrible that the effect does not lessen when it is shared."

Harry wanted to tell him about the oppressive effect of being expected to kill Voldemort and knowing that, because of the prophecy, you were the only one who could do it, but now wasn't the moment. He looked at Lucius and said, "How much dreambane was at this refuge?"

"Which one?" Lucius frowned for a moment, no doubt trying to recall which list Harry had seen the name on. His eyes drilled at the parchment Harry held as if he could read it from that distance.

"Venom's Reach," said Harry.

"The Dark Lord came up with that name," Lucius murmured, and Harry experienced a fleeting amusement that he could care enough about appearances to want Harry to know *he* hadn't been responsible for that horrid thing. "And there were several bales of it. Perhaps also vats. They reached the ceiling in one case. Why?"

Harry closed his eyes.

"Harry." Draco's voice was sharp. "I know dreambane. It's used as one of the ingredients in a powerful version of the Dreamless Sleep potion, one that banishes thoughts that might become dreams. How could it have hurt my father? He's been dreaming."

"It has another, little-known use," Harry whispered. "When combined with a Cutting Curse, it strengthens the wounds and makes the body remember them. I don't know how else to explain it. Even if the wounds seem to be cured, they burst forth again sooner or later. And they become the worse for the delay. It can also strengthen other spells, though I'm not sure of all of them, because they're Dark magic and there was a limit to what St. Mungo's wanted me to study." He opened his eyes and stared at Lucius. "I'm afraid some of them might be spells that are part of the Mirror Maze, and so the dreambane would render it more subtle. When we think it's gone, or even if we actually remove it, the wounds will come forth again and kill you."

Lucius's face grew pale. He gave a tight nod, however, accepting the news. "And what can be done about this dreambane? How can we be sure it has been introduced into my body? I am sure Smythe gave me no potion."

"It could have happened before the curse was cast," Harry said, "if he had an accomplice. Or—" He paused, a part of the reading he had done years ago coming back to him. "Did he spit on you?"

"Yes, he did," Lucius said quietly.

Harry nodded. "That's probably how he intended to do it. Dreambane can ride within human body fluids and be absorbed by the skin."

"And what are we to do?" Narcissa asked. She had her hands folded neatly in front of her, as if it would be against the Malfoy code to express any agitation.

Harry drew a deep, deep breath. There was the part where he confessed he had no idea. "There's a potion that can purge dreambane from the body," he said. "But I don't know how to brew it, and I don't think I would trust myself if I did. My potions skills have never been the best—"

Draco's arm tightened around his shoulders. "And here I am, nearly a Potions master," he said, "and devoted to helping the family. Isn't that convenient?"

The reality he hadn't even considered sank slowly into Harry's head. *I have someone here to help me. I won't lose Lucius because of my own inadequate skills. I'm not alone.*

Harry had to close his eyes again. He didn't *have* to lean back against Draco, but he did it because he wanted to.

Draco's kiss to the base of the skin beneath his ear, where he had kissed Harry once before, was as fierce as a promise.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—Any True Art Can Be Shared

Draco tended to hum under his breath and make small movements even when he was watching Harry tend Lucius. Harry had assumed he lacked the ability to be completely quiet and completely still.

But put him in front of the potions book that contained the purge for dreambane, and he was all earnest attention. Harry had never seen so pure an expression of concentration on any human face. Draco's eyes ran back and forth as if absorbing columns of information—the information Harry couldn't have processed if he had all day to study the same book—but his hands never moved, and his mouth never opened. When he turned a page, he did it with a swift flickering movement that interrupted his reading as little as possible.

And if his concentration is perfect, yours could stand improvement.

Harry kept his huff quiet, so it wouldn't wake Draco from his trance, and faced his own book on Healing magic again. He had wanted to look up dreambane and make sure the herb actually behaved the way he said it did, both in the body and with the potion Harry hoped could be used to purge it. He wasn't about to risk Lucius's life on fragments of memories from years ago.

Dreambane is used mainly as relief from nightmares. It is known by other names…

Harry grumbled under his breath and skipped further down the page. He had never known why so many Healing books included so much extra information about herbs and spells, information not conducive to understanding pain or the easing of pain. Perhaps they imagined half the Healers who read such books were really failed botanists and abstract magical theorists. After all, as Xavier would say, who would choose Healing or mediwizardry as a first career?

Draco would understand, even if he wouldn't choose it. That's the main reason you're finding it so hard to think about resisting him any longer.

Harry rolled his eyes. Yes, it was, but a large part of it also came from the intimacy they'd shared when they used the Malfoy blood magic to heal Lucius, and more from the honest confession of his feelings and tactics Draco had made to him. No one else Harry had dated seemed to think such sensitivity and honesty were possible or necessary.

And he was supposed to be thinking about dreambane, not boyfriends past or future. This tendency to let his mind wander was the reason he had failed his Potions exams. He leaned down and stared at the book until the marching letters filled his vision.

However, other uses for dreambane also exist. Dark magic rouses certain corrupting and pain-enlivening properties not known to persist in the herb otherwise. It is believed that most modern dreambane originates from the garden of a Dark wizard who carefully exaggerated the plant's natural tendencies with selective breeding and then made sure to distribute the seeds to colleagues in other countries.

Though Harry didn't think the history of dreambane's growth and propagation had much use for curing Lucius, he grimly read it through anyway. The sum total of several long paragraphs was that the author of the book, along with other people, could propound theories all he liked, but no one really understood why dreambane was so soothing on its own but so dangerous paired with Dark magic. Harry nodded. In one way, that was satisfying. If no one knew the answer, their enemies were unlikely to be working with unique information that might make the curse on Lucius more dangerous still.

Dreambane imprints the memory of wounds on the body, making it particularly dangerous to feed to someone suffering from a pain curse. Of course, Dark wizards and other such disturbed individuals do exist, and sometimes achieve their despicable ends.

Harry rolled his eyes. He didn't see why so many authors had to pretend to ignorance of their own world, as if Dark wizards were rare magical creatures instead of common enough to keep the Aurors in business.

Dreambane is widely used in cases where the individual casting the pain curse must assume that their victim could survive fairly easy, such as when a wealthy pure-blood retains a private Healer. It sinks deep enough to relax vigilance and may remain buried in the body as long as a year before erupting in bloody vengeance. So deep does it fall, into the very bone and flesh of the victim, that it evades such powerful healing spells as the Heart's Blessing, which rely on the blood.

Harry grimaced. They might not be dealing with very clever people, at least if they were dealing with Death Eaters, but they were dealing with paranoid and persistent ones. They couldn't have known ahead of time that Harry would cast the Heart's Blessing to save Lucius; they had simply assumed *someone* might, and planned around it.

And that makes it more likely still that the attack on me at my home was Xavier, and not someone in on the plan to hurt Lucius. My casting the Heart's Blessing didn't matter to anyone who knew the details.

Harry sat back, rubbing his forehead. The lightning bolt scar still tingled sometimes when he was tired, or seemed to tingle. He was waiting absently for another headache to start, and grew more puzzled when it didn't.

Then he remembered, and smiled wryly. Of course. Even the headaches he, Hermione, and Healer Pontiff had attributed to stress and fatigue must have been part of the curse Emptyweed, or someone else, had cast. Hermione had never looked closely enough to detect a curse once she had her attention fixed on a natural cause, and Healer Pontiff had had enough work that she concentrated on the obviously unnatural pain Harry suffered, and that only. And of course, Harry hadn't noticed.

Why would you? You're only a mediwizard.

Harry looked at the book of Healing magic unhappily. Yes, only a mediwizard. He really did need a second opinion on Lucius's case, so he wouldn't end up condemning the man to death by accident. He started to stand.

A pair of hands descended on his shoulders and a soft voice spoke into his ear. "Leaving so soon? And here I was just about to ask you if you wanted a massage. Your shoulders have been tempting me for the past half-hour."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but then the thumbs dug deep into the tensed muscles of his back and he groaned, dropping his head forwards. Draco pushed him into the chair with gentle insistence and went to work. He found spots Harry hadn't known existed, tense knots that needed to be dissolved and little valleys between his shoulder blades that made Harry feel as if he could

collapse when Draco pressed on them. Harry had to fight not to fold his arms on the table and simply drift into a profoundly relaxed state not far from sleep.

But he imagined the awkward posture Draco had to maintain to reach him at this angle, and stirred, forcing himself to sit upright. "You could have fooled me," he said. "I thought you were concentrating absolutely on that potions book."

"I have the ability to absorb information and think about something else both at once." Draco's voice had a tinge of bright laughter. "Amazing, I know."

"It is," said Harry, honestly. Draco's left hand made a complicated circling motion in which it was joined a moment later by his right one, and Harry hissed and gasped and then sagged. "You're amazing," he added.

"So you say right now," Draco said, still teasing, but with a tone of satisfaction under the words he couldn't disguise. "I also want to make you scream it, whimper it, and whisper it into my ear when you're so sated that you don't think you can move again." He bowed his head and licked the back of Harry's neck. Harry shuddered. "I'm told that I'm a *more* than competent lover."

Harry suffered a throb of dull disappointment that he had to keep his mind on work. He would have liked nothing better right now than to surrender and let Draco do whatever he liked, and to do whatever Draco liked. He couldn't deny to himself how much Draco tempted him now. Someone who offered him respect, who didn't laugh at his job, who could help him in the work Harry considered the center of his life, and who seemed to be attracted to him physically as well…Harry would have to be blind, stupid, or terminally ungrateful to have walked away from that, and he was none of those things.

But he *was* something else, and memories of the times when he had been that way made him sit up and speak in a calm, clear, authoritative voice. "Draco, stop now."

Draco paused in the massage, but pressed another kiss to the back of his neck.

Harry shook his head, dislodging him. "I'm sorry," he added, when he heard Draco mutter a curse and realized he must have bumped Draco's nose with the back of his head. "But I want to speak to you face-to-face."

Draco stepped away far enough so that Harry could pivot in the chair and face him. Harry leaned his arms on the back of the chair and took several deep breaths. The sensation of Draco's fingers massaging him wasn't forgotten so quickly, but he thought he could ignore it well enough to focus on the conversation instead.

Draco leaned against the table that had been between them before and gave him an injured look, gingerly rubbing his nose and cheek.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated. Then he took a deep breath and plunged forwards into the discussion

they needed to have before he could lose his nerve. "Listen. Every other relationship I've had has ended because I couldn't be what the people involved needed: a hero, or a caretaker, or flexible enough, or a passionate enough lover. It's more than pleasant of you to offer me what *I* need, and to do it so well. But I don't know if I can offer you the same thing. Have you considered whether I can really give you anything beyond companionship from someone who's part of the same family? What tastes of yours do I fulfill? What do I do that attracts you? I don't understand the same pure-blood customs or have the same ideals, you know that already. I can learn them, but that's not the same thing as knowing them from birth. I haven't even spent that much time on you, compared to the time I've spent trying to heal Lucius. Are you *sure* you want this? Are you sure that you wouldn't rather have a hard shag from someone who understands you better and gives you more than a physical pull?"

Draco sat there and blinked. Harry tensed further, feeling a faint sorrowful tinge that he'd undone all the good work of the massage. He was sure he had raised an issue Draco hadn't considered, and now Draco would need more time to retreat and think about it all. Which would be the end of any possible love affair. When Harry's lovers really *thought* about what they wanted from him, rather than being blinded by the sex or their love of his fame, they realized he just wasn't up to their standards.

And because Draco himself lived in such a different world than Harry did, the gulf between them had to be wider.

"If you were anyone else," Draco said at last, "I would call you a manipulative brat fishing for compliments."

Harry stared at him.

"But you really are stupidly noble enough to believe everything you just said to me," Draco said in a contemplative tone, ignoring his gape. He folded his arms behind his head. "All right. I never thought I would have to bare my soul twice in confession inside a week—it's rare enough that my mother and father get to hear about it—but you're worth it."

"Look, Draco." Harry felt a sharp, undefined nervousness that made his arms shake as he folded them. For some reason, he could only imagine what Rogers would say if he were witnessing this scene. "You don't have to justify yourself to me. I never meant to cause you pain. You can just—"

"Do shut up," Draco said kindly. "I need to think about how to phrase this, and you aren't helping with your chatter." He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, as if he were staring at the ceiling through his eyelids. Harry watched him, absently scratching an itch on the back of his neck and trying not to think about how Draco's lips could have soothed it better than the blunt edge of his fingernail could have.

"All right," Draco said at last. He still didn't open his eyes. "I told you that I thought your nobility was an act. And then I learned it wasn't, because I was watching your face when you

cast the Heart's Blessing spell. You never hesitated. You reached out with your life force and your blood to protect someone you had every reason to hate.

"I had dreamed sometimes of finding a lover like that, but I knew I never would, because someone like that would have no reason to become my friend or my lover in the first place." He grinned suddenly. "The few people I knew who had a chance of developing their self-sacrificing instincts had to drop them when they found out what being surrounded by former students of Slytherin House meant. But I wanted someone I could *trust*, as I could only trust my parents. That's a simple desire, isn't it? One that millions of people have every day, and can gratify whenever they want.

"I'll not deny that I also wanted someone capable of standing next to me and protecting me—"

"So did Xavier," Harry snapped, his uneasiness returning. "I want this too, Draco, but I've already seen what happened when someone needed me to be a hero, which I'm not anymore, and—"

"Shut up, I said." Draco opened one eye and glared at him like a cat who had had its morning routine interrupted. "Yes, you're capable of protecting me, just as I'm capable of protecting *you*. What I really didn't want was some fainting flower or someone who assumed he needed to wait on me hand and foot and never let me do anything for myself. And unfortunately, I met many specimens of one sort or another in circles of society obsessed with power dynamics, which I often travel in. But you can gratify *that* desire, too. You have power, you wield it, but you're not obsessed with it. You even have more than one kind of power, because you have a Healer's hands as well as a fighter's wand.

"And you're part of my family now. I can relax around you as I can't around others." Draco smiled lazily at him. "Add to that that I find you physically attractive, stubborn enough to intrigue as well as infuriate me, and rather cleverer than I'd expected, and I'd say that yes, this will be more than a quick shag or a disappointing relationship that lasts a few months."

Harry licked his lips. There were so many smaller statements in there he could have disputed, such as his own lack of physical attractiveness—he knew what he looked like—or whether Draco should date someone who shared his blood. But they were shadows before the glittering light of the core truth. He thought he could provide what Draco needed, and Draco believed the same thing.

"All right," he said softly. "I'll try." He grinned at Draco suddenly. "And I think I've been rather remiss in an activity we've already shared."

"What?" Draco's breathing had sped up and his pupils had dilated again. Harry suffered a moment's amusement that he was with a man he could affect so dramatically with so little effort. He only hoped Draco wasn't disappointed when they did make love.

"Kissing," Harry said, and stood up and cupped his hands behind Draco's head to bring him in

before he could respond.

Draco gave a little grunt of surprise as Harry's tongue swept into his mouth, but reacted beautifully a moment later, grabbing his shoulders and drawing him in so powerfully that Harry stumbled on the way. And then Harry was joined at the mouth to someone who not only knew how to kiss, but dared him, challenged him, and lured him in to make him return the kiss. Draco wouldn't have been content to lie back and accept a kiss passively; nor could Harry be, now that he knew what he wanted and wasn't surprised himself.

He practically wrestled Draco backwards, and then they toppled over the library table and to the floor. Harry moved so that he was beneath Draco to cushion his fall. They both lay in silence for a few seconds after the fall, Draco stunned, Harry with the breath knocked out of him. Then Draco began to laugh.

"Anyone might think you liked being pinned beneath me," he said, and stretched out so his weight lay more firmly on top of Harry.

"Anyone might think you talk far too much and imagine audiences watching you when you should be concerned with the judgment of someone far closer to you," Harry retorted, and kissed Draco soundly to silence him. Draco stretched out again, and let his hands languidly spread over Harry's shoulders, gripping and holding him. Harry wrapped his arms around Draco's sides and gave as good as he got.

Any true art can be shared, Healer Pontiff had told him once, gently severe when Harry despaired of controlling a patient with a broken leg who wanted to get up and walk before the Skele-Gro finished its work. *In this case, you can share the art of healing with your patient, and explain the technical terms that might make her understand the truth better.*

At the moment, Draco was kissing him as if they could share more arts than healing together, and for more than a fleeting moment.

It was only when Draco nipped sharply at the side of his throat and slid one hand beneath his robes that Harry remembered he had been *going* to go to St. Mungo's so that he could get Healer Pontiff's opinion on the dreambane. He groaned and reluctantly pushed aside Draco's reaching arm.

Draco gave him another persuasive nip and let his body settle more heavily. "Don't tell me you're about to run off just when things are getting interesting, Harry," he whispered. Harry shivered. He'd never heard so much heat in anyone's voice.

"I don't like to," Harry said, "but we need to talk more about what we'll do to heal Lucius. Do you think you'll be able to brew the potion?"

He received a long look then, heavy with an emotion that was not desire. "Of course," Draco said. "I have most of the ingredients, and I'm certain I can purchase the others without our

enemies knowing of them."

Harry nodded, and made a conscious decision not to ask about how Draco would do that. "All right. Then that leaves my part of the task."

"To study Healing magic?" Draco let his limbs weigh a little more again. "You can do that later." He tilted Harry's head to the side and nipped at the skin beneath his ear, where he had kissed before. Harry surprised himself with a swift groan. That was a sensitive area not even Francis Belfield, the one of his past lovers most interested in sex, had discovered.

"No," Harry said, and made himself remember the wounds that had opened on Lucius, the line of red tracing his face and the invisible *Sectumsempra* flicking his chest. "I need a second opinion on the Mirror Maze, the way the spells connect, and unexpected ways the dreambane might influence them. That means going to Healer Pontiff."

In an instant Draco was stiff on top of him, and not in the good way. Then he seized Harry's shoulders and pressed them to the floor, but the wild look in his eyes told Harry that wasn't meant to be in the good way, either. "No," Draco snapped. "Are you mad? That would give our enemies a prime chance to strike at you."

"They can't expect me to come back to St. Mungo's so randomly," Harry pointed out. "They have no way of learning what happens inside these walls." He paused for a moment, because the declaration of trust in Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco he'd just made was rather overwhelming, but he had to go on when Draco glared at him. "And they may try to watch and follow me, but so what? All I'd have to do is Apparate back to the Manor, and I'd be safe again. I can blast through anti-Apparition wards when I have to."

"It doesn't make sense," Draco said with a growl. "When you're in danger, you retreat into your fortress and pull the drawbridge up behind you. You don't go prancing around inviting people to assassinate you."

Another pure-blood mindset that I don't quite understand, Harry decided, and shoved at Draco's shoulders. "I need to consult with Healer Pontiff—"

"You could do that by owl!"

"And then there's the chance of the owl getting intercepted," Harry pointed out. "Not to mention that there's more time for something to go wrong with Lucius whilst we wait for her reply. At least I'll get an answer more quickly if I visit her."

Draco shook his head, his mouth stubbornly set. "Rogers," he said, and without looking up Harry knew the house-elf had entered the room. "Make sure that Harry stays within the house."

"Yes, Master Draco."

Harry threw Draco off him in an excess of fury, even though Draco was heavier and Harry wasn't in a very good position for it. Draco grunted as his head hit the leg of the library table. "You have no right to *do* this to me," Harry said, sitting up. "Protecting me when I'm being stupid is one thing—"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm doing." Draco brushed dust off his robes, glaring.

"I *am not.*" Harry surged to his feet. "I was stupid to refuse sleep and food. I see that now. That's why I gave in, because you made your point and I would have resisted out of sheer bloody-mindedness if I had continued to resist. But in this case, I can do something—"

"Not the right thing."

"You can't keep me a prisoner here!" Harry said, and his rage gripped the newborn passion he'd felt for Draco and squeeze it almost to death. Draco claimed he wanted someone not obsessed with power, but he certainly seemed obsessed with it himself, if he was trying to control Harry's movements. "You'll lose me if you try, and I thought that wasn't what you wanted."

Draco's face was set and implacable. "I trust my ability to keep you alive," he said, "and to persuade you to come round again after you've had your little tantrum. I don't trust you to *stay* alive if you leave the Manor right now."

Harry snarled at him and Apparated, throwing all his magic into the motion as he had thrown all his magic into the Heart's Blessing spell at the moment when Lucius most needed it, as he had supported the Malfoys' blood magic to keep the Dark curses temporarily at bay. If he had thought about it, he never would have accomplished it.

But he didn't pause, and he had the very satisfying sight of Draco gaping at him in astonishment in the moments before he vanished and then reappeared in the entrance hall of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

"You're certain?" Harry glanced at the diagram of the Mirror Maze one more time. "The connections between the spells really do work out the way I imagined them?"

"They do." Healer Pontiff patted him on the cheek and then patted the diagram, as if it were also alive and needed the reassurance. "They were interlinked in the spiral pattern that you described, but the spiral reverses halfway through—also as you described. You'll have to follow it carefully when you start casting the spells to undo the maze." She paused and looked at him. "Of course, simply destroying the maze would be useless without using the potion that would purge dreambane from the body."

"I have someone making that," Harry said, all calmness. He was utterly sure that his Apparition from the Manor had destroyed his place in the Malfoy family. But he couldn't imagine that Draco would refuse to brew the potion to help his father because he was angry at Harry.

"Good." Healer Pontiff scanned the diagram again. "And from the way you've described Mr. Malfoy's symptoms, the dreambane is the buried factor causing all the problems. Nothing else."

Harry nodded tensely. He still wished there was a way Healer Pontiff could examine Lucius herself, but he doubted that the Malfoys would allow her in their home. And she had more experience than he did; she had asked several penetrating questions about the symptoms that forced Harry to recall more than he realized he knew. If she was willing to say a patient had no more wrong with him that Harry hadn't discovered, Harry would accept her verdict.

"Are your hands weighted down with Malfoy gifts yet?" Healer Pontiff added softly.

Harry sighed. "They were too heavy for me," he said. "Friendship I could have taken, and even the luxuries they wanted me to accept, but they want control over my life. I think that was the poison I sensed lurking behind every second word they spoke." *Not poison,* his conscience whispered, but Harry was too tired and too irritated to speak the truth right now. "Poison" suited his mood better. "They're obsessed with family, with loving and protecting anyone who has their blood. But the person who becomes part of that family has to put it first, too. I don't think I can do that."*Or at least I can't put myself, as part of the Malfoy family, before my friends and before my patients.* He could have come to love Lucius and Narcissa and even Draco, and he thought part of him would always mourn it as a chance lost. But he was accustomed to surviving disappointments.

Healer Pontiff touched his shoulder in silent sympathy. "Without freedom, nothing else matters or can matter," she said. Then she paused to consider her words, and added, "Assuming that health is unimpaired, of course."

Harry grinned. "Always."

It was late when he left Healer Pontiff's office, walking along the familiar corridor to the Floo with the diagram of the Mirror Maze under his arm. He would use the Floo to speak to Narcissa and ask if she would permit him to return to the house. If not, then he would put his memories of the conversation with Healer Pontiff in a Pensieve and send them through the fireplace in his own home.

Don't you want to go back? he asked himself. *Because you had a row with Draco doesn't mean you're not Lucius's personal mediwizard. And even if you plan to leave them altogether, the bargain was that you would receive enough Galleons to set up your private practice.*

Harry shook his head briskly and began to walk faster. No, he would rather stay at a distance from the Malfoys than take the chance of returning and finding the chain fastened around his neck again. He simply couldn't tolerate the suffocating intensity of the closeness anymore. He couldn't regard his time in the Manor as wasted; he'd learned how a few different people thought, something that might help him in the future treatment of pure-blood patients, and he'd probably

helped save Lucius's life. But he couldn't pay the price they wanted him to pay.

"Harry?"

Of course. Harry glanced to the side and then stopped in resignation. Standing in the doorway of a room on the Spell Damage ward was the last person he wanted to see, other than perhaps Xavier or one of the Malfoys. "Hello, Francis," he said, trying to muster up enough enthusiasm to make his greeting sound halfway sincere.

Francis Belfield laughed and tilted his had back against the doorway. He was the most handsome man Harry had ever met, thin and whipcord like a sword blade, with thick curly dark hair and deep blue eyes that had flecks of gold in them in the right light. He was also one kinky bastard, and whilst Harry had been willing to experiment with bondage and blindfolds, he drew the line at bringing live animals into the bedroom. The problems between him and Francis had sprung out of a simple lack of sexual compatibility. Harry still wished Francis well and hoped he'd found someone who could meet his needs, but he had no desire ever to be in close quarters with him again.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked, trying to make conversation.

Francis stopped laughing at once. He'd always had the ability to switch between emotions like that, as if he were a child still. "My grandmother cursed her own foot off whilst she was aiming at a bug," he said. "The Healers hope they can restore it, but it was a Dark destruction curse. Not much hope."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He started to take a step towards the room. "Maybe I can—"

"What are you doing here?"

Harry turned around with a little hiss. Emptyweed was running towards him, his eyes standing out from his pale face as usual. "I'll be gone in a moment, sir," Harry said coldly, "so you don't need to concern yourself."

"You don't understand," Emptyweed said, and slid to a stop in front of him, panting so hard that he could say nothing else for a few moments. Harry waited with increasing impatience, and Francis regarded Emptyweed with dislike. His opinion, expressed many times to Harry whilst they were still dating, was that unattractive wizards should go and find themselves spells that would make them attractive; there was no point in ugliness in a world where magic existed.

"It's dangerous for you to be here," Emptyweed continued, staring at Harry. "They were satisfied when you retreated into Malfoy Manor, but if they realize you're out again—you came here to speak with Emily, didn't you? Dangerous, stupid and dangerous! And if they see you without your headache curse—"

"You put it on, then?" Harry couldn't help himself; the accusation burst forth. At the very least,

Emptyweed had recognized the presence of the curse and had never thought to tell Harry about it.

"Of course I did!" Emptyweed waved his arms madly through the air. "You've always had enemies here, Potter. If it seemed that you weren't advancing quickly in your studies, they might be persuaded to ignore you and leave you alone. So I cast the headache curse to hold you back for a while and make you seem less talented. But then of course you had to study through it anyway. " Emptyweed ground his teeth. "And then you just *had* to save that insufferable Malfoy's life, and get them worried about you, and be more resistant to the Beetle's Bite than they would have liked, and—"

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked loudly, taking a step towards him.

"Yes, I'd like to know that too," said Francis.

A spell streaked past Harry's shoulder and exploded against the wall. Looking up the corridor, Harry saw several people running towards him, wizards and witches in dark blue robes. He had no idea what the blue robes meant, but he knew they weren't the uniforms of Healers.

Harry acted smoothly, without thinking. Lifting his wand, he concentrated on the memory of Draco's smile in the moments before their argument had erupted and cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The stag Patronus galloped out of his wand. It started to charge his enemies, but Harry said sharply, "No! Carry a message to Malfoy Manor instead. Tell them the attack on me in Grimmauld Place had something to do with the conspiracy against Lucius and it's connected to the higher reaches of the hospital hierarchy." That information should be enough to let them figure out what was happening even if he didn't survive.

The stag bowed its antlers to him and then flitted through the wall. Harry sucked in his stomach to avoid another curse, then turned and ran down the corridor. He would have Apparated, but he doubted that he had the magical strength break through another set of anti-Apparition wards so soon. Besides, they might take out their frustration on the patients if he left suddenly.

And he was willing to bet he knew the hospital better than they did, whoever they were.

Harry grimaced—there were still so many unanswered questions. But for right now the most important one was whether he could survive.

He flung himself flat to avoid a curse aimed to hit him in the backs of his knees and then sprang up again, running like a stag for the staircase.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen—Healing Is Sometimes a Battle

It was only as he leaped down the staircase to the third floor that it occurred to Harry that he'd sent his Patronus to the Malfoys and not Ron and Hermione, who once would have been the natural candidates to know he was in danger.

He scowled, and then gripped the banister and flipped over it to dodge yet another spell that skimmed above his head like a Muggle bullet.

And he didn't bloody have time to think about it right *now.* He planted one foot on the steps outside the banister and propelled himself over it again, but this time sliding down, his chest and his arms hugging the smooth wood, his legs flailing. His robes tangled around his feet, but Harry was strong and healthy enough to disentangle himself without trouble when he reached the bottom. He hoped.

Several confused calls sounded from above him. Then Harry heard a shout in which he clearly understood the words, "other staircase," and guessed that his pursuers had split, some of them heading down the staircase at the other end of the fourth floor to wait for him. He smiled.

They'll need luck they don't possess to catch me, he thought, and then he reached the bottom and a curve in the banister that required him to scramble in an undignified manner to prevent himself from flopping to the floor. He was up again in two seconds and dashing towards the middle of the third floor.

This was the Potion and Plant Poisoning ward, and Harry had spent a large portion of his time here, since Emptyweed found most cases of plant poisoning boring and delighted in reminding Harry that he wasn't competent in potions. Harry snorted as he sped down a corridor past shut doors—and a few open ones, lined with gaping faces—and turned left. They should never have let him reach this part of the building if they really wanted to capture him.

Ahead was a room that was as good as an armory.

This time, someone cast a spell that managed to arch over his shoulder and form a glowing net in front of him. Harry saw it too late to slow down. He wrapped an arm around his face, curled in to protect his vital organs, and bulled through.

The net gripped him, strained, and then broke. Harry swore in pain as lines of blood in the pattern of the net broke out on his shoulders, upraised arm, and the unprotected parts of his chest and legs. But though the wounds stung, they were not as bad as they could have been. None were mortal; none would keep him from fighting back. He lowered his arm, shook his hands briskly to

remove the blood from his fingers in case he needed to get a tight and swift grip on his wand, and then sprinted forwards again. The door he wanted was just ahead.

Behind him, his pursuers had stopped and sounded like they were arguing. Harry hoped he had surprised them with his breaking through the net; something in their voices suggested he had. But he hardly had time to stop and see.

He grabbed the door of the room and tried to swing it open. It didn't move, and for a moment he thought his hand was slick with blood after all and had slipped on the knob. Then he realized it was locked. It was spelled to respond automatically to the touch of anyone who worked at St. Mungo's, but Harry had left some days ago, and obviously Emptyweed or one of the people behind him had taken the time to be sure that the locking spell wouldn't accept Harry any more.

Harry took a deep breath. He did not have *time* for this!

A powerful unlocking spell he'd read years ago exploded in his mind like a firework, and he pointed his wand at the door and snapped, "*Exsuscito!*"

The spell snapped the door open so fast that Harry swayed in the wind of its passage. Harry smiled grimly and then ducked into the St. Mungo's Potions cupboard.

He had no ability to brew most of the potions on the shelves, and even their proper application was sometimes beyond him. But he could often recognize the finished produces, if only by the color of the vials and the labels on them. He snatched several promising blue and red vials from the shelf nearest the door and slipped them into his robe pockets—he would have to hope that the cloth would help cushion them from shattering against each other—and then grabbed a handful of green ones to juggle.

The wounds on his hands hurt. Harry shrugged. He simply didn't have the time to stop and tend to them, not if he wanted to survive. And he was sure that Ron and Hermione would agree having him back at all was more important than having him back in perfect physical health.

Footsteps pounded outside the Potions cupboard. Harry spun, uncorked one green vial, waited until he saw a hand emerge around the corner of the door—wand leading, good tactics—and then tossed the potion.

The invisible wizard or witch howled in agony and retracted the hand sharply. The wand was already splintering, becoming so much useless wood in their grasp. Harry grinned, and knew it wasn't a pleasant grin. That particular set of potions was kept as a last resort for restraining mad patients who had somehow got hold of a wand.

Someone else shouted, and a silvery spell bounced off the corner of the wall and came in at Harry. He had time to note that it was vaguely shaped like the lightning bolt scar on his forehead before it slammed into him.

His lungs promptly contracted as every bit of air fled his body. He began to cough frantically, or tried, but he couldn't make a sound. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. His head rang and red began to bloom in front of his eyes, persistently taking over his vision, as if he were drowning.

In the dimness, with death pressing as close to him as any lover, licking at him and murmuring in a voice like Francis's when he was aroused, it was Healer Pontiff's advice that came to his rescue once again.

Healing is sometimes a battle, she had told him. It was the night Harry lost his first patient and had spent hours standing motionless, staring at the empty bed, wondering what he could have done to save him. Healer Pontiff had approached him when no one else would, laying the back of her hand on his shoulder, as if she knew he couldn't bear the touch of palm and fingers right now. *Not always—and those who think it is, who regard death as an enemy, are mistaken—but sometimes you have no choice but to fight. The most important part is deciding where to spend your strength. Use it where it's needed, not in a wild and desperate struggle that will exhaust you just when you must pull hardest.*

With an enormous effort that bunched his muscles and made his head explode with pain, Harry forced himself to ignore the fact that he was dying. He reached out and aimed his wand at himself, also ignoring the confident man in dark blue robes who had just stepped through the door into the cupboard. His magic sharpened in his mind, waiting on the nonverbal command he was intoning.

Finite Incantatem.

Nothing happened. Harry repeated the words in his mind, feeling his fear nearly break the iron shell he'd built to contain it. He was on his knees, he knew, and the wizard was coming towards him to snatch the wand from his hand. But still he concentrated, and still he repeated, *Finite Incantatem. Finite Incantatem. Finite—*

And the hold of the spell broke. Harry reeled as air flooded him, cool and forgiving. He dropped limply to the floor, needing a moment to recover. Incidentally, it kept his wand from the grip of his tormentor a bit longer. The man cursed mildly and knelt down, bracing a hand on Harry's side as if to roll him over.

Harry shot out a foot and caught him in the groin. The wizard collapsed, gasping, and Harry snatched his wand, too. He had dropped several of the green potions, so he settled for sticking the captured wand in his pocket and whipping around the prone wizard, straight towards the door of the cupboard. Merlin, but his wounds were starting to hurt.

Someone tried to punch him as he came through the door; someone else tried to curse him. Harry lashed out with fists and feet, and kicked the cursing person in the shin, so that her spell flew wild and she yelped. The punch caught him in the jaw, though. Once again Harry had to grit his teeth and roll through the pain. He forced himself to remember the direction of the staircase and

turn towards it. His best chance was still to get outside, so that one of his pursuers didn't get the bright idea of taking a patient hostage and using him or her against Harry.

He heard more shouts up the corridor. *The second group of pursuers!* He had been so confident, so sure they could never catch him in time. Well, he would just have to *hurry*, that was all. He lowered his head and put on another burst of speed. His aching muscles whimpered and twinged at him, and he knew he would pay for this later.

But he would gladly pay that price then, because it meant there would be a later for him.

The shouts grew louder as he reached the stairs. Harry snarled. How had they got ahead of him? He was sure they had been behind just a moment before. But he braced himself and dug into one of his pockets, towards the cached red and blue potions.

The second group appeared on the stairs, keeping out of each other's way with a practiced grace and charging upwards with an almost military precision. They didn't wear the dark blue robes Harry had seen before. Instead, they had the regulation, precisely-cut black robes of Aurors.

Harry wanted to close his eyes and drop in relief, but unfortunately he had enemies behind him who would probably only grow more frantic to kill him when they realized who was coming. And then one of the Aurors broke from the rest and raced ahead with the enthusiasm of youth, and Harry knew he had someone else to protect. That Auror's eyes were already widening as he stared beyond Harry's shoulder.

Harry spun and hurled one of the red potions vials to the floor. The glass shattered, and the scarlet liquid spreading in a puddle on the floor hissed and promptly began to release a brilliant gas that filled the eyes and nostrils of Harry's attacker; Harry himself closed his eyes and held his breath. But his ears were still open, and he heard the thump and the snore that told him the sleeping potion had worked as intended.

When he looked again, the gas was floating in dissipating threads down the corridor, and one of his other enemies had fallen. The rest were backing away, their faces set and hard and dismayed. Harry scanned them quickly, but he didn't think he knew any of them. The young Auror charged up and balanced precariously on the top step beside him, brandishing his wand.

One of the blue-robed wizards stepped back, pulling the others into a formation that looked oddly like a protective circle. He began to chant something sweet and strong. Harry blinked. Was it mist rising around them? Fog? He didn't know, but either way, it was the result of a spell he hadn't seen before.

The mist grew more and more brilliant, as if a full moon were shining through it. Then it exploded inwards like a pillow someone had punched, and curling, drifting wisps of it became flying tatters. Harry's enemies were gone.

He swore.

The young Auror beside him patted him on the back in commiseration. And then the other Aurors were there, and everyone was talking to him at once, and Harry resigned himself to answering questions and having people exclaim over his wounds (which looked worse than they were or other people thought them, including the young Auror, who had stopped patting him and was staring at his bloody hand in horror).

"And you're sure you have no idea who they were?"

Harry sighed. The Auror in charge of the investigation, Ernest Muffinworth, wasn't a bad sort, just the perennially suspicious sort who refused to let anything go. He believed Harry, he said, but then he would peer at him and ask another penetrating question, designed to stimulate memories that Harry didn't know he had.

"I think they were associated with the hospital hierarchy, based on what Healer Emptyweed told me, and that he was afraid for my coming here," Harry said. He mopped with the third cloth they'd given him at the threads of blood decorating his face. It seemed a bit of the net spell had got through after all and cut his forehead above the lightning bolt scar; he'd been sodding lucky that blood hadn't rolled down from it and got into his eyes during the fight. "Talk to the Healer if you want to know more."

Auror Muffinworth grunted and leaned back against the table in the empty Healers' cubicle they'd claimed. He was a stolid man in waist and shoulders and robes and, Harry was beginning to believe, intellect. "Emptyweed's disappeared. Had Aurors searching the hospital on every ward for him, and we can't find him."

"Of course," Harry said. "Because God forbid anything go right in my life."

Muffinworth's answering look was wry. "Welcome to my job, Potter."

Harry smiled wearily. He was about to ask a question of his own—namely, whether the Aurors had found any trace of wounded patients or Healers—when a strident, unwelcome voice spoke form the door to the cubicle. "And I *demand* that you let me see him. Mediwizard Potter is working privately with our family, and we're owed some explanation as to what's happened here."

Harry hissed and drew himself upright. He was *not* in the mood to deal with Draco right now. He glanced at Muffinworth. "Do you think you can keep that man busy until I get away?" he asked.

"Bad blood?" Muffinworth asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Lovers' spat," said Harry, not wanting Muffinworth to treat Draco as part of the investigation. He slipped over to the far side of the cubicle, far bigger and more comfortable than the one he'd had, and opened the door there. Draco was arguing with someone, probably the Auror

Muffinworth had placed on guard, about how very ready he was to complain to *authorities* if he didn't get his way. Harry rolled his eyes.

Draco is used to getting his own way too often, which is the reason that any relationship we did try would never work out. I can see the headline now: 'Two Most Stubborn Lovers in the World Choke Each Other to Death.'

He opened the door of the cubicle and stepped into the corridor beyond, taking a moment to breathe the air gratefully. This corridor, at least, was blissfully free of the presence of Draco Malfoy.

Then Narcissa Malfoy stepped into the light coming from the lamp in the cubicle and faced him.

Harry froze, his hands dropping nervelessly to his sides. The cubicle door slipped from his grasp and banged shut. Draco's voice rose triumphantly, but Harry couldn't be concerned about that right now. He could only stare at Narcissa's utterly blank face in dread and wonder at his own sense of helpless guilt.

Then he reminded himself that that was ridiculous. If Narcissa had been in on the plan to restrict him to the Manor, and if she agreed with her son, Harry was as angry with her as he was with Draco. Her sex and the fact that she might have been a mother figure in his life if things had gone better made no difference. He returned her cool look with an unfriendly stare and said, "Look. I'm willing to give you the information I've found concerning the Mirror Maze on your husband. We can hold the consultation by Floo if you like. I was about to return to Grimmauld Place and firecall you to give you that choice. Or I can give you a Pensieve with my memories in them."

"You are a fool." Narcissa's voice was ice-covered iron, that flat and that hard and that cold.

"For leaving the Manor?" Harry sneered at her. Surely, if the Malfoys had taught him anything, it should be how to muster an effective sneer. "Or for suggesting ways in which I can save Mr. Malfoy's life without our having to meet?"

Narcissa glanced around, then flicked her wand. Harry blinked as the air around them turned faintly blue. She had just cast the strongest privacy ward he knew, which was semi-illegal for anyone but Ministry officials to use.

"For thinking that we would cast you out of the family because you had a disagreement with our son," said Narcissa.

Harry bit his lower lip so that his jaw wouldn't fall. *That isn't fair. How did she know I was thinking that?* "I didn't—"

"It is obvious from your expression, and from your manner to me," Narcissa said. Behind the privacy ward, her face had relaxed, though she still didn't show the friendly openness that Harry

suspected she would have if they were within the walls and wards of the Manor. "You speak as if we were once more employer and employee only, and as if you expected us to reject everything about you but your skills as a mediwizard." She paused for a moment, studying Harry as if she hoped that the words she had spoken so far would convince him. When Harry simply stared at her, she continued, more of the ice in her voice melting. "Harry. We are your family. We will not cast you out simply because you have your own opinions about the way your life ought to be lived."

Harry really wished there was a bed nearby, so he could collapse into it and sleep until the world started making sense. Failing that, he would have settled for raking his hands through his hair, but though Healer Pontiff had tended to his wounds, she had warned him that moving too suddenly would reopen them. And the last thing Harry needed was Narcissa and Draco clucking over *that*. Narcissa had already frowned as if she were noticing flakes of dried blood on his skin.

"I thought you had very definite opinions on the way my life ought to be lived," he said. "Or why bother having me learn to act like a Malfoy?"

"We want you to learn those laws, yes," said Narcissa, still not turning a hair or varying her gaze. "But that does not mean you *cannot* argue. Arguments will give us the chance to explain our reasoning to you and try to persuade you that our laws make sense."

Rational Malfoys. Will the wizarding world ever stop providing me with wonders? But Harry had thought of something else, something that made him more nervous than the thought of how much he still had to understand about this adopted family. "If both you and Draco are here," he said, "who's protecting Lucius?"

Narcissa gave a faint frown. "The wards on the Manor and the house-elves are even more fanatical about guarding the family when a family member is alone there," she said.

"It's still not a good idea." Harry took a step forwards. "Listen, I've survived and had my wounds healed. I meant what I said about consulting you through the Floo, but for the moment, I'm going to return home and go to sleep—"

"So soon?" Narcissa let the corner of her mouth rise in a pleased smile.

Harry blinked, and then realized she thought he was referring to the Manor as home. "No," he said flatly. "I'm going home to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and that way you and Draco can return and guard Lucius."

Narcissa gave him a disapproving stare that made Harry feel as if he'd swallowed ground glass. *If I'd grown up with a mother, would this be easier?*

"The closeness of blood does not diminish so easily as that," she said. "We are not angry at you, Harry—"

"Draco is going to be smug and brag about how he was right and my life *was* in danger—" Harry began.

"If Draco does any such thing, then I shall set him down." Narcissa moved a step closer to him, and now she had an emotion in her eyes Harry had never seen there before. "I have already scolded him for being so foolish as to send you fleeing when he should have done anything to keep you close." She hesitated. "You have been attacked, and I believe you do not understand how powerful the instincts are that command me to take you behind walls at once. Having a family member in danger like this makes me feel as if *I* were in danger."

"You probably are," Harry said reluctantly. "I've found evidence that indicates a large number of people knew Lucius was cursed and wanted him dead. But that's all the more reason for you to return to the Manor and add a human presence to the wards and the house-elves."

"Come with us," said Narcissa.

The door of the cubicle opened, and Draco burst through. When he saw Harry standing there talking to his mother, he paused suddenly and tried to make it seem as if he hadn't been running. From the room behind him, Muffinworth's voice said, "You're not supposed to go through there."

Draco ignored him entirely, staring at Harry with greedy eyes. From the way they narrowed, Harry was sure they'd found the same small flecks of dried blood Narcissa had seen. He put his chin up stubbornly, ready to snap the moment Draco gloated about having been right.

But Draco said only, "I understand that it was one of your former lovers who alerted the Aurors. I think it's the first time I've felt grateful to one of them." He moved a step closer, so lightly Harry almost missed the motion. His gaze had returned to Harry's face, but it was still just as greedy. "Now. Are you ready to come home?"

"No," Harry said.

Narcissa made an anxious movement. Draco didn't look at her, however, and Harry didn't feel comfortable taking his eyes away from him. "And why not?" Draco asked quietly. "It makes sense for the family to be together when something upsetting has happened to them, and now you've been hunted and persecuted like Father."

Harry gave the cubicle a glance, half-hoping that Muffinworth would emerge and spare him this confrontation. But no one moved. Perhaps the Auror had decided the Malfoys could have no obvious part in the conspiracy, since they hadn't been in hospital when the chase began, and had gone to hunt Emptyweed.

Draco stepped towards him again, almost within touching distance now.

And Harry stiffened his spine and reminded himself that he *did* have the right to speak up and complain about the situation, especially when he had decided that he couldn't possibly return to

the Manor right now. Maybe it made the most sense to the Malfoys, but it didn't make the most sense to him, and he had already admitted that he wouldn't fit into their lives no matter what happened. Why should he try to obey their prescriptions?

"I hate what you tried to do to me," he told Draco. "I hate everything about it."

Draco drew breath as if to speak, and then fell silent again. Perhaps Narcissa had made some sort of signal. Harry didn't care. At the moment, he wasn't in the Malfoys' home and didn't have any unwritten code, of hospitality or otherwise, to obey. He clenched his fists and continued.

"I hate that you think you have a claim on me, and that means you treat me like a possession. And just because you were right about my life being in danger doesn't mean you were right in your way of dealing with it. If I go back to the Manor, it'll be more of the same. More affection I don't understand, more things I shouldn't be paying attention to anyway with Lucius's life still in danger, more Malfoy 'laws' that don't make sense to me and which I'll never learn intuitively the way you have. You made me feel like a prisoner. I won't take that from *anyone.*"

Draco's face was stricken. Harry rolled his eyes. "You didn't realize this would have consequences? I don't know what your lovers have been like in the past, but I don't fancy letting someone simply have power over me without fighting back."

"You accepted the other care I tried to give you," Draco whispered. "The care that Rogers tried to give you."

"Because I saw that it made sense," Harry said impatiently. "I did start feeling better when I slept more and ate richer food. But it won't make me feel better to spend the rest of my life in a gilded cage. And I wasn't *happy* about it. I would have responded to rational arguments better."

"And that is what we ask for the chance to give you now," Narcissa broke in. Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw Narcissa leaning towards him with her hand extended. "We don't want to cage you, Harry. But we do want you among us, to protect and persuade."

"That's the thing that makes the least sense," Harry said tiredly. His barely-closed wounds were starting to ache. He wanted to go home and sleep the effects of the Healing off. "The Heart's Blessing spell made me family to you. Well, nothing gave me that sense of family in return."

Narcissa flinched for the first time, and a small shard of regret and guilt worked its way into Harry's heart. "So, then," she said in a very low voice. "None of what we tried to give you made any impression on you at all? None of it mattered?"

"It mattered," Harry said, feeling trapped and wishing he could run. How did you reject compassion without seeming like a selfish arsehole? "But there's no way I can *repay* it. I don't know how to answer it. Letting you take care of me puts me into debt, and I don't know what you want in return. Money for the time I spent under your roof? I can do that. But you can't have my freedom, or my soul."

"What we want," said Draco, so earnestly that Harry felt turning fiercely on him would have been like turning on a child, "is your presence."

Harry put his head in his hands. "Why?" he asked. There was a natural headache growing behind his eyes now, savage and hot.

"We like you," said Narcissa.

Draco stepped up behind him and wrapped his arms around him, leaning his head in the center of Harry's back.

That was probably as much of a manipulative tactic as anything else he'd done, but it was better-chosen than most words could have been. Still, it was Narcissa's words that truly melted him. Harry jerked his head up, staring into her eyes. Narcissa looked back. Harry could see only sincerity, even when she lifted her hands as if to cradle his cheeks.

"We like you," she breathed, "and we would take the chance to know you better, if we can. I am sorry if we gave you the impression that you must yield totally to the Malfoy laws to be part of the family. Surely you have noticed that not even Lucius obeys them all the time? And my son is hardly a shining example of them at the moment." Draco flinched a little, but his arms tightened on Harry. "But none of that diminishes the impact of the blood. An argument cannot. We would mourn if you died, and be bereft in a way that we would not if an ordinary Healer or mediwizard sacrificed his life searching for a cure for Lucius. I understand that the sharing of blood is an unusual basis for family love for you. But none of that makes it the less important to *us*." She paused, and then her hands descended and touched his cheeks. "Will you come with us, and give us a second chance to show you the best of what Malfoys can be, rather than the worst, how you may live in freedom and yet be part of something larger than yourself?"

Harry closed his eyes, because otherwise tears would threaten. And he nodded, because even if their offer turned out not to be real, he was incapable of not reaching for what it *seemed* to be.

Narcissa pressed a kiss to his cheek, Draco one to the back of his neck.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—Hearing About and Suffering Pain

"Really, Hermione, you don't need to be so upset." Harry shifted so that the rough stone at the edge of the hearth wasn't digging into his tailbone anymore.

"But Harry, you were almost *killed.*"

Harry cast a nervous glance over his shoulder as he hissed at her to be quiet. They were in one of the upper studies at Grimmauld Place, and Harry had insisted that he contact his friends and tell them what had happened before he returned to Malfoy Manor. Draco and Narcissa had grudgingly agreed, and had even left him time alone to do it in. Harry had felt he owed the whole story to Hermione, especially if she were going to try and find out what was happening through her Ministry connections. But Harry didn't want to think of what would occur if Draco or Narcissa, or both of them, overheard the details about the spell that had caused him to stop breathing.

"Excuse me for thinking that's serious," Hermione said darkly, and then she made a little choked noise. "Harry, you could have *died.*"

"Yes, I think we've established that," Harry muttered in annoyance, and shifted his position again. Nothing much could make him comfortable, though. He was tired, and his muscles ached from running and sliding down banisters and leaping down stairs. When he felt like this, he knew only a good night's sleep would cure it. "And the best way to prevent it from happening again is for me to know who those people were."

Hermione sighed.

Harry leaned forwards. A stray speck of Floo powder blew into his nose, and he sneezed. "You have an idea already, don't you?"

"Only an idea," said Hermione, and gave him a stern look as she brushed her hair out of her face. "No more than that. You shouldn't tell the Malfoys anything about this."

"What? Why? If I can lead them to Lucius's enemies, they'll be better able to guard him against complications from the curse in the future."

"But one of the ways they'll try to guard him is by taking revenge," said Hermione, her voice growing sharper. "I don't want to see innocent people suffer because the Malfoys leap to conclusions."

Harry blinked. He hadn't thought of that, which was one of the problems of spending as much time swaddled among the Malfoys as he had; he lost the perspective that would be clear to someone looking in from outside the family. Perhaps it *was* best if he kept the information to himself a little longer. "All right. Tell me."

"At one point, it was traditional for the hospital administrators to wear robes like that," said Hermione. "The dark blue color represented the night sky, and had silver stars on them in their

older incarnations, because several ancient branches of Healing magic grew out of astrology and astronomy. But the custom spread to include other groups. Even the governors of Hogwarts wore dark blue robes at one point." Hermione pointed at him when he groaned and buried his head in his hands. "I told you it was a vague idea."

"I already knew I had enemies among the hospital hierarchy," Harry muttered. "Now what I need to know is what they want from me, why they're afraid of me." He looked up then, as repentance stung him. "Sorry, Hermione. You have helped. Or at least confirmed something. Maybe."

Hermione gave him a tired smile. Harry was reminded of one of Healer Pontiff's sayings, that hearing about pain could be nearly as bad as suffering from it. It could get him to tolerate some of the stupider things his patients' relatives did. "Do you know how soon you'll be able to leave Malfoy Manor?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "I still lack too much information, and I need to make sure Lucius is *cured* before I go." He debated for a moment whether to tell her that he thought newly formed bonds might keep him in the Manor even longer than that, and then decided it would be better to say those things when he had the words for them and could spend a few hours explaining it all in detail. Speaking hurriedly through a fireplace when they both wanted to collapse in bed would be the worst time for it. "Can I speak with Ron?"

Hermione nodded and moved away. Ron put his head into the fireplace and glared at him. Harry blinked. He was unaware that he'd said anything so bad to Hermione.

"Someday," Ron said darkly, "I am going to hear that you're dead for real if you keep pulling stupid heroic stunts like revealing dark conspiracies. And on that day, I'll probably drop dead of shock that it's happened at last, after all your narrow escapes. Do you want me to drop dead of shock?"

"Trouble trails *me*, not the other way around!"

Ron's scowl stayed steady.

"I didn't ask to have someone cast a curse at me that stopped my lungs," Harry muttered, feeling his cheeks heat up. Ron's disapproval was rarer than Hermione's, because he was more inclined to agree that, most of the time, Harry had been right to risk his life.

"But you could have remained in hospital long enough for Healer Pontiff to check for aftereffects of the curse," said Ron.

"How do you know I didn't?"

"Because you're Harry Bloody Potter, Stubborn Mediwizard," Ron said, "and you treat your own wounds and your own pain as too small to be noticeable. Well, next time, remember that *I* notice them. And Hermione. And the rest of my family would, too, if they had the slightest notion about

how much trouble you still get into. Spare us suffering, and take care of yourself better."

"You're using guilt against me?" Harry stared at him.

"It's the only thing that works," Ron said inflexibly. "So. I want you to promise me that you won't take unnecessary risks for the rest of this case."

"My definition of unnecessary risk and yours aren't the same," Harry pointed out, still reeling. It was normal for Hermione to scold him about his health, but *Ron*? And Ron hadn't even been there. He only knew the story of the risks Harry had run second-hand. And, well, Harry just didn't think he deserved this, not when he was tired and in pain and facing a delicate emotional situation when he returned to Malfoy Manor.

"Promise me you'll try." Ron's voice softened, and Harry looked uncertainly at him, to face a gaze that was a great deal more sympathetic than he had thought it would be. "I know it isn't your fault all the time, Harry. I'm not trying to blame you for getting attacked. And I think the defenses on the Manor will be a lot better than the ones on St. Mungo's apparently are." His voice chilled, and Harry was glad Ron hadn't decided to work in hospital himself. "But there are things you could do to keep yourself safe that you aren't doing. You even know what they are, because I've heard you talk about them as just not being worth the time or effort. Take the precautions, all right?" He took a deep breath. "I don't want to lose you," he whispered then, so softly that Harry could barely hear him.

Harry reached through the fire and clasped Ron's hand in his. Ron tightened his grip for a moment, as if he might drag Harry into the safety of his and Hermione's house. Harry *wished* he could think of it as perfectly safe, the way he had only last week. But no, it was better that he go back to the Manor. Perhaps he didn't understand about sparing himself pain, but he understood about sparing other people.

Spare us suffering, and take care of yourself better.

Harry took a deep breath. "I promise I'll try," he said, and Ron's face lit up with a fierce smile.

"Good." He let go of Harry's hand, apparently not wanting to make more of an emotional scene than he already had, and peered past Harry into the study. "I'm surprised the Malfoys let you alone long enough to speak to us."

"They weren't happy about it," Harry agreed, rubbing the skin beneath his ear. He wondered for a moment if the imprint of Draco's lips was visible there, and then told himself not to be ridiculous. "In fact, we should return to the Manor. Lucius is alone there—"

"Except for the army of house-elves," Ron said, and his mouth fell open as his ears caught up with his brain. "Excuse me," he said. "Did you just call the man *Lucius?* I thought you made it a policy not to address your patients by their first names. Or the ones you had cause to hate during the war, at least."

"It's some complicated pure-blood thing." Harry also wanted to wait to explain this mess to Ron until he had more time and was less tired. "I go along with it because it's not worth pitching a fit about."

Ron nodded, a smile of understanding on his face. "I bet you'll be glad to come home, won't you, mate?"

"Oh, yes," Harry said softly. *If I know where home is, now.*

Harry had assumed he would see Lucius immediately when they entered the Manor, but a house-elf appeared, and Narcissa spoke quietly to it. She turned back to Harry with a faint smile on her face a moment later. "The elves spiked his soup with a sleeping draught," she said. "He'll be abed until noon at least. You should return to your rooms." She hesitated, one hand touching the side of her skirt. "That is," she murmured, "if you would not like us to move your rooms."

"Their location was never a problem," Harry hastened to reassure her.

"Would you prefer a different set?" Draco asked him. He seemed to have an easier time being blunt than his mother. He also had one arm draped around Harry's shoulders, perhaps the better to judge the way his muscles bunched and his breathing changed at any suggestion. "That's what she means. We didn't consult your choice when we put you in those rooms, and I remember the decorating scheme bothering you." His other hand touched the small of Harry's back, stroking as if to ease sobs from his throat.

"I—no, thank you," Harry said, awkward again. How was he to explain that he did admire the rooms, he just didn't think they were for him? And if their beauty was an expression of the liking Narcissa had spoken about, then maybe they were for him, and the Malfoys' anxiety now was a consequence of their wondering whether he would have preferred a different gift.

Still, they were honest with me. They asked which rooms I would prefer rather than offering me their own choices. And Draco hasn't spoken a single order to me since they found me in hospital. I owe them honesty, too.

"It bothered me because I wasn't used to it," he said. "And because I had to wonder about your motives."

Narcissa raised her eyes from the floor. "I trust you know them better now?"

"Yeah, I do." Harry wished he could look away, but Gryffindor courage and that strong sense of what he owed people who *liked* him, like Ron and Hermione, and went out of their way to take care of him, made him keep on meeting her eyes. "Thank you. The rooms are beautiful. I'm sure I'll get more used to them as time goes on."

Draco's arm tightened around his shoulders at the words. Harry glanced at him curiously, but could make out nothing specific in his face.

"If you want to join Father," Draco said then, "I'll make sure Harry reaches his bed properly."

Narcissa nodded and brushed a hand over her son's cheek. After everything, Harry was still startled when she touched his face, too. She had glided off up the staircase before he could say anything.

The moment she rounded the corner, Draco bowed his head and whispered, "If there was anything you felt uncomfortable saying in front of her, you can say it now. Do you like the rooms? Would you prefer something—" He struggled for a moment as if it taxed his vocabulary to come up with the right word, and finally finished, "Plainer? Simpler?"

Harry yawned. "At the moment, anything sounds good if it has a bed in it," he said. He could feel Draco's smile, and the way his fingers trailed up and down his shoulders in the moments before he started them walking towards the staircase. Harry made sure to catch his eye as he put his foot on the bottom step, though, and Draco's smile faded quickly.

"If you command Rogers to watch over me that closely again," Harry said, "or feed me like a baby, or try to smother me with blankets, then it doesn't really matter what sort of relationship I might have with your parents. I'll treat you as coldly as politeness will permit me to, and I'll curse you out of my bed if I find you in it."

Draco stared earnestly back at him. His eyes did waver for a moment, and Harry thought he was probably trying to plot how much he could get away with given Harry's new restrictions.

But then he drove his nails into his palms as if remonstrating with himself to behave, looked up, and nodded. "I understand."

"Good," Harry said, blinking a little. He hadn't expected to earn that victory. But Draco put a hand on his shoulder exactly as if he didn't resent losing, and after long moments of limping along to prove his independence, Harry allowed himself to lean against Draco's shoulder and absorb the warmth of his side.

It has been a long *day.*

The moment they stepped into the bedroom, Rogers appeared. Draco leaned Harry gently against the wall opposite the mirror and then knelt down to the house-elf's level, apparently so he would understand Draco's seriousness.

"I countermand the orders I gave you before," he said. "You're to ensure only that Harry doesn't come to extraordinary harm, like any other inhabitant of the house, and not to harass him with food or sleep or protection when he doesn't want it."

"Master Harry Potter is needing something else at the moment," Rogers said, sniffing the air and then staring at Harry with those disconcerting sharp eyes. "Master Harry Potter has been walking around without the healing potions he needs, because Master Harry Potter is being an *idiot.*"

Draco came up off the floor and onto his feet so fast that Harry thought it left afterimages drifting across his sight. "You're hurt?" Draco demanded, bounding to his side. "Why didn't you say so before I dragged you up all those stairs? Harry…" His voice had an oddly helpless sound to it, and his hands hovered above Harry's shoulders and then his ribs, as if he feared to touch him anywhere in case he hurt him more.

Harry blinked at Rogers. "I had curses cast at me, but I was healed of the wounds," he said. "I really don't know what you mean."

Rogers crossed his arms. "Rogers can be smelling the lingering of the Breath-Stealing Charm in the air," he said flatly. "It damages the lungs without a healing potion. And Master Harry Potter is not to be damaging his lungs in Rogers's house." He spoke as if Harry were a dog that had taken to vomiting on the rug.

"I never learned that," said Harry, his shoulders tightening again. "And I'm sure the Healer who took care of me would have noticed the effects of the curse and made sure I got a healing potion, if I needed one." *Healer Pontiff would have. I'm sure of it. I described the charm to her; she had to recognize it.*

"You have no friends in that hospital, Harry," Draco said briskly, and then nodded at Rogers. "The Breath-Stealing Charm. Precisely what are its effects? I have several healing potions that may work on his lungs, but I don't want to select one too strong."

"Master Draco is being disingenuous," said Rogers, and flicked his disapproving glance at Draco for once. "And also behind in his studies, if he does not recognize this charm. It forces the lungs to stop working. It steals the breath from the body." He shook his head mournfully at Harry. "Master Harry Potter is determined to die where Rogers cannot be watching him."

"I managed to stop it in time," said Harry, but his voice was weaker than he would have liked, thanks to the stricken expression on Draco's face.

Draco didn't say anything for long moments, though, even the scolding Harry half expected. He reached out and delicately feathered his fingers down Harry's cheeks, up over the bridge of his nose, and over his scar, as if he were blind and needed to learn Harry's features. His eyes were steady, his pupils enormous.

"Do you know who they were?" Draco asked at last.

"No," Harry said. "A group of wizards and witches wearing dark blue robes, who vanished together with a spell that surrounded them with mist and *definitely* shouldn't have worked in hospital."

"Hmm," Draco said, so gently that Harry thought Hermione might have been wrong to worry about the Malfoys' tendency towards vengeance. They put family first, so taking care of him would matter more than extracting payment from someone Harry couldn't have named.

Harry paused.

They care about me more than they care about revenge.

To escape the fine trembling that had invaded his limbs, Harry sat down on the bed and stared up at Draco. Draco bent closer, fingers now apparently learning the shape of his ears, eyes still intent. Then he gently tilted Harry's head to the side, kissed the corner of his jaw, and stood.

"I have a potion that should work to ease the damage to your lungs," he said. "Stay sitting if you can, Harry. You shouldn't exert yourself more than you have to." And he turned and stepped out of the room.

Harry leaned back slowly on the bed, groaning as the sheets gave under him and rubbed against his skin. He let his eyes fall shut, wondering for a moment if he would sleep before Draco could even return with the potion. Possibly he hadn't properly appreciated the softness before because he hadn't been this tired. But no, it wasn't his imagination; the bed was subtly shifting its contours to cradle his body better, and the sheets warmed. Harry sighed, turning his head to nestle his cheek into the pillows. Yes, some luxury wasn't too bad once in a while.

Particularly if it took his mind off the disturbing speculations raised by Draco's words.

Healer Pontiff couldn't have known. She wouldn't deliberately have left me in pain, or more than pain. I didn't give her enough detail about the attack, that's all. She must have thought it was some more harmless spell that hit me.

Again Emptyweed's voice snarled warnings in his ear, implying that visiting Healer Pontiff was in itself stupid and dangerous. But Harry shook his head. He accepted that the man wasn't evil, but he'd never made an effort to let Harry know the truth about his enemies, either. Who was Harry to believe, the man who'd cast a headache curse to "protect" him or the woman who had given him advice and trained him exquisitely in healing for as long as he'd known her? Besides, if his enemies were afraid of his talent and didn't want him to advance, it didn't make sense that she'd trained him so well.

Unless she's part of a different kind of conspiracy, and the enemies Emptyweed tried to warn you against aren't the ones who found you today. Could there be a group hunting you and a group hunting Lucius?

"Here's the potion."

Harry managed to drag his eyes open with an effort, but sitting up was beyond him. A warm

lassitude had seeped into his muscles. He suspected that was all the bed's fault, but he couldn't muster the energy to glare right now, either. "Help me drink it, please?" he said.

A long pause. Just when Harry was about to repeat the request, Draco curled an arm around his shoulders and lifted him from the bed. Harry whined in protest at the loss of warmth, but swallowed the potion obediently. It tasted like lemonade, rather than the taint of dirt and dry bark healing potions for the lungs often carried. Harry hazily wondered if Draco had added an extra ingredient to make it taste sweeter for him. But surely that was romantic and sentimental nonsense talking. Probably such potions were delicate and couldn't stand much tampering at all, or they would explode.

"At least, maybe they are," he found himself saying aloud. "And I wouldn't know because I never passed my Potions exam."

"I like doing this," Draco murmured, as if in answer. "Helping you do those things you ask me to and can't do for yourself. I'll help you pass your Potions exam if you ask." He swept Harry's hair away and kissed the back of his neck. Harry smiled, though he was in no mood to pursue this tonight, and Draco drew away as if he realized it. "Hanging the mirror didn't work so well to convince you you're beautiful, but we'll work on that later."

"You like this?" Harry blinked at him. That really hadn't occurred to him. He had thought Draco enjoyed giving orders and protecting a member of his family, and he could understand why, but this was new. Feeding sleepy patients potions had never been his favorite part of mediwizardry.

"I like doing things for anyone I like," Draco said, somewhat defiantly, as if he expected Harry to find fault with that. Perhaps he did, considering their history. "And now you have me talking like you. Merlin." His arms tightened suddenly, and he nuzzled his way into Harry's hair. Harry wondered where the potions vial had gone. "I was furious when I realized where you had gone, and then more frantic as time passed and I didn't hear from you. And I didn't come after you until the Patronus came because of my stupid pride, and because I didn't want to tell Mother why you'd left in the first place."

"I was all right," Harry said.

"You could have died!" Draco's voice snapped like a broken twig. He stopped, panting, and then said, "But you let me do this for you, take care of you like this. I don't understand why, but—thank you. It makes me feel better."

Harry felt a sweet chill run through him. "I'm sorry for leaving so abruptly," he said. It would have been difficult to say those words with his awareness and pride fully intact, but Draco had already seen him lolling about on the bed like some kind of sultan. "But I don't think there's anything else I could have done. You were wrong."

"Not about the danger."

Harry yawned. "You got that right by accident."

"Yes," Draco whispered, and kissed him again.

Harry rather lost track of time after that, and heard someone breathing gently and someone else saying words that made him wonder if he had wandered into Lucius and Narcissa's bedroom by mistake. The words were restrained, still, not as emotional as what Hermione or Ron might have said to him, but open.

"I want you. I like being near you. I wish I saw you laugh and smile more often. I wish you cared as much about healing yourself as you do about healing other people. I'll do what I can to help with that healing. You don't know—you don't know how much you've changed the house, the family, just by being with us for a few days. I like you…"

And that was when he drifted off.

"I fear I have not been entirely honest with you, Harry."

Harry managed to smile even as he finished casting the last diagnostic spell on Lucius and watched the blue dolphin it created swim back to him and blend with his outstretched arm. *No increase of the presence of dreambane within the body,* the voice of the spell said in his mind. Harry had never noticed before how much it sounded like Healer Pontiff's voice.

He had not lost his suspicions, and they were intruding when he tried to take care of Lucius. Really, his life would have been much easier if he could have the gift of concentration at all moments, not just when his life was in danger.

"That seems to be a common plague in this house," he said. "I wasn't honest with you about my feelings of discomfort, either, and look where it got me."

"This matter is more serious."

Harry paused in sliding his wand into his sleeve. When he looked at Lucius carefully, still lying in the middle of the large bed on pillows that spread about him like wings, he realized he wasn't meeting Harry's eyes. That was a first. Harry swallowed. Was Lucius about to tell him that he had been plotting with the conspirators all along?

No. That makes even less sense than the idea that Healer Pontiff was working with them.

"All right," he said.

"I did not know what specific grievance my attacker had against me," said Lucius. "I have never raped anyone, and I do not even remember the girl Smythe claims as his daughter. And with what you have discovered about the Mirror Maze and the dreambane, though he obviously had

help, I do not think anyone else was needed to attack me. They only needed someone who hated me enough to do as he was told and accept help he might have discovered came from former Death Eaters."

Harry nodded slowly. "Then what—"

"The administrators of the hospital have a grudge against me," Lucius said calmly. "Some time ago, I withdrew all of my funding and charitable donations, so as to spend my money on purposes tied more tightly to the Malfoy family. This resulted in a particularly large loss on their part in purchasing medicinal potions, which my donations had mostly been marked for." He stared at Harry now with no expression on his face, but Harry could see the way his mouth pulled to one side and knew Lucius had set his teeth in worry. "I went into hospital in the first place because I had no other choice. I did know from the first day that my life might be in danger, however, and so might the life of anyone who tried to help me."

Harry backed away a step from the bed. His head was whirling with names and faces of all the people who might have been assigned to Lucius's case instead of him—less experienced mediwizards and Healers, who might either have been caught up and killed by the conspiracy or forced to watch Lucius die because they couldn't save him and suffer the guilt for the rest of their lives.

And his own task would have been so much *easier* if he had known. He could have advised Lucius to leave St. Mungo's the moment he identified the problem as a maze of spells. He could have taken the precautions Ron had made him promise to take. He could have made arrangements to start finding out the names and faces of his enemies long before they were aware he knew of them.

"I can give you names," Lucius said.

"You didn't think at all about what might happen to anyone else, did you?" Harry whispered. "If I had died, it wouldn't have mattered to you."

"It would not have mattered before the Heart's Blessing spell, no," Lucius said. "That made you part of the family. It changed things."

Harry shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me before now?"

"I honestly had no reason to think the administrators of St. Mungo's were behind this, until you told me about the blue robes." Lucius gave a small shrug. "I believed you when you said that the person who removed my stabilization fields and tried to kill me was most likely an individual, acting alone. Even after all my experience serving under the Dark Lord, I still suspect individuals first and conspiracies second, if at all."

"But still—I needed to know if you had any enemies there particularly!" Harry glared at him. "Things could have been different."

"And why should I have told you?" Lucius said. "That information is only for family to know. After the Heart's Blessing spell, it is true, I did consider telling you. On the other hand, we left the hospital that same day, and then you were safe within the protection of the Manor's walls, as a Malfoy should be. I did not foresee my son's stupidity and your return, unescorted, to hostile territory."

"But when I started suspecting Death Eaters were behind the curse and had the help of Healers, you could have told me then—"

"I did not think you ready for that knowledge yet," said Lucius. "Indeed, you are so newly settled into the family, and your history with us before that was so tumultuous, that I wished to avoid any unnecessary reference to deeds you may have thought reprehensible. I did not want you to think—" He broke off with a sharp little motion of his head.

The words that would have followed were still as clear to Harry as if he had spoken them. *I did not want you to think me reprehensible.*

"You are a stubborn *arse*," Harry said fiercely.

Lucius stared at him.

"I need the hospital administrators' names," Harry went on, striding towards the door from the bedroom. "And any other key information that you might have felt like squatting on instead of telling me about. And your promise not to keep it from me again." His plan was to exit without looking back, but in the end he had to spin around, slam a hand into the door panel, and yell at Lucius, "And you're an idiot if you think mere references to the past were going to jolt me out of a family who appeared to accept me, but keep in mind that stupidity like yours and Draco's just *might.*"

Then he was running towards his room, swearing under his breath and contemplating the miracle that was Lucius Malfoy looking flabbergasted.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Healing Is Its Own Heroism

"Rogers," Harry called out as he stepped into his bedroom, not bothering to clap his hands. The

house-elf appeared, as before, when he was halfway through his name. Harry turned around and nodded to him. "Could you follow someone if I asked you to? Even through wards that might keep other wizards and owls away?"

Rogers's eyes widened, and his ears trembled and jerked once, though his head hadn't moved at all that Harry could see. "Leave the Manor?" he asked, his voice higher and more squeaky than normal. "Rogers is to be leaving the Manor?"

Harry knelt down to elf-height. "Yes," he said, staring into Rogers's face and wondering if he was imagining the likeness to Dobby, "you would be. I would send my own house-elf, Kreacher—"

"Master Harry Potter has a bad house-elf who is not taking proper care of him," said Rogers, and the familiar frown replaced his startled expression. "He has never been watching Master Harry Potter sleep, and—"

Harry shook his head. "He's wanted to do things for me many times, but I didn't let him," he said. "I scolded him when he took any notice of my problems eating or sleeping, and at last he gave up noticing. He just made sure I had as much nourishing food as possible when I wanted to eat it and that I got unbroken sleep on those mornings when I didn't have to be in hospital early."

Rogers looked torn for a moment, then poked Harry in the chest with one long, spindly finger. "Master Harry Potter is a *bad* human."

Harry grinned sharply. "Yes, I rather fear I am," he said. "There were times as a child when I thought I was born to be a house-elf, anyway." He shrugged and forced the thought away. Rogers was distracting him, perhaps on purpose, from the request Harry had tried to make. "I need you to leave the Manor and hunt down a Healer named Virgo Emptyweed."

Rogers blinked. "His parents were being bad humans, too."

Harry laughed this time. "And he may be as well," he said. "But I need to be absolutely sure of his allegiances now, and of the information he can tell me. If my enemies are keeping him captive, then I can give him his freedom. If not, then at least I'll make sense of the confusing things he tried to tell me before he ran away from the hospital." He shifted his shoulders and tried not to think of what Emptyweed might say about Healer Pontiff. The problem was, Harry *needed* to know, no matter how much his cowardice might scream at him to leave himself some illusions about one of the only friends he had. "Kreacher will be following Healer Emily Pontiff and observing her. But you'll bring Emptyweed here. It *does* mean leaving the Manor, though. Can you do that?"

Once again the strange expression returned to Rogers's face. Harry braced himself for an outburst of scolding, but instead Rogers flung his arms around Harry and began to cry. Harry hesitantly patted his shoulder, wondering what on earth was the matter.

At least I can see the family resemblance between him and Dobby now.

"Master Harry Potter is—" A large sob cut Rogers off, and this time he remained quiet, his fingers trembling on Harry's sides, before he finally whispered, "Master Harry Potter is acting like a proper Malfoy, ordering Rogers around the way he *should*. From the tales Dobby was telling of Master Harry Potter, Rogers thought he was being wild and undisciplined and acting like a bad human at all times. But Master Harry Potter can also act like a proper Malfoy to house-elves." He sniffled. "Rogers is believing Dobby now, that you were a good wizard."

He gave Harry one wide-eyed look of adoration, and then vanished with a pop. Harry stared at the space where he had been for long moments before he stood up, shook himself, and began to debate writing a letter to Hermione. He trusted Lucius—though he had been an idiot—to provide him with the names of the hospital administrators now, but it was possible Hermione, closer to St. Mungo's and possessed of a freedom of movement that none of the Malfoys had at the moment, might be able to hunt down extra information.

Draco stepped into the bedroom just then. Harry stared at him, and then at the vial of yellow potion he held.

"Time for another dose to heal your lungs," Draco said. "I've read up on the Breath-Stealing Charm. You need it." His voice held both wariness and a half-implied threat, as if he wanted Harry to see how important this was but knew what might happen if he pressed him.

Harry nodded, accepted the vial, and drank down the potion in one solid gulp, partially to see the expression that caused on Draco's face. It still tasted like lemonade. Tossing the empty vial on the bed the way he imagined some people tossed expensive wineglasses into the fireplace, Harry said, "Do you know your father is an idiot?"

"That was the daily opinion of my teenage self," Draco said gravely. "What has the idiot done now?"

"Kept important information from me!" Harry paced back and forth, waving his arms. It felt so good to have someone to complain to. "He didn't tell me he *already* had enemies at St. Mungo's, people who were prime candidates for casting the spell that destroyed my stabilization fields. The administrators were angry at him for stopping donations, maybe angry enough to put this conspiracy together or at least help with it when Lucius landed in hospital. And of course it would have been easier on me if I knew all that, but Lucius Bloody 'Watch me faint rather than ask for help' Malfoy isn't about to make anyone's life *easier.* So now I'm making preparations to gather information and actually try to help the stubborn wanker, and if he ever does anything like that again I *swear* that I'm going to subject him to one of my own potions!"

Draco made a small choked sound. Harry blinked at him, suddenly wondering if he had gone too far—Draco might be interested in him, but Lucius was still his father—and then saw that Draco was laughing.

Harry glared at him, "It's *not* funny," he said. "His silence could have resulted in someone being

seriously hurt, the person who treated him if not himself." He pointed an accusing finger at Draco, and tried not to think about how much he suddenly resembled Rogers. "And that's the thing I don't like about your devotion to family. It excludes devotion to or sympathy for anyone else. Lucius sounded as if he wouldn't much care that a Healer or a mediwizard died attending him, as long as he wasn't forced to reveal those secrets to someone who wasn't family."

"Why should he?" Draco stood straighter, and the glee had vanished from his voice. "They don't deserve to know. Throughout time—"

Harry snorted at the pretentious wording. Draco scowled ferociously at him and finished speaking anyway. "*Throughout time,* people who weren't Malfoys have tried to hurt the Malfoys. Had Lucius told the person attending him, then his enemies might have learned he suspected them all the faster. He had to have someone he could trust, and until you performed that spell, there was only me and my mother."

"That spell is an arbitrary boundary," Harry snarled, taking a step forwards. Finally he had the words to express what had most bothered him about the Malfoys' reliance on the Heart's Blessing spell. "What would happen if you made someone a Malfoy based on it and then found out they were a sadistic fucker?"

Draco's nostrils quivered. "Blood is important."

"Magically shared blood can happen by chance, and you would still consider yourself bound by your laws to accept the person who shared it?"

"It brought us you," Draco said, mood shifting suddenly and face shining as he stared at Harry, "and that was *not* a mistake."

"It's still arbitrary," Harry repeated. He would cling to the point he had to make if it killed him. "As arbitrary as dividing people up based on blood. My mother could do magic. She did magic that *saved the world.* You acknowledged as much yourself when we performed the blood magic that saved your father's life. Does that mean she was inferior to your mother, simply because her parents weren't magical?"

Draco closed his eyes. "Blood-based beliefs are not the same thing as blood," he said. "One refers to a group of people who share a similar *culture*—"

"Then why do you speak as if you shared a similar heritage?"

"Culture *is* heritage, you uneducated—"

"And as if Hermione and my mother were inferior because of the way they were *born*, not what they knew and learned?" Harry continued remorselessly. "I'm sure Hermione knows more about pure-blood culture than you do, with the way she studies."

Draco opened his eyes and glared. "Growing up in it give you an insight into the subtleties that you can never have if you're coming to it later. It's the difference between speaking a language natively and learning it when you're an adult. We're *different*."

"And you have stupid customs, and your house is too big!" Harry yelled.

"Harry." Draco said it so gently that Harry almost lost it in the echoes of his own shout. "Do you still feel out of place? Is that the reason for this?" He took a step closer. "Please understand. We don't expect you to share our beliefs about blood. The Malfoys have adopted half-bloods and Muggleborns before, and we never expected that from them." He hesitated, then added, apparently unable to help himself, "Although many of them chose to abandon their birth families in any case, once they saw the superior attractions we could offer them."

"I'm never going to change my name to Malfoy," Harry said. "I'm never going to stop seeing the Weasleys. And if you consider my aunt and my uncle my birth family, yes, I'd abandon them in a red-hot minute, but that doesn't have anything to do with their being Muggles."

Draco raised a doubtful eyebrow.

"They hated magic," Harry said. "And they didn't like me." He suddenly stopped, choking against air, as he realized that, if the Malfoys still liked him after the shouting he'd done at both Lucius and Draco, then he would still like them back, objectionable beliefs and all. He scowled. *Am I being reasonable or pathetic, snatching at every possible scrap of affection?*

"What an irrational hatred," Draco said, sounding shocked. "How could they dislike anyone who was born with magic?"

"How could you dislike anyone who wasn't born to two magical parents?" Harry countered instantly.

Draco opened his mouth, then looked to the side, scowled, and shut it.

A moment later, he said quietly, "Harry, I know our beliefs still don't make much sense to you. And some of them probably won't ever do so. But you need to know that we won't force you to give up your beliefs and adopt ours." He looked up at Harry with a faint smile. "*Real* beliefs, ones that are going to stay in someone's head, have to be accepted for what they are. Maybe in time you'll come to see the Heart's Blessing spell as enough of a test to pass. I don't think you'll ever give up your friends or your liking for Muggleborns, no. But you're still a member of the family." He took Harry's hand and rubbed the back of it with two fingers, staring earnestly into his eyes in the meantime. "Do you understand that?"

Harry looked thoughtfully at him. The corollary to what Draco was saying, of course, and which he took care not to mention, was that Harry couldn't force the Malfoys to give up their beliefs, either, no matter how repugnant and stupid they were.

But Harry was reminded that Draco hadn't been able to answer a logical argument just now, and that that omission apparently bothered him—at least, it did if the way he had changed the subject immediately afterwards was any indication. So perhaps Harry might be able to work on the Malfoy subtly, demonstrating with logic and reason that some of what they believed about Muggleborns was *wrong*.

If he could do that, then he could remain within the family without feeling he had given up his principles.

"Yes, I do now," he said. "Thank you for taking the time to explain it." He hesitated, thinking of something he had noticed that morning but not paid much attention to in his eagerness to visit Lucius. "You weren't in bed with me when I woke this morning."

"Of course not," Draco said, a faint tinge of shock in his voice. His fingers pressed down suddenly, heavily, on the back of Harry's hand. "You said you didn't want me there."

Harry smiled helplessly. So this was the proof that Draco would do what he was asked, respecting Harry's choice, even if he himself obviously had a different inclination. "Thank you," he whispered.

Draco smiled at him, his eyes half-lidded with brilliant desire again, and Harry reflected that he wasn't the only one who could use coaxing and subtle working within the will of the family to get what he wanted. But as Lucius had said, it was a double motive that hurt no one. Draco got what he wanted *and* showed sincere respect to Harry at the same time, just as Harry could respect the integrity of the Malfoys' beliefs and still try to show them that some of those beliefs were simply false.

"I'm bringing Healer Emptyweed here," he said casually as he turned away from Draco. "I hope you don't mind."

Draco choked. "He was the one who cast the headache curse on you!"

"Yes," Harry said, "but he was also the one who first warned me of danger, and he claimed he had cast the curse to protect me. I want to find out what he meant. I sent Rogers after him." He glanced over his shoulder at Draco, wondering if he would protest at bringing a non-Malfoy into Malfoy Manor.

Draco hesitated for a moment, then shrugged, "Oh, well," he said. "We can always *Obliviate* him."

"And now I'm about to summon Kreacher, my house-elf from Grimmauld Place, and give him the task of following another Healer who may be involved in this," Harry finished. "What's the etiquette for calling one's house-elf into someone else's house?"

"It's unproblematic," said Draco, "as long as you accept that we might call on him to perform

tasks for us in the future as well. Crossing the boundaries between houses gives us a claim on him."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I won't ask. I'm sure it's pure-blood logic even more convoluted than what's behind the Heart's Blessing spell."

Draco smiled at him peacefully.

Harry turned to call Kreacher, aware now of Draco's admiring gaze on his back, but no longer uncomfortable with it.

Rogers appeared with Healer Emptyweed in the middle of Harry's bedroom. Harry had been sitting on the bed alone, waiting with his arms folded; Draco had retreated into the library to study the recipe for the potion that would purge the dreambane in Lucius's body once more. Harry had promised to call him when Rogers arrived, and now he rose to his feet and shouted his name, once, not removing his eyes from Emptyweed.

The Healer slumped in Rogers's arms, his head bowed and his eyes downcast. Harry found it hard to remember that he had once thought of him as threatening. Then he grimaced and reminded himself that at one point, he had been convinced the administrators of St. Mungo's were all benevolent, simply unaware of the sometimes inferior Healers who worked in hospital. And now he had the proof, a long list of names in Lucius's hand, to tell him it wasn't so.

"Emptyweed is being a bad, bad Healer," said Rogers, and sniffed. "*Running* when he saw me." He gave Emptyweed a small shake, and Harry hid a grin. Hermione might be satisfied to know that Rogers was not entirely servile to all humans all the time.

"He's been a bad Healer in many ways," Harry agreed, and Emptyweed jerked, looking up for the first time. Harry supposed he must have thought himself captured by another of his enemies. He swallowed now and looked vaguely hopeful. As Draco came into the bedroom at a run, Harry said, staring Emptyweed in the eye, "You claimed that you cast the headache curse on me to protect me. Explain that."

Draco stepped up behind Harry, saying nothing, simply lending his presence as silent strength at Harry's shoulder. Harry resisted the urge to lean back and find comfort in his warmth and solidity. That might read as weak to Emptyweed, and Harry had had enough of stupid men who thought they were stronger than him concealing the truth.

"You've been watched since you came into mediwizard training," Emptyweed whispered. "Everyone was relieved when they discovered that you wouldn't have the Potions scores necessary to become a full Healer. If you had, then you would have come into contact with hospital administration, and you're such a reforming hero that you probably would have pushed for reforms there, just the way you would have tried to clean the corruption out of the Ministry if you became an Auror. Healing is its own heroism, but being a mediwizard was the perfect

compromise. You would stay on the lower levels and exhaust yourself in the service of people who wouldn't give you the credit you deserved."

Harry nodded, jaw tight. At least he was on familiar ground here. It sounded rather like the situation with the Dursleys and the people who had looked mindlessly to him for protection from Voldemort. They feared him and despised him, but they still wanted to use him. And if the administrators had gone on quietly in corruption at the upper levels for a long time, they needed all the help they could get on the lower ones. There was no telling how much they had hurt St. Mungo's, how many patients had suffered or died unnecessarily.

Draco trembled for a moment at his back, as if he wished to reach out and wrap his arms around Harry's waist in comfort, but knew what that would do to Harry's standing in Emptyweed's eyes.

"But then you showed more talent than they expected, and your marks on the second Potions exam you took, though not enough for full Healer responsibility, were closer to passing than they had hoped. So they started watching you more narrowly." Emptyweed glared at him. "And of course, you never noticed. You're oblivious to anything that doesn't involve suffering people or the ones you like. Why someone like you, endowed with no shred of political sensibility, became a hero…" He shook his head in wonder. "I tried to warn you a few times, but you never noticed that, either. And so I did what I could to dull your senses and slow you down so the administrators would become convinced your performance on the Potions exam was just a fluke. I managed to persuade them that you struggled to keep your head above water on a daily basis, and your constant studying was necessary simply to keep you at a minimum level of competence as a mediwizard. You might," he finished, with a touch of haughtiness in his voice, ignoring the fact that he sat on the floor of a strange house in the firm arms of an angry house-elf, "thank me."

Harry felt a slight pulse of relief. It was nice to know his judgment of character hadn't failed as badly with Emptyweed as with Snape, and that the man was still an arse even if he had protective instincts. His way of helping had been to cause Harry physical pain, after all, which Snape at least hadn't done except in Occlumency lessons.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?" Harry asked. "That would have helped."

"And you would have betrayed everything immediately with your lack of political instincts." Emptyweed gave him a look that had a strong mixture of disgust in it. "You never took time to question what happened to you, even the sudden advent of those headaches. You had your eyes on the case in front of you, and the one beyond that, and the one beyond that. Your head was too full of Healing even for a Healer. The pain was probably good for you, as it forced you to care about yourself once in a while." He shuddered delicately. "And I wasn't going to give you the chance to hurt me."

Draco made a sound. Harry couldn't tell if it was meant as a laugh or a groan of disgust; it came out as a sharp bark. Harry reached back to place a hand on Draco's waist in comfort and reassurance. Yes, Emptyweed was rather irritating, but Harry had dealt with people who behaved worse than he did.

"Is Healer Pontiff involved in this conspiracy to hurt Lucius Malfoy?" Harry asked. He had to make an effort to continue on after he spoke Lucius's first name, and add the surname Emptyweed would expect.

"What? No!" Emptyweed stared at him. "I know no harm of Emily, and I won't have you speaking evil of her when she was the only other person who took time to help your hopeless arse," he finished fiercely.

Harry breathed a little easier. Draco shifted skeptically behind him. Harry ignored that for the moment. They would see what Kreacher found out as he followed her. "You said that my coming to visit her was stupid and dangerous."

"Because it brought you back into hospital, when I thought you well-gone." Emptyweed groaned at him. "I knew the administrators had a grudge of some sort against Malfoy, though I didn't know how much they wanted him dead until they removed you from the case. And of course you went wandering into their trap. I had to take an unexpected holiday myself, to make sure no one connected my conversation with you to any warning you had of their attack." He glared at Harry again.

"You still should have told me," said Harry. Anger ached in his gut like splintered bones. "I would have been *prepared*, at least."

"I've told you why that didn't happen." Emptyweed sounded half-bored.

"Did they have anyone to replace me on Malfoy's case?" Harry demanded. This time, Draco was the one to slide a supportive, calming hand across the small of Harry's back.

"No," Emptyweed said. "The next news would have been that Lucius Malfoy had died peacefully in hospital. And before you can ask, I don't know any of the details about the other people who wanted him dead. I only know the administrators were in agreement that he shouldn't receive the best care, or any care at all, in hospital."

"Someone attacked him and took away his stabilization fields."

Emptyweed shook his head. "I'm as surprised about that now as I was when you first told me. It was too open a move for the administrators, though. It put you on alert, and they wanted to avoid that at all costs."

"So we have another enemy," Harry muttered. "Wonderful." He sighed and once again stifled the temptation to lean back into Draco. He did shift his hip so it rested against the other man's hip. "You'll swear that you didn't know anything about the Death Eaters who were involved in constructing the curse?"

Emptyweed's face paled. "Death Eaters?" he squeaked.

Harry thought his fear was genuine. He had enough evidence from Emptyweed's own mouth that the man was a coward, in any case. "Yes, Death Eaters," he said. "This is more serious than you can imagine, and you should have told me about it from the first, from the moment you put me on Malfoy's case." Emptyweed must have had a smidgen of concern for Lucius if he had done that.

"I put you on the case because he had to have the appearance of care, at least, and you were the only one who would touch him," said Emptyweed. "Think what it would have done to the hospital's reputation if we turned him away."

Harry stared at him. "He could have died."

"So what?" Emptyweed shrugged. "I don't like what the administrators were doing, but Malfoy has escaped punishment for his crimes during the war too long."

Draco growled, though Harry only knew because he could feel the vibration in his body. Then he whispered into Harry's ear, "Do you see? Do you see why the Malfoys have spent so much time focusing on blood, and trusting only those who showed they were willing to act for us first?"

Harry nodded absently. His head was still reeling. Emptyweed might be a good Healer, and vastly more talented than Harry in Potions—there were things that lived under rocks which were more talented than Harry in Potions—but he had a callousness that it hurt Harry to hear.

But Draco sounded as if he had expected it. If the Malfoys experienced so much of the world against them on a day-to-day basis, of course they would withdraw into their homes and distrust anyone who approached them and was not of the family. But likewise, they would prize those who offered help freely and didn't have a hidden motive to hurt them.

That made much more sense to Harry than the simple fact of shared blood. He had built his friendships and his bond with his adopted family on shared help and fellowship. Why not build it that way with a second adopted family?

He touched Draco openly now, leaning against him and stroking the hand that had moved up to clasp his waist. "What do you think?" he asked. "Should we try him under Veritaserum?"

"That's all I know!" Emptyweed bucked frantically in Rogers's embrace for the first time. Rogers restrained him with a look of contempt and a mutter that Harry thought contained the words "*bad* human." "Really. I can't tell you exactly who wants Malfoy dead, and the headache curse was the only thing I cast on you to hold you back, the only thing I ever did to hurt you."

"Tell me this," Harry said, staring into his eyes. "Why did you hate me so much from the first day I appeared? You disliked me before I ever took that second Potions exam, I know."

"You were arrogant," Emptyweed said stiffly. "Most people who get such low scores on their

NEWTS don't even apply for mediwizard training. They know they belong in other areas. But you thought you had to be good at it simply because you were Harry Potter. You thought your fame could get you anywhere."

Draco growled again. Harry shook his head. "Forget it," he said. "It's not worth arguing about. *Obliviate* him, and have done." He stepped out of the way.

Emptyweed began to protest, but the next moment Draco had cast a Memory Charm and he slumped, eyes blank.

"You've been on a holiday in your own house for the last few days," Draco murmured. "You probably did some drinking, had some pleasant company, because you'll wake with a headache. You won't remember much of what happened, but you'll be satisfied with the tattered memories you do retain, and not seek more."

Emptyweed nodded dreamily. Rogers bowed to both Draco and Harry, and vanished.

Harry smiled. Yes, Hermione had been wrong to worry about the Malfoys' vengeful instincts, if the worst Draco was going to do to Emptyweed was a single headache.

"Should we start discussing what to do about the hospital administrators?" he asked. "Your parents should be included in that discussion, I think."

Draco turned around. "No," he said quietly. "I believe I'm ready to brew that potion, Harry. I want my father free from those bastards' spell before this goes any further."

His face was pale, and his hands shook as he put his wand back in his belt. Harry stepped forwards and embraced him for a long time, stroking his hair and murmuring soothing nonsense words.

It felt good to play the part of comforter again, for once.

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Chapter: 17

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—Work Produces the Best Results

Narcissa stood with her eyes closed when Harry had finished reciting the information he and Draco had learned from Emptyweed. Lucius sat up fully in bed, without the support of pillows,

the way he had since Harry started speaking. He avoided Harry's eyes, however.

"That would make sense," Narcissa murmured. "After I removed your headache curse, I retrieved a Pensieve and cast my own immediate memories into it, to analyze them at leisure. I had thought it possible I would recognize the magical signature in the curse from the time we spent at hospital. And yes, though faint, it might have been your mentor's."

Harry stared at her. "Healer Pontiff's?" he asked with a slight croak, though as far as he knew, Healer Pontiff had never even come into the same room as the Malfoys.

Narcissa opened her eyes then. "No," she said. "Healer Emptyweed's." Then she smiled. "Ah, yes," she said. "It would be fairer to refer to him as your tormentor than your mentor."

Harry blinked. Narcissa Malfoy had just made a pun. He tried to ignore the sense that the world was collapsing and spoke to Lucius. "In truth, this reveals less than I thought. I still don't know exactly who the conspirators are, though my house-elf is following a—potential one." He swallowed around the hard lump of pain and disgust in his throat. He didn't want to think about its being Healer Pontiff until he had absolutely no choice; he had done enough by setting Kreacher on her. "But I haven't yet asked my friend Hermione Granger to investigate the hospital administrators. Should I do so?"

Lucius nodded decisively. "I remember having reason to admire her research skills," he said. Harry looked at him, but he refused to elaborate, only adding, "I would suspect everyone on the list I gave you, but the names listed first are the ones who spoke to me sharply at the time of my revoking my donations to the hospital. And of course, we have to consider how much we should tell the Aurors working on the Smythe case. None of them have so far contacted me with definite proof or with a different motive than the one Smythe gave."

Harry sighed. He suspected he knew a way to get truthful information out of *one* of the Aurors working on the Smythe case, but he doubted any of the Malfoys would like him to do it. Draco, especially, would have objections.

And even though he and Draco weren't dating yet, Harry didn't like the thought of his having objections. Harry felt as if they were slowly floating into alignment as he shed more and more of his uncertainties about whether Draco would suddenly revert to either his schoolboy insults or his recent smothering behavior. He had to lose the distrust slowly, or the resulting trust would be worth nothing. But he was doing that, and he was noticing more and more things about Draco that confirmed the quiet respect and admiration that had sprung up in him.

"Speak your thoughts," Lucius said.

Harry would have liked it better if Narcissa had been the one to notice the dark thoughts on his face and to command him to speak—he was still annoyed at Lucius for his idiocy—but he reminded himself that Lucius was still sick and spoke evenly. "The Auror who intruded into your hospital room, Julius Adoranar? He's still working on the Smythe case, from what I know, and he

was once my lover. There are measures I could take to get the truth from him."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. Lucius stared at him for long moments as if he didn't know what Harry meant. Harry was surprised. He would have suspected Lucius to leap at once to the worst inferences that could be taken from the words, not because he was a Malfoy but simply because he was intelligent.

Narcissa spoke a moment later, her voice tight. "You will not betray our pride or our dignity in that way, Harry."

"Because it would look as if you were desperate to know?" Harry felt his lips twist in what was not really a smile. "You don't need to worry about that. Julius is arrogant; I never knew how arrogant until after I stopped dating him. He'll convince himself that I came back to him because he's so handsome I was unable to stay away."

"I *mean*," said Narcissa, voice tighter still, "you will not betray your pride or dignity as a Malfoy."

Harry blinked, caught without words. He had lived among people who thought they had some sort of family reputation to keep up, of course, but the Dursleys had never considered that Harry could add anything positive to that reputation. If he did something disgraceful, he was immediately considered as an individual, not a Dursley. Harry hadn't considered that of course the situation would be different with a family who saw every member as responsible for sustaining it.

Narcissa said nothing else, but she had taken a step forwards and was staring at him with clear blue eyes, not so different at that moment from the piercing gray of Lucius's or Draco's. Harry nodded slowly. "I won't go to Julius," he added, when she made a small motion of her head that seemed to require a verbal answer.

"Good." Narcissa turned back to Lucius. "Now. I do still have those connections among the mothers of some of Draco's schoolmates, Lucius. I have not yet touched them because I did not want to betray family secrets. But I think the time has come. We need to find out who cursed you." She raised an eyebrow and waited.

Lucius nodded. "Question them, Narcissa. If you can find out which of them might have an aged relative who could have visited Rodolphus in Azkaban—"

"Of course," said Narcissa, with a small scornful glance at Lucius for daring to tell her her duty, and then she glided out of the room. Though her steps were necessarily short because she was walking in a gown, they reminded Harry of the stride of a predator, and he shivered.

"Where is Draco?" Lucius asked. "I thought it odd he did not attend this discussion with you, but perhaps he might have been in bed or have a need to *think*."

Harry frowned at Lucius, wondering why Lucius had laid so much emphasis on the one word, but said, "He wanted to begin brewing the potion that would purge the dreambane from your body. He says you've been sick long enough."

"And what do you think?" Lucius's eyes were keener than they had been since his confession.

Harry clenched his hands into fists. "I think that I still don't enough yet about how the spells in the Mirror Maze connect to each other," he said. "I could dissipate half of them, but there's no telling what might happen to the other half. I'll need to research for at least a few more days before I feel confident to try anything, and there's no Healer I can trust to consult on this."

"I trust you."

Harry glanced away from him, though he did have to wonder for a moment if Lucius was putting himself in Harry's hands partly to distract Harry from the consequences of his earlier lying. Or maybe to make up for it? Harry was already starting to have more generous interpretations of the Malfoys' motives, even though his common sense told him the manipulation probably went along with those motives at all times.

But if I choose to see them a certain way, who's to say that that perspective isn't also right? I shouldn't let myself be taken advantage of, but that's true in every relationship, even the one I have with Ron and Hermione.

"I am still only a mediwizard," Harry forced himself to say. "That makes a difference in talent and skill." Lucius started to say something; Harry rushed on, because he didn't think he would have the courage to say this if he didn't. "I know it doesn't *seem* to, but I've been lucky as much as anything else. The Malfoy blood magic healed you when I would have been helpless to do anything but sacrifice my life. I simply don't feel ready to dissipate the Mirror Maze yet. I would rather wait until I am."

He looked back at last. Lucius nodded thoughtfully. "And the knowledge I did not give you can hardly have contributed to your confidence," he said.

Harry frowned. He didn't want to agree, but on the other hand, he didn't want to lie and say he wasn't still angry about Lucius's omission, because he *was*. He hoped Narcissa had found out and scolded him already. Harry thought she could make a larger impression than he could.

"Let's let Draco try the potion first," he said. "When the dreambane is gone from your body, at least it'll be easier to treat you."

"And I will feel easier as well," Lucius said.

Harry looked at him again and thought suddenly how hard it must have been, for such a proud man to spend days in bed and suffer other people not only to care for him but to do research for him and make decisions about his health. Harry had spent so many years now in uncomfortable

situations that he simply accepted his patients' incapacity to do some things as a matter of course. On the other hand, he hadn't liked it when Draco tried to take care of him, had he, no matter how well-intentioned? And even though he could admit that he needed the care now?

"I'm sure you will," he said, and gave a small bow to Lucius. Yes, he was still angry. Yes, he could forgive Lucius and carry on treating him anyway.

Lucius blinked, but a moment later, his face assumed a small smile.

"I promise." Hermione snapped the list of names Harry had passed to her through the Floo and glared at it as if a mere scan with her eyes could mark the names of the guilty. "I'm going to find out something solid for you in the next day or so."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Hermione. I appreciate you doing this when you have no reason to like or trust the Malfoys."

Hermione lifted her head and stared at him. "You mean you don't know?" she said in wonder.

"Er." Harry wondered if Narcissa had appeared on Hermione and Ron's doorstep and apologized for any inconvenience from Death Eaters during the war. "What?"

Hermione leaned forwards, making it seem for a moment as if her green-tinted face would dip below the corner of the fireplace. "I can see well enough that they're giving you what you need," she said. "I haven't seen you look so rested in several months. Being with Xavier certainly didn't relax you." Harry nodded ruefully; even during the time he and Xavier had got along, the relationship had been tense, strung to a constant high point of melodrama. "So somehow, the Malfoys have managed that. I don't really need details." She wrinkled her nose, as if she imagined that Harry would tell her exactly how he and Draco were fucking.

Harry began to protest. That had only ever happened when he was dating Julius, and *then* only because Hermione had teased him about his sex life when he was drunk.

Hermione hurried on. "I still don't like them. I won't without a lot more prompting." She frowned, eyes distant, and Harry wondered if she was thinking of the insults that Draco had heaped on her during school, or the diary Lucius had passed Ginny, or something else.

Harry stayed quiet. He could hardly make apologies or excuses that rightfully belonged to the people involved, and he thought the Malfoys would probably be insulted if he tried. Besides, he understood that the Malfoys might tolerate his friends but not like them, and certainly wouldn't extend the tenderness they displayed for Harry to include them. Nor would they want Harry explaining how they acted inside their own home in case it revealed a weakness. How could he convince Hermione by saying, "They're different with me, really, but I can't tell you about it?"

"But I can accept they're good for you," said Hermione, returning to the present. "*Very* good, if

the way you're looking is any indication. I've wanted that security for you for years. I have every confidence they'll make sure you balance your job with the rest of your life, which is something I can't coax you to do." She smiled at him. "And so it's for you that I'm doing this, not them. They have to stay alive and contented so that you can be content."

She closed the Floo connection before Harry could say anything else. He sat back on his heels, thoughtful. Both Hermione and his new family seemed to have a skill in severing people from their past deeds and coexisting with aspects of their personalities that they didn't like.

Harry needed to try that.

"Come in. You might learn something."

Harry had only intended to put down a note outside Draco's potions lab, so that he might know what his mother was doing and that they had decided to use the potion first, without waiting for Harry to master the spells that would dissipate the Mirror Maze. He paused, swallowing, one hand hovering above the doorknob, and then turned it and stepped inside, reminding himself that Draco wouldn't have asked him to come in if he were at some delicate point.

On the other hand, every point in potions-brewing looked delicate to Harry, as he was forcibly reminded when he stepped into the neat stone room and saw several simmering cauldrons, glittering with pink and purple and green liquids. Bubbles rose and burst in the air; Harry flinched, but Draco didn't seem alarmed. He was standing in front of the largest of the cauldrons, casting chopped roots of some kind into it, a faint smile on his face. He gestured for Harry to come closer without taking his eyes from the potion.

"The purge to clear dreambane from the body is potent," he murmured, "and requires powerful ingredients." He paused as if he expected Harry to add something. Evidently he'd forgotten that Harry was pants at Potions theory. Harry made a faint noise of assent.

"Surely you must know," Draco said, with a faint tinge of exasperation to the words, "that ingredients with strength in them confer a greater strength on the potion in return?"

"It seems like it makes sense," Harry said. Draco was stirring the potion with one hand now and scattering in flakes of some black powder—it looked like ordinary pepper—with the other. Harry felt a swell of envy that he had enough concentration to do that and hold a conversation *at the same time.* "But I've never been sure what strong ingredients were and how you differentiated them from weak ones." He forced a grin. Of course Draco could do some things that Harry couldn't, since he was in training for the Potions mastery, and feeling jealous of him was rather beside the point. "Of course, I don't have much use for such knowledge."

"So you would simply have given any potion to my father when you were treating him in hospital?" Draco's voice was light and idle, as if he were discussing the color of the robes he intended to wear at some party a month in the future. He seized a vial of pink particles that might

have been crushed horn or powdered flower petals or scrapings from a human heart, and sifted them into the potion. "Without testing it first?"

"Of course not." Harry folded his arms, unsure why he felt half-defensive. Hadn't he acknowledged his own incompetence a moment ago? "You were there. You could have identified it for me."

"But most of the time I'm not there," said Draco. "And I could very well have trained for some other profession than that of Potions master, and then what would you have done?" He snatched up a bit of something blue—a crystal, Harry thought—and removed his hand from the stirring rod for a moment to toss it from palm to palm. It spun and winked, but still not slowly enough for Harry to be sure of what it was, before it dropped into the cauldron with a small *plop*. Draco seized the stirring rod, which hadn't even had time to fall still, and moved it through the liquid again.

"I find that hard to imagine," said Harry. He felt as though he had just seen some unexpected and daring Quidditch move.

Draco darted him a glance. "What's hard to imagine?"

"Both," Harry said. "That you wouldn't have trained for a Potions mastery, when you're so clearly good at it, and that you wouldn't be there. From now on, I mean," he added, and then paused, fearful he might have said too much.

Draco brewed without answering for a long moment. Harry found himself glad—obviously that little unexpected declaration hadn't broken Draco's focus—and oddly bereft at the same time. Some acknowledgment *would* have been nice, not that he had a right to expect it. Maybe Draco's subdued manner since Harry came back from St. Mungo's was an indication he was rethinking his lust for Harry.

But then Harry remembered the little monologue he'd overheard last night before he fell asleep, and decided that that couldn't be true. Draco wanted to concentrate on mingling powders and catalysts and all the other mysterious apparatus of the purge for right now, that was all. Harry leaned on the wall and tried to find some pattern in the swift movements of Draco's hands, but it made no more sense now than it ever did.

Draco finally tapped the stirring rod on the edge of the cauldron, scattering a few stray drops back into the potion, and then bent down and closed his eyes as he inhaled the fumes. Harry could tell he was satisfied by the way he stepped gently back and laid the stirring rod down as if it were made of finest alabaster.

And when did I learn to read him that way?

Draco turned around then, and Harry's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth at both the passion and the uncertainty in the other man's face. He stood with his hands at his sides, but twitching as

if he would like to reach out. His words limped with difficulty.

"I—need to know what exactly you feel right now, Harry," he said. "I was committed to friendship that might never build up to anything more after the warning you gave me, and now…" He shook his head and stared at the floor. His cheeks bore a delicate flush. "Now you've leaned against me for comfort when we confronted Emptyweed, and now you're staring at me as you wouldn't stare at a friend."

Harry licked his lips. Draco had done most of the reaching out so far, though, granted, it hadn't been reaching in a manner Harry was inclined to appreciate. And Harry might crush that pride Draco had apparently inherited from Lucius if he made the wrong move, or at least turn Draco accidentally away from him.

"I do like you as more than a friend," he said, and took a step forwards. He wondered if telling someone else he liked them should be this much labor. *Work produces the best results,* Healer Pontiff's voice sounded in his head, and her advice might be sound even if her loyalty was not. *No matter how slow or ponderous it seems. You will never achieve by sitting back and waiting for inspiration alone.* "I like the way you work, the way you care for your parents, and the way you can open your mind and home to someone like me, even if I don't understand all the reasons why. You can even argue with me and not be mortally offended. I like all of that."

Draco's neck twitched as if he wanted to look up, but in the end he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the floor. "That's not enough," he said, voice thick. "You probably like all that about Weasley, and yet you don't want to go to bed with him. Do you?" he added suddenly, and then bit his lip so hard he drew blood.

Harry found himself smiling. It was easier, now, to move the rest of the way forwards and clasp Draco's wrist. "No, I don't," he whispered. "It takes a different combination of admiration and trust and liking for me to want to sleep with someone. My relationship with Ron has never been like that."

Draco made a shuffling little step. Harry reckoned he was pleased at the news but still annoyed with himself for asking. "And your relationship with me?" he asked.

"I want it to be like that," said Harry, and gathered up all the courage he used to want for his Potions exams and leaned in to kiss Draco on the lips.

Draco made a noise of startled delight and wrapped his arms desperately around Harry, kissing him back until his vision blurred and his head rang. Harry kept control of the kiss, though, enough to draw away when he grew in need of air and whisper, "I'm still going to make mistakes. But thank you for everything you've done for me so far. And I really do need to show more trust in you. I can't even imagine how extraordinary it must be for you to reach out to someone like me and not have your hand accepted immediately." Draco's shoulders tensed a little, as if he were wondering which reaching out Harry meant, but Harry didn't attempt to clarify. It could stand for all the occasions Draco had asked something of him and Harry had turned away. "But you kept

trying anyway, and you've managed to overcome your biases towards me now. It would be silly if I couldn't do the same, when you've shown the greater trust."

"I'm not sure about that," Draco said. He was still trembling slightly. Harry caressed the back of his head and kissed the side of his neck, surprised but pleased when Draco immediately went still in his arms and then groaned. Apparently he'd found a sensitive spot by accident. Draco caught his breath, though, and went on speaking with some effort. "You were the one who came and stayed in our house."

"And you were the one who opened your house to me." Harry was more content than he would have believed, standing there with Draco Malfoy in his arms. He might have believed it if someone had told him this was his future, but only in the same way he had believed evil of Julius and Xavier when he learned what they really wanted from him. Of *course* things like that would happen, because Harry's life had taken strange turns that he would simply have to endure. But to be happy like this—Harry half-feared to move, as if doing so would shatter a dream in which he had another family and acceptance and a path towards love. "The one who took the burden of caring for me on yourself—"

"Via Rogers."

Harry wondered for a moment if Draco was protesting in order to secure extra compliments for himself, and then chuckled. Of *course* he was. And Harry didn't mind, because he was entering this relationship with his eyes open. He knew what Draco needed, and he was confident in his own ability to provide it. Even what Draco wanted might not be such a problem.

"That's true," he said. "But it was the impulse behind it that's admirable. Even your trying to keep me in the Manor and away from the hospital was admirable in its way. Stupid, but shouldn't everyone be allowed a little stupidity in his life?"

Draco shoved Harry away from him and stood there, eyes brilliant, face flushed and happy, lips slightly parted. He tried to speak, but ended up shaking his head and stealing another kiss from Harry.

"I have to finish the potion," he said.

"You've already finished it," Harry said, taking a glance over Draco's shoulder at the potion, "or you wouldn't have allowed yourself to become distracted by me."

"You think all you are to me is a *distraction*?" Draco reached out for him, and Harry allowed his shoulders to be clasped, because he was short of breath.

That was so unlike what I expected him to say. I expected some remark about how I couldn't possibly know if the potion was ready or not, and—

And really, was it so surprising when Draco had shown that he liked and respected and trusted

Harry?

"No," he said, and kissed the side of Draco's neck again, so that he could pull the groan from him. Certainty swung through him like a pendulum and solidified. "Not anymore."

"And what will happen once I drink this potion?" Lucius turned the vial back and forth with what Harry would have thought was scientific curiosity the week before. Now he concentrated and could see the way that Lucius's small finger, folded against the glass of the vial instead of stuck out like all the rest, conveyed nervousness.

"The dreambane will stream from your body." Draco stood at the foot of Lucius's bed, close to Harry. Narcissa hovered not far away, her gaze passing back and forth between her husband and son.

"It doesn't sound a pleasant process." Lucius turned the vial upside-down, a procedure only possible because it was corked. Harry tensed anyway. From the sudden tight arch of Draco's neck in front of him, he wasn't too happy himself.

"It isn't," Draco said shortly. "Purges never are, and this one less so. The dreambane will seek out every orifice for emergence it can, and it will come out mingled with a stream of blood."

Harry winced. Lucius merely snapped his fingers, and a house-elf appeared in the corner of the room. "We'll have to change my sheets quite often, then," he said, and uncorked the vial to pour the chalky potion inside down his throat.

Draco sucked in a harsh breath. Harry stepped up behind him and bent to whisper in his ear. "What's the matter? Was he supposed to take only a few drops at first?"

Draco shook his head. "He startled me, that's all," he said. "Sometimes I forget how much he really trusts me."

Harry was sure the answer was honest, and he permitted himself a moment's smugness that only two other people in the other world would ever get to hear the like from Draco Malfoy.

Lucius coughed, and a small stream of milky blood escaped from the corner of his mouth. A moment later, bubbles of brilliant red emerged at his ears, and one burst on the side of his eye. Harry flinched instinctively. Narcissa watched with a pursed mouth, as if she were thinking of the sheets. Draco leaned closer, observing. Lucius himself examined his hand critically; perhaps he expected the dreambane to exit from beneath his nails, too.

Draco suddenly hissed.

"What?" Harry whispered.

"Something's wrong," Draco said. "The potion should have produced a heavier flow by now. It's impossible that I brewed it incorrectly, but—"

Wounds burst out all over Lucius's body, face and shoulders and chest and legs and hands. For a moment, Harry caught a glimpse of tooth and gums through the holes in his cheeks, and then Draco was screaming incoherently and trying to get to his father. Narcissa had taken a step away from the bed, hands folded in front of her, eyes fixed and staring.

Harry grabbed Draco's shoulders, pulled him out of the way, and raised his wand. His voice didn't shake as he spoke the incantation, "*Congelo!*" because he wouldn't let it shake. The spell would freeze time for Lucius's body and buy Harry extra hours to study what had gone wrong. Obviously, their enemies had used a trap that made the removal of the dreambane from Lucius's body a trigger for the resumption of the Mirror Maze's worst attacks; what Harry needed to know was how.

The spell flared around Lucius's body in a brilliant white corona, and then vanished. The blood went on breaking out everywhere that it wasn't supposed to, and from Lucius's open mouth, he was screaming without sound.

Lucius was dying in front of Harry's eyes, and he had no idea how to stop it.

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Chapter: 18

Thank you for all the reviews!

Chapter Eighteen—One Strand in the Web Touches More

Harry felt his attention splitting into three. One part of him wanted to keep casting healing spells at Lucius until he revived, no matter what those healing spells were or what they cost Harry in terms of energy. Another part wanted to comfort Draco. Another part wanted to vomit and rush out of the room, just so that he would be too busy to notice the moment of Lucius's actual death.

But the thought of losing a patient who had become family pressed against his throat like a knife.

He accepted you into his home, he listened to you when he had every reason not to, and you are not going to fail him by letting him die.

Harry seized Draco's wrist in one hand and squeezed down, making Draco gasp at the sudden pain and focus dazed, tear-stained eyes on him. Staring at him, Harry pressed down again and snapped, "Invoke the Malfoy blood magic. Now."

Draco opened his mouth as if he were going to protest or explain the risk that the magic would kill other members of the family was too great. Harry shook his head, and Draco swallowed and closed his eyes, seeming to fall down within himself.

Harry felt the swell of power passing across him, and wanted to lose himself within it as he had done when he and Draco helped heal Lucius of the *Sectumsempra* and Scalper's curses. But he couldn't. He had to take control and manage this.

Even though he knew little about the Malfoy blood magic. Even though the only clue he had that this technique would work was something Healer Pontiff had once mentioned, and then only in connection with a spell that allowed two experienced Healers to work together. Neither Harry nor Draco was a full Healer, and the spell was tricky and invasive.

But Harry simply didn't have time to worry about either his lack of skill or Draco's probable reaction later.

"*Guberno carmen de Malfoy!*" he said.

The magic ringing him and Draco froze for a moment, an odd sensation; Harry felt as if his lungs had become stone, so used had he become to breathing the power and existing within it. And then the magic reoriented and streamed through him again, making Harry feel as if he were shining like a star. It was an effort to keep his mind focused on the *one* thing he wanted the magic to do, instead of sending it off to accomplish anything he dreamed of.

"*Congelo!*" he said again, the time-stopping charm he had tried to use once before, and which hadn't worked.

This time, he felt the shudder as the Malfoy blood magic slammed into the Dark magic wreaking havoc on Lucius's body. Harry opened his eyes and took a step forwards, his fists clenched, his wand wavering. The force of power passing through the phoenix feather core might actually crack it, but that worry was distant, compared to the puddles of blood and torn edges of skin covering Lucius's body.

And as it had done once before—Harry's mind scrambled and leaped into an insight he couldn't have had until now—the reluctance of Lucius's enemies to let him simply die came to his rescue. They had wanted him to *suffer*, and therefore the combination of curses had been designed to cause a heavy, lingering death. Harry doubted now that even the randomly appearing wounds in his body that had been the first symptom of the curse would have killed him immediately. Instead, they would have gone on opening and then closing again until the people behind this felt he had endured enough pain.

Which could take a long time.

It was a sadistic motive, particularly repugnant to the Healer in Harry, but right now it was

working for them. The curse hadn't killed Lucius yet, and its power was split several different ways so that the Mirror Maze could bend, flex, and concentrate damage in many places on the body, as Harry had told Lucius once before. Had they been dealing with a straightforward Mirror Maze that focused pain like a lens focusing sunlight, Lucius would already have been dead.

As it was, Harry's single-minded magic, trying to do only one thing, forced the other slowly backwards. Harry saw the Mirror Maze manifest above Lucius for a moment, a crystalline, surging web of light. It turned black and cracked into dust that sifted back down, vanishing as it touched the peeled skin.

And then those wounds stopped bleeding, as every life process in Lucius obediently locked itself into place, obeying the *Congelo* charm.

Harry sagged, panting, barely catching himself on the bed with one hand. But they couldn't afford to lose time, so he raised his wand and cast a spell that would tell him if Lucius retained enough life-force to survive when the time-stopping charm was removed, or if he would need to be sent into a healing coma. That spell burst like a golden firework above the bed, then rushed back together and formed a corona above Harry's eyes, presenting a reassuring vision of a slowly breathing man. Yes, he could survive. The time-stopping charm had succeeded, and Lucius would not have to spend months recovering.

Harry felt relief more powerful than the magic. He would have been grateful to fold his hands on the bed before him at the moment and collapse into a healing sleep of his own.

But he had done something wrong just now, even if it was in the service of a greater good, and he needed to face the consequences. He had seized control of the Malfoy blood magic from Draco, directing it so that it obeyed his will only. Two Healers might work together that way if one was more skilled in the types of spells that needed to be performed, or if one was knowledgeable and the other powerful, with the experienced one directing the other's magic. But otherwise, it was a grossly inconsiderate thing to have done, and Harry knew Draco wouldn't be happy about it.

He stood up and turned around.

Draco was watching him with startled eyes, as though he had just seen Harry slash a wound across Lucius's chest himself. He cradled his wrist where Harry had squeezed him; Harry could see a bruise forming. It took an enormous effort not to look away, and to speak the words he had promised himself he would speak. "I could be charged and fined, if not placed in Azkaban, for taking control of your magic without your permission. If you want to do that, I won't resist, but please wait until Lucius has been treated. I've studied the Mirror Maze deeply enough that I think I can find a solution and release him from the stasis spell in a few days."

Draco put his head in his hands. Harry, not knowing what that meant, turned to Narcissa.

She held her hand out to him, and when he looked at her uncertainly, she took the extra step forwards to lay it on his arm. "I am amazed," she murmured, "though perhaps I should not be,

that you think Draco would drag you before the Wizengamot for this. Professional Healer ethics do not seem to sit well with Malfoy ethics, however. It is no wonder that you feel so out of your depth here." Her hand moved, smoothing up and down his elbow.

Harry didn't know what was going on, but he was pretty sure it wasn't what was *meant* to happen. He turned away from Narcissa and looked at Draco.

"You just saved my father's life," Draco said. His voice was choked. "*Again*. If you had to use my magic to do it, who cares? That means I got to have some part in rescuing him, which I needed, after my potion caused him such pain." His eyes shut, and Harry thought he was struggling against tears.

"Draco, no!" Harry reached out with his free arm to embrace Draco and drag him close, because Narcissa still showed no sign of letting him go. "That wasn't your fault. It was completely the fault of whoever set up the spells so that giving him the dreambane purge would make the Maze react."

"And the reason that you had to take control of Draco's magic comes from the exact same source," said Narcissa into his ear, her fingers tapping hard on the bone of his elbow. "Whatever it may have cost, Harry, the result is worth it."

Draco nodded frantically against Harry's shoulder. "You thought of a solution in the midst of all that—screaming," he said, tilting his head cautiously towards the bed where Lucius was frozen, as if he might awaken and cry out again. "I couldn't have. I was panicking, which is something I was taught never to do."

"I was no better," Narcissa said softly. "Under other crises, I have managed to retain my coolness of temper, but my husband has nearly died too often in the past fortnight. We owe you yet another debt, Harry, or we would, if it were reasonable to talk of members of the same family owing each other debts. For that reason, accept Draco's forgiveness and think no more of it. You have my blessing to do whatever you must in the name of saving Lucius."

"Mine as well," Draco added.

Harry had a long moment when he thought he might break down. He had not expected to be given such latitude; he had not thought he deserved it. He had come to appreciate the gifts and the kindness that Draco, Lucius, and Narcissa offered him as individuals, but now he caught a dim sense of what it would mean to be absorbed into a family, where guilt was not unforgivable and mistakes didn't mean the end of a relationship.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Draco lifted his head. Harry touched the back of his neck, thinking he might need more comfort, but found he was staring at his father with fixed eyes. Harry frowned.

"I'm trying to memorize the way he looks," Draco said, as if Harry had asked the question of what he was doing aloud. "That way, I won't be inclined towards mercy when we punish the ones who did this to him."

Harry gritted his teeth. *And here's another reminder of how different we are, and the things family bonds can't smooth over,* he thought wryly. *I'll have to move fast to ensure that our enmies get a fair trial.*

On the other hand, Draco had let Emptyweed go with only a headache. Maybe he would forget about violent vengeance if Harry could involve him in saving Lucius's life.

"I know nothing about how potions might interact with spells like this," he said. "I'll need your help to figure that out."

Draco turned back so that his forehead rested against Harry's chin. "You're hopeless at Potions, Potter," he said, but his voice was soft.

Harry pressed a kiss into Draco's hair, and only then remembered that Narcissa was watching. He flushed. She raised an eyebrow and gave him a faint smile that Harry could at least hope was approving.

"That's it."

Harry stared at the list Hermione had passed him through the Floo. For a moment, he thought it was the same as the parchment he had given her yesterday containing the names of the hospital administrators, and he was about to ask why she had given it back to him again. Then his tired eyes made out new words among the blurring letters, and he forced himself to read carefully.

Two of the administrators, Burne-Jones and Neverlong, had connections to Death Eater families, though carefully buried through aliases and spelling changes to the original names. Another, Foxe, had a nephew who had died in the war, suspected to have been killed with Lucius Malfoy's wand.

"That's why they wanted him to suffer," said Hermione. "It really is the strangest alliance, Harry, between people who want to punish him for betraying Voldemort and the ones who want to punish him for what he did whilst he was in service to Voldemort."

"You're certain of this?" Harry blinked, and the letters on the page changed place yet again. He'd spent so much of the last sixteen hours reading books on the spells in the Mirror Maze and the possible threads by which they linked to each other that his brain was rebelling against absorbing more words.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Several of the people they worked with were in the Ministry, and the Ministry even had records on the Death Eater connections and the Foxe connection. They were

interviewed before the Malfoy trials, but the Aurors concluded there was no need to call them in as witnesses. From there, it was just a matter of—leaning on a few people." Her mouth moved in an unpleasant smile. Harry was reminded that he knew very little of the seamier sides of Hermione's job.

"It's nothing that could hurt you, is it?"

Hermione snorted. "No. You'd be surprised how cooperative people become when you offer them the chance to talk about something they clearly disapprove of but were frightened to talk about before, as long as you promise them immunity from legal prosecution." She looked unhappy for a moment, then shrugged. "I wasn't *happy* to promise that, in a few cases, but I really don't think any of the people I spoke to are guilty." She stared at Harry. "And you'll make sure to protect the people who are from Malfoy wrath, won't you?"

"If I can," said Harry, the snappish tone emerging in his voice before he could stop it. "At the moment, I'm more worried about curing Lucius than I am about what happens to the people who did this."

Hermione smiled. "Of course you are." Suddenly her gaze sharpened. "And when was the last time you rested, Harry?"

"I'm going to cure that now," Harry said, standing, "as soon as I can drag Draco away from his books."

Hermione nodded and shut down the Floo connection on her own. Harry braced himself with a hand against the mantle and shut his eyes. He needed to take the information Hermione had found down to Narcissa, because she would be better able to do something with it, given her own connections with Death Eaters' wives, but he didn't think he could manage the stairs between his room and Lucius's.

And then he remembered, and nearly smiled. He called, and Rogers appeared with an eager bow, extending his hand for the parchment.

"Narcissa," Harry murmured as he handed it over.

"Of course," said Rogers, but he hovered for a moment instead of vanishing immediately. "And Master Harry will go to bed and get some food and take care of Master Draco."

"Yes," Harry said, "I will."

"Master Harry will keep his word," Rogers said with satisfaction, and popped out. Harry tied to ignore the sense that there was an invisible *or else* attached to that sentence, and stepped back into the library, where Draco had brought the relevant potions books from the lab as well as all the books on Healing magic in the house.

One glance at Draco roused all the mediwizard instincts Harry had ever had. His face was so pale it looked unnatural in comparison to his hair, and his hands were bloodless as they gripped the sides of a large book. He held his face close to the page, as if he could no longer read the words from a reasonable distance. Scattered around him were piles of crumpled parchment, puddles of spilled ink, and five broken quills.

Harry stepped up behind him and put his hand on Draco's shoulder. "Come on," he said quietly. "You need to rest."

Draco flung his head back and stared up. His eyes were desperate, and Harry would have winced from the sadness in them, except that he had seen worse things in his life—including Lucius lying so still in the midst of a lake of blood. But the sadness still hurt him, enough that he put his arms around Draco and kissed him on the cheek.

"I know the solution is here," Draco whispered. "I *know* it is. If I can just find it—" His hands scrabbled over the sides of the table for a moment. "What if I go to bed, and that means I miss a discovery that could save his life?"

"That won't happen." Harry gently pulled him from the chair and towards the bedroom, murmuring Cleaning Charms as they went. He would have liked to take the time to enter the shower, with Draco in tow, but he didn't think either of them would remain awake through it. "Lucius is under the *Congelo* charm. It won't fade."

"They might have put on some spell that could dissipate it." Draco twisted restlessly in his arms, but didn't actually try to pull away. "We don't know enough about the Mirror Maze to say that they didn't."

"I know that much," Harry said. "I'm absolutely sure they didn't foresee this happening. In fact, the magic they used in the Maze might actually help the stasis spell endure, because they wanted him to remain alive as long as he could under the stress of such pain."

Draco gave a low sob. Harry kissed his cheek, his ears, and his mouth before he laid him gently on the bed.

"Do you mind sleeping in your clothes?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't have enough strength myself to undress you." He yawned. *Nor interest, right now,* he admitted to himself. He had always become less interested in sex when he was under intense stress, something Xavier had never understood.

"I mind sleeping alone," Draco said, and extended his hand.

Harry smiled. The question itself was a risk, of a sort, given how powerfully Harry had rejected the idea of having Draco in his bed before. But Harry had a need for company himself, right now.

He climbed into the bed and wrapped his arms around Draco, who rolled so that his head was resting in the crook between Harry's neck and his shoulder. He sighed and seemed to fall asleep at once.

Harry expected to remain awake, stroking his back and watching over him. Instead, his body relaxed as it absorbed the warmth of Draco's beside him, and then he melted, slowly, away from the surface of wakefulness into a heavy slumber.

"Harry? Harry, wake up."

Harry stretched luxuriously and opened his eyes. Draco's face was hovering above him, and for long moments, Harry couldn't work out how that had happened.

Then he realized he was flat on his back in his bed, with Draco leaning over him on his elbows.

He arched his neck, touching his lips to Draco's in a kiss. It seemed natural to do that when he was in bed with someone as handsome as Draco.

Draco moaned once, and then wrapped his arms around Harry and buried his head back where it had been when he fell asleep, his cheek resting heavily on Harry's collarbone. "How did you do that?" he murmured. "I feel more hopeful about my father already, even though we haven't *done* anything yet."

Harry laughed and embraced Draco, his fingers digging into his shoulders, massaging as Draco had massaged him when he was hunched over his books. "It's not me, it's the sleep."

"But you still knew when I needed to go to bed," said Draco.

"If you're determined to give someone credit for that, it should be Hermione. She's the one who reminded me that we both needed to rest."

"Why did you rest *with* me?"

From the emphasis of the question, Harry knew he was talking about Harry's presence in the bed, rather than his deciding to sleep at the same time. He answered in the same tone he'd been using so far, a mixture of gentleness and amusement. "Because I wanted to. And because you asked. And because you've shown that you can keep your more unreasonable demands under control."

"Is that all it takes to get around a declaration you make?" Draco sounded both surprised and smug. "You're easier to handle than I imagined."

Harry swatted him on the shoulder. He was consciously refusing to let himself think about Lucius still lying in his bed, white and still, waiting for help. He might not feel like having sex right now, but there were other ways to have fun, and they were a necessary way of releasing

stress. *One strand in the web touches more,* as Healer Pontiff would say. *The amount of relaxation and fun you've allowed yourself will influence how well you can do your work and how much concentration you possess.*

Kreacher still hadn't returned with a report on her, Harry noted. He wondered if that meant Kreacher was finding it difficult to determine her allegiances or because he had nothing conclusive to report yet.

He pushed the thought away when Draco murmured, "I'm hungry."

Rogers appeared at once, with a tray so heaped with dishes that Harry was amazed he could carry it. He saw the dark brown of chocolate and the pale color of ice cream among the red of fruit, the brown of toast and bacon, and the neutral color of porridge, and he raised an eyebrow at the house-elf.

"Master Harry and Master Draco are needing many different kinds of strength," Rogers said, and set the tray on the table that pulled out of the end of the bed.

Harry sat up and moved to the end, where he was relieved to find two smaller plates on that enormous platter.

"Fetch me bacon," Draco said, his voice prissy. "And some of the chocolate, and some of the ice cream. And then you can come here and feed me strawberries with your fingers."

Harry snorted and placed the food Draco had requested on a plate, then handed it to him, forcing him to sit up. Draco gave him a disappointed stare. Harry shrugged. "What can I say? Kisses are one thing when a patient is sick, but sex is another."

Draco ducked his head, so that his hair fell across his face, but Harry suspected he disagreed. Well, he could disagree all he liked, so long as he didn't actually try to interfere with Harry's treatment of Lucius. And Harry knew he wouldn't.

Afterwards, however…

Harry smiled, licked bacon grease from his own fingers, and wondered ruefully if he was being too hopeful by deciding that there *would* be an afterwards, that Lucius would come out of this alive. But allowing too much pessimism tended to destroy his concentration far worse than too much optimism. That had certainly been the reason he'd failed his first Potions exam, if not his second.

When they had finished eating, Rogers produced a piece of parchment. "This is Mistress Narcissa's response," he said.

Harry took the letter from him with a hard stare, wondering why the elf hadn't given it to him before the breakfast. Rogers returned a serene glance, and Harry knew the answer. He had

wanted Harry and Draco to think about breakfast instead of work. Sometimes, Harry thought grumpily as he read the message, Rogers had the strangest sense of priorities.

My sons:

I have now been to visit the Burne-Jones and Neverlong houses. I made sure to choose female relatives I thought would not know about the plan, so they would have no reason to suspect me, but might betray incriminating answers from innocent ignorance. They have confirmed that their Death Eater relatives have spent much time by themselves lately; Angela Burne-Jones in particular complained about this, as she had wanted to show her new dress robes to her aunt and uncle.

More significantly, in each house was a new painting of a star-shaped pattern, which I have sketched below. Both the ladies seemed very proud of it, and mentioned that it was a recent purchase, a sign of some alliance pending between families. They thought it to be a marriage alliance. Might it have something to do with Lucius's condition?

Harry sat up the moment he saw the pattern Narcissa had sketched. It did indeed form the rough shape of a five-pointed star if one only looked at the outer lines, but in the middle, the lines joined and darted through a web of astounding complexity. And in the middle of the bottom right-hand corner was the self-reversing spiral pattern Healer Pontiff had confirmed existed in the Mirror Maze.

The spiral pattern you suspected existed in the first place, his doubt hissed at him, *and that a suspect Healer confirmed existed. What if you're wrong? You're only a mediwizard.*

Harry gritted his teeth and shook his head. He had confirmation in the books and in the training that he had received at the hands of people other than Healer Pontiff, though none of that training had been as kindly and as freely given. He would trust the spiral pattern existed until he had proof otherwise.

"This is the pattern of the Mirror Maze in Lucius's mind," he said quietly, holding the parchment out to Draco. "I'm sure of it. How that would make the Maze interact with the dreambane purge, I don't know, but—"

"No wonder the bloody potion didn't work," Draco said. His face looked as pale as it had yesterday, but his lips were thin with annoyance instead of with barely suppressed panic, and Harry noticed the change with a lightening of heart. "Nothing with dandelion seeds in it would work, laid against a star-pattern like this. There are variations of the purge that the books recommended, but I had no reason to think that the standard potion wouldn't suffice."

Harry laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, you didn't."

Draco looked at him with a fierce grin. "I can tell you how the potions I try next would work with this pattern, if you can tell me how you plan to undo the spells and in what order."

Harry smiled back. "Let's go, then," he said, and as they rose to return to the library, he reflected that research really was more fun when done in such clever and congenial company.

No one said anything when they gathered in Lucius's bedroom for the second time two days later. Narcissa had already read a message from Draco that seemed to explain as much as she wanted to know, and she stood out of the way with her hands folded in front of her and gaze passing grimly back and forth between Harry and Draco. Draco had uttered his last sound, a snarl of triumph, when the new potion, chalky with a light green tinge, worked successfully on a rat given dreambane a few hours before. And Harry was too full of hope and despair, wracking him in alternating waves.

He *thought* he was right. The book on Dark magic mazes the Malfoys had—a book Harry had never heard of before and suspected had been banned fifty years ago—gave several examples of a star-like maze combined with a spiral one, though not one utilizing the specific combination of spells that had been used to harm Lucius. Harry had read the directions new to him until he saw them blazing in his mind when he closed his eyes, and the rest was a standard procedure for undoing spell mazes.

But he still would have liked to consult with Healer Pontiff. He would have liked to consult with Emptyweed, for that matter. They were Healers, and they knew more than he did. Draco could reassure him about the potion, but Harry was the one who understood Healing magic and the one who had to put on a brave face when Draco asked if he would learn anything new if he studied any longer.

Harry knew he wouldn't. But what if he had gone wrong from the beginning? What if he had missed something vital about the clues to the maze? What if Healer Pontiff had lied to him when he went to see her and the reverse spiral was not really part of the Mirror Maze at all?

Harry swallowed and focused on Lucius. He lay under a mass of blood still, because the stasis spell froze everything, and touching him to clean up the blood would have meant opening the wounds again. Harry's hand shook as he lifted his wand.

Narcissa took a step towards him, so that Harry could feel her warm presence at his back, though he didn't turn around. "I trust you," she murmured.

Harry nodded once, and then began to chant the spells.

The Mirror Maze remained the fundamental pattern for the curses that had been cast on Lucius; that had not changed from the time Harry used the spells that revealed it. But the star-like pattern combined with the reversing spiral referred to the order in which he would have to undo the spells. If he went in the wrong direction, if he tried to take off one curse that needed another removed beforehand in order to become harmless, he could kill Lucius himself.

He edged out over a dark abyss as he cast, eyes fixed on Lucius's legs rather than his face. He would see new wounds open there if he did something wrong. He thought he could stand to see Lucius's foot severed better than further damage done to his face, which he already needed a harsh regimen of healing potions to recover from.

Slowly, they peeled away, the Dark spells meant to slow Lucius's healing, to make him suffer more pain than he would have from an ordinary injury, to addle his mind so that he could not make clear decisions about what he should do to save himself. The more Harry pulled off, the more he hated the people who had done this to Lucius. No, he hadn't been punished as much as he should have for deeds like giving the diary to Ginny, but the Wizengamot had declared him free to go. Taking the administration of justice into one's own hands was neither possible nor clean.

Harry should know.

The Cutting Curse fell away, then *Mansuefacio*, then *Hebeto.* Harry found the twisted *Sectumsempra* buried at the uppermost point of the star and took great delight in destroying it. He flinched when he encountered the Flaying Curse and an intense pain spell that was a cousin to the Cruciatus.

His confidence grew as he persisted and no new wounds opened. He wasn't a Healer, maybe, but he was a damn good mediwizard. And his wand, his hands, and his brain seemed to be linked in a flowing triangle of power now, passing back and forth, brimming with more magic instead of less even as he tired.

When he looked up at last, with only the Permanency Spell still to go, it was to see Draco pouring the last of the new dreambane purge down Lucius's throat. He was looking at Harry now, and not his father. Harry held his eyes and whispered the final *Finite.*

The air above Lucius turned chill; Harry could feel the last of the Dark magic fighting for its right to exist. Narcissa took a step forwards as if she could shield her husband from the curse's malice.

And then it was gone, so suddenly that it was like watching summer displace winter. Harry blinked and staggered a bit. Lucius lay with whole skin under the pelt of blood, and no new wounds opening.

Narcissa made a sound that Harry thought was as close to swearing as he would ever hear her come.

Draco *smiled*, and Harry felt himself flush from the combination of gratitude and promise it carried.

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—Hard Truths

"It's been ten hours now."

Harry opened his eyes slowly, blinking. He could have sworn he had lain down just five minutes ago, but the voice murmuring in his ear said otherwise, and so did the languor in his muscles, come to that. He rolled over and looked up at Draco, who was sitting beside him in the bed and running a hand through Harry's hair as if fascinated with the texture.

"I've been asleep ten hours?" Harry wanted to say more, but a yawn cut him off. He stretched his arms above his head and grimaced; sleeping oddly on the pillows had given him a twitching pain in his neck.

"Ten hours since you cured my father," Draco corrected. "And he's sitting up, eating, talking, and sleeping without ill effects." Harry could hear the smile in his voice as he shifted on his knees behind Harry. "Drinking healing potions to ensure his skin doesn't scar, though that, he *does* complain about. Here," he added, as Harry shook himself. "Let me."

His hands clasped Harry's shoulders and began to stroke; then his thumbs pressed into the nape of Harry's neck and pressed down hard. Harry arched, gasping. For a moment, the pain was unendurable; then it melted, and Harry collapsed against the pillows as if the massage had cut all the wires in his body.

"You don't make the potions sweet for him?" he murmured hazily. "If you did that for me, surely you can do it for him."

"No one deserves sweetness more than you do." Draco's voice had descended from the pitch Harry was used to hearing it at, and had a trace of a hungry growl. He leaned forwards, and Harry felt a powerful jolt of arousal as he imagined what they must look like from the door. Despite the awkward position, though, Draco's hands never stopped their slow, steady massage. "And I want to give it to you. Let me."

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

Draco made a sharp sound that Harry didn't even want to define, and nipped at the back of his neck. "Roll over," he said.

Harry had just started to when a loud pop shattered the silence, and Rogers appeared at the end

of the bed with a tray in his arms and an announcement on his lips. "Mistress Granger is wanting to speak to Master Harry through the fire."

"It can wait." Harry had never heard Draco's voice like that, so low and sensual it made him arch simply from the sound. His hands had dropped from Harry's shoulders to his waist and were working their way under the robes Harry had slept in because it was too much trouble trying to take them off. Harry wondered if he was cheating and using a spell to make his hands warmer; Harry half-flinched from the brushes of heat Draco's fingertips gave off, when before his skin had seemed a natural temperature. "So can that breakfast, for that matter," Draco said, and his teeth closed on Harry's shoulder. Harry arched again, and moaned this time. Draco leaned heavily against him, mouthing at the bite he'd made. "Come back later, Rogers."

"Mistress Granger will be calling back and calling back," Rogers said, his voice shrill with distress. "Rogers does not want to be making up excuses for Masters Harry and Draco fucking whilst there are still enemies abroad."

Well, that effectively broke the mood, Harry thought as he rolled over and gently caught Draco's wrists in his hands. After one glimpse of Draco's eyes, he focused on his chin instead; he had never known how much gray eyes could change when the pupils were dilated and lust was shining from them. "Later," he said. Draco gave a protesting little buck, letting Harry feel Draco's cock against his arse. "Think of how much better it will be when we have no distractions."

Draco made another growling sound—Harry hadn't known he was so fond of them—and butted his erection up against Harry one more time, shutting his eyes. Harry grunted helplessly.

"So long as you promise," Draco said. "I *want* this." His voice was still in the sensual register, making it sound as if it would be a sin to deny him. Harry licked lips that felt chapped and managed to ignore Rogers's piercing eyes long enough to nod.

"I do promise," Harry said. "And do you really think I want it less?"

"I don't know." Draco's voice had risen and turned coy; his eyelids drooped over his eyes in a parody of innocence. "I know you didn't seem enthusiastic at first, and then the few touches of eagerness I saw in your face were overwhelmed by concern for my father, to the point that I almost thought it was *him* you came to the Manor for."

Harry let his legs spread and rolled to the side until Draco could feel his own erection, which had hardened the moment Draco bent over him. "I came for both of you," he said. "I just didn't realize the truth at the time. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgiven," said Draco. "With your promise to resume later." His hand trailed lightly across Harry's groin, so suddenly that Harry had no time to do more than let his eyes roll back in his head. "So long as you only come *for* me in the future."

By the time Harry could recover, Draco had already crawled to the end of the bed and was choosing calmly and quietly among the scones, biscuits, and grapes Rogers had brought. Harry shook his head and moved up beside him to eat a hasty breakfast, knowing Hermione wouldn't like to wait.

He tried to think of that, and not of the way Draco kept letting his wrists brush against Harry's. The last thing he wanted was to appear flustered and out of sorts in front of Hermione, who had no doubt spent all sorts of time gathering the information that would make it easier for them to track down the conspirators.

Harry had not expected Draco to come with him into the spare library where Hermione had made the Floo call, but he did, and took up a standing position behind Harry, his arm falling, as if casually, across Harry's shoulders. Harry would have rolled his eyes and told him he didn't need to stake a claim in front of Hermione, but his friend already looked impatient.

Besides, Harry would never admit it to Draco—yet, anyway—but he liked the feeling of the arm resting there, solid and immovable, a part of his life.

"I have fairly solid proof about who cursed Mr. Malfoy," said Hermione, barely nodding to Draco. She wore a cold smile of triumph, and Harry hid a shiver. Draco leaned closer to him anyway. "I finally found a witness who was more curious than the rest and less loyal to his family. He eavesdropped on a meeting between Burne-Jones and Neverlong. They were the ones who came up with the first ideas for the curse and chose Smythe as an appropriate dupe to cast it. He'll require a payment from your vaults, Harry. Can you manage that?"

Harry started to answer, but Draco interrupted, voice full of vindictive glee. "He'll have whatever he wants from the Malfoy ones."

"Good." Hermione rustled about for a moment, then produced a Pensieve and passed it through the fire. "He's also agreed to confess under Veritaserum in a small setting with only a few people present, if that's necessary," Hermione added.

"Hopefully it won't be." Harry handed the Pensieve to Draco, who cradled it under his right arm like a newborn baby. His left arm remained draped across Harry's shoulders, as if it were unthinkable than he should move it. Harry tried not to preen. Hermione would never understand why he was doing it, and it was too awkward to try and explain right now. "Thank you, Hermione. How can we repay *you*?"

"Make sure that Burne-Jones, Neverlong, Foxe, and the rest are tried fairly," Hermione said bluntly, "not subjected to vigilante justice."

Draco drew a breath, but said nothing. Harry wished he had that luxury himself. He leaned forwards, holding Hermione's eyes. "Of course I want them to have fair trials," he said. He wouldn't look at Draco. "The last thing I want is suspicion to cling to my adopted family. And

their families would probably be quite willing to turn in the Malfoys for hurting their loved ones, even if they disapproved or didn't know about the original plan to curse Lucius."

"You never finished listening to the Malfoy laws," Draco said, his arm suddenly pressing on Harry's shoulders like a chain. "One of them is vengeance. No one is allowed to get away with hurting a Malfoy."

Hermione's face shut down in sharp lines of disapproval. Harry sighed, murmured some words to her that he hoped would excuse his turning his attention away, and then faced Draco. Draco looked obstinate and pleased with himself both at once, as if he were obeying a rule he knew to be absolutely right. *Not a good combination,* Harry thought. "Listen," he said. He massaged the back of Draco's hand with his cheek, since it lay on his shoulder, and held his eyes. "You let Emptyweed get away with only a headache, even though he could have told us about the conspirators earlier and even though he cast the headache curse on me."

"You were paying too much attention to my words and not enough to my wand movements." Draco's eyes glittered. "I cast a nonverbal spell that will give him a permanent headache, lasting the rest of his life. I thought it fit payment for the kind of low-grade, constant suffering he caused you."

"You did *what*?" Hermione said.

Harry wanted to bang his head against a wall, especially when Draco glanced at Hermione and arched a brow. "It's all right," he said. "There's no way he'll trace it back to our family, since I *Obliviated* him. He'll certainly never remember coming to the Manor."

"It's the fact that you did it at all—" Hermione began.

Harry moved, standing so that he was literally between his friend and Draco. He realized, as he reached out and cupped Draco's face in his hands, that he had no convenient term for his relationship with Draco. Friend? Not when they had conflicts of ideals like this one. Brother? But no, Draco had made it clear he wanted to make love to Harry. Could they be lovers when they had barely spent time together in bed yet?

"In the future," he said, voice so quiet that it would force Draco to pay attention to him, "don't do such things."

"I have to protect you," Draco responded simply.

Harry smiled. "I appreciate the impulse," he said, and heard Hermione snort behind him. Well, right now he was dealing with Draco, and even if he wouldn't reject Harry for not choosing the right words, Harry still wanted to choose ones that wouldn't hurt him. "But it makes me uncomfortable when someone hurts others for my sake. Whether that hurt is physical, magical, financial, or otherwise," he added, seeing Draco open his mouth and guessing what was coming next. "In self-defense or the heat of battle, it's one thing, but I still tried to use non-fatal spells on

the people who attacked me in hospital."

Draco's eyes were nearly as dark with fury now as they had been earlier with arousal. "I'll find them," he said. "And I'll make them suffer."

"But that's exactly what I'm asking you not to do." Harry lowered his voice even more and stared directly into Draco's eyes, smoothing his hands up and down his face. "Unless what I want doesn't matter to you?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "You're being *manipulative.*"

"Then I fit right into this family, don't I?" Harry asked, even as he smiled to let Draco see he was joking.

Draco bit his lip for a moment. Harry was surprised that he felt comfortable enough around Hermione to show such a sign of uncertainty, and then realized that, with the way he stood, his head and shoulders were blocking her from getting a good glimpse of Draco.

At last Draco, folding his arms stubbornly, said, "They also hurt my father. And if you think Father and Mother will be content to let our enemies go unpunished for doing that, then you have not learned anything about them at all."

"I'll speak with them," said Harry. Draco blinked, probably at the implacable tone in his voice. Hermione made a small spitting noise, as much to say that that wasn't good enough. "For now, there's something I need to say to Hermione. Why don't you go see Lucius and Narcissa and prepare them for our talk? You can even tell them exactly what you want to say and make up a secret strategy to use against me. You won't find me so easy to convince."

Draco walked slowly towards the door of the library. Once he paused with his hand on the wall and looked back, opening his mouth. He ended up shutting it and walking out without saying anything, however. A faint line between his brows denoted the whirling of his mind, Harry was certain.

Harry turned back to Hermione.

When Harry stepped into Lucius's bedroom, it was to face cool expressions from all three Malfoys. He reminded himself that they had forgiven worse things from him; his seizing Draco's magic had been a crime even if it had saved Lucius's life. And Draco had admitted that he didn't expect Harry to abandon his principles. Harry shut the door behind him, though there was no one to close out except the house-elves, who didn't need doors, and leaned against it.

"If you will, Lucius," said Narcissa, never taking her eyes off Harry.

"The fourteenth law of the Malfoys," said Lucius, in tones that suddenly made Harry wonder if

Rogers had been imitating an ancestor after all, or just his current master when he talked like this, "calls for the protection of the family. No insult shall be suffered when it can be avenged. The authorities at any time are unlikely to do much for us. We must dispense our own justice, our own mercy, and our own punishment, as we must reward our best friends in secret if we would keep any allies at all. You shall remember this, and carefully contrive subtle and suitable punishments for those who hurt us, that others may fear and hesitate to harm a Malfoy again."

"Well," Harry said, "*that* doesn't make much sense."

Narcissa's lips twitched. Draco's eyes opened wide. Lucius was back to the cool mask he had worn for the first few days Harry tended him in hospital. "And why not?" he asked. "I must admit it sounds very attractive to me, having endured the pain that I did." He touched the side of his face, as if Harry would forget about the fading scars the healing potions had only just begun to affect.

"It wants you to punish people in secret, and yet do it in such a way that everyone will fear you?" Harry snorted.

"The ones who matter will know," Lucius said gravely. "In this case, the members of the Burne-Jones and Neverlong families who were not involved in the plot against me, and any Death Eaters or 'victims' of mine who might have declined to avenge themselves this way. They will know the risk is not worth it." His hands twitched on the covers, as if he imagined clutching his wand and having his enemies in reach at the moment.

"You have enemies who were clever and brutal enough to devise this curse and cast it on you in the first place, through a dupe who, I'm sure, had no idea what he was doing," Harry said.

"Smythe did not, no." Lucius smiled. "We have looked through the memories in the Pensieve. They are few and the explanation straightforward. When they had put the curse together, which took many tries, according to our informant, they had to work extensively with Smythe to be sure that he would cast it correctly and scatter his saliva with the dreambane on me at the same time. Many of the minor spells were linked together not so much to cause me to suffer as to baffle any attempts at healing."

"And the families of people like *that* are the ones you want to enrage," Harry said flatly.

There was a long pause. Narcissa took a step back and then stood there looking like a contented cat, which Harry felt was a pair of decidedly mixed signals. Draco closed his eyes. Lucius leaned forwards. "This time, we shall be prepared for them. And it's at least possible that they won't seek revenge."

"Do you *believe* they won't?" Harry asked quickly.

Lucius slowly shook his head.

"Then I think this is stupid," Harry said. "You risk drawing down danger on yourselves when you're still vulnerable—" He paused when he saw Narcissa dart a quick glance at him. "We risk drawing down danger on ourselves," he corrected himself. Narcissa gave him a small smile that made him feel so absurdly good he knew he would have to watch what he did in the future, as far as letting her approval determine his actions. "If we let the Aurors take charge of this, those families will blame the Ministry and not us. There's no risk of getting in trouble with the Aurors for *our* revenge, either. We buy time for Lucius to recover, because the remaining enemies won't move whilst the *Prophet's* attention is on us, will they?"

"No," said Draco, in a faint voice. "They have similar laws about the lack of wisdom in drawing publicity to their vengeance."

"Well, then." Harry made a motion as if he were brushing invisible dust off his hands. "There's one more advantage. If this is the fourteenth law of the Malfoys, it stands to reason that it's fairly far down the list, and the others are more important. I think we have a better chance of survival if we live through our revenge vicariously." He ignored Draco's little mutter about how "Granger must have taught you that word." "And you can go on showing me how to settle into the family. My comfort and safety, in this case, is more important than revenge."

Narcissa smiled fully this time. "I agree with Harry," she said. "You know that I've disagreed with drawn-out revenge from the beginning, Lucius. I don't want you to make the same mistake that Neverlong and Burne-Jones did by giving you time to get treatment and figure out who was behind the attack. And as we can think of nothing that would be sharp, sufficiently painful, and yet undetectable, turning the matter over to the Aurors is the best course."

"There may be something yet," said Lucius. "There are several books of Dark curses in the library that I haven't looked through in years."

"And I was helpless during most of this," Draco said passionately, his cheeks flushed. "I want to *do* something."

"Helping Lucius recover with your potion wasn't enough?" Harry asked.

"I want to hurt someone. That's different from healing."

Harry didn't reply to that. It was too opposed to his own principles for him to make a rational argument. Instead, he turned to Narcissa. "Of all the people in this room," he said, "you and I are most likely to get our wish."

Narcissa raised her eyebrows. Lucius said, in a lower and colder voice than Harry had yet heard him use, "Malfoys owe loyalty to the first of their name, Harry. You will tell me what you have done *at once.*"

Harry grinned and made a point of facing Lucius slowly. He thought Draco might figure out the truth before he could tell it, but Draco's forehead was still wrinkled, giving him the pleasure of

announcing, "My friend Hermione Granger, who works in the Ministry and discovered most of this information for us, has already alerted the Aurors. If all went as scheduled—" he made an elaborate show of drawing out the watch Mrs. Weasley had given him for his seventeenth birthday and checking it "—then all the conspirators will have been arrested by now."

"I *knew* you wanted to stay behind with Granger for a reason!" Draco exclaimed in fury.

"As you told me," said Harry, putting away the watch and smiling at Draco, "I'm a Malfoy in more ways than one."

Lucius spoke with a gentleness that would have frightened Harry more than open anger, if he had decided to allow himself to be frightened. "We can strike at them as easily when they are in Auror custody as we can when they are free. It's a noble effort, Harry, but shall only fail."

"No, you can't," said Harry. "The Aurors aren't always competent, that's true, but they've been much better at holding criminals since Kingsley Shacklebolt became Minister. And you'll still need a regular dose of healing potions for several weeks, which means you won't be away from the house for any length of time."

"Besides which," Narcissa said then, her voice as light as a fall of flower petals, "I agree with Harry. No vengeance is worth the possible loss of life and prestige that we would incur."

Lucius turned to glare at his wife, but she looked serenely back. She was more than a match for him, so Harry wasn't worried that her support would suddenly vanish. He looked at Draco in turn, and wished he had something more solid than the door to brace himself against, because Draco's face was a mask.

When he spoke at last, it was slowly, consideringly, as if he had thought of several different perspectives on the situation that would never occur to Harry. "You're quite determined not to allow me my vengeance, are you?"

"Quite," Harry said.

"I'm not bound to the house by my father's limitations," said Draco. "Or by my mother's opposition." Narcissa slewed a glance sideways at him, but Draco didn't choose to take notice of this. "You'll have a task to keep me here."

Harry ground his teeth. He had planned to open his own Healing practice as soon as Lucius was cured, or within a week, when he had made absolutely sure that no ill effects from the Mirror Maze's curses lingered. "I would prefer to think that you're a responsible adult who knows when he's been outmaneuvered, and—"

"I'm a responsible adult who knows a sound bargain when he hears one," Draco said. Finally, he smiled. Harry thought the edges of the smile curled up like parchment touched by fire. "I want you to agree to study for your Potions exam again, and to let me help you."

Harry stared at him. Then he shook his head. "I'd agree if I thought that would do any good," he said. "They only let me sit my NEWTS a second time because I'm Harry Potter. And I did as badly the second time as the first. No becoming a Healer without an Outstanding on both the theory and the practical portions." He heard the bitterness coming out in his voice, and did his best to swallow it back. "Your offer's generous, but you can't help me."

"The NEWTS are offered as many times as needed to anyone in a particular profession," Draco said, "who's already shown several years of proficient practice in that profession. No, they won't give it over and over again to lazy students who haven't chosen a job. But they will give it to you." He surveyed Harry with something uncomfortably close to pity. "You never looked again once you failed the second time, did you?"

Harry blushed.

"And I don't know if I'm so generous," Draco mused, "when I'll drive you harder than Snape ever did." His face twisted with a complex expression as he mentioned Snape, sorrow and resignation and exasperation and anger. Harry found himself wanting to know what that meant. He wanted to know everything about Draco.

"I never had a problem with the amount of work involved," said Harry. "It was Snape's teaching method I objected to."

"It's settled, then." Draco smiled, and his eyes looked sleepy, which rather made Harry distrust him. "You'll let me teach you Potions, and in return I won't seek vengeance. Shall we aim for a date of October in which to take the NEWTS?"

"I wouldn't want to inconvenience—"

"That would be most convenient for *me*," Draco said, with a hint of sharpness in his voice.

Harry liked to think he knew when to give in with good grace and when to stand his ground. He nodded, and Draco reached out and ran a lazy hand up his arm. Then he turned to Lucius; it seemed that his parents had taken the chance to look in the Pensieve but Draco hadn't, and he wanted to do so before he and Harry resumed their interrupted morning activities.

It was just as well, because, when he returned to his bedroom, Harry found Kreacher waiting with a letter from Healer Pontiff.

Harry stared at the letter sitting on the bedsheets and wondered if he had the courage to read it. Kreacher was being roundly scolded by Rogers because he was "a disgraceful and dirty and despicable example of a house-elf, whom Rogers is being ashamed of." He had already reassured Harry that he had seen no suspicious activity from Healer Pontiff; he had listened to all the private conversations she had with other people, and she only ever talked about Healing and

sometimes her nieces and nephews, when she firecalled her sisters.

On the other hand, she had placed a letter on her kitchen table that morning and told Kreacher he might as well take it to his master. She'd announced that without looking around, and immediately walked out of the room. Kreacher had wavered, but in the end accepted the letter and carried it back to Harry.

In the end, Kreacher's whimpering in front of Rogers was what convinced Harry to read the letter. Poor Kreacher had suffered enough, and if Harry rejected what Healer Pontiff had chosen to say to him, whether it was the truth or a bundle of lies, that suffering would be for nothing.

Dear Harry:

First, I want to say that, as you have collected enough evidence to show you have some suspicions of me, you may send your house-elf to follow me again at any time.

Second, I know what you wish to accuse me of. Others have accused me of the same fault in the past, and I can only answer that I am too old and set in my ways to change.

"Others have accused her of conspiring with the hospital administrators?" Harry muttered.

I do not notice enough. I have many cases on my mind all at once, and give a full portion of my attention only to the life-threatening ones. I only ask persistent questions, dedicated to uncovering the truth, when I know that my patient has a reputation for lying or concealing issues vital to his health. I did not have such an impression from you. Perhaps I should have asked more questions of you when you came to me to heal your injuries. But I trusted you to take care of your health.

Harry could feel his ears flaming. It was true that, when Healer Pontiff asked him if he'd taken any damage from curses during his flight from the conspirators, Harry had been as vague as possible. He hadn't mentioned the Breath-Stopping Curse at all, and had only admitted to the one that cut bloody lines on his face and legs because those couldn't be hidden. And Healer Pontiff had nodded and healed those.

Could he blame her for taking him at face value? It was only Draco and Hermione who had dug so much deeper, and that was because they *knew* him as a friend, instead of as a mentor knowing a student.

I have always been aware that there are things happening in hospital of which I do not approve. When something like that crosses my path and I can find out about it, then I use my influence to investigate and stop it if I can. At other times, I fear I let vital things slip. But there are always questions I should ask and do not—that is my fault as lack of concentration is yours—and always patients to be helped. I choose to help patients instead. I pride myself on never having lost a patient to hospital corruption or for any factor that was not inherent to me or the case. But you seem to suspect a connection between me and the people who hunted you.

I deny such a thing. I care for you deeply, Harry. But from the beginning, I could tell you were a talented mediwizard, and did not need as much of my individualized attention as other students. So I spared my attention for them, and only looked in on you occasionally.

Harry looked at the letter in wonder. He had always thought Healer Pontiff spent extra time on him, and it was somewhat humiliating to be told she didn't.

On the other hand, the *reason* she didn't made him feel honored. And it would explain why she had never noticed Emptyweed's headache curse; she trusted him to tell the truth about how bad the headaches were (which Harry never had) and to have to skill to tell if someone had cast a curse on him.

I can understand if this does not soothe your anxieties. Send your house-elf to follow me again if you wish. Or, if the Malfoys will allow you to invite me to their house, I can visit next Saturday at three in the afternoon. I understand the Malfoy son is in Potions training. He can make Veritaserum for me. I prefer to take it in tea; I have an abnormal sensitivity to potions that others find tasteless.

I hope these truths are not too hard for you, Harry.

I remain

Yours,

Emily Pontiff.

Harry sat back slowly on the bed and stared at the ceiling for long moments.

Then he began, even more slowly, to smile. He was intensely, insanely, astoundingly happy.

There was an excellent chance his mentor was not his enemy. He had a second family that accepted him, besides the Weasleys, and a home like no other he'd ever known. Lucius was cured. Hermione had promised to contact him immediately if there was a problem with the arrests, which likely meant they had gone smoothly. He had a chance to pass the Potions exam and become a full Healer in the future.

And then the door opened, and Draco stood there with his eyes gone brilliant dark gray, as they had been that morning.

Harry swallowed and sat up.

And now, he and I are going to make love.

Yes, I'm very happy.

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

This is the last chapter of *Bloody But Unbowed.* Thanks for reading along!

Chapter Twenty—Brilliant as Blood or Love

Rogers and Kreacher turned around and looked up at Draco. A moment later, they had both vanished. Harry blinked. "Did you say something to them?" he asked, momentarily shaken out of his rising daze of lust.

"They know when we're serious and won't be persuaded otherwise." Draco shut the door behind him and began to undo his robes, his motions smooth and leisurely, as if he knew that Harry wouldn't run away or object this time. Harry licked his lips several times, and still couldn't make them moist enough to be comfortable or pull enough saliva into his mouth. "Unlike this morning," Draco continued, and his voice had deepened into a growl. "Unless something else has happened to convince you otherwise in the meantime."

"God, *no*."

Draco seemed satisfied with that half-involuntary gasp, given his flashing smile. He took another step forwards. His robes hung off his shoulders now, revealing a long strip of chest incredibly pale for someone who stepped out of his house more than once a week. Harry wanted to lick it.

And why shouldn't I? There was no law that said he had to remain motionless on the bed whilst Draco undressed. Harry stood and crossed the room with a few swift, silent steps.

Draco, his attention on a stubborn button, didn't notice until Harry was standing in front of him. He looked up with a slight gasp as Harry seized his chin, and then Harry was kissing him, thrusting his tongue in gleefully, to have more of that taste he'd only really experienced the day in the lab when Lucius sickened.

No need to think of that right now. It's past and done, and finally, finally you can think of Draco the way you were meant to.

Harry pushed Draco's robes out of the way and spent a moment tracing the line of his shoulder blade, running back to his collarbone. Draco stood still, his eyes shut and his breath departing his lips in quick little pants. Harry smiled and dipped his head to follow the path with his teeth and

tongue. Draco swayed back and forth, seeming torn between writhing and remaining motionless to experience the sensation more intensely.

What happens if I scrape my teeth against his skin a little harder? Harry realized he had no idea how much roughness Draco liked in bed; it wasn't a common conversational topic, understandably enough, when his father was still sick. A deep thrill ran through him at the thought of how much he had to learn about Draco, how much to explore.

In this particular case, what happened when he scraped his teeth across Draco's shoulder was that Draco came to life. He twisted, grabbed Harry's neck, and hauled his face back up for another ferocious kiss. It was the first kiss in which Harry had ever forgotten where he was. He tasted only the smooth dart and liquid whip of Draco's tongue, heard only his own choked moans and Draco's hungry half-snarls, until Draco suddenly pushed him backwards. Harry didn't even have time to grasp at Draco's arms before he found himself flat on his back on the bed, Draco crawling above him and pinning him to the sheets with his knees around Harry's ribs. Harry panted, not sure whether the fall or the parting of Draco's lips from his had startled him more.

Draco stared down at him with a possessive, covetous look that made Harry's cock harden to the point of pain. Other lovers had looked at him much the same way, if not for the same reasons; Harry had discovered too late that Xavier used that expression because he was thinking of how he was the only person in the wizarding world to have Harry Potter in bed at the moment. But Draco's look seared as if he could change the past as well as the future, as if Harry had never had any lover but him.

He pushed his robes off his shoulders, never taking his eyes from Harry's. They collapsed in a soft puddle of cloth onto Harry's legs, teasing his groin with a whisper of fabric. He tried to push his hips into it, but Draco's legs kept him locked down, and the next moment the robe had been shoved to the floor.

"You should undress," Draco said. His voice was the guttural growl that had aroused Harry this morning. "I want you naked."

His eyes were brilliant with desire again, and Harry nodded agreement, not sure he could speak. He reached for his wand, but Draco caught his wrist in both hands, rubbing his fingers softly along the skin beneath which Harry's pulse beat. He smiled, and Harry found himself moving only as Draco directed, gripping the first button on his robes.

"The slow way," Draco said. "I've seen far too little of you, and I want to appreciate the first sight."

Harry felt himself blush. Draco's eyes were too bright. This, Harry thought, was the expression he had probably worn when ordering Rogers to hang the mirror in the bedroom. He looked as if he really thought Harry beautiful, as if he were someone who *deserved* to be looked at in such a fashion.

But Harry knew Draco wasn't stupid or thoughtless. Perhaps, this once, he could believe that he did deserve it.

He undid his robes slowly, holding Draco's fascinated gaze sometimes, and looking at the way Draco's hair hung around his face at other times. Light strands of it fanned back and forth; Draco's head must be quivering, perhaps with the swallows Harry could hear him making. Harry's fingers itched with the urge to grab that hair and drag down Draco's face for a kiss.

But he seemed intent on Harry undressing first, so Harry unbuttoned his robes until he reached the point at which he couldn't push them back any more because Draco sitting on him prevented it. "Draco," he whispered.

"Hmmm?" Draco's voice rang high on a rasping note at the end, like the humming of a bee.

"You'll need to lift up."

Draco blinked slowly, seeming to fetch back his brain from a very long distance. Then he gave a sly smile Harry groaned at. "I do, don't I?" he murmured, voice a growl again. "Well, I wouldn't want you to miss me too much in the meantime."

He settled back, rubbing his arse against Harry's cock. Harry bucked in sheer surprise at first, and then closed his eyes and matched his imagination to the firm flesh touching him. He had never seen Draco's arse without the protection of cloth, but not even cloth could disguise how good it felt.

And then Draco swung his leg away from Harry's hip and crouched on the bed beside him. When Harry popped one eye open to glare at him, he saw Draco had a smug smile.

Well, two can play at that.

Harry pushed his robes off as slowly as though he were about to change his mind any moment. He wore nothing but pants under them, so he had the satisfaction of seeing Draco's eyes widen and his breath quicken as he caught sight of Harry.

Then Harry rolled smoothly over, seized his wand, flicked it so that Draco's trousers rolled down his hips and off the bed—a charm he'd perfected for quickly undressing bleeding patients so that he could tend to their wounds—dropped the wand back on the table beside the bed, and bent to lick a long stripe over Draco's hip.

Draco let out a hoarse half-bellow; he'd probably intended to protest, but Harry had made him react in this undignified manner instead. Harry felt a moment's enormous glee. Then he moved his mouth and settled it over Draco's cock without warning, and that reaction was even *better*: an instant full-body flush and Draco's delighted, high-pitched "*Harry!*"

I'll be able to tease him about screaming like a little girl, Harry thought in contentment, before

he closed his eyes and gave himself up to the sensation.

Draco's skin was salty and sharp-tasting in his mouth, laying a stripe of fire along his tongue very much like the one he must have created on Draco's hip. His cock was unexpectedly thick just below the head, nudging Harry's lips apart an uncomfortable but satisfying distance and nudging hard against his palate. Harry swallowed around the fullness and used the motion to pull Draco's erection deeper into his mouth. His tongue lashed under the head and lapped at the vein running towards the shaft, and Draco fell back on the pillows, his upper body limp, his lower body tensed and his hips thrusting helplessly.

Harry clenched his hands in the sheets to keep from touching himself. He wanted Draco to do that. But oh, it was *tempting*, when Draco's thighs quivered and then fell open, his back arching as if he were offering his whole body to Harry to do what he wished.

The only thing that could be better was if Draco reached down and grabbed his hair. And his hand had settled on Harry's head, his fingers twining into the curls in a moment. Harry moaned in anticipation and opened his mouth wider, meaning to take Draco as far down as his throat as he could and *suck* to cause his orgasm.

"No, stop!"

Well, that's a first. Not even Francis, when he was disappointed at Harry for not doing the things in bed that he wanted to do, had ever stopped him in the middle of a blowjob. Harry swallowed his disappointment instead, licked the head of Draco's cock one more time, and lifted his head.

"*What*?" He didn't care if he sounded annoyed. He knew he was excellent at giving head. Draco had no right to look as if he were struggling desperately to control himself. He was supposed to be *losing* control, and losing himself down Harry's throat at the same time.

"Not like that," Draco whispered. He'd recovered at last, but his eyes were so dark they looked as if they were all pupil, and the hand that he used to caress Harry's cheek shook so much his fingernail nearly stabbed Harry in the eye. Well, that was something, at least, a sign that Harry had affected him.

"You want us to both suck each other at the same time?" Harry eyed Draco's mouth in interest. Fantasies were rushing through his head now, so thick and brightly-colored that he barely had time to identify one before it gave way to the next. He licked his lips to tell Draco he had no problem with that.

"No." Draco stroked his cheek more steadily this time. His mouth curled in an expression of hunger that had Harry clenching his hand in the sheets again. "No, I want to fuck you."

Draco had no right to sound so good when he made the *k* sound of *fuck*, either. Harry's body bent towards him before he could stop it, as if it were under Draco's will and not his own. Draco closed his eyes for a moment when he saw that.

"Yes," Harry said, with all the dignity and serenity he could muster, "yes, I think I'd like that."

Draco was on him then, pinning him to the bed and kissing him insistently. Harry kissed him back and wrapped his arms around his shoulders, rocking for a moment, testing whether Draco would prefer to lie down and let Harry ride him. But apparently Draco was a traditionalist in some things, because he took Harry's wrists in one hand and pinned them to the pillows above his head.

That works, too, Harry thought, and spread his legs, showing his arse to Draco. "Well?" he prompted, when Draco simply stared at him. "Get *on* with it."

"You wouldn't like me to simply get on with it," Draco whispered, even as he reached for Harry's pants. He had to reach twice, because he couldn't take his eyes off Harry's arse. Harry felt another warm glow of satisfaction and power spread through him. *He talked about how he needed to make me realize I was beautiful, but a look like that is better than all the words in the world.* "I have the feeling it would be a bit too—*much*—for you to handle."

"Braggart," Harry panted.

"Oh, no." Draco tore the pants off, then seized Harry's wand. When he flicked the wand, a large pool of shimmering liquid appeared on Harry's belly and coating his arsehole, making him yelp and wriggle. "At this, I'm exactly as good as I say I am."

Harry had never tried to hold someone's gaze whilst they were fingering him. He had thought it impossible, given that his instinctive reaction to pleasure was to shut his eyes and toss back his head. But Draco wouldn't let him look away as he slid his fingers slowly through the liquid on Harry's stomach, coating his hand and trickling it down to join the rest at his entrance, or when his first finger slid into Harry's arse, Harry realized how much more intense it was this way, like trying to hold still during an orgasm. His belly was tightening with delight; he gasped silently again and again, because he couldn't quite get his breath behind the sounds to make them into full words.

"*Yes*," Draco said, voice so thick he sounded as if someone were strangling him.

Harry felt satisfaction stir in him at that sound. He might be more affected than he had ever been, but so was Draco, and he saw no point in hiding it, so Harry could fully enjoy the sense of giving Draco pleasure even though he didn't have his cock in Harry yet.

When the second finger joined the first, Harry had to concentrate more fully on the sensations inside his arse. Draco kept parting his fingers and then bringing them back together and crooking them slightly, a regular motion that was surprisingly hard to get used to. Or maybe it was the idea that Draco was partially inside him that made him pant and squirm. Harry parted his legs without conscious thought that he'd do so, and Draco murmured and bent to bite at his hip.

Draco moved to add a third finger. Harry laughed, and then frowned. He hadn't meant his voice to shake like that when he chuckled. Well, it had, and Draco was already looking smug. Harry planned to take that arrogant look away, anyway, in a moment.

"Two's enough," he said.

"How long has it been since someone fucked you?" Draco managed not to sound as if jealousy was eating his stomach out, but Harry could hear the effort it took him. He laughed again, and Draco scowled, his free hand tightening on Harry's waist. He'd moved it down when he saw Harry could be trusted to keep his own hands in place.

"Four months or so," Harry said. "And that was Xavier Brandeis."

"That fool who confronted you in hospital?"

Harry nodded. "And the one who cast the Beetle's Bite on me through the wards at Grimmauld Place."

Draco bristled like a cat. "You only forbade me from taking vengeance on the people who hurt my father," he said.

"But I did tell you that I didn't want you ever taking revenge for me, no matter what the situation was," Harry said.

Draco curled his lip.

"Listen," Harry said persuasively, determined not to discuss past lovers when they hadn't even experienced each other in the present yet. "You can take a better vengeance on Xavier than by hunting him down, even if he never knows it." Draco arched a brow, and Harry smiled. "Make me forget him."

"*Yes*," Draco said in that guttural way again, and leaned back on his heels. He gave Harry one more heavy-lidded look, one more chance to back out. Harry lifted his chin and stared back stubbornly. Draco nodded and then lined up his cock with Harry's entrance. Harry spread his legs still further and adjusted the angle of his arse.

"Keep doing that and I'll come before I get inside you," Draco muttered.

Harry threw him a look of scorn which he knew mingled challenge with it. "Even *Xavier* never did that."

Draco growled and bent forwards, pressing into him. Harry held his breath, then let it out slowly. That technique had helped him relax in the past when a lover's cock was entering him for the first time.

He had never been entered like this before, breached so inexorably or by someone he had so wanted to have inside him, and his attention remained on Draco no matter how much he loosened his muscles or slid down to welcome him. Harry accepted the burn of the penetration gladly; it was yet another sign that this was really happening and not just a dream or another scene that Rogers could interrupt.

Draco stopped at last, his balls resting gently against Harry's skin, his head hanging as if the effort to enter him had been too much. He looked extraordinarily proud of himself. "All right there?" he asked, bending to lick a line of sweat from Harry's chest.

"More than all right," Harry said, and grinned at him. "Besides, you haven't *done* anything yet. Do you want to be a rival to Xavier or not?"

Draco snarled and snapped his hips forwards. Harry cried out, the lower half of his body rising from the bed and his toes curling. Draco smirked; he knew a cry of pleasure from a cry of pain, which was a point in his favor. Harry had had to reassure Xavier every step of the way, though perhaps that was less because Xavier had been a poor lover than because he liked being praised.

Draco gave a slow thrust the next time, then two more long ones, then three quick jabs that hit Harry's prostate and made his eyes fall shut at last. Even in the darkness there was no escape from the keen, almost cruel pleasure. It hunted him down, and he let his head fall back and his arms twitch.

"Keep your hands there," Draco whispered. He had settled into a steadier rhythm now, helped by the thickness and softness of the bed, which worked as well as a pillow placed under Harry's hips. "I like that."

Harry laughed low in his throat. He liked it, too.

And he liked the way Draco's fingernails dug into his skin, pinching and scratching too hard and marking him. He liked the way Draco had begun to release quiet gasps on the end of every thrust, as if his happiness had to escape somehow. He liked the way Draco's tongue would dart unpredictably across his skin, or one of his hands would brush Harry's cock. The sudden touches were about as frequent as the hits to his prostate.

He didn't realize he was moaning and sighing until Draco said, "Quite a concert you're giving me, Harry."

Harry opened his eyes, unsure if he most wanted to smile or glare, and then Draco, staring straight at him, grabbed his cock and rotated his hand around it, squeezing the head, at the same moment as he rubbed Harry's prostate firmly with his cock.

Harry cried out, the vision of Draco above him blurring as pleasure struck him like a sudden meeting with the ground after a fall from a broom. The feeling seemed to start in his bones, then collect in his belly, wash around, and shoot out through his cock. Draco never stopped softly

squeezing him even though it splashed his hand with white stickiness. Then he held out his hand to Harry to clean off, seeming utterly confident that Harry would instead of lying there limp and sated.

Harry sucked one finger into his mouth and clenched down with his inner muscles at the same time.

"No—*fair*—" The two words Draco spoke were just recognizable as he thrust forwards, paused, hesitated, froze, and then hammered out his orgasm into Harry, coming with force that sent him crashing onto Harry's chest before he finished, his hips still moving in languid pushes. Harry went on to leisurely clean up his come from Draco's fingers and enjoy, as he hadn't been able to before, the mere presence of Draco's cock in his body.

"I think that was a draw," Draco said at last, shifting around so he could see Harry's face without disconnecting their bodies. "I trust that I've sent Xavier entirely out of your head."

Harry put on the perplexed expression he had used to confound embarrassing schoolmates whom he didn't want to admit to knowing. "Who's Xavier?"

The best part was that Draco actually looked worried for a moment.

"Mr. Malfoy. Hello." Healer Pontiff nodded to him as she sat down on a chair in the ground floor room Narcissa had told Harry the family kept specifically for visitors whom they didn't want to see the rest of the house. The walls were bland and so was the furniture, white marble in the one case and brown wood in the other. Nothing in the room said anything about who the Malfoys were, the aesthetics they favored, or what they liked. Harry could admire the effect, as little as he thought the pretense necessary.

But then, one thing he hadn't managed to match his new family in yet was paranoia.

"Hello." Draco's smile was grim. Harry knew that look. Draco had worn it when he gave Harry a preliminary exam in Potions theory and realized how much he would have to learn. Harry had suggested abandoning the project if it would cost too much time for Draco to teach him, and Draco had suggested resuming his vengeance. That was the end of that conversation.

Healer Pontiff didn't seem to notice Draco's expression, or more likely she did and chose not to care about it. She smiled and held out her hand to Harry. He went to her, though he looked carefully at her palm first, to appease Draco. Draco had drilled him in the signs of the most common poisons that could be slid beneath the nails and sprayed across the palm, as well as some hand weapons that could be hidden up a sleeve. He appeared convinced that Healer Pontiff was an assassin who had trained in obscure Muggle martial arts.

"Thank you for coming," Harry murmured in turn. He saw no sign of weapons or poison, of course, only his mentor's hand, calloused from years of work. He clasped and shook it, making a

mental comparison between it and the softness of Draco's hands. He was always doing that since he and Draco had become lovers. It was disconcerting; he was more physically aware of Draco than anyone he had ever shared a bed with.

Well, that only makes sense. You've never had a lover like him.

"Anything to free myself from suspicion in the eyes of my favorite student." Healer Pontiff settled comfortably back in her chair. "Have you finished putting the Veritaserum in the tea? I like a dash of sugar, no more than that."

Draco gave Healer Pontiff a steady annoyed stare as he tipped three drops of Veritaserum into the cup of tea standing ready, following it with sugar he had to summon Rogers to fetch. Harry concealed a grin as he sat down in the chair opposite Healer Pontiff. The more willing she was to take actions that would clear her name, the worse Draco seemed to hate it. Presumably he thought it was only reasonable that everyone should skulk about as he would, refusing to reveal their secrets.

Pontiff sipped the tea and gave a satisfied sigh. "Some amazing changes in the hierarchy of the hospital," she remarked to Harry. "Burne-Jones and Neverlong have been arrested. And Foxe. Really, I wouldn't have thought it of him. He seemed content to condone the minor forms of corruption whilst driving out the major ones."

"He lost a relative to Lucius, as he thought," Harry said quietly. "The conspiracy involved a wide range of people, both former Death Eaters, or their relatives, and those who thought it permissible to strike back because they believed the Wizengamot was wrong."

"*Harry*," Draco hissed, coming up behind him.

"I intend to ask her to make a Healer's Oath to me," Harry said calmly, "so that she can't speak to anyone about what we say in this room without our permission. It's used all the time when a patient has only one Healer and wants to keep the condition secret."

Healer Pontiff nodded. "Very good," she said. She drank a little more tea, with a long sip Harry had never seen her employ before. Of course, they hadn't spent much time around each other that wasn't in training, and she had discouraged her students from having food or drink then, fearing it would distract them from a course of lessons in which the small details were usually the most important.

Harry felt sadness touch him as he thought about that. Her words had been more important to him than anyone else's advice; she had been more of a mentor figure to him even than Dumbledore. And yet they didn't really know each other. Pontiff had told him in her letter that she rarely noticed anyone's behavior unless it related to Healing. Harry had admired her for that, and for her otherworldly detachment that let her be serene under the worst circumstances, but he could see the costs of them both now.

"The Veritaserum should have had time enough to take effect." Pontiff carefully set her cup on the table beside the chair and gave them that graveyard angel's smile. "Ask me what you will."

"Were you involved in the conspiracy against Harry?" Draco demanded.

"No."

Draco frowned. Harry thought he would have folded his arms and stomped his feet, except he had to maintain a more dignified demeanor in front of someone not part of the family. Then he smiled as if he had just thought of a cunning new question that was sure to trap her. "Were you involved in the conspiracy against my father?"

"No."

Draco clenched his jaw. Harry knew he had barely prevented his mouth from hanging open like Neville Longbottom's in Potions class. Pontiff watched Draco with bright, intelligent eyes, causing Harry to cough and take over the interrogation. "Why did you never mention the headache curse that Emptyweed put on me?"

"He put a headache curse on you?" Healer Pontiff blinked.

Harry nodded. "You never noticed?" Yes, there were limitations to placing Healing at the center of one's life. He hoped that he would never fall victim to them again, but knowing himself, he probably would. At least he had Draco at his side now with his complementary obsessions, to coax Harry to study Potions or talk about the Malfoy laws or have sex.

Harry blinked. He had not realized how full his life seemed to him now, and how cramped and small his life in hospital seemed, looking back on it. He had been happy, but anxious, always afraid he would lose the next patient or receive a case he wouldn't be able to do a good enough job on due to lack of Potions knowledge.

"No." Pontiff sounded disturbed. "I knew you had headaches, but I had no reason to look closely at you for anything but immediate wounds." She gave him a half-embarrassed, half-apologetic look. "I was often thinking of my next patient already when I treated you, since I knew you had the knowledge of Healing magic to help yourself even if I missed something. I was more worried about your keeping your wounds secret out of misguided stoicism for so long that you would collapse. Therefore, I wished to treat the obvious ones. Your headaches were not life-threatening."

"No," Draco said between gritted teeth, "only livelihood-threatening."

Pontiff shook her head at him. "It is understandable that you would wish to blame me," she said, with a kind of gentleness that Harry knew would irritate Draco like nothing else could, "but I had nothing to do with this."

"And I know that now." Harry squeezed her hand with his. Pontiff looked at him with a peaceful smile. "Tell me, how do you think these changes will affect St. Mungo's?"

"For the better, in the long run. We will have new administrators, and whilst they might also be corrupt, they will notice what happened to the last who dared to be too open in their evil and temper their actions." Healer Pontiff spoke with warm, comforting authority. Harry relaxed. It was no wonder he had trusted her for so long. "In the short term, the publicity from the trials and from reporters trying to find out why Harry Potter left the hospital so abruptly will cause some trouble."

Harry grimaced. "Would it help if I gave an interview saying I left the hospital to treat a patient, not because I was disgusted with what happened there?"

Pontiff's hand gently squeezed his in answer. "Will you ever come back?" she asked.

"If he does, it'll be a long time in the future." Draco was beside Harry now, an arm resting across his shoulders as he'd stood when they talked to Hermione a fortnight ago. "I'm tutoring him in Potions, and he'll become a full Healer. And then he can have a private practice if he wants it, or work part-time for private patients and part-time for St. Mungo's. But he'll still belong here."

Pontiff ignored him entirely, looking at Harry. Harry grinned. That was another thing that would infuriate Draco, but it was a natural consequence of her trusting Harry: she wanted to see what *he* would say.

"Yes, I think so," Harry said. "Eventually."

"And the Malfoys' gifts have not been too heavy for you?"

"I've learned to carry them."

"Why would you say such a thing in the first place?" Draco sounded like a particularly indignant adder, kept for his venom to be added to healing potions, that Harry had once talked to. *He probably doesn't want to think she could ever have talked me out of coming to the Manor,* Harry thought, and reached back to clasp the wrist of the arm resting on his shoulder. Draco shifted his balance, but didn't look at Harry.

"Because I have treated Malfoys, and seen them try to recruit Healers before, when they had reason to trust someone," said Healer Pontiff. "Other families with much the same heritage and laws do the same thing. In almost every case, bringing the Healer into the family did not work. The Malfoys, or the other pure-bloods, expected miracles and perfect conformation to their way of life. The Healers, even when they were part of the same culture, had chosen other paths for reasons that often conflicted directly with that way of life. They either broke from their new families quickly or sank and lost their principles and their ambition, being content to live in luxury." She stared at Harry. "I did not want either to happen to one of the most talented mediwizards I have known."

"It's a good thing your family doesn't always manage to follow its own rules," Harry said gravely to Draco.

Draco cuffed him on the back of the head, but he looked rather pleased than otherwise. *Only a Malfoy,* Harry thought wryly, *would consider it a compliment that his family overwhelms other people's principles.*

"I have some hope, since you have managed to fit in," Healer Pontiff continued, "that you will cease to neglect your own health so severely, Harry. I imagine the Malfoys would not care to have their pet Healer die."

"He's far more than a pet Healer," Draco said stiffly.

Harry cleared his throat. "Draco's already pulled me up short when he thought I was going too far," he said. "And he has a better memory than I do for such things. I thought for sure I'd told you about being hit with the Breath-Stealing Charm when you treated my wounds after the attack in hospital. That you hadn't given me a potion for my lungs was one reason I suspected your involvement with the conspiracy."

Healer Pontiff's eyes grew sharp. Harry winced. He had only been a cause of the disappointment he saw in her face now once or twice, and he hated it each time.

"You said you had been cursed," she said. "You gave me no details beyond the obvious and a few nods when I asked you questions. But you were weary to the bone by then, and needed sleep more than you needed an interrogation."

Harry sighed. Yes, his memory had been the culprit in that one, and probably also his own sense of injured dignity, which wanted him to think he had done everything he could to act responsibly and reveal his wounds. "I'll try not to do that in the future."

"I hope not," said Healer Pontiff. "A Breath-Stealing Curse is nothing to let lie, Harry."

"That's what I told him," said Draco, his arm bearing down hard again on Harry's shoulders. "He'll listen to me, at least."

Harry relaxed. Draco was speaking now as if he had found some sense of comradeship with Pontiff. Harry hoped so. He wanted two of the most important people in his life to like each other.

It probably doesn't hurt that he knows he can make me listen when she couldn't, either.

"Good." Pontiff stood and smiled at them. "Bless you both," she said. "You have found something as brilliant as blood, Harry, something as brilliant as love. I would hate to see you squander it. Either of you." Her eyes went to Draco's face then, as if she thought him more likely

to do so.

"Thank you," Harry said, and took her Healer's Oath before she vanished through the fireplace that the Malfoys had temporarily opened to admit her.

"It's fine," Harry growled, and swatted a hand through his hair. The house-elves had spent hours tending it. He didn't need Narcissa fussing over it now.

"Fine is not the same as perfect," Narcissa said, "and Malfoys are always perfect when they appear in public." She took a step away from him, cocking her head and pursing her lips. Harry winced at the expression on her face. She was plotting something, and since she had insisted that he tuck his wand up his sleeve to create the perfect combination of reassurance and threat whilst she held her wand in her hand, he couldn't do anything to stop her.

All she did was swish her wand, but an immense amount of magic gathered over Harry's temples, sparking like a lightning storm. It pressed hard, and evidently made his hair satisfying for Narcissa, because she nodded. "Yes. Now go out."

Harry had no time to protest; he'd said he would give a press conference to the *Prophet* and other papers at one in the afternoon, and now it was one exactly. He ducked through a long green curtain they'd hung over the front door of Grimmauld Place to give him some privacy—of course the conference could not happen near the Manor—and the crowd went mad. They stood in a tent that used wizardspace to extend Grimmauld Place's yard and doorstep so they wouldn't spill into Muggle territory, and they began shouting questions so fast that Harry couldn't have kept track of them even if he wanted to.

Harry ignored them and spoke his prepared speech instead, which revealed the details of the conspiracy the family had deemed safe to release. The reporters learned, for example, that Lucius had been wounded, but not how, or how severely. They learned that several administrators of St. Mungo's were arrested, but Harry didn't mention which ones had Death Eater connections and which didn't.

And they knew, because Lucius had been quietly insistent about it, that Harry Potter from now on had a permanent association with the Malfoy family.

Harry added the part about not changing his name to Malfoy and about possibly continuing work for St. Mungo's in the future. But from the way that quills started industriously moving the minute he said he was accepted as part of the family and would spend some time living in Malfoy Manor, Harry had a feeling those amendments went ignored.

He was muttering to himself when he stepped down from the temporary podium Draco had Transfigured from one of the ugly kitchen chairs in Grimmauld, which was the only reason he could give later for not immediately noticing who approached him.

"Harry!"

He looked up in surprise just as Julius caught him in a hug. Cameras flashed, of course. Harry could feel Draco's jealous, rage-filled glare from all the way across the room. He grabbed Julius's arms and pushed them off his shoulders in the next moment, but the damage had been done, at least for people who thought a picture was worth more than a speech.

"Julius, what the fuck are you doing?" he asked, and didn't bother to lower his voice.

Julius blinked at him, but the smile that covered his face hadn't faded yet. He would think being on the front page of every newspaper in Britain was just wonderful, Harry thought. "I wanted to congratulate you on solving the Malfoy case," he said. Harry had never managed to persuade him that Healers didn't speak of "solving" cases in the same way Aurors did. "And I wanted to give you some information you probably won't learn unless you follow the course of every trial, because the Wizengamot would consider it minor. I know *you* wouldn't, though." He gave Harry the wink Harry had once found so charming.

Harry swallowed back fury, then wondered why. He was a member of a proud pure-blood family and had an established lover; why did he have to be polite to someone like Julius? "Tell me, then," he said, and used some withering sarcasm he'd stolen from Draco to fill his voice.

For the first time, Julius acquired a faint frown. But he was too self-confident to suspect that something was wrong until it forced itself into his face. "Well," he said, "I found out that those people approached Xavier after he made that disgraceful scene in hospital." Harry waited a moment to see if the irony of Julius complaining about that when he had made his own scene would strike him, but he was continuing blithely on. "They thought they could use someone with a grudge against you and who knew you well, because he might be able to get past your wards. They weren't able to convince him to use more than a Beetle's Bite Curse, but *still*. It might have got nastier if you hadn't moved to Malfoy Manor when you did, since they had an expert in wards speaking to Xavier. Aren't you glad he was caught with the rest of them?"

Harry forced himself to nod. At least it laid some suspicions to rest. "And was he also the one who removed the stabilization fields on Lucius?"

Julius went pale.

Several things fell into place with a *bang* in Harry's head. "You incredible bastard," he said, and the slow wonder in his voice combined with the tone of it brought the reporters swarming around them. "It was you, wasn't it?" The anger overflowed then, and Harry would have lunged forwards and cursed him if not for Healer's ethics and what Narcissa would think of such a scene. At the moment, Harry thought, the latter was the stronger force. "What in the world did you think you were doing?"

"I thought—well, I wanted to give you a chance to show off your Healer's skills, and that seemed the best way to do it." Julius cleared his throat. "And if he'd died, then you could have paid more

attention to me." He was pouting now. "I didn't like you choosing him over me, Harry, when I was just trying to tap you on the shoulder."

Harry stared at him.

"I knew you would come back to me if you left the hospital," Julius explained earnestly. "And you always said you would leave if one of your patients died. Besides, didn't Malfoy deserve it? He might have been the victim of that curse, but he did some horribly evil things."

"I'm not sure what's worse," Harry said slowly, putting his head in his hands. "Your faith I would come back to you if I gave up Healing, or your attempt to kill—no, wait, that was *definitely* worse."

"But you must miss me." Julius reached out as if to lay a caressing hand on Harry's elbow, but Harry jerked his arm back in an irresistible impulse; he would have felt cleaner if a giant shit-covered cockroach had been about to touch him. Julius stared at him. "Don't you? I was the best lover you ever had, and your objection to me couldn't have been serious. You would have told me to sod off it was."

"He would have told you to sod off if he wasn't too polite for his own good and in too much pain at the time," Draco said, and then his arms wrapped around Harry's waist and tugged him backwards. Harry leaned gratefully against the solid warmth of Draco's body. "And now, he's *my* lover, claimed and *mine*, and you've just admitted to trying to kill my father. I think Minister Shacklebolt will be extremely interested to know one of his Aurors endangered the life of a man the Wizengamot pardoned simply because of jealousy."

Julius lifted his wand a few inches.

Draco spoke a complicated charm that made boils open on every surface of Julius's body, including inside his nostrils and mouth and, Harry knew from experience treating the results of the spell, on his penis.

Julius howled and staggered away. He Apparated, but Harry was less concerned about that, because a number of reporters Apparated at about the same time. He was sure the Aurors would know the extent of Julius's crimes when the articles showed up on the front pages, if not earlier.

"*Must* you do that?" he demanded, twisting around to frown at Draco.

"He was lifting his wand," Draco said. "It was self-defense." He lowered his head to lick Harry's ear, though at such an angle it would be out of sight of most of the audience. "And you're mine."

"That, at least, is well-established," Harry said dryly. "But what you did—"

"Was the smallest thing it is possible to do and still retain the honor due you as a Malfoy." Lucius had appeared at Harry's side, his eyes scanning the crowd as if to make sure that Julius wouldn't

reappear. "And you are a Malfoy now. Permanently." He gave Harry a crocodile's smile.

"You had me make that announcement because you wanted everyone to see the Boy-Who-Lived as part of your family," Harry said in resignation.

Lucius inclined his head.

"You're *enjoying* the notoriety we'll get out of this."

"As I told you once," Lucius said, and smiled precisely as a camera flashed at him, "motives can be double without hurting anyone involved. I can value you for yourself, as part of the family, and still be smug that we will earn public favor and glory from your allying yourself with us."

"I wish I could just *give* you the fame," Harry muttered, leaning back into Draco and trying to conceal his smile. Seeing Julius erupt in boils had been very satisfying, but he couldn't give Draco the chance to think that he approved of such attacks.

"That would be best," Lucius agreed. "It would rid you of an unwanted burden and give a precious possession into the custody of one who would value it as it deserves. Alas, we do not live in an ideal world."

Julius, Harry thought, *isn't the only one who can't recognize irony.*

"I can't understand this! It's hopeless!" Harry flung the stirring rod at the wall of the potions lab and vaguely hoped it would shatter. It only bounced, however. After the first few days, Draco had insisted on replacing all the glass stirring rods with wooden ones, though he still tutored Harry in the theory of potions that needed to be brewed with glass.

Draco stood behind the cauldron, arms folded and eyes narrowed. He waited until the echoes of Harry's shout had died before he spoke, in an infinitely patient voice that Harry could have borne if it were coming from Healer Pontiff.

"It's not hopeless, and you can understand it. You're not stupid. I've seen you have a few flashes of insight about potions already, do something correct without being told to do it."

Harry glared at him. "Those are things I remembered from Hogwarts."

"Then that proves your brain can retain some information about potions," Draco retorted instantly. "You *are* going to do this, Harry. And not just because I would go out and take vengeance otherwise." A frightening smile slipped across his face. Harry knew he was thinking of the news that the Healers had failed, for the sixteenth day in a row, to cure Auror Adoranar of his case of boils. Draco had said only that he'd added something "extra" to the charm when Harry asked. "You'll do it because I want you to pass your Potions NEWT with an Outstanding and become a full Healer. And I always get what I want."

"Not always," Harry said, with a pointed glance at Draco's arse. "Sometimes you even enjoy not getting what you want." He'd persuaded Draco to let him top last night, and it had been a marvelously pleasurable experience for both of them.

"A Potions master cannot have his mind always in bed, even if he is brewing love potions," Draco said, quoting one of the interminable books he'd made Harry read. "He must think of the colors, the smells, the fumes, that make up his work. He must have an intellectual passion for potions, or he will never succeed."

"Talking of being in bed," Harry said, because what he would have said in response to that statement otherwise would have offended Draco for several hours, "I wondered about something. How will you have an heir to continue the Malfoy line, if you remain the rest of your life with me? I don't want you to get some woman pregnant."

Draco gave him a pitying look. "Harry," he said, "how did we acquire you?"

"Adoption by blood?" Harry blinked. "It's that easy?"

"It is *not* that easy. It will require several months of intense negotiation with the child's birth family to decide which properties and duties of the Malfoy family he or she should accept, and it will take at least a year before we find a suitable child, I'm certain." Draco stepped forwards. "Not just anyone can become a Malfoy."

"You wouldn't know it, looking at me."

Draco crossed the distance between them in a few easy strides and clasped his shoulders. Harry shivered. He always did when Draco looked at him with those wide, earnest eyes.

"I find you beautiful," Draco murmured. "From that twisted scar of yours to the feet that are far too hard and calloused from running around barefoot in your irresponsible youth." He kissed Harry on his forehead, just above the scar. "I'll tell you that as many times as you need to hear it, until you believe it, too."

Harry swallowed. "That doesn't have anything to do with me, or our future child, becoming a Malfoy," he managed to say, in a huskier voice than he liked.

"Of course it does," Draco said. "We simply would not have accepted you, even with the Heart's Blessing spell, if you had been utterly unsuitable."

"That's not what you said the first time you explained the spell."

"The depth of your ignorance of proper pure-blood culture demanded that I speak in simplicities. Now you're ready for the advanced course." Draco stepped away and turned back to the cauldron. "And you will be ready for it in potions, too, if I have anything to say about it. By

October, we agreed."

Harry smiled helplessly at Draco's back. His life had changed so many times and in so many ways in the last few months that it required a smile.

Especially when he thought of what he'd learned about the expressions Draco found most attractive, and which he would allow to coax him out of the potions lab and into bed—

"Harry?"

Harry blinked and looked up. He'd lost himself in daydreaming, and Draco looked at him with a knowing expression that was not like Snape's or McGonagall's or even his parents'; it was uniquely his own.

"Time to get back to work."

End.

Special Note: I will be moving at the end of this week (the 11th-15th of August) and don't know when I'll have Internet access again. It may not be for up to two weeks. I promise not to abandon my stories permanently.