Storyid: 3956922
FanFiction.net
Name: A Potion Named Desire
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Chapter 1 to 12

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Chapter: 1

Title: A Potion Named Desire

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

Pairing: Harry/Draco preslash, Ron/Hermione, past Harry/other women.

Summary: When Ron dies, Hermione falls into a deep depression. Desperate to relieve her symptoms, Harry reluctantly approaches "independent apothecary" (read: black market brewer) Draco Malfoy for help. Draco, agreeing to help for his own reasons, finds himself falling into a surprisingly intellectual companionship with both Hermione and Ron. But as they work together, two questions become paramount for Draco: How powerful will the Desire potion be when they've finished it? And what exactly is the mysterious potion that Harry takes every two weeks?

Warnings: Post-DH, ignores epilogue. Profanity, character death (obviously), clinical depression, lots and lots of Potions shop talk.

Rating: PG/K+ (mostly for language).

Author's Notes: Welcome to the first story in a series of three. The series title will be 'An Intellectual Love Affair.' This first part is preslash, moving strongly in the direction of slash, and will be about twelve chapters long. The story is focused mainly on a companionship of the mind being the first thing that attaches Draco and Harry, rather than shared danger or physical attraction. As such, it will be probably be more cerebral and not as action-oriented as my other stories, though the second story does get into Ministry politics.

Enjoy!

A Potion Named Desire

Chapter One—Out She Goes

"You have everything?" Harry glanced one more time around the flat he and Susan had shared, though he was certain they had already cleared out her belongings. It was a way to cling, for just one moment, to the warmth that had been between them.

"Yes. Thank you for everything, Harry."

The words were warm in and of themselves, and enabled him to look at her with a faint smile. "Well," he said, "if I weren't used to my girlfriends falling in love with my friends by the fifth time it happened, I'd have to stop having girlfriends." He paused reflectively. "Or having friends, I'm not sure which."

Susan Bones laughed and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. "I didn't mean just for not making a fuss when I met Zacharias," she said. "I meant for everything. For being a perfect gentleman when we were together, and understanding that love is stronger than liking, and—"

Harry clasped both hands above his heart and grave a dramatic gasp. "Stop, stop, I'm having more than my recommended portion of praise!"

Susan squeezed his arm with one hand. "You have been really great, though," she whispered. "I hope someday you'll find a girl who does fall completely and madly in love with you and *stays* that way."

"Or a man," Harry added helpfully. "At least in theory."

"Yes, you and your theoretic bisexuality." Susan rolled her eyes, then jumped when Zacharias yelled impatiently from below. "Oh, dear, he *will* think we're consorting up here together," she muttered, and waved her wand so that her trunk bobbed up neatly behind her.

"Remind me why you're together with him again?"

"Git," Susan said, which Harry told himself *could* have been directed at Zacharias, and then turned and hurried down the corridor. Harry lingered for a moment, watching her. Her face had lit up at the thought of Zacharias. He experienced a moment's wistful regret that he had no one in his life whose face would light up for *him* like that. The closest he had ever come was with Ginny, in the few months they had before their relationship went straight to hell.

Then Harry laughed at himself and closed the door. After five girlfriends lost to other people, he'd resigned himself to spending the rest of his life partially alone, if necessary. He still had his friends, and none of his relationships, of which all but one had ended amicably, prevented him from going out and trying again.

The silver clock on the wall of his flat chirped urgently, and Harry jumped. In the excitement of

bidding Susan goodbye, he'd nearly forgotten to take his potion, and *that* would have been disastrous. He hurried across the open front room of the flat and through the door to the loo on the far side. A swift flick of his wand unlocked the enchanted cabinet that none of the visitors to his flat—except Hermione, who knew already and strenuously disapproved—ever noticed, and he took out a vial of the thick green potion and downed it.

No change was immediately visible, of course, but he could draw a breath of relief now. As long as he took the potion, no more bad things would happen.

Harry really didn't like it when those particular bad things happened.

That done, he wandered towards his film room. Making film for wizarding cameras was not what he had expected to do with his life when he left Hogwarts, but then, he hadn't expected an awful lot about his life.

He flicked his wand to enchant his eyes so he could see in the dark of the film room, and smiled a little. One of the few regular and long-expected events in his life was about to happen next week. Ron and Hermione would get married, after a year of dancing around each other and six years of engagement. Harry was allowed to be excited about that.

He went to work enchanting the paper and glass that would, hopefully, become a new variety of film which could capture ghosts better than the existing stuff did, and soon happily lost himself to anything but considerations of incantation, color, and wand movement speed.

"Harry? *Harry!*"
Blinking and stretching his arms, Harry turned around. The voice had called his name God knew how many times before he heard it, and then, though he wanted to move quickly, he had to scuttle from the room like a crab because of the way his back had bent during his hours hovering over the table.

He was walking like a human by the time he reached the fireplace, at least. He blinked in surprise when he saw Ginny's head hovering there. Since their parting, they had rarely seen each other except in the context of full Weasley family gatherings. But now she was staring at him desperately, as if only he could do something to aid her. It didn't help, Harry saw with slowly growing alarm, that tears were streaking down her face.

"Ginny," he whispered, kneeling to be on her level. "What's wrong?"

"Ron," she whispered.

Harry clenched his fists. Ron had got pissed with him a few nights ago and had fallen into maudlin lamentations about how he wasn't good enough for Hermione, but *surely* the prat hadn't broken the engagement or run away to the Continent, as he'd threatened to do. "What about Ron?" he said.

"Oh, God, Harry." Ginny's face tilted forwards, almost concealing her expression from him, and the nature of Harry's alarm shifted.

"What is it? Is he in St. Mungo's?"

"He's *dead*, Harry."

Harry had thought he was done with his world falling apart around him after what had happened with Ginny. But it had just smashed like an egg again, and he stared at her, unable to say a single word.

As Harry came to understand them later, from a sobbing Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, a miserably tight-lipped Percy, and a Hermione who was so hard-faced she frightened him, what had happened was this:
Ron had become Keeper for the Chudley Cannons two years ago, a position so much his dream job he had accepted immediately, despite a few offers from more prominent Quidditch teams in the league. He'd been playing in a practice game today, his last one before his wedding.

One of the Beaters had hit a Bludger slightly too hard. It'd spun away from the team's Seeker and Chasers and slammed into the side of Ron's skull. The bone fragments collapsed inwards and pierced his brain. By the time his racing team members reached him, it had already been too late to save him, though they'd valiantly Apparated him to St. Mungo's anyway. The Healers confirmed that even a faster journey would have done nothing; he was dead when they brought him upstairs.

The Beater had already quit the team in self-loathing. Harry had seen him in the background when the rest of the Weasley family converged on St. Mungo's, crying, face so miserable that Harry had gone to comfort him. That proved more than the boy could take—he thought for certain the Savior of the Wizarding World was going to destroy him for killing his best friend—and he fainted dead away.

Harry had stayed by his side until he woke up and finally persuaded him, as best as he could, that it was not his fault and that no one blamed him. Harry didn't add that he, personally, would have found it easier to have someone to blame, would actually have liked for Ron's death to be murder. Then he could hunt down and punish the person responsible.

But this young Beater, Warren Erikson, had looked up to Ron, joked with him, and joined him for consolatory drinks every time the Cannons lost. There was no possible reason he'd have to kill him, and the sight of his extreme distress and the words of the rest of the team convinced Harry. It had been an accident.

An accident that had simply marched into the middle of a normal, sunny May day, and taken Ron away from them.

After talking with Erikson, Harry went to the Weasleys. There was so little he could do, but what

he could do, he did. He offered a literal shoulder for Molly and Ginny to cry on; it was the first time Ginny had willingly touched him since the Incident. Harry gently stroked her hair and wished Ron could have been alive to witness his best friend and his sister slowly coming back together.

Ron should have been alive to witness everything.

Percy arrived, busy and officious and likely to drive everyone mad if he weren't given something to do. Harry placed him outside the room in St. Mungo's where Ron lay to fend off everyone who might possibly *look* like a reporter. The *Daily Prophet's* people had already learned that Harry Potter had rushed into hospital in great distress, and Harry was determined not to have the Weasleys bothered with insensitive questions.

Bill and Fleur arrived, leading their solemn-eyed daughter Victoire by the hand. Harry stepped aside so Bill and Fleur could enter the room, but, after a swift and quiet discussion with Fleur, kept Victoire out of the room. She asked a lot of questions about death. Harry evaded some of them, but admitted that she wouldn't see Uncle Ron anymore. The little girl clung to him and cried. Ron had been her favorite of her uncles.

Charlie had sent word he was coming from Romania. Harry wrote the owl back to him; Molly was still weeping too hard to hold a quill, and Arthur had just showed up, so pale and wan Harry hated to dump the duty on him.

George, of course, was the one who lingered outside the room, his hands in his robe pockets and his stare fixed and desolate. Harry, after one look at him, Transfigured some water that the mediwitches had deposited on the Weasleys into Firewhiskey and offered it to him. George nodded his thanks and went into the corridor to be quietly drunk in peace.

And Harry shed his own tears and took his own turn sitting beside Ron's body feeling as if a dragon had kicked him in the chest and he wouldn't ever be able to breathe again.

That left Hermione.

When Hermione remained stoic throughout the funeral, Harry didn't worry. He knew she wasn't much for public displays of emotion; she had hated to be caught crying, hated for people to stare at her, ever since the war. He sat beside her and held her hand, which lay in his like marble, and watched her watching the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. And why not? The man she loved was in there.
When Hermione quit her job working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures the next day, Harry wasn't surprised. She would probably come back, he assured the worried Ministry official who contacted him. But she needed some time and distance right now, and they *would* give it to her. He added what he privately called his "Savior Stare" to those words, and the man facing him turned white and spluttered out that, certainly, they would give Miss Granger all the time she needed, and her old job would be waiting for her the moment she wanted it back.

Miss Granger. She would be that for a long time now. She and Ron had quarreled vociferously about how they should hyphenate their names, or if they should; Hermione thought it would be modern and progressive of Ron to take *her* last name. She was not going to be plain Hermione Weasley, at least. But she would change her name to Mrs., she had graciously conceded.

The recollections made Harry smile for a bit, the closest he'd come to a smile in a week. He took a deep breath and resumed his work on the ghost-capturing film, though several hours a day were spent in contact with the Weasleys and Hermione, checking up on them to make sure they didn't need anything. Slowly, the edges of the wound in his soul began to pull and knit together. If he hadn't had experience recovering from his grief after the war, he doubted he would have been able to do this. But he did, and he deliberately remembered as much of the life in Ron as he did the death.

Ron had got pissed and moaned about not being good enough for Hermione and how he should leave her free to marry some brilliant Muggle scientist or pure-blood Potions brewer, but Harry knew he never would have. Ron loved Hermione with the breath in him.

Ron had been so pleased with the Firebolt Harry bought him when he joined the Cannons. Harry knew he would never have persuaded his friend to accept the gift if he hadn't argued for an hour beforehand, pointing out that a professional Quidditch player needed a *much* better broom, and that Harry only wanted the Cannons to be actually competitive. Ron had hit him for the last statement, but the look of delight in his eyes when he opened the package had stayed with Harry.

Ron had come over and yelled at Harry after the Incident. Harry had expected that. What he *hadn't* expected was the way Ron had insisted that Harry stay in contact with the Weasley family, that Harry was still his best friend, and that he did *not* have Ron's permission to lie on his couch and sulk himself into oblivion. The yelling had led to an awkward dinner at the Burrow that night, whilst Ron glared fiercely in every direction with an expression that challenged someone to say something, *go ahead and say it.*

The edges of Harry's wound pulled together. He assumed they were doing the same for Hermione. She always told him she was feeling fine, getting better, when he asked her. Harry didn't always believe her, and he did worry when she didn't go back to the Ministry by the time seven months had passed since Ron's death, but he had to respect her decision. Thanks to her careful spending, she wasn't hurting for money.

Then she stopped answering his Floo calls.

Harry finally Apparated to her flat and found it warded so strongly that he was trembling and exhausted by the time he broke through the last piece of magic. And then he found her asleep on the couch in her drawing room, covered with glamours that melted when he touched her. It must have been a week since she had eaten, and longer than that since she'd showered.

Harry had thought, once, that he would tire of acting the hero, of playing the savior, of dredging

up strength when people needed something of him.

As he gathered up his one remaining best friend in his arms and frantically Apparated to St. Mungo's, he discovered he was a very long way indeed from that point.

"Why?"
Harry asked Hermione the question the moment he sat down by her bed in St. Mungo's, which was the moment the Healers had stopped spelling water and food into her stomach and decided she was fit to have visitors.

Hermione didn't answer for long moments, staring out the window instead. Then she turned around. Harry let out a hard breath. There were tears in her eyes, the first time she'd shed since Ron's death. He took her hand and held it tightly, trying not to notice that her skin wasn't much different in color from the sheets she rested on.

"I want to stop," she whispered. "I want to wake up, and stand up, and get ready for the day. I even want to go back to the Ministry and start arguing down the ridiculous laws about house-elves again. But I *can't*, Harry. There's a mountain in my mind. I can't move it. Whenever I think too much about doing something other than lying on the couch and sleeping, the mountain falls on me. I always close my eyes and tell myself I'll get up tomorrow. After all, what do I have but empty days since I lost *him*?"

Harry licked his lips. What she described sounded similar to what he'd experienced in their fifth year, but his mountain had been anger, not grief, and his solution to the problem was hardly something he would advise for Hermione.

"Do you think you should talk to someone?" he asked.

"A therapist?" Hermione took the suggestion more calmly than he had expected. But she also shook her head. "I thought of that. There's a problem with both sides of the question. In the Muggle world, I'd have to leave out so much about what happened to us and how Ron died and what I want to get back to in my daily life that it's not worth it. And in the wizarding world—" She hissed under her breath. "Frankly, Harry, the therapy here is primitive. And there's the further problem of the fact that they probably wouldn't be able to forget I'm 'Hermione the Heroine.'" She pitched her voice high, in imitation of Rita Skeeter, who had tagged the title on her after the war, as she said the last words. "And that would prejudice the treatment."

Harry nodded. "Would talking to me help?"

Hermione smiled tiredly at him. "It'll help. You're a wonderful friend, Harry. Thank you." She squeezed his hand. "But I don't think that'll do enough. I've talked to you every day for the past seven months—" she glanced out the window as if to check that the blank slate of the December skies was actually present "—and when I realized how badly I was failing, the first step I took was to hide the signs of my failure from you."

"You'll never be a failure, not to me." Harry kissed the back of her hand.

"Talking to you isn't enough," Hermione repeated, her eyes bright. "But that's what I want to do, in combination with something else. There must be *something,* a spell or a potion, that can help relieve *this.* And please, Harry—" She closed her eyes and swallowed. "I want to do this in private, with you. No reporters. No therapists. Limited contact even with the Weasleys and my parents. I know they care about me. I *do.* But—but you're the only person who brings back my memories of Ron but doesn't hurt me with them. Please?"

Harry nodded at once. He felt the same way around Hermione. The times they'd acted together, just the three of them and no one else, had woven an enchanted circle about them that no one else could step inside, even Ginny or the other members of Ron's family. Now that Ron was gone, the circle had just contracted tighter.

"Thank you." Hermione closed her eyes and then opened them again. This time, she didn't let the tears fall. "I *do* want to beat this. I *do.*"

Harry nodded again, and laid his cheek against hers.

It was March, and Harry was at his wits' end.
He'd done the most thorough and comprehensive research he could. Hermione had helped him when she'd felt up to it. And still, everything he could find didn't last.

Cheering Charms were only meant to cure temporary sadness or make someone giggle. The variations on Pepper-Up Potion and the Patronus Charm that Harry had thought promising at first turned out to last less than an hour, barely enough for Hermione to summon any will to do anything. Entire books of spells had to be rejected because wizards of the past hadn't recognized depression as an illness; they'd simply assumed people who grieved too long were mad and shut them up. Harry had researched chocolate, even, remembering the way Remus had used it to cure the effects of Dementors, but that, too, had no properties with any lasting effects.

Harry put his hand over his eyes and rubbed his forehead in small circles. Hermione was asleep in his bedroom, her cheeks still damp. Harry felt like crying himself at the sight of the despair in her eyes each time some new approach failed.

His clock chimed. Harry hurried into the loo. The potion tasted thick and sludgy going down, but it was imperative. He forced himself to swallow and wait a few minutes, staring fixedly at his own reflection in the mirror.

The vial that had held the potion sparkled at him.

Harry furrowed his brow and stared at the vial for long moments. Then he swallowed, slowly, and not because of the stickiness in his throat.

His potion might work. His potion had been designed from a common base, with Hermione's

simultaneous help and disapproval, to remove what he loathed most about himself. Hermione was just as frantic to have the depression gone as Harry was, or at least to have the worst symptoms removed so she could accept her grief and move on. If she could use the potion, it might relieve her.

The problem was, the potion had been specifically designed for Harry alone. Giving it to Hermione might hurt her, or, at best, do nothing. Harry would have to modify the base again and cast new spells to transform the ingredients into their needed state, and he didn't trust his own Potions brewing skills enough to do that. Nor, at the moment, could he trust Hermione's.

He would have to have help.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back against the tiled wall. At the moment, he would not have been above asking Snape for help, if only the git were still alive.

He ran over, in his head, the list of people he knew who were Potions brewers of sufficient skill, who would be attracted by the project, and who knew him well enough that they wouldn't accept the job just because of who he was.

The list was, well, short. In fact, it was one name long.

Harry grimaced and opened his eyes. He didn't *want* to ask Draco Malfoy for help, but it was true that the git had created an awfully bustling apothecary business for himself, and that even the Weasleys had gone to buy his products and hadn't been poisoned. Malfoy seemed to disdain poisoning as beneath him, unless it was a complex, subtle thing, the effects of which lasted for years and were not immediately traceable to him. Harry had heard rumors from the Ministry…

Harry shrugged impatiently. At least Malfoy was unlikely to be overawed by him, and Harry could offer him something he knew would attract the bastard: the chance to profit from the potion once it was modified for a general market. If Harry was right, this thing could be enormously powerful and much in demand. And he didn't care about the money. What he cared about was Hermione getting better.

He sat down to write the letter. He made sure to keep it polite, strictly within terms of business, and offered Malfoy the money even before the knowledge.

As he watched his owl Athena wing away with the letter, he hoped fervently that Malfoy had changed into enough of a coldly practical man to agree to treat a Muggleborn.

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Chapter: 2

Thanks for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Troubles and Doubts

"Always a delight to see you, Madam." Draco let just the tips of his fingers brush across the hand extended to him. Touching her more firmly than that wasn't advisable. She might take offense at the slightest thing, or have decided to dust some rare poison—to which she would be immune, of course—on her skin today.

Besides, Draco made it a personal policy never to be intimate with his creditors.

"And a delight to see you as well, Draco." Cordelia Nott's mouth was a peculiar thing, Draco thought, and the standout feature of her face. Once it shut, it looked like a sweet, small curve, prone to pout, as innocent as the expression of a sleeping girl. It was only when it opened that one was able to see quite how many teeth she had. "I notice you walk unaccompanied."

Draco laughed, deliberately misunderstanding the allusion as he sat down in the chair across from her. A server was already approaching them. One never needed to signal the servers in the Antipodean Opaleye; they took their cues from the ways that their clients moved and spoke. "It's been long years since someone tried to kill me for being the son of a Death Eater, Cordelia."

"And even longer since you had extra Galleons to spare, isn't it?" Cordelia gave him a sympathetic smile.

The server was upon them, so Draco's answer was restricted to a short bow of his head and a confident ordering of the most expensive Firewhiskey concoction on the menu. Cordelia ordered a light meal for herself, some fabulously cooked chicken with half-a-dozen different spices. The man bowed and vanished more quickly and expertly than a house-elf. Draco leaned back and matched stares with Cordelia for a moment.

He had wondered, before he arrived, why she had chosen to meet in the Antipodean Opaleye. He should have remembered how much she enjoyed seeing her victims squirm. He couldn't respond as he liked, he couldn't even make the slightest hint of a threat, without the owner appearing next to his table with apologetic politeness and asking him to leave.

"It's true," he said, again misunderstanding the allusion, as he sipped his Firewhiskey and nodded to the hovering man to show it was good enough, "that the Ministry pounced most eagerly upon my father's fortune when the war was done."

"*Most* eagerly," Cordelia breathed, as if she had been there to witness it, instead of—Draco strained his memory briefly after what she'd been doing that year—in the Himalayas hunting yetis. "But that needn't present any obstacle to a young wizard with sufficient determination and sufficient funds of his own."

Draco bit the corner of his lip savagely, but for such a short moment he was sure she didn't notice. Then he sat back and tried to consider her with the cold eyes he needed to have, if he was

to come out of this conversation retaining both his self-control and his position relative to Cordelia.

His companion simply stared back at him, a faint smile haunting her mouth. She resembled Theodore Nott, his old schoolfellow, about as much as a unicorn resembled a draft-horse. Ten years older than Theodore, Mr. Nott's daughter by his first wife, she had inherited a seemingly inexhaustible sum of money from an aunt when she was seventeen and promptly vanished from England and her father's entanglements with the Dark Lord. She had the life that Draco always wished he could have had, the life he was *entitled* to.

And he had borrowed money from her to start his own apothecary shop, and she was closing the net on him little by little.

The server brought Cordelia's meal. She bit into it with a little exclamation of satisfaction. The server actually lingered a moment to watch her, until he caught Draco's eye and made himself scarce.

Draco could understand the fascination, though. Cordelia wasn't pretty in the way a girl like Daphne Greengrass had been, but she had a certain light that came to her features when she was enjoying herself which could trap men, and had. The rumors proclaimed at least ten lovers who had revolved about her, briefly, helplessly, before they finally spun away. The rumors also said that there were three more who had intended to marry her and defraud her of her money, in countries where respect for witches traveling alone was less than it was in Britain. Cordelia had learned to wield her claws and teeth of necessity.

"Careful, Draco." Cordelia didn't look up from her meal, but there was undeniable pleasure in her voice. "Someone might think you'd come here accompanied by jewelry, if not Galleons." She looked up then, and her dark eyes flashed at him before he could turn away.

"How much money do you want?" He asked the question quietly, without the stinging humiliation she would have expected of him after being hauled out in public. It was the only way to make the game so distasteful to her that she wouldn't continue it.

"I think—" There came the sound of a finger being tapped against a glass, but the server was already there to refill Cordelia's glass of water. Cordelia gave him a smile that floated across her face like a cloud. Draco had never known her to drink alcohol. She turned back to face him. "I think it would be my reward simply to see your business and your reputation for creativity prosper, Draco," she said. "Shall we say, I would like to see a new potion developed by the summer solstice? A truly *new* potion, mind, not a simple variation on the old ones. And then you could offer me a share in the market value of that potion, and we could call half your debt settled."

Draco's hands clenched under the table, where she couldn't see them—unless she'd cast spying charms on the table before he arrived, of course. He at once relaxed his fingers and nodded. "That will be acceptable."

Inside, of course, he wanted to spit and rage. Developing new potions was a vital part of his business, and one of the reasons that more pure-blood witches and wizards than just Cordelia had invested in his shop, but it took years. He could, perhaps, hurry one of the developing variations he had now along, to differentiate it sufficiently from the parent potion by June—only three months away—but it would be a hasty and a risky thing, and require him to close the shop and concentrate on *just* that. That would hardly permit him to earn the money he needed to eat and pay his other creditors back.

On the other hand, he owed Cordelia twenty thousand Galleons. Forgiving ten thousand Galleons would be—well, quite special. He wondered what had brought this offer on, but could only think it was one of her freaks. She was the kind of person to take more pleasure in showing off a unique potion to her friends in other countries than in recovering all the money she'd spent. She always had more vaults where the first one came from.

"That's settled, then," he said.

"Excellent." Cordelia bestowed another smile on him. "I always have said that you're a young man of ambition and drive, Draco. Not at all like my poor, lazy brother. He and his wife have had a second stillborn child, did you hear?" Cordelia clucked her tongue. "And yet Theodore absolutely refuses to go to a Healer about the problem. He insists that the Notts can cure themselves."

Draco, who had chosen his own path of intensive labor, work, and borrowing money over his parents' insistence that he settle down and have a family before he was thirty, bowed coldly to accept the compliment, and then sipped his whiskey again. It was really quite good.

He returned to the shop by a winding route, just in case anybody was watching him and keeping track of his routine. He had creditors, but he also had people whom he'd thwarted more than once in battles over rare potions ingredients and by choosing others as clients over them. It never hurt to be too careful.

His shop was concealed in a quiet little alcove not far from the place where Knockturn Alley began, but much cleaner than that filth-trap, thank God. The door itself looked as modest and inviting as the door of a cottage in Hogsmeade, but glittered with wards that could steal memories, Apparate intruders into Albania, and do other, less advertised nasty things. Draco laid his hand flat on it; a pointed tongue shot out of the wood and tasted his skin. The wards extended outwards in a shimmering curtain, encompassing him inside them, for the time it took to open the door; then they relapsed back to their previous position as he stepped inside.

Since he wasn't at home to clients today, Draco didn't bother taking the wards down after him. He *did* take a moment to stand there and look around his shop, just breathing in the scents of saffron and fennel and feathers and dried dragons' blood. This was his place, *his*, and no matter what price he had to pay, he would not let anyone take it away from him.

The shop was brilliantly lit by two enchanted windows, one in the eastern wall and one in the western, that didn't actually exist; Draco wanted to avoid the dimness apothecaries were notorious for, but saw no reason to leave gaps in his defenses. The shelves held finished potions in neat alphabetical order, sealed and corked in unbreakable vials so that no one could spill one, or "discreetly" extract small amounts, in the shop. Near the door were the barrels of ingredients. They looked like nothing special, but sharp wards coiled around them as well, and they were immune to Summoning Charms, Levitation Charms, and other means of removing their contents from a distance.

Draco cast a brief glance of regret at the counter near the western window; he'd been tallying up his accounts when Cordelia's owl arrived. But he wouldn't get to return to the work now. He slipped across the shop to the door that wasn't visible except to someone who already expected it to be there, and then climbed the staircase behind it to the second floor.

Here were his living quarters—drawing room with more enchanted windows, loo, small kitchen, bedroom—and, most important of all, his lab. It had taken Draco more than a year after moving out of the Manor to realize he didn't miss the expansive spaces of his ancestral home at all.

But then, it had taken him that long, too, to realize how much he loved brewing. It wasn't just a job to him, and it wasn't just the only means he could think of to earn money when he realized how ruined his family really was; it was an *art.*

Draco had once been gloomily convinced that everything he touched turned to dust. But potions came alive under his hand. They were the only things he could *create*. By now, he wouldn't have returned to the Manor even if the Ministry had apologized, reversed themselves, and returned the Galleons they'd taken for reparations (and compensation for keeping his father free of Azkaban).

He collapsed into the main chair of the drawing room and stared out the windows for a moment. They showed a sunny spring day, not too far from the reality. Draco closed his eyes and, despite himself, a tingle of excitement rose and brewed in his belly.

Cordelia had asked the impossible of him.

The *seemingly* impossible.

If any brewer in Britain could create a new potion from scratch in three months, Draco was certain he would be the one to do so.

Smirking, he was just about to rise from his seat and enter the lab when a loud tap sounded throughout the room. Curious, Draco turned to look at the one window that was real, but, from the outside, visible only to owls. The tap sounded again, and he realized a strange bird was fluttering there, a handsome great horned owl with its message firmly held in its beak. It caught its eye and ruffled the sharp feathers of its body, as much to ask him what he was doing sitting there when it had already reached its destination.

Draco opened the window and let the owl into the room. It dropped the letter on his head and soared across the drawing room to alight on a perch he kept ready, with bowls of water and owl treats on the sides, and a self-cleaning carpet underneath it. Draco snorted. Evidently a reply was expected. Well, he would have to hope that its master was not as rude as his owl.

Of course, if it was a request for a specially brewed potion on the morrow, as he thought it probably was—he recognized all his creditors' owls—he would simply refuse it. He had Cordelia's demand and the passion that always revived in him when he encountered a potions challenge to occupy him now.

The handwriting on the envelope was unfamiliar. Draco frowned and cast several spells, but they revealed only a single sheet of paper in the envelope and no hexes. Draco shrugged and tore it open.

He looked at the signature first.

Harry Potter.

And was that a *sincerely* above it?

Draco actually staggered, and needed the support of the nearby wall to catch himself. Growling at the moment of weakness—no, no one had been here to *see* it, but he hadn't always lived alone, and displaying bad habits in private could lead to displaying them in public—he read the letter from the beginning, determined not to miss a nuance of what it said. If Potter was playing a joke on Draco, after having no contact with him for seven years, he was going to be so sorry he would be crying apologies a decade later.

Draco Malfoy:

I believe you may have heard about the death of Ron Weasley ten months ago. Hermione Granger, his fiancée, is still depressed, and no ordinary potions or spells will help settle the grief in her soul. I do take a potion I believe might help her if it were modified—the potion removes the thing a person loathes most about himself—but I can't modify it without help, and Hermione is in no condition to give me that help. I barely managed to brew the original with all her knowledge at my disposal.

I would like to hire you to develop the potion, into one that might relieve Hermione of her depression. I can offer you working space and information if you need it, though I imagine you have your own lab. I can also travel and collect ingredients as necessary. My own work is light, done more for fun than necessity, and easily put aside. You can consult with Hermione on the days she's feeling better, as long as you don't press.

In return for your time and effort, I offer you full control of the potion when it's completed. Sell it as you like; claim credit for it as you like, which you will certainly deserve, as the end product

will be more your work than mine. Send me back a reply with Athena, as soon as you reasonably can.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter.

Draco's first, ecstatic thought was that the fates loved him indeed, and his second that Potter was plotting with Cordelia to ruin him somehow. But then he thought of Potter's precious purity and noble ideals, and snorted. He couldn't believe the man would willingly associate himself with a Slytherin, let alone a member of a family he had reason to distrust for being Death Eaters.

No, this offer was genuine. And the fates loved him.

And he had no idea what potion Potter was talking about, which meant he *would* have a genuinely new potion to offer Cordelia.

And if Potter already had a base to work from, that would make Draco's task much easier than if he were starting with a collection of ingredients and a plan.

As he sat down to write his reply, he wondered idly how long Granger had been depressed before Potter had condescended to write to him. Months, likely, or at least weeks. The stubborn git would have refused to come to Draco otherwise, he knew.

Well. This way, they would both be in his debt. Potter showed no interest in claiming credit for the potion in any way—Gryffindor *noblesse oblige* again—but he would always know that Draco was the one who had done something he could not, and that *Draco* was the one who had saved his precious friend's life.

Draco would finally have *won* at something concerning Potter.

He thought his letter was quite gracious, considering that.

Harry read Malfoy's letter over one more time, and sighed to himself. The git was rude, arrogant, condescending, self-absorbed, and entirely too delighted that Harry was asking him for help, but he *would* help. Harry told himself he could hold his temper around Malfoy and accept his direction in the matter of brewing the potion without complaint. It was certainly easier now than it would have been seven years ago, or even five.

Now he just had to tell Hermione.

She was feeling a bit better this afternoon, enough to move out of the bedroom and sit huddled in an afghan that had been a favorite of Susan's on the couch, staring out the window at the gray-green March sky. Harry sat across from her, and waited until her attention came to him on

its own. When it did, he swallowed at the look of blank despair in her eyes—better physically wasn't better mentally—but pressed ahead.

"I think I might have a way to change the potion I take so it can help you," he said.

She blinked, and the familiar look of worry stole over her face. "Harry, I know you've got used to brewing *that* now—" she eyed him with the same disapproval as always "—but I really wouldn't trust you to change it into anything else." Then she flinched as if he'd slapped her and put a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I should have—I shouldn't have said that. You'll think I'm not expressing confidence in you, and—"

"Hermione." Harry leaned across the gap between the couch and his chair and caught her hand. "You're right. I wouldn't trust myself, either. I still have to watch every step of my own potion-making after five years of doing it every month. But I've hired someone to help me."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"Draco Malfoy."

He had expected an explosion, or maybe a storm of the tears Hermione found it harder and harder to control lately. He didn't expect her mouth to fall open or for her to sit there in stunned silence.

"He agreed to help," Harry rushed into the gap, "because the potion challenges him, I think, and because we can use the potion I already have as a base, and probably because he wants to hold it over our heads whenever we meet in the future, and I know he called you names but that was a long time ago, and everyone says that he's the best Potions-maker in Britain, more trustworthy than the ones in St. Mungo's, even, and—"

Hermione bent double at the waist, laughing. The laughter was a painful hacking sound, which caused Harry to cross over the gap between couch and chair and hold her, but it was amusement.

"I'll be all right with this, Harry," Hermione whispered, when she'd finally recovered from her hilarity. "Just the fact that you went and asked *Malfoy*, of all people, for help—" She giggled again, but managed to cut it off this time before it took over her voice. "Just think what Ron would have said!"

It was the first time she had mentioned Ron without a gasp of soul-deep pain immediately afterwards. Harry closed his eyes and gave Malfoy a silent thanks. He was already doing Hermione good, and he wasn't even in the same room.

Not that he would tell Malfoy that, of course.

Draco spent the first five minutes after he'd met Potter at the door of his flat trying to decide

exactly how he'd changed.

He didn't bother to pay attention to the stiff, stumbling welcome Potter gave him, or the way he showed Draco around the flat, carefully neglecting the bedroom, where Granger probably was. He could predict what the boorish Gryffindor would say a year in advance. It was more important that he be able to tell *exactly* what kind of person Potter had changed into (Draco refused to use the word "matured").

It was the self-possession, Draco decided finally. Potter didn't move as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders anymore, or as if he were constantly conscious of that stupid scar on his forehead and what the *Prophet* would say about it next. He gestured and talked like a normal person, like someone who found himself excessively ordinary. He had trouble meeting Draco's eyes, but that was because of the history they shared, Draco thought, not because he hated the necessity of inviting Draco into his home.

Harry Potter had made peace with himself.

Oh, he was a Gryffindor, of course; his eyes still softened when he mentioned the dead friend and the depressed one, and he still found it necessary to assure Draco that he'd keep his word and give him full control of the potion when it was completed. But he carried his head as if he were used to looking the world in the face. His ridiculous hair no longer seemed so ridiculous. His eyes were calm and strikingly green behind glasses that no longer wore the cracks and Spellotape of constant repair.

Draco could feel the contained energy in Potter. He wished he had an excuse for provoking it, so he could see it come out.

But he didn't have an excuse, so he just nodded and said, "Hmm," in the right places, and then asked if he could see the potion Potter intended him to use as a base.

Potter nodded and vanished into the loo, reemerging with a vial full of a thick green liquid, which he tossed to Draco. Draco caught and uncorked it, sniffing delicately.

His senses sharpened. He had thought Potter was exaggerating in his letter, and probably possessed some less common potion Draco would still recognize; those thoughts had come to him after the initial exultant ones, because Potter's offer was just *too* spectacular a piece of good luck. But the smell was completely unfamiliar. Magic had been involved in the creation of the potion, he thought, separate spells for each ingredient.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, raising his eyes to Potter's.

Looking back on it later, that was the moment that really got him *involved.* That was the moment that pulled him into Potter's dilemma with the full-blown passion of an artist, and overpowered his reluctance and disdain.

He was going to duplicate this. What's more, he was going to make it *better*.

He was Draco Malfoy, best Potions-maker in Britain. It was what he did.

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Chapter: 3

Thanks again for the reviews!
Chapter Three—Things Potter Should Not Be Capable of Doing
"I'll need more information about the potion in order to duplicate and change it, of course."

Malfoy's calm tone soothed some of the fear that had arisen in Harry when Malfoy stared at the vial in his hand for long moments. Perhaps the task was too difficult. Perhaps he would manifest some odd scruple common to all Potions brewers and refuse to touch a potion that had been modified with magic. Perhaps he would simply think better than to spend months of his time in a flat with a man and a woman he believed he had reason to despise.

But that hadn't happened, and Harry nodded. "You'll need to talk to Hermione, since she was the one who offered me the original recipe. I'll fetch her." He turned towards the bedroom.

Malfoy's voice arrested him, cool as midwinter frost. "You don't *know* where the recipe came from?"

Harry turned around slowly, leaning his back against his bedroom door. This was the first argument, then. Better that he should be the one to face a possible enemy alone, given Hermione's fragile emotional state. "No. Hermione was the one who copied it out of a book and showed it to me. Then I modified several of the ingredients with magic to produce the variant you're holding now." He watched Malfoy's eyebrows climb, probably at his use of "variant," with a sense of enjoyment. *You aren't the only one who's gained some knowledge since school, Malfoy.*

Then Harry sternly reminded himself he didn't really *need* to be this antagonistic towards his old rival. Said old rival had agreed to help them, after all. And so far he hadn't said anything *too* condescending.

As long as Harry could keep some control over his tongue, then Malfoy was unlikely to retort with the same acid. And Harry's control was much better than it had been five years ago, as was his perspective. He could now look back on those incidents in Hogwarts and admit that he'd been at fault in some of them, too. Not nearly as often as Malfoy had, with his blatantly unjustified malice and bigotry against Hermione, but sometimes.

"Spells in combination with potions are rare, at least for non-expert practitioners." Malfoy's voice offered no doubt about what category he thought Harry fell into.

"Hermione said the same thing." Harry watched in interest as the git's mouth pursed. He probably didn't want to be compared to Hermione, either. Well, he would have to get used to it. They were the ones who would do most of the theoretical work, though Harry stood ready to offer whatever practical help he could. "But she also said that the spells I chose *would* work. And she locked up the vials of the potion until the balance—Erfil's Balance, I think she called it—between them stabilized. Just because I was desperate to take it was no reason to destroy myself, she said."

It really *was* entertaining to watch Malfoy's jaw sag slightly at the mention of Erfil's Balance. He recovered in the next moment, though. "And what exactly does this potion do, then?" He held up the vial.

Harry smiled pleasantly. "I told you already, in the letter. It removes what the drinker loathes the most about himself. At the moment, that's definitely her depression, for Hermione. She needs a variant of this potion specific to her in order to think and work and live normally. And of course I'll encourage you to develop a variant which can apply to everyone, so you can market it as a general remedy."

"But for you—"

"It removes what I loathe most about myself, of course." Harry gave a neat little half-bow. "I should get Hermione now. And of course I'll furnish you with a list of the spells I used on the potion along with the original recipe." He turned and stepped into his bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Draco scowled at Potter's retreating back. He didn't understand why the former hero refused to supply a simple description of what the potion did for him. It would help Draco to understand its effects much better.
And would you expose one of your greatest weaknesses to someone you still considered half an enemy?

That wasn't the *point*. The point was that Potter had asked for Draco's help, and he was already withholding information that might make a sizeable impact on that help.

Then Draco bit his tongue. What kind of brewer *was* he, anyway? If he couldn't figure out what the potion did to Potter from the general description, the original recipe, and a list of the spells involved, then he had no right maintaining an open shop and calling himself an apothecary at all.

He turned to stare at the potion again while he waited for Potter to fetch Granger. He had never expected to encounter a true original in such an unpromising setting. It surprised him almost as much as Potter's knowledge of Erfil's Balance—no, more, because that was explicable in Potter's learning a few parroted phrases so he could impress Draco.

But here was a potion that didn't exist in any of the works Draco was familiar with, and which would make him an enormous amount of money. What *wouldn't* people pay for a potion that altered a loathed portion of their appearance? That suppressed particular unfortunate memories or impulses? That made them sexually potent, capable of ambition and drive, triumphant over their most significant weakness?

Potter is a fool to let an opportunity like this go. But then, fool is another name for Gryffindor.

A soft sound made him look up. Potter was guiding Granger into the room, leaning over her, supporting her with one arm, and fussing softly all the while, as if she were a unicorn with a broken leg. Draco rolled his eyes and stepped forwards so that he could confront the Mudblood himself. If they were to work together at all, it was essential that she understand him. *He* wouldn't coddle her, not when Potter was there to do it. And nothing she did, no amount of intelligence, could change what she was. He would maintain a brusque politeness to her, and she was mad if she expected more of him.

"Granger."

Her eyes rose slowly but steadily to his. There was a will of steel behind them that made Draco start. He had expected to see them swimming in tears. He'd expected—hoped—that she would fall on Potter's shoulder and sob her heart out, which would mean she was incapable of helping him and he could act on his own.

"Malfoy."

Granger's voice matched his precisely. Draco recovered himself in a moment, though. Mudbloods had always been good mimics.

"I'll just get the list of spells that I used to modify the original potion," Potter said, and lowered Granger gently to a seat on the couch in the drawing room. "And fetch the book. Where is it, Hermione?"

"Behind those books on the practical aspects of Herbology that you never touch," Granger told him.

Potter nodded once, then shot a thoughtful glance between Draco and Granger before he departed. *Leaving the two of us alone to see how we get on,* Draco thought. *Removing his presence from the room to see what happens. Presumptuous bastard.*

It again manifested a cleverness and subtlety that he wouldn't have expected from Potter, though. Draco wondered irritably if he was doomed to be continually surprised no matter how long he spent here.

He dropped into the chair across from Granger and folded his arms. "*You* can tell me, since Potter

refuses," he said. "What does the potion do for him?"

Incredibly, horrifyingly, the depressed woman who hadn't managed to recover from the death of her fiancé ten months after the accident gave him a look of pity. "Did you really think I'd tell you the truth so easily as *that*? Lost your touch for fine Slytherin manipulations, have you, Malfoy?"

"Listen, Granger." Draco restrained his mouth from the M-word, with decorum that would have done his mother proud. He leaned forwards. "If he's keeping facts from me that could determine the effectiveness of the potion's outcome, I'm not going to do you *or* him *or* myself any good." He had put himself at the end of the sentence, too. That ought to gain him some honor in her eyes.

Granger lowered her eyelids. "I can tell you that it's nothing that disrupts Erfil's Balance, Fasterned's Heating Ratio, Young's Cooling Ratio, or the safety of the potion in question. It was simply necessary to create a potion that would work for *him*. If you can figure out what it does just from watching him drink it, good for you. But otherwise, it's exactly what he offered. A potion that works to remove what he most loathes about himself. You don't need to know what the particular component is that the potion removes, any more than you would need to know if the hippogriff feathers that went into a Draught of Eternal Wakefulness were white or brown."

Draco cocked his head and sat back. "You're *sure* that this gap in my knowledge will be something as small and harmful as that?"

"I promise." Granger shrugged. "You're welcome to pry at him, too, but you won't get anything else out of him. Harry's reticent about his privacy, which I'm sure you can understand, given his history." A pointed glance said she probably still remembered his selling information to Rita Skeeter in their fourth year.

A gap in my knowledge. Something not dangerous, but which I can probably ask about anyway, under the sure knowledge that Potter will put all his resources forth to protect it.

They couldn't have set up a situation more designed to tempt me if they tried.

What convinced Draco they *hadn't* set out to trap him was no belief in Gryffindor honor or lapse of his protective paranoia, but the simple fact that neither Potter nor Granger was capable of figuring out the labyrinthine turns of his mind and so pinpointing what would capture his attention. That meant the situation *was* what it seemed, and he would have the assurance of working in safety while also being presented with the opportunity to needle Potter.

He relaxed back into the chair, though he glanced up alertly enough when Potter stepped back into the room with a roll of parchment and a book. His face was odd, as if he couldn't quite decide whether to be upset or not.

He held up the book. Draco squinted at it. It appeared to be a battered copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* by Libatius Borage. Draco curled his lip. If they wanted him to believe *that* was

the source of the mystery potion, then their trap had not been so cunningly baited after all. Draco could have recited the contents of the book's recipes from memory, and there was nothing impressive in them. It was a fine enough textbook for sixth-years striving desperately to prove their Exceeds Expectations O.W.L.S. hadn't been a fluke, but an advanced Potions-maker needed—

He went still, though, when he noticed Granger was red to the ears. At the very least, there was an interesting story here. Perhaps Granger had enchanted the book with a glamour that Draco couldn't see through but Potter could. He settled back, prepared to watch the play being prepared for him. Potter's letter hadn't offered entertainment, but Draco would take the unanticipated benefits of this strange engagement where he could.

Harry would have taken Hermione away for a private consultation if he could. But this concerned Malfoy too intimately, and that meant he had to say, "Hermione? Where did you get *this*?"
Hermione swallowed twice and glanced down at her hands. Her cheeks had turned pink. Normally, Harry would have rejoiced to see her getting so much color back, but the sight of the book had struck him like a punch to the gut, and he didn't have his air or his compassion back yet. He just waited for an answer.

"Well," Hermione said at last, speaking so fast and so softly Harry could barely hear her, "I, er, that is. I saw it as we were passing, and I couldn't really leave it there to burn, could I? It was a *book*." She glanced up at Harry, as if to point out that books, to her, were a little like helpless children. "So I snatched it, and put it in my bag. No one *noticed*, and it's not as though it added any extra weight when we were escaping." By the end of the explanation, she was almost wringing her hands, and Harry remembered the words of the Healers at St. Mungo's that too much excitement wasn't good for her.

He sighed and came forwards to squeeze her hand. "I'm not *angry*, Hermione," he said. "I just can't understand why you didn't tell me about this when you offered me the potions recipe."

"Because you've always been irrational about that book!" Hermione's eyes practically sparked as she looked at him. "You might demand to have it in your hands again, and who *knows* what you would have been up to with it? I got the recipe from a scribble in the margin. You might have tried to take it and alter it *without* knowing what it did. Or you could have tried the spells again, and you know I never approved of them." She folded her arms, a figure of disapprobation that Harry doubted Professor McGonagall at her fiercest could have bettered.

Does it really matter? Harry was already aware that he'd invoked memories of Ron, without meaning to, and Hermione was struggling hard to hold onto her tears in front of Draco Malfoy. He sighed, and squeezed her hand again. "All right," he said. "I promise, you can have the book back the moment Malfoy's done with it." He smiled. "Or I'll give it to him," he added. "God knows he'd brood on it like a dragon over her eggs and not let me have it again."

"*What* are we talking about?" Malfoy's voice was an expertly wielded whip, thin and precise and

stinging. "I want to know what's so remarkable about an ancient textbook I could recite the contents of with my eyes closed and my mind addled."

"This was Severus Snape's textbook when he was in school," Harry said quietly, opening the book again. The words *Property of the Half-Blood Prince* stared up at him, and memories tried to overcome him. Harry shook his head and blinked them away. "He invented spells and potions, too, apparently, and wrote them as marginalia in the book, along with improvements on the potions already there. I hid it in the same room where you went to work on that Vanishing Cabinet—the room Crabbe burned with Fiendfyre." He glanced up at Malfoy, whose face had gone expressionless. "Hermione saw it just before you confronted us, I suppose, and put it in a bag she was carrying. I think you can trust Severus Snape's brewing work, Malfoy."

He tossed the book to the other man without much regret. Malfoy's look was so acquisitive it was hard for Harry to resist a smile, in fact. When he got hold of the book, he opened it reverently and then traveled through a few pages, peering at the scribbled notes with a rapturous half-smile on his face.

Probably thinking of all the future Galleons he can get from it. Harry doubted they would see the book again if they let Malfoy take it away, or, at least, not the *original* of the book. Malfoy would copy out every recipe and brood over them the way Harry had said he would.

Strangely, though, seeing that combination of longing and greed on Malfoy's face reassured Harry. He was more likely to brew this potion correctly than not. He would want to have the triumph to brag over more than he would want to poison Hermione or declare that he had an angry Harry Potter on his tail. There were too many other people who could say that last.

Finally, Malfoy nodded and looked up. "What page is the recipe for this potion on, Granger?"

"Page 134." Hermione was leaning back against the couch when Harry looked at her again. Her voice had weakened, and her face was already pale, with sweat starting on her forehead and tears creeping along the undersides of her eyelids. Harry moved so he was shielding her from Malfoy's line of sight, and handed over the list of spells to further distract him. Malfoy looked up at him when the list landed on the page of the book as though Harry were taking him away from the contemplation of some beloved religious relic.

"I'm surprised you trusted the recipe in here," he commented, even as he began to scan the spells. "Many brewers encrypt their private notes or at least suggest dangerous and complicated techniques that the novice would have no way of implementing."

"It's Hermione," Harry said with a shrug. If Malfoy wanted to imply that Harry should have less than complete trust in his friend, he'd have to try harder. "I trusted her to figure out any encryptions Snape might have put in there. And I'm sure you can, as well. I hired you because you're the best," he continued, thinking Malfoy might want the compliment explained. "And you've already shown you have some familiarity with the way other brewers think, so—"

He broke off. Malfoy had lifted his head and was staring at him. Harry leaned forwards, frowning. "What? Is my handwriting so horrible you can't read it?" Susan had teased him about that more than once, and threatened to forcibly enroll him in calligraphy classes, so that at least the indistinguishable nonsense he produced would be *pretty* indistinguishable nonsense.

There was no reason for Potter to lie about hiring Draco or his motives for hiring Draco, not if he wanted his Mudblood friend to get better. Draco had already determined that.
But based on at least one spell on the list, he *had* to be lying. And Draco needed to confront him about it right away. There was no way he was letting Potter's old grudges and misguided spite take away the sweetest victory Draco had ever tasted.

"Tell me about the third spell down," he said, and threw the parchment back at Potter. Potter caught it and fumbled with those ridiculous glasses until he could see clearly. Draco clenched his fingers in on each other. The fumbling gesture was one of innocence. And it did seem impossible that the Gryffindor should lie well enough to fool Draco.

But admitting he hadn't lied would mean—

Draco cut himself off with a savage baring of teeth, and waited until Potter had read out the spell and glanced up at him.

"The Diamond-Cutting Hex? Yes, of course." He handed the list back to Draco, who took it with numb fingers. "I have to use that to slice the ingredients into the sizes the recipe requires. Three-eighths of an inch of duckweed, a piece of dragon's scale as long as the joint of a child's finger… I'll never remember all that, and I'm forever mis-measuring. Besides, the Hex makes the sliced ingredients *more* themselves, if you know what I mean. They have some of the hardness and integrity of a diamond then, and they won't dissolve before their time." Potter shrugged and grimaced comically. "Of course, when I *want* the necessary ingredients to dissolve, I have to be careful to remove the Hex. A few times I've almost forgotten and ended up with sludge."

Draco shook his head and chose his words carefully. Potter was starting to look suspicious now, and better Draco admit his confusion than that Potter force the truth from him. "Potter, you can't cast the Diamond-Cutting Hex in the way you're describing. First, it takes an enormous amount of power, and it leaves you a sodden mess. The other spells you've got on the list would demand more magic than that. Second, you're talking about casting it on multiple targets, on multiple *scales*, which as far as I know can't be done. And then, removing it from multiple targets, but not all of them, later…" Draco clapped his hands. "That's impossible."

"Um." Potter flushed. The look wasn't attractive on him, which Draco thought numerous *Daily Prophet* photographs of him looking embarrassed ought to have proven. "It's not impossible for me. Maybe it's just because I've been casting the hex for so long?" He ended on a hopeful note, as if he wanted Draco to confirm that for him.

"No," Draco said flatly, and Potter's face fell. "This isn't a spell you build up that kind of tolerance for. Besides, even if your absurd theory were true, you would have destroyed the potion

on your first attempt, when you weren't used to it."

Instead of getting angry, Potter just gave a single hard nod. "That's rather a problem with my theory, yes," he said.

Draco blinked.

"So I suppose I'll have to help you brew the potion, at least at first." Potter shrugged. "Or perhaps you can just watch me brew the next batch of my own, and get an idea of how you can create a variant where the Diamond-Cutting Hex isn't necessary?"

"I thought—I thought Granger brewed your potion," Draco said, and then cursed himself for the slip.

Potter didn't pounce on it, though. "No," he said, calmly enough. "I do it. I'm due to make a batch in a few days. Do you want to come back then? That should give you some time to examine the recipe and the list of spells, come up with ideas, and decide if you do want to help us after all."

Draco rose slowly to his feet, conscious of the way that Potter shifted to keep his body between Draco and Granger, but not really caring. He was seeing Potter with new eyes, and wondering how he could have been so fooled.

Of *course* a more self-possessed man, and one who had survived the loss of a person Draco had always assumed would destroy Potter if he died, would be more likely to be able to admit his mistakes. And of course Potter could attain expertise in making something he really desired, which this potion clearly was. Whatever the loathed thing about him was, Potter wanted to get rid of it.

And Draco had seen what Potter did to the things he *really* wanted to get rid of.

The power…that was less explicable. Draco should have sensed magical power sufficient to cast the Diamond-Cutting Hex the moment he walked through the door. But it was possible Potter didn't use his magic for anything else so strenuous, which meant that only during the brewing process would it be alive and active.

Draco was now more curious than ever to see said brewing process.

He made an abrupt little bow that seemed to startle Potter, who eyed him warily. "I think that sounds like an excellent idea," he said amiably. "Is it two or three days from now that you brew?"

"Three." Potter's eyebrows bent down. He peered at Draco again, this time more thoughtfully.

"I'll come back then." Draco deliberately leaned around Potter to nod. "Granger." And he let himself out of the flat, the list of spells and the book burning in his hands, and new-formed ideas burning in his head.

And an interest in Potter burned in his soul, too. The git would have to help. It was inevitable.

But it need not be unpleasant, or uninteresting.

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Chapter: 4

Thanks again for all the reviews!
Chapter Four—Brewing
Harry eyed the ingredients twice, counted them, then looked under the table to ensure none of them had fallen there. Then he paced in a circle and dried his sweaty hands with two quick sweeps of them on his trousers.

He was nervous.

And why *shouldn't* he be? Normally, he brewed by himself, or at least when Hermione was resting, since she had come to stay. She would keep courteously silent if he made the potion in front of her, but even in a depression she flinched at every mistake he made and uttered little put-upon sighs. It was best for both him and her if he did it when she was sleeping.

But today he would do it in front of someone who made his *living* brewing Potions. He'd had a chance to look over Snape's Potions book, too, and get a little used to Harry, which he seemed not to have been during their first interview. Draco Malfoy would be sharper and more sarcastic than usual, and act to make Harry feel the full force of his expertise. Anything else was simply unthinkable.

Harry closed his eyes and forced himself to stand absolutely still for a moment, not reaching for a tool, not touching a vial, and *not* thinking of the visit he would receive in a few hours' time. He hovered distantly above his feelings, a skill he had used in the days troubled by the echoes of the war, and still more in the aftermath of Ron's death. He'd had to know when he was feeling irrationally guilty, such as the first time he had really laughed after Ron's funeral. The impulsive teenager he'd been could never have done this, but Harry liked to think he had better judgment now.

Except during things like the Incident…

Harry snorted aloud. The chances that there would be an Incident with Malfoy were slim to none.

And he could identify the sources of his anxiety now. His fear that he might make a mistake in front of a perfectionist, known Potions expert was understandable; Snape's presence had always

affected his brewing the same way. The fear that Malfoy would stomp out of the flat in disgust, swearing up and down that he was sorry to have accepted the commission to brew Hermione's potion, was ridiculous. At worst he'd shove Harry aside and take over himself.

He should have remembered, too, that side-effects like this always struck him on the morning a few days after he'd drunk his latest dose of the potion. He had to pay for his calm with a reverberation of his calm.

Harry forced his eyes open and shook his head again, smiling. Malfoy would no doubt find all sorts of things wrong with Harry's preparations, but he would make them *better*, and that was in the end part of what Harry was paying him for.

He went back to his arranging and gathering with a thoughtful eye, and this time noticed that he'd left out the duckweed. He went to retrieve it.

Draco sat back and admired his letter to Cordelia Nott. It was a masterpiece of indirect compliments, full of sly insinuations that he'd come upon his fortune—and hers—and hints that he could deny later, if she ever asked him to prove them to a third party. He sent it on its way with a post owl he'd hired expressly for that purpose, as more discreet, and then sat back to give some cursory attention to the *Daily Prophet* before he went to Potter's flat. He'd spent more time with Snape's old Potions book in the past few days than being aware of the world around him. Oh, but it had been *wondrous.* Old as the scribbled marginalia were, the majority was still relevant. Draco had never seen most of the improvements Snape suggested anywhere outside that book. Sometimes, it was true, his professor's acidic contempt for others had got the better of him; on several antidotes for poisons was scrawled the short suggestion *Use a bezoar.* Draco's eyes rolled when he saw that. Potions was a delicate art, even a lover's passion treated properly, a conception that Snape had been the first to teach him. He did damage to his own profession to suggest shortcuts that simply avoided the labor necessary.

On the other hand, Draco had to remember that Snape had been trapped in a school, brewing potions to order, and mostly the same few over and over again, which would be used to heal the results of scrapes between adolescents who really ought to have known better. If he had been free—

Well, if he had been free, he probably would have been using and teaching Dark Arts instead. Skilled as he had been, Potions had come second to Snape. Draco knew enough about his old teacher to admit it now.

It had both amused and soured Draco to find the spell that Potter had used to cut him open in the book as well. *Sectumsempra.* He had paused with his fingers running over it, wondering if Potter had known he would find this incantation when he lent the book to Draco, wondering if he was *meant* to find it—

Then Draco shook his head briskly. No, this time, surely, he was overestimating the Gryffindor's intelligence. Potter seemed to have been honestly surprised the book survived. Granger might

have planned something like this for him, but Granger was in no condition to plan anything right now.

After seeing the preparations Potter regularly undertook to make his potion, Draco was a little surprised the git was around to plan anything at all.

Enough. He had sat down to read the newspaper, not get involved in more speculations about what would happen later this afternoon.

The leading article was about Celestina Warbeck's latest love affair, because God forbid the *Prophet* put important news on the front page. Draco turned to the second one, which sometimes carried sense, and snorted when he discovered *that* was devoted to testimonies from Celestina Warbeck's fans about how her latest love affair would affect their concert attendance. Irritated, he glanced at the third.

And froze, his eyes narrowing. He couldn't distinguish the immediate importance of the picture in front of him, since he couldn't remember the face of the wizard in the photograph, but he was sure he had seen it before.

The photo showed a wizard probably in his late thirties, his hair thinning already, his head canted forwards at an angle that for some reason reminded Draco of Cedric Diggory the Hogwarts Champion. (Still the real and true Hogwarts Champion, for Draco). Then he straightened, laughing, and waved to someone out of range of the picture. His smile was like Diggory's, too, Draco mused. Very cheerful, very full of goodwill and peace on earth.

Draco didn't trust it for a moment.

He remembered why, finally, and without being reduced to reading the article, which would no doubt be rubbish. This was Charlemagne Diggory, an older cousin of Cedric's, who had actually survived to leave school and have a political career of the kind described by obscure Ministry officials as "brilliant." He had negotiated a few diplomatic settlements with other countries where British wizards had made fools of themselves, if Draco remembered correctly, and also done well on sensitive assignments that took him near the Muggle Prime Minister. He typically waded into delicate situations with that cheerful grin on his face, and ended by making everyone else grin with him. Draco had noted him a few times as someone potentially dangerous in the future, assuming Draco made enough money and dredged up enough desire to go into politics, but Diggory had spent so much time out of the country lately Draco had almost forgotten his face.

Now he was officially announcing his intention to run for Minister; the election was coming up quite soon.

And Draco had remembered something else, something that made him frown thoughtfully at the paper. Charlemagne Diggory had been one of those half-helpless young wizards who became suitors of Cordelia Nott's for a time. He had escaped with most of his money and his unimpaired

health, which was impressive.

Draco had wondered why Cordelia was back in the country, exactly—just as he had wondered why, at the time, Charlemagne Diggory did so well in comparison to everyone else who tangled with her.

It was something to think about. Not something to *do* anything about, since Draco had next to no evidence, but he would remember it. He clipped loose the photograph and pinned it to the wall of his rooms, near one of the enchanted windows, then sat back and watched it until it was time for him to depart for Potter's.

Harry greeted Malfoy with a nod. He thought the less wasted conversation, the better. Trying to be polite at length hadn't got him much the other day. He swept his hand towards the table in the center of the drawing room. "Here are the ingredients," he said. "Did you have any questions before we begin?"
Malfoy blinked at him like a lizard disturbed from its warm rock. "Before *you* begin, you mean."

Harry couldn't really admit that he expected the git to meddle just because, so he simply shrugged, smiled, said, "I misspoke," and turned back to the ingredients in front of him. The cauldron was already bubbling. Filling it with water and lighting a fire beneath it were tasks that even Harry had trouble messing up.

Of course, the water had to be at a certain temperature, hot enough to melt some of the ingredients and not others. Harry cast a quick charm to ensure he'd reached that, and found himself short a degree. He waited—if only he'd had this kind of patience in regular Potions class, he might have reached the sixth year even with Snape still teaching it—and then began to cast the series of spells he'd given Malfoy.

The order of them was unique to this potion, and several weren't used in Potions-making otherwise at all. Harry had got used to them, and he found them much easier to master than the order in which he cast the ingredients into the cauldron or how many times he had to stir it with a glass or silver rod. Of the intense six months of experimentation and research under Hermione's direction that he'd used to develop the potion, determining the spells had been his favorite.

After the charm to check the temperature came the spell that crushed the lavender petals into an even dust, and then the Diamond-Cutting Hex that Malfoy had been so impressed with the other day. The duckweed separated itself into the regulation lengths. The dragon scale shimmered and calved a piece as long as the joint of a child's finger, or so Hermione assured Harry; he'd never had the temptation to go about measuring that. The fine Demiguise hairs, touched with a slight glow so Harry could keep track of them, were severed into equal halves. The hoof scraping from a black unicorn lost its impure end. The coil of tarnished silver rang and warbled as Harry cut half a spiral. And so on.

He glanced sideways at Malfoy, though just with one eye, to see how he was taking this. A tricky feat of memory was coming up.

The moment Potter began to cast, Draco felt it. The magic that had only hovered in the room before, subdued, landed and extended itself like moth's wings from the cocoon, slowly, torturously, but inexorably.
Draco pressed himself back against the wall. Potter didn't appear to notice, though now and then one of his eyes drifted towards Draco in a motion that would have made the *Prophet* reporters dance and several hundred young witches considerably less enthusiastic about Potter's appearance if they could have been here to notice it. The magic billowed and flapped and roared like the sails of a ship now, so expansive Draco wondered Granger could stand to be in the same flat with it. Of course, perhaps she was used to it by now.

He had imagined that Potter would call upon some enormous reserve of power when he brewed, which otherwise he left untapped. That would explain both his ordinary calmness and lack of attraction for someone who had grown used to ferreting out magic, and the fact that he could cast the Diamond-Cutting Hex. Instead, Draco had the impression that Potter had loosed a wild beast from its fetters—most of them. He was still trying to control it with a slender halter.

The beast strained against its bonds, but Potter ground it down into a fine point, which required both enormous power and enormous finesse. That someone could even keep track of all the multiple targets that sliced themselves apart when Potter cast the Diamond-Cutting Hex was impressive. Draco bit his lip and stood a little straighter. He might have been able to do it—

If he could have cast the Diamond-Cutting Hex at all, which was still beyond him.

Potter faced the cauldron, seeming unaware of Draco's pallor and intense attention. He was gazing directly at the boiling water. He made a tiny gesture with his wand, and another with his left hand, in complement. Draco wondered if he was even aware of it. The crushed lavender petals swirled up in a tight cloud of wind that let none of them escape, and Draco imagined they would drop into the potion.

Then he remembered the fifth spell on Potter's list, and frowned. He was about to see it happen, obviously, but how it could apply to lavender petals—

Magic raced past Draco like a single exhalation of midwinter's wind. The lavender petals separated. Half of them remained as normal, and sifted down carefully into the cauldron. The rest transformed, crisping at the edges, turning white. Draco, staring, knew that Potter had changed their essence and not just their color; he had Transfigured them into daisy petals.

We definitely didn't cover that in Transfiguration at Hogwarts.

The daisy petals attached themselves like a cluster of flies to the severed piece of silver, which Potter had just Levitated from the table. Draco was watching for it, knew it would happen from the list of spells, and *still* almost wasn't able to believe it. The petals melted *into* the silver, the metal liquefying to accept them and hardening again around their ends, in a localized blast of extreme heat that should have been tangible far beyond the petals—should, in fact, have fried

them.

And Potter, when Draco turned back to him, though he had a slight frown on his face and his concentration appeared complete, still hadn't broken a sweat.

The coil of silver spun around twice, gathering momentum that Draco knew was essential for the angle at which it would drop into the cauldron, and then plunged. Potter had already cast a slight dome over the cauldron to prevent it from splashing hot water on him, Draco, or the ingredients still waiting on the table. Behind the silver and its fused daisy petals came the dragon's scale, which Potter briefly caught close in his hand so he could cast a spell on it that made it throb like a heart, and then one of the transparent, glittering lengths of Demiguise hair.

"This is the dangerous part," Potter said suddenly, his voice odd and staccato, utterly devoid of emotion. Draco reckoned he was directing too much of his effort into the potion to be able to spare warning or anger for his audience.

Draco pressed back against the wall. He would have cast a Shield Charm in front of himself, but he knew the *Protego* spell sometimes reacted badly with potions that contained silver. He waited, instead, immovable as stone now, fascinated as much by the risk as by the process.

And it was a process that Potter had obviously perfected.

Not that it was controlled; Potter bowled along on the edge of disaster, conjuring salt onto the scraping from a black unicorn's hoof and hurling it into the cauldron just a moment before the potion would have gone unstable without it, casting a *Finite Incantatem* that released the hold of the Diamond-Cutting Hex on the silver but not on the dragon's scale a breath before the potion became unusable sludge, whirling through a series of no less than five separate spells to enchant the duckweed and the remaining Demiguise hairs into a glittering lumpy concoction like a piece of obsidian, which would make everything explode if an edge on it was too sharp.

He sped the lump into the cauldron and cast a *Finite Incantatem* to remove the diamond properties from the duckweed and the Demiguise hairs in the same motion. Then he raised the temperature of the water at the surface of the cauldron, while chilling the part closest to the fire, and began a steady chant that turned the middle of the liquid into a maelstrom, mixing and spreading the ingredients more or less evenly, whilst guiding several of them through a spiraling widdershins path that called on *solar* magic, of all things.

Draco didn't think he could have taken his gaze from Potter at that moment if Cordelia Nott had walked through the door with the news that he was free of his debt. Potter's eyes were narrowed, proud and pure in their determination. His wand never faltered, not even when he had to take up a silver stirring rod in his left hand and lash it through the middle of the maelstrom. A glass stirring rod followed, but he broke *that* one with a sharp ringing sound on the rim of the cauldron, tilting his palm at the one angle that would protect his fragile skin from the shards. One shard fell into the potion, one outside the cauldron. Draco thought it might look accidental, but he knew it was planned.

Like an Auror battling his way through the middle of a duel, like a Dark wizard fighting for the family honor, like a politician walking through the fiery ordeal of his first speech, Potter finished the last spell, a hoarse *Finite Incantatem* that doused the fire. Then he shook his hair back from his face and studied the thick green liquid in the cauldron with every indication of happiness.

"There," he said. "I'll leave that to cool for a few hours, and when that time ends, I'll bottle it. And it'll be exactly like every other vial of potion I have sitting on my shelves." He looked up at Draco, as if this were an ordinary occurrence. "So now you've seen how that's brewed. What do you say?"

Draco swallowed the pride and the long-standing grudge against Gryffindors that would have made him lie and temporize. He stood up straight instead, and stared into Potter's eyes. Potter blinked twice, and a slight wrinkle appeared in his brows.

"I think that I can't brew this potion without you," Draco said.

Harry snorted and folded his arms. The expression on Malfoy's face had shaken him. There was a raw appraisal there that Harry was all too familiar with from the faces of *Prophet* reporters—how many papers could he help them sell?—and people who had wanted his autograph or pictures of him "doing beneficial things" or his childhood blankets—how could they profit from this?
"I don't see why," he said. "Yes, you'll need my help and Hermione's in the initial research, but the actual brewing—"

"Is impossible for me without your command of magic," Malfoy interrupted smoothly. "I don't have it. I told you I can't do the Diamond-Cutting Hex."

"And that's why we'll prepare this potion a different way, and seek out possible variations on the incantations." Harry thought he was being very patient. "You won't *need* this particular set of spells, Malfoy."

"I won't need one that's much different, if I'm to produce a potion that has the same general effect it has on you, but adapted to other people." Malfoy smiled a little. Harry wished he knew what there was to smile about. "Do you know how rare it is to introduce magical modifications into a potion, Potter? *New* magical modifications, not ones that were tested and agreed upon generations ago? Do you know how much rarer it is to see them work so well? What you've done—or Granger's done, I suppose—is to alter the basic nature of Snape's potion, not just the surface composition of it. If we're to market the Desire potion in the form everyone will want it in, then we'll need that magic. And you cast the spells with a finesse that I can't touch."

Harry shifted uneasily. Malfoy was already making plans to drag Harry into the part of the process he wasn't interested in. "But I leave the marketing to you. I've resigned the potion we develop to your care. And it's only this one set of spells that I cast with—finesse." The word sat oddly on his tongue. He was accustomed to thinking of himself as someone who blundered, as

clumsy in most of his relationships with the world as Tonks had been physically. "That's because I've practiced them so long. I'll just stumble on the others."

"Enough *practice*, and you won't." If Malfoy had resembled a lizard earlier, he was a crocodile now, in the long, lazy smile he gave Harry. "It took months to develop this potion, didn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Six."

"We can take at least three with this one." Malfoy flung a glance at Harry's green sludge. "Three is all it should take. Of course," he said, and his voice had dropped into previously unknown registers of softness when he turned around again, "it would go much faster, and give me support for the theory I'll need to back my modifications, if you would just tell me what the potion does for you."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Not on your life." The Incident had been bad enough when his friends and family were the only ones who knew about it. The thought of how Malfoy would *stare* chilled Harry's stomach like a full glass of ice water.

"It increases your magic, doesn't it?"

And Harry laughed, and managed to relax again. From the calculating glances Malfoy was giving him, he had entertained an absurd suspicion of the bastard *knowing.* But of course he didn't. "Try again."

Draco resigned himself to not knowing right now. He didn't really need that little tidbit of knowledge, though it would have amused him, when visions of an extremely profitable and entertaining future were dancing in his head.
"I need you to help me," he said. "Do you have any idea how much potion I'll need to produce, and how much time it will take, if I work at this alone?"

Potter blinked and frowned. "I'm sure there are other potions out there that do something *like* this one. Madam Skullwink's Happy Draught—"

"Madam Skullwink's Happy Draught gives delusions of comfort," Draco said flatly. "That's all. This would actually enable a person to escape the problems that always haunted them, and for good—and without much expenditure of effort, given that you only take the potion every two weeks. That *is* correct, isn't it?" Potter gave a guarded nod, and Draco spoke on, gazing appealingly into the other man's eyes. Gryffindors liked that sort of thing. "Potter, do you have any *idea* what it would mean to people if there was a convenient, easy solution to problems even more damaging than Granger's depression, which they've struggled with for months or years?"

"But Hermione won't take it forever," said Potter. "She only wants her variant so she can establish a routine of activity that will fight the depression."

"And you?" Draco edged a few steps nearer and put a hand on Potter's arm. People were more

likely to agree to things when you touched them. Potter gave him an extremely puzzled glance, but didn't move away. "Do you think you're likely to take it for the rest of your life?"

Potter flushed and averted his eyes. "My situation is different. Without it, I'm a—" He forced the word out. "A criminal."

"Hmm," said Draco. "But consider how many people aren't as brave as Granger. And consider how many people there might be like you. Potter, this Desire potion is going to be *enormous.*"

"Isn't that a cheat, though?" Potter asked, obviously still caught in a wrestling contest with his morals. "We would be giving people a way *around* their problems, instead of forcing them to face them."

"House-elves are a way around problems," said Draco. "And heating charms, and cleaning charms, and a bewildering array of others that I can't even mention right now." He caught Potter's gaze and leaned forwards. "You've lived in the wizarding world almost as long as I have. You *know*, better than anyone else, that the majority of our precious fellow wizards would rather someone else take up the burden of defending them, encouraging them, creating for them. We're just taking advantage of an attitude that already exists, that's all. And if we can get some Galleons in the bargain, why not?"

Potter chewed his lip. Then he nodded, not with the manner of someone entirely convinced, but with the manner of someone who'd think about it.

"Good," Draco said, and stared back at the cauldron. The feeling that came over him then was like falling in love.

Welcome, little potion, to a brand new future.

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Chapter: 5

Thanks again for all the reviews!
Chapter Five—Variations on a Theme of Desire
"You're sure you know what you're doing?"

Harry gave Hermione a wry smile and pushed the pillows up so she could lay her head on them more comfortably. "When have I ever?"

Her hand caught and squeezed his wrist hard enough to give him pause and make him meet her eyes. Hermione's face was pale and her gaze so shadowed that Harry had the uncontrollable

thought she looked like one of the dead he'd summoned back with the Resurrection Stone, but the strength behind the surface blazed through. "This is a *dangerous* potion, Harry," she said lowly. "It could change the wizarding world as we know it."

Harry checked his retort, which centered on the impossibility of his doing any such thing from his little London flat. For one thing, Hermione was still too weak for his anger. For another, he had changed the world by idle speculation before, even if that *had* been in Hogwarts' library or a tent in the middle of a frozen forest. "I know," he said. "But I don't think we'll have free rein the way Malfoy thinks we will. The Ministry is bound to get involved, and they can put a stop to this more effectively than I could. They'll know the laws, the controls—"

"Or you could just convince him to make the potion less dangerous," Hermione suggested. "Make it necessary to develop a specific variant for each client who comes to you, instead of creating one that works generally."

"Hermione," Harry said gently, brushing the hair back from her forehead, "do you think I *could*? Or that I'd be able to tell the truth even if he promised not to do it and then brewed the general potion under my nose?"

"Your magic is necessary for any potion he makes." Hermione plucked at her sheets and didn't look at him. "You—Harry, you could simply refuse to cooperate if he doesn't restrict his brewing."

Harry didn't respond, save to fluff her pillows again.

"*Harry.*"

So it has to come to this, then. Harry leaned forwards and folded his arms, giving her a level glance. All his practice in controlling his temper since the war came in handy now, making his words calm and level, the truth, instead of angry. "I promised to turn over the marketing and the choice of how to make profits to him. I can't go back on my word. And if I did, he might refuse to brew the potion for you."

"You care more about me than the whole damn wizarding world," Hermione whispered.

"Yes, that is in fact the case," Harry said. He didn't take his eyes off her.

"So you won't—you won't hold him back, just in case that means *I* might suffer."

"Got it in one."

"I wish Ron was here."

At least that wish enabled Harry to wrap his arms around her and hold her close, nestling her head under his chin. "So do I," he said, and then held and rocked her whilst she cried, his own

face dry and implacable. His control over his temper had given him remarkable strength of will.

Why shouldn't it have? Harry had learned what happened when he was weak.

Draco narrowed his eyes only slightly when he came into the drawing room of Potter's flat, after having heard Potter's voice call distractedly through the door, and encountered only Granger sitting on the couch. He laid down the book and the ingredients he'd brought on the table furthest away from her and bowed elaborately. "Granger," he said. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I want to convince you not to brew the potion in a form that can affect many people." Granger folded her arms obstinately. "Harry said I could try, but he wouldn't try himself, just in case you wouldn't brew for me."

Draco smiled slightly. *Well.* The ethics he had conquered by appealing to Harry's heroism for the ungrateful masses would receive a more spirited defense from Granger, it seemed. He took a seat on the chair across from her and rested his elbows on his knees. Looking into her face, devastated though it was by loss and set by Gryffindor stubbornness, was easy enough; Granger had nothing on the pathetic addicts who begged at Draco's door for just one more dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion or one of the numerous pain-killing draughts.

"You still want the potion for yourself, correct?" he asked.

Granger's eyes glittered, as if she saw the trap Draco was setting for her but was prepared to meet it. "I do."

"Then how can you deny other people the chance to experience what *you* will?" Draco spread his hands. "I've seen problems you can't even imagine, Granger. Independent apothecaries often do. The thought that I could cure those problems—well, suffice it to say I'm not so selfish as to keep the cure to myself."

"But I only plan to take it as a temporary solution, and most of them *won't.*" Granger had Gryffindor earnestness in her eyes, which stood less than a zero chance of converting Draco, but he thought her intellectual arguments might be interesting. She gestured as if snatching hope from the air with a curved palm. "What are the solutions to our problems worth, if we don't struggle for them? We'll lose half the beauty, and all the joy, of triumph with a potion like this. People who take it won't have overcome their personal weaknesses. They won't know themselves better. They'll just have bought a magical panacea."

"Not quite a panacea," Draco said. "Potter tells me that this potion cures only the thing you most loathe about yourself. I imagine some people taking it will be in for a surprise; they'll think that they're changing their looks, for example, and then it will turn out that they've always loathed their cowardice most, and *that's* gone, instead."

"But *still.*" Granger drummed a hand on her knee with a force Draco was surprised she could

command. "Can you tell me that it won't affect the outcome of people's struggles? That it won't cheapen them?"

Draco arched an eyebrow. "Tell me, Granger, do you think that the widespread joy after the Dark Lord's defeat was cheapened because Potter was the one who killed him? Should everyone involved have done it themselves, striven to take his place?"

Granger gave a negative little jerk of her head. "That was different. There was a prophecy involved. No one but Harry could have done what he did. It was enough for other people if they did their part in the larger war."

"A bad comparison, then." Draco smiled a bit. "My mistake. Do you think Potter's joy was cheapened because he used the Deathly Hallows, and, in part, my own wand in the victory? Should he have done it with his own, incompatible wand? Should he have *really* bounced the Killing Curse off his forehead because of his own enormous power and not his mother's love, as I understand was the case? How far will you go, how much help will you proscribe, before you allow someone else to enjoy one of your truly *moral* victories?"

"That isn't the same thing." Granger's voice was very soft. "You're trying to confuse me."

Bang on, Draco thought cheerfully.

"But it isn't the same thing. Everyone involved had suffered before Voldemort died." Draco had to admit he admired the way she spoke, without hesitation, the name he couldn't bring himself to utter even now. "Harry had suffered most of all—"

Draco snorted.

"He suffered the most for Voldemort's *defeat,*" Granger corrected herself, "since it was all on him. I'll grant you that other people suffered more pain and trauma." She drew a deep breath. "And if there—if there had been a potion, or a spell, or a simple curse that would have taken care of Voldemort all along—that would have cheapened things enormously. Don't you understand? Ron and I—" She shut her eyes and counted her breaths for a long moment, something Draco was willing to allow. "We thought Harry *did* have some kind of special power of his own, not love but magic. Harry scolded us for thinking that. And he was right. It was for the best that he relied on the simple things and simple help in order to defeat Voldemort. *It* was right."

Draco applauded politely. "Very pretty, Granger. However, all of that is based on the view that suffering *ennobles* someone. It does not. Pain is *pain.* I've seen people become saints under it, but they're the rare ones. I've seen pain twist far more people, and twist the ones taking care of them, as they try helplessly not to resent their relatives or friends and *can't.* You're just lucky that Potter is one of the people who can bear up under it, and even then, I'm sure you've cost him some headaches since your Weasley died."

"Harry's retreated from a position of judgment," Granger said, her voice bright with disapproval.

"He doesn't think he has the right to say what good or evil is anymore."

Draco paused, but decided not to question her on the matter. She probably didn't realize the value of what she'd just revealed, which Draco was *sure* had something to do with Potter's reasons for taking the potion. If he didn't draw attention to Granger's words, she might say more.

"Regardless," Draco continued, "the people who believe that everyone else should fight with and overcome their problems tend *not* to be the people who have those problems. The ones who say that it's perfectly possible to lose weight are already skinny. The braggarts who claim that torture wouldn't break *them* have never endured torture in their lives." For a moment, memories tried to intrude. Draco whipped them back into place. "The pretty people chide the ugly ones for caring about looks. I simply want to offer everyone a fair chance to correct their problems, *if they want to.* The Gryffindors like you can refrain."

"But you'll still charge them money."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"So much for an equal chance."

"It's compensation for the time and effort and ingredients I'll put into the potion. And my reward for being such a good person," Draco said modestly.

Granger growled under her breath, but Potter's voice sounded from the doorway. "I don't think you'll convince him, Hermione. And since you *need* this potion, and*I* won't be convinced, and *you* won't stop arguing, then it's best if we just get on with the brewing." He nodded to Draco.

Draco had already stood and moved to fetch the ingredients and Snape's book, enlivened by the challenge to his view of things.

Harry shut the door of his bedroom behind him and turned around. Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him with a half-smile.

"Making sure Granger doesn't intrude?" he asked.

"Oh, she wouldn't," Harry said, and took a deep breath. He *had* to calm his nervousness. He had spent a good deal of effort to ensure that he was more balanced than this. "She's too tired, and she knows better anyway. Just making sure that I don't torment her with my inferior brewing skills." He met Malfoy's eyes, and decided some honesty wouldn't go amiss. *What's the worst he can do? Laugh at me? Better that than we make a mistake in brewing the potion because he thinks I can do things I can't.* "The way I reckon I'll torment you."

He received a calm, blank face in response. Then Malfoy turned and thoughtfully rearranged the dragon scales and the coils of copper he'd brought along before responding.

"You'll have to get over that, you know," he said. "Your brewing skills are excellent."

Harry sighed. "For *this potion,*" he emphasized carefully. "The variant I'm using now, the only one that exists, the one tuned to *me.* And they're only that way because of long practice. I still don't see how you can expect me to help you with the other variants."

Malfoy turned to look at him again, arms folded in front of him. "Potter, no one who is hopeless at Potions-making shows that deft touch you showed me last week." He lifted a hand. "No, hear me out. It's more than just remembering how many times to stir and when you add the lavender petals. The best brewers are unconsciously competent, uniting an instinct for grace and beauty and speed to mastery of the mechanical things."

"But I'm not an artist." Harry knew his face was burning. "You are. That's why I chose to invite you into this."

A soft smile crossed Malfoy's face. Harry stared. He felt he could have met Malfoy in the street wearing that smile and honestly not known the man.

"I know that," Malfoy said. "But it's going to be a pleasure working with you because you're not *completely* hopeless. By the time we finish this brewing, Potter, you'll be competent in at least two potions, the Desire potion and your own, and I'll have managed to impart a good deal of general theory as well. See if I don't." He gave a small nod and faced the ingredients again. "Come here."

His skin tingling with odd sensations, his nerves thrilling, Harry moved up beside Malfoy. The other man's breath brushed his skin as they leaned close together. Harry was grateful to realize he wasn't that uncomfortable with the position, and what discomfort remained was because of Malfoy's one-time status as his enemy. He really *did* have better control of himself.

But not enough control to risk letting the potion run out, he told himself sternly. He would have to brew more tomorrow, just in case. What happened if he dropped a vial? Or accidentally swept the whole cabinet clean with an awkward motion of his arm, as had happened once? He'd be up all night feverishly brewing, and he didn't want the tiredness that would result from that when he was taking care of Hermione.

"Now," Malfoy continued, voice low, "I've made my first decisions about substitutions for the ingredients. I noticed that you used a scale from a Hungarian Horntail. Have you ever used anything else?"

Harry frowned. "No, of course not. Hermione said it was better to choose a piece of a magical animal's body that you had a close connection to, if possible. And since I faced that kind of dragon in the Triwizard Tournament…" He shrugged.

"Ah." Malfoy sounded pleased. "I *thought* I'd read the original recipe correctly."

"Only thought?"

"Prat." The response was purely automatic; Malfoy's face was closed, austere, and distant, his eyes hazed. He was seeing Malfoy the artist now, Harry was certain. His hands flicked as sharp and precise as insects' wings as he reached out to the dragon scale he'd brought. It had an iridescent sheen—Antipodean Opaleye, Harry thought. Definitely not Horntail. "This substitute should come off without harm in the initial experiment. The trick is in finding a magical animal that as many people as possible feel a strong connection to, so we can create a general variant."

"But," Harry said quietly, "the potion for Hermione comes first."

Malfoy cocked his head at him. His mouth quirked in an abstracted smile. "Of course," he said. "Has she decided on what magical animal she feels the strongest connection to?"

"The phoenix." Harry shrugged. "She admired Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix."

"Phoenix feathers are hardly common."

"I'll pay for them, Malfoy." Harry waited for the gray eyes to meet his this time. "Money is no object at all."

"That's true, isn't it?" Malfoy ran a slender, graceful hand through his hair, and then reached out again. It was odd, Harry thought, how just watching the other wizard's hands increased Harry's confidence in him. They *looked* meant for graceful labor instead of hard, as if he were a painter or piano-player. "I do keep forgetting. Well. The Antipodean Opaleye scale goes into the first draught, since that's what we have here. And then we'll substitute the copper for the silver—"

"Why?" Harry demanded. "I know that silver represents the moon in alchemy, and that calls a lunar influence to the potion that counteracts the solar influence of the widdershins stirring. I hardly think we can replace it without making the whole thing into worthless sludge."

Draco started. It was one thing to say that Potter was competent in the brewing itself, another to realize that he had memorized, if only by rote, the magical theory that justified the choice of his original ingredients.

A frisson slid along his spine. He had worked alone for so long—even though taking on apprentices would have been a source of income and free help, he had always refused them—that he had expected company to be necessary but tedious. Any enjoyment would come only from watching Potter's displays of magic. But this—well, it wasn't Snape, but it was someone he could justify and explain his choices to.

"That's true," he said. "But I don't think the widdershins stirring is actually necessary."

Potter leaned a hip on the table and frowned at him, arms crossed. "I don't buy that," he said. "The whole potion failed for a month before Hermione thought of it. The potion is too—what did she say? It violates Morgana's Strangeness Constant. Too many Transfigured and melted ingredients. It needed something common and earthly, and imitating the track of the sun in the stirring provides that."

Draco resisted the temptation to stretch luxuriously. Oh, yes, he could get *used* to this.

"And this potion *won't* violate Morgana's Strangeness Constant," he said easily. "The Antipodean Opaleye scale and the copper together will ground the potion."

"Why?" Potter chewed the inside of his cheek. "What does copper represent in alchemy? I know that Hermione told me once, when we considered using it in one of the original brewings, but I can't remember—"

"Copper represents Venus—"

"That doesn't sound any more earthly than the moon!"

"Ah," Draco said, drawing the sound out, "but Venus is much more of a *balance* with the earth. The moon is smaller. And it matters, as well, that the Antipodean Opaleye scale comes from a dragon which commonly lives on the other side of the world from Britain."

"But Hungarian Horntails don't live in Britain, either." Potter's frown was pronounced, and he had started to pick at his teeth with his thumbnail, which Draco considered a highly unattractive habit.

"The symbolism is more important—the greater distance," Draco said. "You have one ingredient symbolizing a planet that's closer in size to Earth and one 'weighing' down Earth from the other side." He smirked a little at Potter's confused expression. "It matters where the potion is being brewed," he added considerately. "Believe me, Potter, I thought very carefully about this before I decided to change these two particular ingredients."

"And then you won't need the widdershins stirring at all?" Potter's eyes were bright, and at least he had removed his thumb from his mouth. He was leaning forwards to peer at the table as if he could already see the completed potion with the new ingredients shimmering there.

"Exactly." Draco controlled the impulse to pat him on the head and tell him he was a good boy, but barely. "The widdershins stirring would add a solar influence that's not *needed*, now. This potion is going to be nearly all of the Earth. That's a very good thing, since it's meant to apply to so many people. The symbolism of the Earth ties us to the planet, and that's a connection we share with all our potential customers—"

"It's for *Hermione.*"

"You really are extraordinarily stubborn about this," Draco muttered. "Why couldn't we develop a general variation that will benefit many people, Potter? Among those people would be Granger."

Potter blinked and scowled. "I suppose that I never thought of that." The scowl said he thought he should have.

Because he knew of his own failure, Draco refrained from most of the cutting remarks he wanted to make. "You don't need to worry about someone mistaking you for a master brewer and demanding that you concoct them an impossible potion just yet, Potter," he said, and turned to the table himself. "Shall we begin?"

Harry was tightly-strung at first, expecting at every moment that he would forget some vital spell or get distracted by one of the two substitutes Draco had chosen. But gradually he settled into the rhythm of things, and it hardly required any more effort to blend the Transfigured daisy petals with the copper than it had to blend them with the silver.

It was when he put the Antipodean Opaleye scale in the potion that everything went to hell.

The only warning Harry received was the potion turning a light, misty blue instead of the blue-black it should have been at that precise moment in time, but that was enough. He was on the ground in a moment, casting the Shield Charm he had never dared to cast before, given the silver that had been present in the potion then, and dragging Malfoy flat with him.

The Shield Charm was just *barely* strong enough. The potion sizzled and painted the walls in burning gouts, starting small fires where it landed. Harry cast *Aguamenti* steadily from beneath the shield, beyond grateful when he noticed Malfoy doing the same thing. At least he hadn't decided that it didn't matter if Harry's flat burned down.

The cauldron wasn't empty yet, unfortunately. One burst of potion rose like a firework, rotating through flashes of blue and gold and silver, and barreled straight for Malfoy's outstretched wand hand.

Harry reacted without thought—though he reckoned later he *must* have thought it through, or he would simply have knocked Malfoy's hand away and put his in its place. Instead, he aimed his wand and bellowed, "*Phantasma temporale!*"

Malfoy's hand turned thin and gray and sideways to the world, the hand of a ghost, along with his wand. The potion shot straight through without stopping or harming him, and spattered on the floorboards. Harry yanked him out of the way and cast a spell that had originally been meant to contain acid spills, successfully preventing that gout from igniting or eating through the floor.

Then, finally, the cauldron calmed.

Harry turned around with a sigh. Malfoy's hand had returned to normal already, and so had his wand; the Temporary Ghost Charm had its name for a reason. Harry gave him a small smile. "Sorry about that. Do you think we need to add the copper and the Antipodean Opaleye scale at the same time?"

Malfoy opened his mouth. Malfoy closed his mouth. Malfoy blinked. Harry put it down to his near-death experience, and waited patiently.

Draco knew it wasn't the appropriate or wished-for response, but he felt a surge of excitement anyway. It wasn't that he particularly liked danger; he just liked the confirmation that Potter was dedicated to saving him from it, and that his magic and quick wits weren't restricted to one brewing process, whatever he thought.

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly the solution I would have suggested. What made you think of it?" He was interested to see if Potter knew all the symbolic answers.

"Well, they didn't do so well when going into the cauldron one after another," Potter said dryly, gesturing about at the mess, "and everything was fine until then, so they should probably go in at the same time."

All right, no symbolic answers. But Draco's excitement refused to die. If one of them knew the theory, and one of them had a grounding in common sense of the "maybe this will work" variety, that would be enough.

"Shall we try it?" he asked, and extended his hand to be helped up from the ground, the hand Potter had saved from burning or worse.

Potter grasped it and hauled him up with no idea of the significance the gesture had to Draco.

One of us knowing that significance as well is perfectly fine.

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Chapter: 6

Thanks again for all the reviews!
Chapter Six—A Work of Three
Harry woke slowly. It was one of those mornings when he managed to drift up from his dreams without breaking the stillness that held him, so he lay deliciously relaxed, as if his limbs were lapped in warm water.

He could hear Hermione's soft, snuffling breaths from his bedroom, if he listened. He left her the bed most often and took the couch in the drawing room, though when she felt better she insisted they switch off. And there had been more days lately when she felt better, at least enough to dig into books that Harry fetched from her former home and sit up reading late into the night about ethics and potions and the consequences of past magical discoveries.

Harry felt a smile widen over his face, so gently it didn't disturb the peaceful contours of his muscles. Malfoy was helping her just by being here, even though he hadn't finished the potion; Hermione dug deep into herself and found a core of strength that she unearthed in her passionate belief they shouldn't create a general version of the potion to release to the public.

Malfoy never seemed to mind. He would answer Hermione's arguments with logic of his own, and Slytherin "ethics," and amazement that anyone would even worry about some of the concerns she had brought up. And though the potion variants they tried, even now, a month after they had begun their efforts to modify Harry's potion, went inert or exploded or turned into deadly poisons, Malfoy showed no sign of discouragement or slowing down.

The other day, they had managed one that seemed likely to work until the final step, the adding of the glass stirring rod. Then the potion had given a forlorn*gloop* and subsided into silence. Harry grimaced and swore under his breath. Malfoy only laughed and muttered something about duckweed interacting with the carrots he had introduced, and how he should have anticipated that. After a charm that dried the liquid in the potion to eliminate the last chances of a volatile reaction, Malfoy had peered closely into the cauldron, then picked it up and taken it with him, remarking that he wanted to study this.

Their working relationship consisted of sharp exclamations and Malfoy's attempts to explain Potions theory. Harry understood more than he had a month ago, but only basic facts. What he still lacked was the ability to think ahead and reason it out, as Malfoy could, so he could *anticipate* what ingredients they should try and which wouldn't mix well at all.

But still, Harry thought, drifting and floating between thoughts like a bather between Greek islands, their relationship reminded him of the peace that gripped him now. It could break easily, but so long as both of them attended to keeping it whole, it wouldn't.

He had learned that knowledge too late to benefit some of the bonds he had with other people. But he could cling to it now and wield it when it seemed that his ties to the Weasleys or Hermione were in danger of breaking down.

Malfoy's helped me, too. I'll be sorry when he's developed the potion and this is over. Though Malfoy had sometimes made little gestures towards the possibility of Harry helping him in the future, Harry doubted it would occur. They lessened the amount of magic in the potion every session. Soon, Malfoy would be able to simply *brew*, and then he would have the future control of the market Harry had promised him.

Don't try to make things linger past their natural stopping point, Harry advised himself. *Enjoy*

them whilst they last.

Hermione moaned in her sleep, and Harry stirred, disturbing the restful lassitude that had gripped him. It was about time for it to end anyway, though, so Harry refused to regret as he went into the bedroom.

Draco had discovered most of what he knew about brewing by devouring books of theory, studying as many personal notes of other potions-makers as he could get his hands on, and experimentation. Most of the time, it was a good enough combination to get him the results he wanted.
But there was something else, too, rarer than the passion he carried to his most interesting concoctions, rarer even than the times he felt totally in control and totally free, as Potter seemed to be when on the edge of explosion in his original recipe. And that was the moment when insight blazed in his head like a vision, and he saw ahead to the end of a long, troublesome process.

He could not command those insights. He supposed they were what inspirations were to artists. They came and flickered and went out, and sometimes they vanished before he could grasp them.

This one came as he half-drowsed, half-pored over Severus's old Potions book, examining again, idly, the improvements on the making of the Draught of Peace.

*Of course he would recommend using crushed peridot to balance the hellebore. It symbolizes peace, which is wanted here, and why should anyone believe that extra flakes of peridot are harmful when they're about to put*hellebore *in their bodies? That's the kind of thing I really should have thought of myself, if—*

And then the book dropped from his hands, and Draco stared across the room, feeling his thoughts unwinding into a spiral, which quickly braided itself back together, tying his new notions about the Draught of Peace together with the latest improvements he and Potter had been trying to make on the Desire potion.

A moment later, he had seized the quill and piece of parchment that always sat near him on the table and started scribbling madly.

Yes. Yes. One opposite of loathing is peace. We've been concentrating too much on the negative consequence, the simple removal *of whatever is plaguing the drinker. But there's another way to think of it: the soothing into somnolence of the evil personality trait or memory or nightmare. If we can combine the Draught of Peace, or the relevant parts of it, into the Desire potion…*

Draco sketched diagrams, created an elementary map of the way the brewing table would need to look for the most convenient access to the ingredients, and murmured to himself as he created a new half-list of ingredients, which would not need to substitute for the ingredients in the Desire potion but be mixed into and integrated with them. It would be tricky, of course, ensuring that the peridot flakes didn't react with the dragon scale in any substantial way. He would need more

magic from Potter after all; he knew the spell, but once again it was unlikely that he would have the time or strength to cast it in the middle of the brewing.

He ought to favor this solution, though. It makes the Desire potion more unlike the parent potion, so when this causes speculation among brewers—as it will—it'll be harder for them to trace back and reckon his original recipe.

Draco laughed under his breath as he scribbled. He felt the passion washing through him now, slave to the complicated instructions unfolding, so beautifully and so clearly, in his mind.

Potter will be so surprised. Perhaps he'll even tell me what his potion does, as a reward.

Harry had been sure that he'd seen the limits of Malfoy's expressions. He could look contemptuous, pitying—when talking to Hermione—and engrossed when they faced the brewing. He had never known that Malfoy could look purely *joyful*, as if the morning had restored everything taken from him since the war.
But that was the way he looked when he stepped through the door of the flat and nodded at Harry. "Potter. A very good afternoon to you. I hope you're ready for an addition that should eliminate some of the problems we're having and move us closer to a solution."

"Always ready for that," said Harry, and gave a half-smile to prevent himself from replying in stronger terms. Really, Malfoy *didn't* need any more encouragement; the way he looked, he would be dragging Harry behind him. He had some news to impart that might dampen the excitement, though. "Hermione feels well enough today to work with us, and she has some thoughts on why the potion went inert when we added the glass stirring rod."

Hermione gave a firm nod from the couch, where she sat with her arms wrapped around her stomach. It was her most frequent posture, Harry thought sadly, as if she were trying frantically to hold in a bleeding gut wound. But her face was less pale than it had been for weeks, and she met Malfoy's challenging gaze with a direct one.

Malfoy crossed the room in order to take up her hand and kiss the back of it. "Wonderful," he said. "We are now a trio of Skill, Intelligence, and Magic."

Harry was sure he was staring. He had never thought Malfoy would willingly touch Hermione, let alone act charming. Hermione blinked, caught off-guard, and Harry could almost see her prepared words dissolving into mist.

That was why he did it, Harry realized suddenly, and struggled to keep from shaking his head and giving away the game to Hermione. She frowned at him now, the corners of her eyes pinched, but not with pain.

"I may be able to create a potion attuned to me, so that you don't have to loose your extremely dangerous general variant on the rest of the populace," she said to Malfoy.

"The more the merrier," Malfoy replied, "both in numbers of brewers and in the multiplication of potions."

And he swept back across the room to collect the parchments he'd brought, which Harry assumed contained his vaunted solution to the problem. The grace of the movements made Harry's breath catch in his throat. He thought Malfoy looked best like *this*, not when he was arranging himself so as to attract the attention and approval of an audience.

Malfoy glanced up and caught him staring. Harry stared back frankly, too mature now, he hoped, to stammer and blush like a schoolboy.

He received, in return, one of those cool, appraising stares that told him Malfoy was back on his guard. Harry gave a shrug that was purely inwards and philosophical. He was sorry to see that unstudied artistry gone, but he knew that Malfoy wouldn't let it interfere with his brewing. He never had, the other times Harry acted uncouth.

A sharp awareness had been added to the emotions threading through Draco as he led Potter and Granger into Potter's bedroom, the usual site of their brewing. He had someone new to impress, and he had impressed his older compatriot by doing nothing at all. Two of the purest pleasures of Hogwarts, competing with Granger and winning Potter's attention, had returned to him unexpectedly.
There would almost certainly be no permanent fruit of either interaction. Granger would not let herself be impressed for long—one reason she returned constantly, and fruitlessly, to the attack on Draco's morals. And if Potter was not unaware of what his interest indicated, he was certainly too much of a Gryffindor to do anything about it.

All the same, Draco was as far from displeased as it was possible to be. He set his new ingredients and the parchment list of them down on the table with a flourish. Potter, as usual, already had a cauldron hanging over a fire and awaiting him.

"Now," Draco said, "first, I've adapted some ingredients from the Draught of Peace. My thought was that we shouldn't be trying just to *subtract* something from the people we give the potion to. We should be trying to *replace* what they most loathe with a better substitute. And the best thing to replace it with would be a sense of peace, a calm approach to the situation."

Granger narrowed her eyes, even as her face took on a hopeful expression. It was an odd combination to look at. "But wouldn't that mean you wouldn't really be changing the people who drank the potion?" she asked. "Just giving them the strength to deal with whatever bothered them?"

"Not at all," Draco said. "In the end, the Desire potion won't be the Draught of Peace, and it won't be what Potter brews, either. It has to be capable of reacting to the emotions of the drinkers, and it has to be capable of neutralizing anything it encounters—within reason. It can't make someone immortal, for example."

He spoke with his gaze apparently fastened completely on Granger's face, but in fact he was looking sideways from the corner of one eye at Potter. Potter's face had gone pale, and he had stepped heavily away from the table. It took only a moment for him to shake his head and stride back, of course, and Draco suspected he had already swallowed whatever had disturbed his calm in the first place. Say what you liked about Potter; in the last seven years he had become much better at keeping his temper, even in the face of all the needling little provocations that Draco couldn't help but give.

Interesting. Draco licked his lips, and tamped down the temptation to go after the unusual reaction right then and there. *Very interesting. But I'll make him trust me more, and perhaps relax his guard, if I lure him in.*

Granger had picked up the ingredients list and was reading it in the meantime. "*Peridot?*" she said disapprovingly. "Malfoy, you know as well as I do that extra flakes of peridot should never be added to any potion—"

Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to her. "And do you know why, Granger?"

"They're dangerous for human health—"

"More dangerous than hellebore?"

Granger lifted her chin, the very picture of Mudblood stubbornness. That was all right. This just gave Draco another chance to show her the superiority of pure-blood culture and all the ways that pure-blood wizards had of thinking and doing and acting. "The Draught of Peace neutralizes the hellebore. I must admit, I have no idea how peridot flakes will neutralize the hellebore in *this* solution, or how you plan to keep them from reacting with the Antipodean Opaleye scale."

Draco gazed at her, and tried not to give, too much, the impression of a cat crouched in front of a mousehole with its tail twitching. "Oh," he said. "Quite simply, Granger, Potter is going to cast a spell that Transfigures the crystalline structure of the peridot when the dragon scale is added."

"Harry—" Granger shook her head, looking lost. "Harry isn't confident enough as a brewer to do that."

Ah. Things are as I suspected, then. Granger only sees the lack of control Potter has over his magic when he's brewing, and the way he doesn't follow the usual procedures perfectly, and that leads her to imagine that he can't do it correctly. "You're wrong," Draco said, and extended his hand. Potter stared at him, blinking like a Muggle toddler seeing a wand for the first time. "Come *here*, Potter," Draco snapped, irritated that the way he wanted to present Potter in front of Granger had been ruined by the former's cluelessness. "Time to show her that you do indeed know what you're doing, and give up this charade of your incompetence."

"You know how often Snape said that I wouldn't amount to anything in brewing potions," Potter said, reluctantly stepping up beside Draco. Draco grabbed his hand. "The only reason I

succeeded at all during sixth year was because I had *his* book."

Draco grabbed Potter around the waist and hauled him back against Draco. Potter's gasp of surprise was muffled; he seemed to be more interested in finding a way out of Draco's hold than letting his jaw hang open. Good. Draco bowed his head and whispered, "Severus, much as I admired his skill, could be blind when it came to recognizing talent different from his. I would have impressed him. You wouldn't have. But you can do it, and you know it. *Now.*" He nodded to the cauldron and the table and the ingredients, familiar and abnormal, arranged in front of Potter. "*Cast.*"

Harry shivered, partially from the warmth around his waist. In the eleven months since he'd broken up with Susan, no one had held him like this.
But, feeling strangely disconnected from his own body and his own fears, he raised his wand and cast, crushing the lavender petals and using the Diamond-Cutting Hex to slice the ingredients on the table.

Halfway through the sending of the magic out of himself to power the spell, he realized that Malfoy's new ingredients list called for the hellebore to be shredded, not sliced, and that the flakes of peridot were as cut as they needed to be. But Harry had cast the spell intending to sever everything except the things he was used to leaving out.

Finite Incantatem flew through his mind, as smooth and powerful as if he'd spoken it aloud, and then Harry flipped his wand over in his hand and cast the spell upside-down. That was a good technique he'd found for dividing his magic in half—or, at least, it worked for *him*. Half the power went into the Diamond-Cutting Hex as usual; the other half concentrated simply on modifying the spell to shred the hellebore and the waxy, sticky lump of dark stuff Draco had brought along, which must be honeyed dragon dung.

Draco's arm tightened around his waist, hand splaying across his stomach. Harry didn't allow himself to think about that as he began to incant, and the lavender petals separated, sifting down into the cauldron and blending with the copper. This time, though, he lifted the piece he'd cut from the honeyed fewmet and sent it into the cauldron right beside the copper. Then came the Demiguise hairs, and then came…

Harry lost himself in the rush of magic, in the slight flick of his wand and the throbbing in his veins that always resulted when he was brewing like this. He kept part of his mind alert for the changes in the necessary spells, though, and when the moment that he had to change the crystalline structure of the peridot arrived, he was ready. He let himself fall into the trance that was waiting for him, that always waited for him the first time he performed a particularly complex and difficult piece of magic.

"*Commuto compositio lapidis*," he sang, uncaring that his voice probably sounded like a croon on the words, and that Draco and Hermione would both think he was strange. Was it any stranger than the impulse to call Malfoy by his first name, the closeness that had joined him along with the rush of warmth?

The power lunged out through him—

And met resistance.

Harry closed his eyes fully this time, so as to shut out any distractions, and *forced* himself deep into the crystalline structure that sprawled in front of him. Because, yes, it was there in front of him, though before he hadn't had any idea what peridot looked like, and he doubted he could describe it in words now. He only knew that there were two structures stretched before his eyes, one of them the arrangement the stone flakes currently sustained, one of them the arrangement he wanted to change it into. And it was so simple, wasn't it? Just the matter of altering a few segments, turning *this* into *this*, and bending and smoothing certain corners.

Harry smashed headlong against the resistance, bearing it down with main strength, willing it to yield to him as all things did when he was in the middle of a potion. He was afire with confidence, forgetful of his fear that he couldn't do this right, or of the fact that Draco had intervened in their other solutions before this point. He called up more strength, and more, and hurled it in.

The structure *changed.*

But there was a terrifying moment when it wobbled, and Harry was certain it was about to change back and waste all his work. He held up a commanding hand, forbidding it to do so; it didn't appear inclined to listen. But he felt a slice of magic come in just behind him, adding force to his demand, and he heard another voice chanting the spell he had initially used to Transfigure the peridot, over and over.

He leaned on that voice, and on the flow of power from behind him. Someone had opened his magical core to Harry, inviting him to take what he needed. Harry didn't question, simply took, and then flicked a surge of healing behind him that should repair the wound in the other wizard's core.

He had no words for the whipsaw of magic, like colored winds, coiling past him in the next few moments. He floated in the middle of it all, not in control.*Ignored* might be the best word. Providentially ignored, because the forces moving around him could destroy him if he was a threat.

And then it was done, and Harry sagged boneless to the ground. He blinked, and realized his throat was hoarse and dry as sand, and there was a heavy body on his back. He stirred, and the body squeezed him once before it very slowly sat back on its heels.

"Malfoy," Harry said, concentrating hard for a moment so he would address him by that name and not Draco. He turned around with a tired grin on his face. "Did that work?"

"Not quite," Malfoy said. "We Transfigured the peridot, you and Granger with me lending you

strength, but we lost track of its place in the potion and ended up with sludge again. At least it's *different* sludge this time."

Harry laid his head down and laughed. Malfoy's grumbling voice couldn't hide the tone of exaltation behind his words.

Draco would have to say that was—quite an adventure. He had lost all track of the room and the people around him, something he *never* did when he was brewing. Granger had managed to overcome her own depression and join in, probably because she saw her one remaining friend about to lose himself to the complexities of changing the crystalline structure. And Draco had given of his magic without hesitation, something he hadn't done even with Snape or his close friends in the past.
At least he now knew it was possible. And he would take note of what had gone wrong for next time, and correct it.

For now, he simply wanted to lie still, and feel his arms shake, and think about the moments when Potter had seemed to exert the gravity of the sun while Draco held him. It wasn't as though his companions could complain. Granger had slumped against the table, her face gray, and Potter was humming under his breath like an idiot.

Which he is, for taking that potion. Draco didn't question the direction his thoughts had taken; some amount of mental wandering was to be expected after an experience that intense. *If he's like this under it, what could he be without it?*

Certainly I should encourage him to find out.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Slips

"Now, now, Draco, no reason to look so wary. Can't a creditor check up on her favorite brewer, and ensure that his work is going smoothly?" Cordelia Nott smiled at Draco, and reached out as if she would squeeze his hand. "That's all I require, some assurance."

Draco managed to miss her hand by the expedient of twisting his body slightly, as though he needed more room to edge into the chair on his side of the table. Cordelia didn't seem offended. She simply watched him with a faint smile, and then folded her fingers in front of her and chirped, "So. About that reassurance?"

Draco took a look around the restaurant before responding. The Dragon's Dream was even more private and exclusive than the last place he and Cordelia had met; it had windows that shone like dark, faceted jewels, providing a view to the outside that was tinted as if it with twilight, but which permitted no one else to see inside, and its walls glowed with subtle Confundus Charms that would keep out anyone who tried to enter without a reservation. The décor itself was simple at first, until one realized that the pattern of repeating dragons twining around the legs of the tables and the base of the walls varied slightly each time. Here a dragon had a pattern of scales typical of an Antipodean Opaleye—Draco thought he ought to be an expert on that by now—and here it was a Hungarian Horntail, though seated in the same posture. And as one's eye proceeded around the room, it became increasingly hard to tell what was a stream of slender flame, what a coiling neck, what a reaching leg.

Supposedly, the original idea for the restaurant had been to make the diners think they were eating inside a dragon's belly. Draco was just as glad that no investors had accepted that.

He faced Cordelia again, whose eyes had narrowed but whose face was extremely pleasant. "Why, Draco," she said. "One might almost think you didn't want to talk to me." She leaned nearer and lowered her voice. "One might almost think you had bad news to report, in fact. But given how happy you've looked in the past month, and the encouraging letters you've sent me, I know it can't be that."

"As a matter of fact," Draco said, deciding that honesty could take its place among his weapons this morning, "I did get interrupted at a delicate, tricky step in the brewing. I could have wished for lunch tomorrow instead of today." He nodded to the waiter who had come up beside him, and ordered a bottle of Effervescence, a wine made from grapes that grew on the bodies of decaying dragons, a specialty of the house, and turtle soup. Cordelia had a few crumbs in front of her, and ordered only more wine.

"You are telling me many remarkable things in your letters," Cordelia said, and her nails made her wineglass ring. "*Such* wonderful things. Marvelous, one might almost say."

Draco bared his teeth. Of course she would accuse him of lying; she had no idea how *remarkable* the Desire potion really was. Well, let her wonder. When she held the first sample in her hand, then there would be time enough for praise and admiration.

I wonder what she most loathes about herself, what the potion would remove for her? Draco decided that he would like to be around when she drank it, assuming it didn't involve a risk to life and limb for him to be so.

"I am very happy," he said blandly. "That much is true. I never expected to find help in the oddest corner of the British wizarding world. The Harry Potter I knew in school never had much brewing skill, and yet here he is, helping me with this potion!" He spread his hands wide in mock amazement. "It's only more proof that the years can alter someone for the *better*, if he lets it happen."

Cordelia regarded the table with a faint smile. "I suppose that you've thought of what Potter's name and reputation will do to boost the sales of the potion?"

"Such looking ahead would be premature of me," Draco said smoothly. "The potion isn't successfully brewed yet, after all."

A faint wrinkle of her eyebrows as she glanced up at him. "No, it's not."

If that statement was meant to make him nervous, it succeeded. Of course, Draco had no intention of *showing* her it had. The waiter had brought his wine and soup. He sipped them and murmured compliments, all the time watching Cordelia's fingers to make sure they got nowhere near his meal. He settled himself to eating—he *was*hungry—and decided that he might as well let her resume the conversation when she was ready.

Cordelia watched him eat for longer than Draco would have thought she had patience to, like a cat at a mousehole—the way he watched for clues Potter dropped about the nature of his own potion, Draco thought. Then she said, "You realize that the Ministry would almost certainly want to place restrictions on the sale of such a potion."

"I do realize that, yes," said Draco, who had seen her mouth start to open and already swallowed his latest spoonful of soup. "The question is whether they *could*, when—forgive me the pun—this potion will be such an object of desire for so many people."

Cordelia widened her eyes prettily. "Why, Draco! This talk of rebellion, of challenging the Ministry! I didn't think it was like you."

And you just slipped, Draco thought, with violent satisfaction that he kept out of both his face and his hands as he turned back to his meal.

Cordelia knew well enough that he had made his way in the world during the last seven years by nothing *but* rebellion, challenging the social norms that everyone would have expected him to follow, working for a living, brewing in ways that the more accepted apothecaries didn't. She should not have spoken an outright lie. And she had a snap of brittle ice in her voice when mentioning the Ministry, when it should have been, as a pure-blood witch living mostly abroad, of no more importance to her than a buzzing fly.

She *did* have ties to Charlemagne Diggory. For whatever reason, she supported him in his run for Minister, and she wanted to make sure that Draco and his potion didn't end up making trouble for him.

"I consider myself above the social gaffe of open rebellion, that's true," Draco said modestly, putting absolutely no inflection on any of the words.

Cordelia reared back a little, staring at him. Draco ate more soup through a serene smile. If he

had judged his tone right, as he should have, then she would be uneasy, but wouldn't know what had triggered her unease. And, of course, searching for it openly would only put her more at risk.

She picked up her wineglass and took a small sip. Draco took the moment to steal a covert glance at her face, wondering, as he always did, what so attracted the poor fools who thought it possible to ride on the whirlpool of her personality and still escape her pull. As usual, he saw nothing spectacular. Potter had a more expressive face than hers, and a better smile.

"You're absolutely sure the potion will be finished by the summer solstice?" When Cordelia spoke again, it was with polite doubt, as much to say that Draco had defaulted on promises to her before.

That wasn't true, and Draco checked the swiftly rising anger it was meant to provoke in him. He flexed his fingers as though he'd been holding his spoon too long, picturing the anger leaving through the tips of his nails. Then he looked up at Cordelia with a soft smile that he knew was enigmatic, and said, "Positive."

She nodded to him, just a touch too sharply, and sat back to nurse her wine in silence and gaze down on the bustle of Diagon Alley through the windows, as though he had ceased to interest her already.

Draco sipped, and sipped, and drank his soup daintily from the bowl of the spoon, and watched her, and in no way showed his glee.

Harry had known that May would be difficult. This was the month Ron had died, the month his and Hermione's lives had changed so drastically, and the month things had really begun to go *wrong* for her. Harry knew now that the tearless mask Hermione had adopted after Ron's death wasn't real.

Still, he had thought the worst day would be the anniversary of the Quidditch accident itself. He hadn't expected to get up on the first day of the month and find Hermione curled into a tiny ball under the covers of his bed, her arms wrapped around a pillow, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Harry said nothing, because he knew from the depth of the sobs that she wasn't in the mood for comforting platitudes. He sat down next to her and put a hand on the back of her neck instead. Hermione tensed, but when he didn't try to hold her, she abruptly relaxed and began to weep once more.

He lay down next to her, and fought his own grief for a moment—grief both for Ron and for the fact that his proud, strong Hermione had been reduced to this. He concentrated his mind on the potion that *was* going to help her; he and Draco got closer and closer every day, and made even greater strides on the afternoons Hermione was strong enough to help.

Obviously, this wouldn't be one of them.

Harry continued to stroke her neck, and sometimes her hair, and gradually, as if by coincidence, she turned slowly towards him. Her eyes were tightly shut, but tears squeezed from beneath the lids anyway. Now and then she made a dry hiccoughing sound, a strange thing given all the moisture in her nose and throat. Harry held himself still—how much practice he'd had at this in the last few years, especially when his girlfriends had to tell him, tearfully, that they'd fallen in love with someone else—save for the regular, light motion of his hand.

Hermione reached out and wrapped her arms around him.

This was *much* better than her being in a fetal position, and it was something Harry knew he would never have achieved if he'd tried to coax her out of that position. He embraced her in return and held her steady, while she sobbed into his shoulder. If he could be nothing more than an anchor in a storm, then he would be that.

He wasn't sure how long he'd lain there, his only clue the grumble of his stomach that told him he'd missed lunch, when a peremptory knock on the door startled him. It was Malfoy, of course, come to brew. Harry frowned, and wondered for a moment how he could tell the git to go away. Ordinarily he would just have cast a charm that carried his voice outside the door of the flat, but his arms were wrapped around Hermione and his wand was trapped neatly beneath his hip.

A moment later, Malfoy solved the problem by pushing the door of the flat open—he'd been keyed into the wards several weeks since—and then shoving at the door to Harry's bedroom, complaining under his breath all the while.

"Potter, when we both agree on *one-o'clock*, that's when I expect you to be waiting—"

He stopped at the sight of the sobbing Hermione, and stared. Hermione curled her face more firmly into Harry's chest, as much to say that she couldn't face Malfoy's company right now. Harry quite agreed.

"There's an emergency here, Malfoy," he said, making sure not to raise his voice, which would upset Hermione further, but putting steel behind each one of the words. "We won't be brewing today. Sorry for the inconvenience this may have caused you. Come back on Tuesday."

He meant the last words to sting, and turned away, certain Malfoy wouldn't want to stay. It was Harry's weakness and not Hermione's he had always delighted in exposing, and he *must* know, because he wasn't stupid, that if he said anything about Hermione in the future, Harry would take his head off.

Harry was startled when fingers brushed the nape of his neck, in the same place he'd first touched Hermione. He glanced back and saw Malfoy just withdrawing his hand, face pale and neutral as a cloud.

"I'll come back on Tuesday, then," he said, with a small nod, and departed.

Harry cradled Hermione in his arms for the rest of the day. By the time she finally fell asleep, his limbs were fantastically cramped, his bladder was full, and his stomach was aching with hunger. He managed to detach himself, for a miracle, without waking her, and went to use the loo. Then he ate a heavy meal and went back to the bedroom to fall asleep beside her. Propriety be damned when she needed him this much.

Hermione's ordeal exhausted him and took up his attention nearly as much as it exhausted her and took up hers. Even so, that was no excuse for what he later learned he had forgotten to do.

Draco made sure his steps were firm, audible a good distance down the corridor from the door to Potter's flat. If he was going to be turned away again, then maybe Potter could have the courtesy to come out and meet him this time, and explain why.

You know why, last time.

Draco frowned at the turn his thoughts had taken. He should have felt far more impatient with Potter than he did, letting Granger's hysteria take him away from an important day of brewing. They had limited time and were so close to a fundamental change in the potion that Draco could almost taste it. Being so close, they should keep working steadily. Draco would have arranged to meet Potter every day if he hadn't needed *some* hours for separate research and testing new combinations of ingredients.

And yet, he couldn't find it in his heart to scorn what he'd seen the other day. The emotion he'd felt most strongly, to his astonishment, was envy. He had no one who would hold him in his arms like that and shelter him from the world—no lover so close, no friend so true. He'd gone up and touched Potter before he'd been aware of it, just so he could feel like a part of that friendship for a moment.

And you are becoming silly and sentimental, he scolded himself, and rapped firmly on Potter's door. This time, it opened at once, but Potter only gave him a curt nod before he turned away again. Draco frowned, but stepped inside, deciding that Potter would have dismissed him at once if it was another "emergency" with Granger.

"Hermione won't be joining us today."

Draco frowned further. Something was *wrong* with Potter. He was pacing in circles as if his goal was to wear a hole in the carpet, and his hands were clasped behind his back, his face thunderous. It really did look as if he were struggling with a problem he'd thought about for days and still had no answer to. Draco let the door fall shut, and observed him carefully.

There was high color in his cheeks Draco hadn't seen before; even in the moments of most heated debate or most intense embarrassment in the brewing, when he made an elementary

mistake, Potter hadn't acted like this much of a child. His hands were wringing and traveling over one another, sometimes squeezing his wrists viciously, as if he sought relief from a painful operation. He hissed something under his breath in what Draco thought might be Parseltongue, and then drove a fist into his knee.

"Something wrong?" Draco asked mildly.

"I—no, nothing." Potter shook his head and made a bee-line for the table in the center of the drawing room this time, where he had a cauldron hanging over a fire. Granger must be resting in the bedroom, Draco presumed. Potter stared at the cauldron for a moment, as if he'd forgotten what it was for, and then exhaled explosively and aimed his wand at it. A moment later, water filled it and began to bubble. "Sorry about that." Potter's words were clipped, and he kept his back to Draco as he spoke them.

Draco stared for a moment, then put down the ingredients he was carrying on the table and said lightly, "Nature calling. I'll be out in a minute."

Once in the loo, he locked the door behind him and spelled open the cabinet where Potter kept the doses of his own sludge-green potion. He counted the vials quickly, and narrowed his eyes with triumph when he finished. There were still fourteen of them, as there had been the last time he visited before Granger's "emergency."

But Potter should have taken one of those vials between then and now. In fact, from what Draco knew of his two-week schedule, he'd been supposed to have one on the afternoon that Granger had got so hysterical. In the bedroom comforting her, he'd probably never heard his clock chime.

So this is what Potter's like when he's off the potion. How very interesting. Draco turned to relieve himself, to make the lie truth, but didn't take his eyes from the vials until he absolutely had to close the cabinet again. *I think we'll leave him off it for a little while longer, and see what happens.*

Harry didn't know what was the *matter* with him. For one thing, his emotions seemed near boiling point. He had acted impatient with Hermione this morning, even though he knew perfectly well why she needed help and that it wasn't her fault. That horrified him. He had managed to act calm around her for the rest of the morning, but then, while waiting for Malfoy, he had caught himself thinking about what cutting remarks he'd make if the git was late. And then there came a spiteful thought about Susan and Zacharias.

And then Malfoy had walked in, and Harry found himself absorbing what he really hadn't before, that the past seven years had only changed the other man's appearance for the better. When he flicked his hair out of his eyes to address Harry, the motion exposed pale skin along his shoulders and collarbones. Harry couldn't decide why that would be so fascinating, but evidently it drew his eye.

Then there was forgetting to actually fill the cauldron with water and set it boiling. That was a mistake he'd never made before, and he flinched when he thought of the way Malfoy had raised an eyebrow about it.

I have to calm down. I have to act like an adult. I've fought too hard and too long for this. I can't let it go to waste.

He smoothed a hand down the middle of his face and took a deep breath, though he couldn't help jumping slightly as the door of the loo opened and Malfoy came back into the drawing room. He nodded at Harry and stepped past him to reach for one of the new ingredients he'd brought along, a red flower Harry didn't recognize. His arm brushed along Harry's shoulder, which had happened before, but only *this* time did it send a sizzle straight to Harry's nerves. Vague imaginings, lustful thoughts that had no fantasies to back them up, darted through his head.

Harry held himself rigidly in control as he moved a little out of the way. Malfoy didn't seem to notice. He turned towards Harry instead, twirling the red flower in his fingers.

"This is an anemone," he said. "Used in many potions resembling the Draught of Peace, though not the Draught itself. And it has a particular virtue to it that I think we should use to replace the lavender petals."

Harry frowned. So far, they hadn't discussed replacing the lavender petals with anything else, and he didn't think they should do so now. But if Malfoy's reason was persuasive enough, well, he could listen to it. "The blood-color? Is that why you want to put it in the potion?"

Malfoy paused, just for a moment, but long enough to let Harry know he was surprised. "Yes," he said. "Not only the color of blood, but associated with blood. In Greek mythology, it was the flower that sprang from the blood of Adonis, Aphrodite's lover, after he was killed by a wild boar." He turned to face the cauldron, which had already nearly surpassed the proper temperature for the boiling water, Harry saw with a frown. He flicked his wand again, and cooled the worst excesses of the fire. "I think the ingredients we've chosen so far have too much of an effect on the mind and the soul. We need to balance them with something that connects to blood, to flesh."

"And a purely symbolic effect is enough to do that?" Harry moved up beside Malfoy, to watch critically as he plucked the petals from the anemone, but was careful to leave enough space between them that they wouldn't accidentally touch.

"Copper's association with Venus is also purely symbolic." Malfoy shrugged, his clever, delicate hands still working. Harry glanced away as the undefined thoughts stormed through him again. "That doesn't mean we won't use it. And we should also use this." He laid the plucked petals on the table and turned to Harry, a challenge in his eyes. "I want three whole petals in the potion, and one shredded to the same length that you used to cut the duckweed. Can you do that with the Diamond-Cutting Hex?"

Harry grinned slowly, his blood firing at the challenge in Malfoy's gaze. He raised his wand. "All

the other ingredients are cut just the same?"

"They are."

Harry whirled into the spells, staring all the while at the blood-red petals, filling his mind with their place in the spell and their virtue, to ensure he wouldn't forget them when the moment of the Diamond-Cutting Hex came. And then it was there, and he *did* it, with even less conscious thought than usual, cutting one petal into segments three-eighths of an inch long, while the rest remained untouched and all the other ingredients fell apart just as usual.

It was like being on a horse that carried him smoothly over all the obstacles in its path. It was like being an artist, able to create whatever sound he wanted, beauty and music flowing from his hands. It was—

It was *wrong.* Too wild, too uncontrolled, too deeply tapping at the root of him.

And that was the answer, of course. He hadn't had his potion. He should have drunk it the day that Hermione had been overcome, and he hadn't.

Thinking about his potion, he lost control of the one he was brewing. A swirl of lavender petals joined the anemone in the cauldron when they should have remained on the table, and, without fanfare or noise, the potion exploded.

Harry flung his arm over his eyes to shield his glasses from the rain of thick goop that followed. When he lowered it, it was to see Malfoy staring at him, his expression intense and furious, his hair slowly plopping gobs of the potion onto his shoulders.

"Sorry," Harry babbled, backing up a step. "I haven't had my potion. I got distracted. Sorry," he added, and then burst into the loo and opened the enchanted cabinet.

See? he scolded himself as he poured the green sludge down his throat and massaged his throat to ease the swallowing. *That's a sample of what happens when you don't keep up your obligations. And now you'll have to practically grovel before Malfoy until he forgives you.*

Still, what most filled Harry was a profound sense of gratitude, edged with just a tint of dread.

At least I took it before anything worse could happen.

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Chapter: 8

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—Outlines of Friends and Enemies

"I'm sorry."

Draco kept his gaze fixed on the cauldron, and didn't turn to look at Potter, even though he had already Vanished the potion that clung to him and he could hear actual contrition in Potter's voice. That wasn't *quite* enough groveling.

"I really am sorry," Potter said a few minutes later, earnestly, but with none of the exasperation in his voice that Draco would have expected from having to say the same thing twice. "I don't know what I can do to make it up to you, but I'm willing to try."

Draco turned to face him, leaning his hip against the table. Potter had Vanished the potion in his hair and covering his face, as well. He looked apologetic, but not sheepish in the way that Draco had envisioned him looking.

The way he should look, Draco thought irritably. *The man he was without the potion would have. This Potter—he's too confident, too settled. Is that what the potion does for him? But he hasn't had to be* that *much of a public figure since the war.* Potter had effectively told the *Daily Prophet* to fuck itself six years ago, and the reporters hadn't yet recovered from the ringing reverberations of that statement. *You'd think he'd have something he loathed about himself more than his own nerves.*

"Apology accepted," he drawled, at last, when nothing changed, and Potter continued to look at him with that calm face, only slightly tinted with pink. "Perhaps you *should* stay on your potion until we're finished brewing after all, if being without it makes you that jumpy and distracted."

Potter's smile flashed out, as suddenly as a clumsy Potions apprentice's knife cutting ginger root, and he laughed. Draco stood up straight, blinking. He hadn't even *known* that Potter was capable of expressions like that. It changed his whole face, and made him seem an ideal compromise between the infuriatingly calm man he was now and the agitated one who had greeted Draco when he entered the flat.

"I was doing all right, until I started thinking about what would happen in the next few seconds." Potter shook his head ruefully and stepped past Draco to study the anemone petals again. "I need to *not* think to make any kind of progress." He darted a sideways glance at Draco, his eyes bright. "Imagine what wondrous feats we could be accomplishing if I were drugged!"

I don't understand you, Draco thought, but was careful not to let that show in his face or eyes as he conjured more water back into the cauldron. Displaying weakness in front of anyone, whether it was Cordelia Nott or Harry Potter, would result in problems for him later. "I prefer that you have some of your wits about you," he said. He paused, and then added delicately, "The potion didn't seem to affect your ability to comprehend why I'd want to bring anemones in."

"I like to think it doesn't affect my intellect," Potter murmured absently, occupied in building up the fire again.

Intellect. There had been a subtle emphasis on that word, so gentle that Draco doubted Potter knew he had put it there. He narrowed his eyes. *Emotional, then. But I still don't understand why he would feel he was a criminal, or incompetent to judge in matters of right and wrong, as Granger said he felt.*

Draco wanted to encourage that perception, because it meant that Potter was less likely to join Granger in putting obstacles in his way as they developed a general potion. But he also wanted Potter off the potion, or at least open enough to tell him about what it did. There *had* to be a secret there that would affect the production of the Desire potion. The relationship between a potion's base and its variants was deep.

But the only way he thought he could get Potter to open up and trust him was to seem open and trustworthy himself. Which was almost always more trouble than it was worth.

On the other hand, he thought, as he nodded to Potter to begin the sequence of spells again and stepped back, *this is a Gryffindor, not a Slytherin. There are fewer risks with him. And he's only interested in his own life and getting Granger back to normal. I doubt he'd much care about what I'd use the knowledge of him for, even if he did know why I wanted it.*

So Draco waited until Potter had proceeded through the steps of the potion as far as he could—resulting in a large puff of foul-smelling blue smoke that consumed everything in the cauldron after he added the copper and had to be dissipated—and then said softly, "There's at least one thing we have in common, you know, despite all the differences in our lives so far."

"What's that?" Potter gave him one of those absent glances that seemed endemic to him when he was on his potion, more interested in making sure that none of the blue smoke had drifted under the door into the room where Granger slept.

"Neither of us did what anyone expected us to." Draco folded his arms and gave a challenging grin at Potter's raised eyebrow. "Really. You didn't stay the media darling and hero, and I didn't become the idle ideal pure-blood that everyone was expecting. I didn't let the war permanently discourage me from a good evaluation of my own capacities, either. I was fairly pathetic that last year." He could admit it; he had forced himself to come to terms with the memories one by one, over a period of months. "But that doesn't color me now. I've become successful, even though they didn't want me to."

"Who's *they*, Malfoy?" Potter still didn't sound very interested, but he was listening and hadn't dismissed Draco's confession out of hand. That was all to the good, as far as Draco's ultimate goal was concerned.

"My parents."

Draco knew he had Potter when the other man's head came around as if he were a unicorn scenting blood. For a moment, his nostrils even flared like an animal's. And then he was frowning and shaking his head.

"I saw—" He cleared his throat, as if what he were about to say embarrassed him. "I saw the way your parents looked after you, and *for* you, during the Battle of Hogwarts, Malfoy. I can't reckon they'd just let you strike out on your own, no matter what you wanted to do, and not support you."

"Oh, they never threw me out to starve." Draco examined his nails critically. It was easy telling this story to Potter because he'd spent months narrating it to himself, along with his memories of the war. He could weave a story that would enchant the other man, while barely exposing himself, because he'd said everything in his own hearing before. "They let me know I always had a home if I wanted to come back to it." He looked up, and straight into Potter's appalled, fascinated eyes. "But at the same time, I was supposed to be their heir, their support, their hope in a world which had almost no place for them anymore. I was supposed to harden in their traditions and then join those traditions to my experience among the Mudbloods." Draco shrugged lightly. Potter didn't even scold him for his use of the M-word, which was progress, or else a sign that he was too immersed in the story to care. "But I didn't want to *do* politics. I studied Potions instead, and then I broke away from them and became a common apothecary. A successful apothecary, that's true, but one who sullied his hands with common *work.* No Malfoy son and heir had ever *worked* for a living. They would have tolerated me having Potions as a hobby, but not making money from it."

Draco left out the bigger half of the reason his parents were so displeased with him: that he had gone into debt to get his shop started. No Malfoy ever went into *debt*, either. Money was paid to creditors so quietly, usually through the hands of house-elves, that the outside world had been fooled for centuries into thinking Malfoys simply handed over Galleons on the spot for whatever they wanted.

Draco saw no need to delude himself like that. Those days had come to an end with his great-grandfather's death, if not sooner. He wanted to do something, and Potions was that something.

"I had no idea, Malfoy," Potter said at last, his voice low and full of compassion. "How awful for you."

Draco blinked. He had expected commiseration, yes, but not this level of sympathy. "Awful? How? I chose what I wanted to do, and I did it. I thought you'd be proud of me for striking out on my own, away from my father's bigoted attitudes," he added, unable to keep a speck of spite from his voice.

Potter shook his head, his hair flopping into his eyes. *Doesn't he ever cut it?* Draco wondered in irritation. "I meant that you have a living family, and you don't ever see them," he said. "I'd give

anything for that."

"I see them sometimes," Draco corrected him uncomfortably.

"But it's not the same, is it?" Potter folded his arms in turn, and took one more look into the cauldron, as to make sure that none of the ingredients had escaped sublimation into the smoke. "Not the same as if you were all on the same terms and you knew they perfectly understood and approved of you." He opened his mouth as if he were about to continue, and then shut it, shaking his head.

"Oh, don't go high and mighty on me, Potter!" Draco edged a bit nearer. "Say whatever it was you were going to say."

"No," Potter said, with unexpected strength in his voice. "It was ill-considered—the kind of thing one schoolboy would say to another."

"I almost miss the schoolboy side of you," Draco said. "Is that what the potion suppresses?"

Potter gave him a one-shoulder shrug and a faint smile. Annoying as all hell, Draco thought, and suppressed some sharp words of his own. He glanced back at the table. "I'd let this continue, but it appears we're out of anemone petals."

"So we are." Potter just bobbed his head peaceably. "Well, Hermione might feel better in a few days. Or maybe not, but I'll try catching her at a time when she feels stronger and asking her what she thinks of your theory about adding symbols of blood to the potion."

Draco knew a dismissal when he heard one. He reminded himself that it would probably take more than one conversation to get Potter to open up. He lingered long enough to say, "Make sure that she gets the *complete* list of ingredients. You can't just go substituting symbols of blood willy-nilly, you know. Rubies, for one thing, would be absolutely disastrous in their reaction with the peridot—"

Potter waved him out. Draco went, wondering if he'd won or lost their private contest.

The knock came two days later, just as Harry was preparing a light lunch of soup and toast for Hermione. He opened his mouth to bid Draco come in, and then paused with a frown. The light vibration of the wards along his nerves let him know it wasn't Draco who stood at the door. In fact, he didn't recognize the magical signature of the wizard who did at all.

If it's another reporter, they'll have to sod off, he thought, and took the lunch in to Hermione. She accepted the tray with a watery smile and began to eat the soup. Harry pressed her hand and left her, automatically letting his fiery feelings drain away as he opened the door. There was no need for them.

Standing on his threshold was a dead man come to life.

It took Harry a long, shocked moment to realize that this *wasn't*, in fact, Cedric Diggory somehow brought back from the dead and aged. The lines of the face were very much the same, and so was the honest, delighted smile turned on him, but the eyes were a different shade of brown, and he had his hair in a sober, adult style that Harry thought Cedric never could have managed, Seeker as he was.

For a moment more, Harry was choking with grief, as if the years between him and Cedric's death had been stripped away. Almost as if he knew that, the man on the threshold paused with courteous dignity, his smile turning gentler. Then he held his hand out, and waited patiently until Harry could shake it.

"How d'you do," he said, with affability Harry didn't think was feigned. "My name's Charlemagne Diggory. I understand you knew my cousin."

The name, and the voice—much deeper and quieter than Cedric's—and the mention of the family relationship calmed Harry and enabled him to get his bearings. Blinking, he wrung Charlemagne's wrist and dropped it. "I did," he said. "I—I was in the Triwizard Tournament with him at Hogwarts, the year Voldemort came back."

He didn't see the expected flinch when he spoke Voldemort's name. Charlemagne watched him intently instead, and then nodded a little, as though Harry's words corresponded with a story he had once heard. He raised his eyebrows after that and glanced past Harry into the flat.

Just that one glance was enough to make Harry flush and feel as if he'd excluded the other wizard on purpose. "Come in, please," he said, almost stumbling out of the way. "Of course."

Charlemagne stepped past him, seeming to simultaneously admire and evaluate everything his eyes touched on. Harry was grateful he had remembered to close the bedroom door on his way to answer the knock. He doubted Hermione was up to visitors right now.

"This visit is unexpected," Harry told Charlemagne's back, and waited until the man turned towards him, unhurriedly. "Are you a reporter?" He wouldn't put that graceful, confident manner together with the occupation of writing up scandal for a living, but clever reporters had fooled him before now.

"Actually, no." Charlemagne's smile reached his eyes, one of the few Harry had seen recently that did. "I'm running for Minister, or will be, officially, as soon as the elections begin." He shrugged a little. "And I realized that I'd never had the pleasure of making acquaintance with Britain's most famous wizard."

"That would probably be Dumbledore, actually." Harry folded his arms. "Or Voldemort."

Charlemagne laughed, tossing his head back to do it. He was certainly the most *open* politician

Harry had been around, though with Scrimgeour and Fudge for comparison that might not be much of a contest. "Well, circumstances conspire against my making *their* acquaintance," Charlemagne said, when he finished laughing, a trace of humor still lingering about his lips. "But no, I *did* want to talk to you, and not simply to ask for your vote."

"Good," Harry said. Smooth or not, he didn't feel like unbending now. Politicians were the only people in his world more annoying than reporters. "Because Kingsley Shacklebolt is a close personal friend, and I know where my vote's going."

"But you'll grant me an unbiased hearing?"

"If you'll tell me what you've come about."

"Fair enough." Charlemagne nodded agreeably and took Harry's own favorite chair. Harry checked an exclamation. Just because he might *feel* off-guard was no reason to show it. He reminded himself of all the lessons he had learned in the past five years, of the benefits of calm contemplation and the ill results of haste. He took a seat in the chair opposite Charlemagne and waited, while once more the man glanced around the flat, this time seemingly taking in the position of the doors.

At last, Charlemagne faced Harry, clasped his hands in front of him, and began, exuberant as a small boy. "You've noticed, I'm certain, that there are still restrictive laws in place that ought not to be. Oh, in practice many Muggleborns are moving up the ranks of the Ministry now, but there are still more pure-bloods in power than otherwise—*especially* in the Wizengamot. Members of the Wizengamot don't have to stand trial the way we illustrious Ministerial candidates do." He chuckled under his breath. Harry didn't see what he had to be amused about. "The appointment's for life, and most pure-blood wizards are notoriously long-lived. So I'm trying to get the laws changed. I want to make the Wizengamot members *face* election. Not so often as the Minister does, as I appreciate that would disrupt some of the good work they do; it takes forever to process a law, and I don't want their minds more on popular favor than work that might be scut work but is still necessary. No, every ten years or so would suffice. What do you think?" He focused brightly on Harry again.

"I think you're doing this for more reasons than just to show favor to Muggleborns." Harry was caught in spite of himself—Hermione had sometimes talked about becoming a member of the Wizengamot, before she found out how hard it would be to unseat someone—but he couldn't quite believe Charlemagne's innocent spiel. "You're a pure-blood, I know, and your family's strong in the Ministry. Why would this matter to you?"

"You want to know what my stake is." Charlemagne actually sounded pleased, not insulted, as Harry had fancied he would. "Good. I can see that you're not so blind and naïve as most reports make you out to be."

"Thank you," Harry drawled.

"Well, some of the things people said made me think that I'd only have to waltz in here, start talking up an orphanage, and sob a bit to get you to extend your purse." Charlemagne gave him that open smile again.

"My money is different from my time and my political support." Harry stared at him. "What's your stake?"

"And you cling to the point!" Charlemagne made a lazy motion with one hand. "This is predicated on my thinking that I stand at least a decent chance, and probably more than that, of winning the election. I want *competent* servants. The majority of the people in the Wizengamot right now are lazy and so traditional that they'll be horrified to see a Diggory taking office just because no Diggory has taken office before. Yet it's hard to challenge them. By changing the laws, I can ensure that new people come in and the ones remaining become more alert."

"That makes sense," Harry admitted. There was probably more political theory and a good deal of rhetoric behind the proposition that he hadn't heard, but shorn of that, it sounded like a reasonable and worthwhile goal. *Always assuming that one thinks this man should be Minister, of course.*"But I still don't see where I come into it."

"Your name is still powerful," Charlemagne said. "And though I don't know your friend Hermione Granger personally, rumor and solid observation convinces me that she would be one of the best candidates for the Wizengamot."

"She's only twenty-five!"

"There's actually never been a restriction on age, as far as becoming part of the Wizengamot goes." Charlemagne shrugged. "It's simply that most wizards and witches settle down young, raise their children first, and then use their middle and old age for the pursuit of politics. I think she could do well."

"And that's still her. That's not me."

"If you were to announce that you support the new laws, that would be enough for some of the people who might not care otherwise to become interested." Charlemagne winked. "I'm more interested in the groundswell of popular support you'd stir up than in you as yourself. I'll tell you frankly, I have no interest in a figurehead."

"And I should support you because—"

"Because I'm doing a good thing, and because you'd receive political sponsorship for your friend in return."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

That was unusual, too, Harry thought. He didn't see outrage at his dismissal on Charlemagne's face, only simple good will and intense interest, as though he were sure Harry had a good reason but not what it was.

"Hermione's been depressed since her fiancé, Ron Weasley, died a year ago in May," Harry said.

"I did hear something about that. Awful thing."

"I'm taking care of her," Harry went on, determined not to be drawn into any political digression. "And she won't be ready to become a member of the Wizengamot for quite a long time. If ever."

"The Ministerial election isn't until October," said Charlemagne. "Count on at least another year from that point until I can get the laws changed. So she wouldn't be required to test her wings right away. But who knows what can happen in a year? If she's out there before then, making her presence known through me and you and her own hard work, her name will be in people's minds. That's half the battle won."

Harry worried his lip between his teeth. On the one hand, it was the only kind of political work he could ever see himself doing: work that benefited other people, not him. It was the same impulse that made him want to improve the Desire potion. He knew it had changed his life. Could he keep that from Hermione, or anyone else who wanted it?

But he wasn't sure he should be promising such things, or even considering them, while Hermione still lay ill and depressed.

"I can't promise you my support yet," he said.

Charlemagne stood and bowed. "You've done a great deal just by giving me a chance to talk with you and see you face-to-face," he said. "I find that I judge people better when I meet them this way."

Harry held his eyes and waited until the practiced politician's smile had somewhat dimmed. "I won't be just a tool for your hand," he said softly.

"I would never think of you as *just* a tool."

With the echoes of that barbed phrase still ringing in his ears, Harry escorted him to the door of the flat. Charlemagne nodded to him once more, smiling again, and then strode down the corridor.

Harry frowned and leaned back against the wall, debating as to whether he should tell Hermione about any of this. On one hand, this might give her a goal besides simple recovery; on the other, it was probably too soon.

He *would* have an amusing story to tell Malfoy, though.

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Chapter: 9

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—Smashing the Barriers

"Someone named Charlemagne Diggory came to visit me the other day. Said that he's running for Minister. Do you know who he is?"

Draco was glad he'd only been holding one vial of a newly-brewed Draught of Peace a few inches above the table when Potter spoke those words. It dropped and rolled, but didn't smash as it would have a few moments earlier. Draco blocked its progress with his palm and huffed out a deep breath, not yet trusting himself to turn and face the other man.

"I reckon you do." Potter sounded amused.

Draco did turn then, drawing his shoulders back and forcing his face into its deepest scowl. Potter promptly took a step away from him and lifted one hand, blinking, as if to shield his eyes from Draco's sudden attack. Draco felt a pulse of gladness. At least the idiot's smile had faded.

"Charlemagne Diggory is dangerous." Draco spaced the words out precisely, wondering idly if he could put up a ward on Potter's flat that would let him know if Diggory came near it again. Probably not; a wizard of Potter's power would sense and remove it, and there went Draco's chance of gaining his trust. "If he shows up again, you should refuse to talk to him. And notify me immediately, of course. Not the next time I come." He folded his arms, hoping the move would look intimidating rather than defensive, and leaned forwards. "Do you *understand*, Potter?"

"No." Whatever the potion did for Potter, it didn't diminish his curiosity. His green eyes sparked as he gazed at Draco, and he had taken up a stance with his legs spread slightly apart, as if braced for a physical battle. "Why is he dangerous? Why should it matter what he comes here for, and when he comes here?"

"Don't be stupid, Potter." Draco wondered how much he would have to reveal in order not to make Potter behave like an idiot. *Surely not everything. On the other hand, this is Potter we're talking about.* "You should know by now how much trouble Ministers can cause when they want to use you as a figurehead. Or did you forget Fudge and Scrimgeour so quickly?"

Potter shook his head fast enough to make his hair whip around his face. "I haven't forgotten a *thing*, Malfoy. What *you've* forgotten is that I haven't heard of this person before. I wouldn't have recognized him as anything more than Cedric's cousin if he hadn't told me why he came."

"Don't you *ever* read the *Prophet*?"

"Half of what's in there is lies, anyway."

"Charlemagne Diggory is connected to Cordelia Nott," Draco explained, praying for patience. *Let him recognize that name without any more explanation from me, please. He ought to have paid attention just because he knows someone with the last name of Nott was in our year at Hogwarts.* 'That means he's dangerous. If he's not smart and credible on his own—and I have reason to believe he is—then her money and her instruction can make him so."

"Who's Cordelia Nott?"

Oh, for the love of God. But Draco didn't feel as panicked as he'd expected when the moment came for him to reveal something so deeply personal. He was disgusted that Potter didn't already know who she was independent of her connection to Draco, yes. Weary, yes. Amazed that Potter was such a political babe in the woods when he could have used his name to win himself anything he wanted, yes.

But not panicked.

"She's Theodore Nott's elder half-sister," he said, and held Potter's eyes, which was unusual for him, and should subconsciously tell the prat something was off even if Draco couldn't find the words. "Independently wealthy, abroad on the Continent for the inconvenient years of the war. She wasn't a Death Eater, but she *is* someone who's always shown an interest in manipulating and controlling people. She returned to England quite suddenly, and Charlemagne Diggory, who was associated with her at one point in time, suddenly announced his candidacy for the Ministry." He paused, evaluating the bored expression on Potter's face, and knew there was nothing for it. "And she's my creditor. One of the people whom I borrowed money from to help get my shop started. She'll share in the marketing rights of the potion, since she commissioned me to make it."

He had known that would make a difference to Potter. What he hadn't truly understood was what a dramatic difference it would be.

Potter caught his breath as if he were choking down knife blades. Then he took a few steps, and magic like a wind caught Draco and pinned him to the opposite wall. He went with the push, never removing his eyes from Potter's, and confident this couldn't be too loud. Potter wouldn't want to awaken the sleeping Granger.

"This whole time?" Potter whispered harshly. "This *whole*time, when you've pretended to be interested in the potion for its own sake, you were really only doing it to repay your debts?"

"You've never been in debt, so you underestimate the persuasiveness of the motive." Draco arched an eyebrow. "And you mistake me. Cordelia agreed to forgive half my debt to her if I developed a new potion by the summer solstice—"

"So that's why you've talked about a deadline," Potter muttered.

"But she didn't set the terms of the potion or know anything about what you were going to ask for my help on," Draco continued. He was relieved to see the flush already subsiding from Potter's cheeks, and his voice sounding more resigned. One thing Draco was growing absolutely certain about: the potion Potter took helped in chaining his anger somehow, though why he would have suffered such problems with his temper that he *needed* to chain it was beyond Draco's ability to speculate. "It was just coincidence that she asked me to do this and then your offer arrived."

"An awfully big coincidence," Potter said.

"Listen." Draco leaned forwards, testing the pressure that held him against the wall. Faded, he judged. "Does anyone but your close friends even know you *take* the potion?"

Potter bit his lip and looked exasperatingly thoughtful. Draco wanted to say that he definitely hadn't known, but kept silent. Potter would probably snap back that no one would talk about Potter to Draco, knowing his dislike of him.

"No," Potter said at last. "And certainly, nobody besides them knows what I take it for."

"Then accept that this was just coincidence." Draco tried to catch and hold his eyes again, though Potter was now looking off to the side as though he found the walls fascinating. "They couldn't have known I would go to you, and I'm sure they're dismayed I did. Cordelia and Diggory probably suspect that I contacted you for some political purpose. And Cordelia has a partial description of the effect of the potion. They're trying to court you to make sure that this unknown factor doesn't disrupt the election."

Potter still looked doubtful. Draco added, "Trust me."

"Why?"

Draco hissed under his breath. He had assumed that his growing faith in Potter, born out of the way they worked effortlessly together when brewing the potion and the way he had opened his magical core to Potter during the day Granger helped—a gesture that indicated a great level of subconscious trust—was returned.

"Because I'm telling the truth," he said. "Or the truth as I know it. And I'll tell you more, if you favor me with some." At this point, he wasn't about to risk everything *he* had without some promise of a matching stake on Potter's side.

Harry stared at Malfoy. On the one hand, what he'd said about Charlemagne Diggory and Cordelia Nott made a great deal of sense, though Harry hadn't heard of either of them before and would have to do some research.
On the other hand, Malfoy hadn't told Harry anything about his debts, either, and the part they must play in urging him to develop the potion. God knew what else he was hiding.

But Harry wanted to know. He *needed* to know, for Hermione's sake; he didn't want doubts hanging between him and Malfoy and impairing their effectiveness as a team. And was giving up secrets to Malfoy such a great price? There were a few he'd retain, as he was sure Malfoy had some he wouldn't speak. But this—

Talking to each other as freely and as honestly as they could would help a great deal. Harry had seen it happen often enough in the past to be sure of that.

He finally nodded and released Malfoy from the pressure of magic holding him against the wall. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to speak under Veritaserum?" he asked.

Malfoy's eyes glittered like packed snow. "If I have a promise from you that you won't ask questions for the simple purpose of personal embarrassment."

Harry hid his surprise. He had expected Malfoy to refuse, and then they'd move into the conversation on each other's word of honor. But of course Malfoy would have access to Veritaserum, as an independent apothecary, and if he was really concerned about the future of his business, he might be willing to take the risk.

"All right," Harry said as briskly as he could. "Then we'll work as normal for today, but when you come back in a week, bring Veritaserum with you, as well as the knife necessary to make a blood oath."

Malfoy slowly inclined his head. His eyes still had that savage, cold glitter, and he never removed them from Harry's face, even as he picked up the vial he'd brought along and said, "This is the Draught of Peace. I wanted to examine how closely the hellebore in it, during the final stages of the potion's stability, resembles the hellebore in our potion."

They didn't get much work done that day, both watching each other too distrustfully, or engaging in staring contests when they should have been attending to the bubbles and color of the Desire potion. But if it would get them past the barriers that lay between them eventually, Harry wasn't sure he minded a lost day of work.

Besides, perhaps Hermione would be well enough to sit in on the conversation next time.

Draco stepped through the door into Potter's flat with his breath coming irregularly. The vial of Veritaserum in his pocket seemed to weigh more than a millstone. The flint knife on a belt around his waist, the tool they'd need to complete the blood oath, was scarcely lighter.

But finally, *finally*, they would move past the uneasy combination of distance and reckless trust that had bound them together so far. They'd thresh things out. They'd talk. Potter would understand the danger he was in from Cordelia and Diggory, and Draco would have the chance to quash a few doubts about how committed to this potion Potter was.

Potter waited for him in the drawing room, with Granger on the couch. Her face was weary and pale, but her eyes alert, the way Draco had seen his mother look after one of her frequent painful headaches. She sat up when he came in and looked at Potter. Potter nodded, and Granger drew her wand.

Draco physically *forced* himself not to react when the wand waved and a tingle of magic settled around his person—or around the knife on his belt, as he realized quickly. Granger was testing to see if it was the real thing. Since Draco had sought out the oldest flint knife he could find, he knew it was. He raised an eyebrow and waited until the blue glow had faded before he spoke. "Aren't Gryffindors supposed to ask guests first, before casting spells on them?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Potter snarled. For a moment, when he saw those green eyes stab at him, Draco thought Potter had forgotten to take his potion again, but then he uttered a sigh and said, "Sorry. But—I just realized how much of the camaraderie we've built up is nothing more than my trust in your greed and your trust in my love for Hermione. I want something more than that. It'll *have* to be something more than that, if I'm going to get dragged into this maelstrom you see as inevitable."

Draco, who had seen nothing wrong with the relationship they'd built until Potter had displayed the political instincts of a warthog, just inclined his head in a small nod. Then he drew the flint knife from his belt, and—

Granger cast a Summoning Charm. Draco scowled at her as it was ripped out of his hands and carried over to hers, where she could examine it at her leisure. "I would have given it to you if you asked," he said, and suppressed a comment about Mudbloods never learning better no matter how much they were exposed to the manners of their superiors. Potter didn't look as though he'd choose to be amused.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Granger said, proving that she and Potter shared a single brain between them, and then studied the knife for long moments more, carefully running her fingers over the grooves in its surface, made where flakes of stone had been chipped out. Draco held still, confidence returning as she frowned and stared harder. She wouldn't find an imperfection. One reason Muggles hadn't found all the flint knives thousands of years old was the wizard interest in them. Flint knives had been one of the first tools of humanity. That made them perfect for an ancient blood oath that called upon old cooperative and social instincts.

Granger finally sighed and nodded at Potter. "It looks as though it'll do, Harry." She sounded disappointed.

Potter didn't show that he was, which made Draco decide their single brain must be flexible. He

beckoned Draco over to the table where they often brewed, and took the knife from Granger. As he had promised, he had a tin bowl ready and waiting. He sliced the heel of his hand, and then Draco's, and let their blood mingle and drip into the bowl in the moments before they pressed the wounds together.

Draco hissed at the sting, but said aloud, "I give you my oath, as contained in this blood, to ask you no questions of an embarrassing or personal nature."

Potter repeated the words, and the blood beneath them bubbled once, then settled into a thick paste. It was a crude effect, but this was a crude oath—though not the less powerful for all that. Draco knew the effect had been compared, in more than one of his textbooks on the subject, to thick stone chains. They didn't have to look pretty to hold you more effectively than iron.

When he judged that enough seconds had passed for both Potter and Granger to feel impressed, he pulled the Veritaserum from his robe pocket. "And you're ready for this now?" he asked. Potter nodded, his green eyes so shadowed that Draco added, "I'll go first."

It was worth it, just for the way that Potter jerked and Granger leaped as if a bug had bitten her.

But then Potter smiled, and reached out to take the vial from Draco with a hand that brushed his almost shyly. "Thank you," he said, and hesitated long enough to warn Draco that something special was coming before he added, "Draco."

"We're not friends yet," Draco said. "But maybe we can be." He sat down in the chair nearest to the tin bowl full of blood. "I'm ready. Three drops on the tongue, remember, not the whole vial."

Harry wanted to snap that he knew that, but he didn't think it would be productive. He had already washed his hands, anticipating that Malfoy would complain about the taste of sweaty skin if he didn't. He could sense Hermione watching tensely, critically, as he placed the drops on Malfoy's tongue. The other man closed his eyes and swallowed, with no apparent attempt at deception.
Apparent, Harry reminded himself. Hermione had warned him that a blood oath like this could sometimes spark unnatural feelings of trust, the connection it forged was so primal. He sat down in the chair opposite Draco, and waited until the gray eyes blinked at him, dazed and neutral, and the expression faded from the mobile face.

"What is your name?" Harry demanded.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy."

Of course it would be, Harry thought in resignation. Then he asked, "Is the story you told me about owing Galleons to Cordelia Nott true?"

"It is." Flat, emotionless, and though Harry was technically in Draco's line of sight, the gray eyes stared to stare *around* his face anyway. It was creepy.

Harry was tempted to ask how much Draco owed, but the wound on his hand promptly hurt. That was probably too personal a question, or maybe it would embarrass Draco, who certainly seemed to have enough pride in his business. "And do you think Cordelia really is supporting Charlemagne Diggory's election as Minister of Magic?"

He heard Hermione stifle a little gasp. He had told her the details of his previous conversation with Malfoy, but she had been in one of her deeper fits of depression, and he hadn't been sure how well she heard. At least she was listening now, and understanding the implications, maybe better than he did himself. Harry felt a burst of pride in her.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Cordelia's made many conquests." Harry surmised Draco must not have been one of them, or the oath probably wouldn't have let him talk about this. "Usually, they leave her broken in heart and fortune. Diggory survived. Why, I have no idea. But he's rising suddenly, and she's here in England—one place she always avoids, if only because she doesn't want to come into contact with her family—and she's been uneasy during the times I met with her."

Harry sat up. "*Met* with her?"

"She met with me as a creditor, to talk about how much I owed her and about developing a potion to pay half my debt."

Harry half-shook his head. He shouldn't be so surprised; Draco had mentioned that the last time he visited. It was this damn blood oath, really, forcing a sense of kinship to Draco on him that rebelled at the thought of betrayal. "Of course," he murmured. "But what do you think Diggory really wants with me, if it's not to use me as a figurehead to make himself more powerful?"

"He really could want that," Draco said earnestly, though Harry knew he would have added some more sarcastic remark if he were in his right mind. "But he'll want something else, too—to find out how to use you, or tame you, or get you out of the way, so that you can't interfere."

Harry frowned. "Why me?"

"Because you're developing the Desire potion. Cordelia knows I'm working with you. And she has, and Diggory has, if he's smart, some idea about how much it could change the wizarding world as we know it."

"*See*?" Hermione whispered triumphantly.

Harry sat back in his chair, rapping his fingers together. He knew that his own potion wasn't addictive, and he presumed that the Desire potion wouldn't be, either. But maybe it should be

regulated, if it was so powerful.

Now, how was he to do that without breaking his pledged word to Draco, that *he* would be the one to control the marketing and the distribution of the potion?

By being involved, of course, Harry realized reluctantly. Draco had already tried to convince him that his magic was necessary for the continued brewing of the potion. Harry would have to see to it that yes, it *would* be necessary, and stay as close to Draco as possible, shadowing his movements to make sure neither the production nor the price got out of control. And he would have to face Diggory and Nott, since he in no way intended to back away from this project just because it had become dangerous. Hermione still needed her potion.

"Draco," he said.

"Hm." Flat, without a hint of question or trouble in it. Harry hated the sound.

"Would you deliberately *try* to develop a potion that was addictive? Or dangerous to the people who took it?"

"No."

Harry waited a moment, and then sighed as he remembered how literal people under Veritaserum could be, only giving answers to the questions asked, and not the ones implied. He prompted, "Why not?"

"Because addictive potions are easy to make, or easy to make accidentally," Draco said. "I'm an artist. I'd prefer to do the more difficult thing."

Harry smiled in spite of himself, and looked sideways at Hermione. "Can you think of anything else to ask him?"

She shook her head, looking weary but determined. "That doesn't mean I trust him yet."

"That's perfectly fine," Harry said, and then sat back to wait for the Veritaserum to wear off.

Potter under Veritaserum wasn't much different from Potter without it. His face looked a little more relaxed, but his eyes were still as calm as they normally were when he opened them, and he slumped in his chair just as he'd been doing before. Draco remembered the difference between *this* Potter and the potion-less one, and his curiosity about Potter's potion increased exponentially.
But the cut on his hand stung, and he remembered that he had promised not to ask any personal questions, which that most definitely was. *Damn.*

Obedient to the strictures of the blood oath, he switched the direction of his thoughts and asked, "Why don't you pay more attention to the political world around you?"

"I don't want to be reminded that it exists," said Potter, and even his voice wasn't much different, just slightly slower and flatter. "I had to deal with it enough during the war and the first two years after."

Draco nodded. An attitude that he never would have adopted himself, but one which made sense for the Gryffindor Boy-Who-Lived. "Would you start paying more attention to it if you had to, because Cordelia and Diggory could be a danger?"

"Yes."

"And how much do you believe me about the connection between Nott and Diggory, and how dangerous they are?"

"I only half-believed you before the Veritaserum. I fully believe you now."

Draco relaxed. Yes, this had been worth the risk. His memory of his own questioning was hazy and fragmented, like a dream, but he knew that Potter would have held to the terms of his own oath. In truth, Draco hadn't really expected many pointed and personal questions from the other man anyway. Potter was simply too*nice* for that.

"Do you have any ulterior motives to the brewing of the potion?"

"No."

"What is your motive?"

"I want Hermione to be well again."

"And you won't try to take away control of the brewing and the distribution from me?" Draco knew he was being paranoid; if he had relied on Potter's word in one instance, he should rely on it in the other. But he felt better when he had asked the question, and that was the ultimate point of this exercise, after all.

"No."

Draco relaxed even further. He wished he could have made an attempt to turn the conversation indirectly towards the reasons Potter had started taking his potion in the first place, but with Granger watching like a hen hovering over one chick, he knew he wouldn't get the chance.

"What will you do after the Desire potion is perfected?" he asked, which was the only question he was curious about and which might slip past Granger's net. She scowled at him, but didn't try to interrupt Potter's answer.

"Become more involved with the world again, since I have to. Help Hermione rejoin it. Work

with you in the continued brewing, if you still want the help. Find someone else to date, like I always do."

Draco could have purred. It seemed Potter *had* changed his mind about using his magic for Draco. And whilst he probably wanted to remain a virtual recluse, he knew when it was impossible.

"No further questions," he said, and leaned back on the chair with his hands behind his head, ostentatiously not trying to touch or mess with Potter while the Veritaserum lasted. All in all, this had been most successful.

The only thing that would make it better, he thought, would be if Potter could smile or snarl at him with real *fire* in his eyes.

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Chapter: 10

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—Blood and Lavender

"Evening, Potter."

Harry automatically stepped out of the way as Malfoy strode past him, but kept his palm on the door to hold it open. Any visit from Malfoy after five-o'clock was unprecedented, and Harry intended that it be a short one. The anniversary of Ron's death was today, and both he and Hermione were exhausted from a short visit with the Weasleys. It didn't help that there was an empty chair left for Ron, and that Harry had accidentally met Ginny's eyes once or twice during the afternoon. Each time, she glanced away, so much pain in her face that Harry was forced to consider she might never be free of it. He would have come home and got quietly drunk if he was alone. He probably should be grateful Hermione was here. She kept him from doing something stupid.

But now Malfoy was here as well, which meant the stupid thing might have come to him. Harry trusted the prat a little more now after their blood oath, though the bond created by it had faded with the Veritaserum, but one arrogant comment was much more likely to set him off than usual.

"Evening, Malfoy," he said, and watched in some bemusement as the other man arranged several ingredients on the table in front of him. He frowned when he realized that Malfoy obviously intended to stay a while, and shook his head, even though Malfoy wasn't looking at him. "This might not be the best idea."

Malfoy laughed, and turned around. Harry paused. His eyes shone as they had the other day, like banked snow, but with a feverish touch to the glitter that made Harry uneasy.

"It might not be the best idea?" Malfoy echoed him. "Potter, this *is* the best idea. I think I've finally come up with a way to create the ideal Desire potion." He paused a long moment—just, Harry knew, for the delight of seeing him squirm. "But I need your help, and we need to do it now."

"Does it rely on the phase of the moon or something?" Harry slowly let the door fall shut, anxiously glancing at his bedroom as he did it. Hermione had kissed his cheek when they returned to the flat and said she really only wanted to go to bed. She hadn't seemed more depressed than usual, but her usual was pretty damn bad. "I don't want to wake Hermione up."

"Nothing to do with the phase of the moon." Malfoy snorted and flicked his fingers as if brushing the dust of crushed lavender petals off them. "We have to do this before I think it all the way through and lose my courage."

Harry's eyebrows strayed near his hairline when he raised them. "Um. And you still think this is one of the best ideas you've ever had?"

Malfoy laughed like a loon, and then reached out and snagged Harry's hand, dragging him close. Harry found himself going very still, save for a mild tremor, like he had when Malfoy opened his magical core to him.

"Yes," Malfoy whispered into his ear. "I'm *certain.* You see, I've been leaving too much of the work to you. It's no wonder that the potion hasn't come out right. It's not just alchemy or ingredients or magic that we need. Do you know what makes a Potions master, Harry?"

"Not really." Combined with his first name, the soft, hot breath against his ear was extremely distracting. Harry felt his body taking an inappropriate interest, and frowned. Since the Incident, one thing he had prided himself on was acting on liking instead of lust; he had found Susan and his other girlfriends attractive, but he had always known them as people first. Finding Malfoy attractive separately from admiring his personality was *stupid.*

"Because we reach out to potions with our passive magic," Malfoy whispered, "rather than our active. We open our magical cores to them, on a very basic level. That's not something you do with any other magical art, except maybe Divination and Care of Magical Creatures, to the extent that you can call *those* arts." His hand twitched against Harry's stomach, where it had wandered for some reason. "There, the wand is the conduit. But mostly, you don't use your wand to*directly* affect a potion, only its ingredients. You're unusual. But even you must have used passive magic when you brewed your own variation of this potion.

"Then you started to use your passive magic with a different set of ingredients. That didn't work. You only knew how to handle the one. And I stood back and almost never involved my *own*

passive magic. The one time I did was the time that we came closest to success."

"We still failed." Harry was striving to clear his mind from the peaceful fog that seemed to be enveloping it.

"But we came close," Malfoy said, and rucked Harry's shirt up to touch warm skin. Harry shivered more violently, and finally broke loose from his grip and twisted around to face him.

"If you brew it, and I add my magic," he said, "we should succeed? *That's* your grand insight? If you always knew this about active and passive magic, why didn't you figure this out before now?"

Malfoy's eyes shone with something like joy. Harry fell back a bewildered step. He might trust Malfoy more now, but that didn't mean he *understood* him.

"Why, Potter," Draco said, though he would have been willing to use Potter's first name now, "one might think you were *irritated.*"
His own joy overwhelmed him like glittering, leaping cascades of both light and water. He wanted to laugh, except that laughing too much would lead to hysteria, and then he couldn't brew the potion. He wanted to hold Potter again, to feel the heat of lightly trembling skin under his fingertips, but that might tease Potter into refusing to work with him. He wanted to do this *now, now, now*.

Potter merely folded his arms and glowered at him, which Draco thought was poor return for the effort he was putting into this relationship. He was about to tell Potter so, when the other man said, "You didn't answer my question. Why didn't you figure this out before now?"

"Why didn't you?" Draco countered. Triumph blazed in his throat, his eyes. God, it was so hard to hold himself back. He wanted to snatch the ingredients and begin the motions of brewing immediately, but he hadn't explained to Potter his part in this yet, and he would have to.

"*Malfoy.*"

Hearing his name in that tone was enticing. Draco bit his lips to keep from grinning and assumed as much of a sober, penitent expression as he could. "Honestly? I was so fascinated watching your magic at work that it didn't occur to me *brewing* didn't go into it. You perform nearly the whole process through the medium of your wand. I thought I could learn to duplicate it eventually, by hand. But we never got to that point. We only approached through your magic. And since that's the part I *wanted* to learn, because it's very different, I let novelty value take precedence over *thinking.*" He shrugged elaborately. "Or you could say that I've grown so used to the higher, abstract, complex practices of Potions making that I neglected to go back and relearn the basics."

"Wait." Potter blinked at him. "That made *sense.*"

"You are by no means as stupid as you think you are," Draco said, at peace with the universe and willing to say almost anything if it would mean that Potter joined with him in the process.

Potter gaped.

"Open compliments too much?" Draco cocked his head. "Very well. You probably *are* as stupid as *I* think you are. But I don't hold your low opinion of your skills. I've seen them in action, and I judge them more fairly and honestly than you do. Isn't that sad?" He couldn't help himself, and he reached out to touch Potter again, running his fingers over the line of his shoulder and collarbone. "I value you, and you value me more than you state—I know it—and I'm *sure* this is the best way to overcome the problems we've been having with the potion, and can we please *brew* now?"

He ignored the way his voice probably sounded like a whinge on those last words. If he wanted to whinge, he had a right.

It was like being seduced.
Harry literally didn't have it within him to resist the entreaty he saw in Malfoy's eyes. It was as if Ron had asked him to play a Quidditch game; Harry might doubt that his presence was absolutely vital to Gryffindor's victory, but that his friend wanted him there was enough to quell his doubts.

And Malfoy had just given him compliments, and spoken without a trace of the pride and aloof dignity that Harry sometimes found absurd in him.

"All right," he whispered.

Malfoy gave him a genuine smile, which was enough to make Harry catch his breath like an idiot teenager, but Malfoy had already whirled away and approached the cauldron again, so it was possible he didn't see it. Harry followed him, only pausing to cast a spell on the bedroom door that should prevent Hermione from hearing what they were doing out here but which would let him know if she cried out in her sleep.

He came to a halt beside Malfoy and automatically lifted his wand to light the fire. Malfoy caught his wrist and shook his head.

"No," he said. "I need to do this part, to start the potion off as *brewing* rather than strictly a wand-process. You'll open your magical core to me at points during the brewing, though—"

"I don't know how to do *that.*"

"Yes, you do." Malfoy smiled again; Harry felt himself flush. "It's instinctive, once you trust someone enough. You fall into the necessity of magical lending, you realize what's going wrong or what might be a weakness, and you release yourself into it. Believe me, Potter, I think it'll be harder for me than for you."

Harry nodded dazedly.

"And then you'll use your magic, and I'll open my core to you." Malfoy gestured, as excited as a child who'd figured out a new play in Quidditch. "That was the other part of the insight, the really *important* part. We can't create a potion like the Desire potion if only one person does the brewing, or if the magic and the brewing are handled in complete isolation. This is a very delicate potion, one that can be attuned to individuals, and the base is most definitely attuned to you. It would become attached to either you or I if one of us does the majority of the work. We have to prevent that. By handing the work back and forth, by mingling spells and brewing, active and passive magic, we'll create a general solution that can cure what *anyone* most loathes about themselves."

"That part, on the other hand, I'm not so sure I understood," Harry muttered.

"You're perfectly *capable* of doing so," said Malfoy, and leaned forwards to stare at him. Harry shuffled a step back. Malfoy pursed his lips as if he were being too generous to call attention to this. "I'll give you a simple analogy. Some Crup puppies have the tendency to bond with just one person, if only that person feeds them. You really need two people working together to keep a Crup as a friendly pet. We'll both feed this potion, to prevent it from imprinting on either of us."

"And that will automatically make it friendly to *anyone*?"

"Yes," Malfoy said comfortably. "It should. It has to do with the difference between active magic and passive magic, Potter," he added, when Harry's eyebrows rose again. "Active magic is what you feel in someone's magical signature. It's different from person to person. Passive magic, though, can hardly be distinguished. It's what gives wizards the ability to fly brooms, to live long lives, and to connect with wands. And basically, *anyone* above the level of a Squib can do that, even if they're not very good at, say, flying. Fed on an exclusive diet of just one person's passive magic, this potion becomes attuned. Given more than one, it can't distinguish them, and it will bond to everyone. I promise."

Harry wrinkled his nose. It still sounded odd to him, but…well…

The simple fact was that he *did* trust Malfoy enough to do this.

And he was curious about what might happen.

He nodded. "All right."

Draco had often had perfect moments in his life—usually the moment when inspiration for overcoming a potions problem struck him, but also the day his shop opened, and the day he realized the Dark Lord was dead and *he* was going to live, and the times when he had confronted a memory from the war and managed to overcome and live with it. But they were always fleeting. He recognized them later, for the most part, and regretted that he had been much too

busy *living* at the time to *appreciate* them.
This time, he knew, as soon as he lit the fire under the cauldron, that a perfect moment was coming. And then it turned into a long stream of them, and they simply never *ended.*

He conjured water, but poured it into a likewise conjured glass and dumped it in, rather than using the *Aguamenti* charm to send a spray directly into the cauldron. He hadn't exactly planned that; it only came to him, he knew it was right, and he did what his instincts demanded of him. He waited, weirdly calm in the middle of his impatience, like being in the eye of a storm, whilst the temperature in the cauldron rose to the correct point.

Potter was beside him when Draco stepped back and raised his wand, aiming it at the ingredients on the table. His face was openly startled; obviously he had assumed that *he* would perform the Diamond-Cutting Hex. But this was a great excuse for Potter to use his passive magic and feed it to Draco, and Draco chose to force the issue. Potter knew how dangerous the spell was, and he would share Draco's determination not to let the potion fail. That should provide all the impetus he needed to open his core.

Potter closed his eyes and tilted his head back. His breathing stilled for a moment, and then Draco felt a stream of magic passing into him and blending with his own power. He choked, breathless, dizzy with the strength of it, and began to cast.

The duckweed, the Antipodean Opaleye scale, the coil of copper, the Demiguise hairs, and the black unicorn's hoof scraping—a mixture of the potion's original ingredients and substitutes that Draco had introduced and liked the symbolism of—severed themselves. Draco choked again. He had never felt anything *like* this. He hadn't been able to do this, and now he could. He extended a trembling hand before him, and wondered if Potter ever felt the temptation to simply unleash his power and take over the world. Draco would have suffered from that temptation, were this magic available to him at all times.

Potter cursed suddenly, and Draco turned in time to see him casting a crushing spell directly at the anemone petals. It was true that they hadn't crushed them first, the way the original directions for the potion called for with the lavender petals, but Draco couldn't bring himself to regret it.

This was *right.*

Draco opened his passive magic to Potter for the spell that would Transfigure some of the anemone petals into daisy petals and meld them into the copper. He had imagined it would weaken him to let the magic go; instead, it felt as if he were simply opening a sluice gate and pouring water through. Potter accepted it with a tiny tilt of his head, and then the copper was studded with daisy petals—

But Potter had left the distribution of the crushed anemone petals that were still anemone to him.

Draco gathered them in the cup of his right hand, rolled them between his fingers, and tossed them into the cauldron at the exact same moment as the copper fell in. He didn't know why he

did that. He only knew that it felt right.

His mind tried to come up with calculations about the salt in his skin and how that might balance the overabundance of copper in the metal coil and the blood represented by the blood-colored flowers, but Potter had opened his core again, passing a roaring tide of floodwaters back to him, and Draco was swelling with too much confidence to work on theory. He had to plunge forwards, Gryffindor-like, unchecked.

He Summoned the Opaleye scale and cradled it in his hand as Potter had, but that was no longer enough. The *anemone* petals had the influence of his skin; the dragon scale would have to have something else. And Draco lowered his head and breathed on it, a breath pregnant with magic, and then threw it like a Chaser tossing a Quaffle, *splash* into the potion.

Potter laughed. Draco glanced at him, saw his cheeks flushed and his eyes brilliant with something like passion, and felt a throb in his lower abdomen. Well, just like theories on the amount of salt in the potion, he could think of what to do about that when this brewing was over.

He poured passive magic into Potter, who Summoned one of the Demiguise hairs, breathed on it in turn, and then propelled it into the potion with magic. A cloud of fragrant purple steam rose above the cauldron, but nothing exploded. Draco took a deep breath. He would have expected something to go wrong before now, if something *was* going to go wrong.

On the other hand, Potter had said that *this* was the dangerous part in the original brewing Draco had watched.

Draco picked up the scraping from the black unicorn's hoof and conjured salt onto it. Potter poured magic into him, and the scraping was in the potion before Draco had blinked, followed by the release of the Diamond-Cutting Hex on *all* the ingredients at once, which he hadn't known he would do. He was moving so fast that he was only remembering his actions like afterimages of a speeding figure.

But Potter had already claimed some of the passive magic, or else Draco had given it at a silent demand without even noticing, and he was the one who raised his wand and arched an eyebrow. He did the spell that turned the remaining Demiguise hairs and duckweed into obsidian *nonverbally.* More than that, Draco realized a moment later, he completed the process that had previously taken five spells in one step.

In the lump went. Potter altered the temperature of the water with a simple sweep of his hand, and called, "Draco!" as he tossed the rope of passive magic back. Draco nodded once, and seized the silver stirring rod lying beside the cauldron, beginning to turn the liquid in a pattern that resembled the maelstrom Potter had before created using a spell.

He watched the ingredients jostling against each other, worrying over the thickness and the texture of the potion in the back of his mind. The front of his mind was far too concerned with smug exaltation in the power he could feel connecting both him and Harry. It didn't leap back

and forth between them now; it simply *traveled*, like water poured into an infinity symbol, always curling around to Harry's magical core, always entering Draco's and departing again.

Draco could hardly move, save for his stirring hand, which continued its frantic pace. He didn't *want* to move. The web of links that bound him to Harry was incredible, sweet and strong and striking warmth into every part of him. It was the most intense bond he'd ever felt to any human being. He closed his eyes for just a moment, to savor it.

Harry lunged past him in the next moment, grabbing his wrist and stilling his hand, and then picked up the glass stirring rod lying on the left side of the cauldron. He broke it with a spell this time, and dropped the smaller shard into the liquid. Draco approved, in the small part of his mind that wasn't completely thrilling with the way Harry's limbs tugged on his own as they moved. Draco could almost *see* the pattern of magic that connected them now, flickering in and out of view like the spider web of violet and gold one got from staring at the sun too long.

And that was the final step. Draco blinked, and waited for the potion to do something.

Another puff of fragrant smoke arose; this one smelled like lavender petals and blood. And then it settled. Potter flicked his wand to douse the fire, slowly, his face full of its own listening expression. Draco reckoned he was also responsive to the gravity of their tied bodies.

And then it was done.

Draco knew he should shut his magical core and break the connection between them, but damn, not *yet.* This was too delicious. The longer he and Harry stayed tied, the more their magic traveled back and forth, and the closer he felt. Draco found himself swaying towards Harry, his mouth slightly open, his eyes shut.

Strong hands caught his wrist and turned it over. Draco opened his eyes in time to see Harry bow his head and lick his pulse point. He managed to blink languorously, and Harry glanced up in time to see it and understand it was a question.

"It wasn't fair that the anemone petals should get to know what your skin tasted like and I didn't," he said. His eyes were *flaring*, the way Draco had seen them do the day he forgot to take his potion. That was passion battling its way to the surface, and Draco reached out for it, trying to draw Harry's emotions into him the way he had drawn his magic, naturally, without thought.

Harry held his wrist tighter, and his eyes darkened. Draco was delighted to discover a new way of being wanted—an experience he had always enjoyed. The expression Harry watched him with was not lust for his body, but lust for touching, tasting, connection. Draco leaned nearer still, reaching out to curl an arm around Harry's shoulders.

And Harry stiffened, all at once, and then shut his magical core. Draco hissed soundlessly as the blow went home like a stab to his guts. He bent over, holding his stomach, and it was long moments before he could bring himself to look up again. He knew the glare of betrayal he fixed

on Potter was slightly ridiculous, but he had never had someone violently *end* one of his perfect moments like that before.

Harry turned away, panting heavily, his body shaking. He was on the verge of running off to the loo to be sick. If he hadn't just taken his potion the other day, he wasn't sure what would have happened.
You cannot afford to feel like this, and you know it. You do terrible *things when you feel like this.*
He closed his eyes, but that didn't shut out Ginny's face, scarred with horror and pain.

"What the hell, Potter?" Draco's—Malfoy's—voice was weak, but he managed to convey his outrage clearly enough.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "It had to end, and I—ended it badly. I'm sorry." He drew several sharp breaths, and said, "How long until you can know whether we succeeded with the potion?"

"Two hours," Draco said, stiffly.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated, and then he thought of Ginny's face again, and what Draco's face might have looked like if Harry had done the same thing to *him*, and he really did have to run for the loo. "Sorry," he gasped as he slammed the door. "The smell."

He bent over the toilet and was noisily sick. Then he lowered his head into his arms and ignored Draco's knocking for a while.

We've got to figure out a less intimate way of brewing the potion.

When he came out of the loo, he avoided Draco's eyes, and they stood in studied silence until Draco at last went to the cauldron, and cast several spells that Harry couldn't hear. He turned around with an expression of strained triumph on his face.

"We did it," he said.

Harry closed his eyes, and nodded. He made himself think of a happy Hermione, and nothing else.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eleven—Desire at Work

Harry had insisted they wait to introduce Hermione to the potion; he wanted Malfoy to run more analysis spells and strain the potion for unmelted ingredients before he poured the thick concoction down his best friend's throat. Malfoy had snorted at him, his eyes showing indignation that Harry would suspect his—their—skill of being less than perfect, but he had grudgingly capped the cauldron of the Desire potion and taken it home with him.

Now it was the next morning, and Hermione was feeling well enough to venture out and eat at the table in the drawing room beside Harry, and Harry was sipping his tea and thinking about what it meant, that they had really *made* this potion.

It would change lives, and not only Hermione's. How many people would gain confidence? How many people would learn to disregard minor problems that they had been obsessing over as if they were major worries? How many people would be like him, and trust themselves around those they would otherwise have avoided, once the potion was in their bodies and helping them to control their criminal tendencies?

Harry smiled into his teacup. Let Hermione object that the potion was a moral cheat, or that it moved too fast and changed too much. Let the Ministry try to forbid the brewing and sale of the potion if it really wanted to. Harry was sure the same objections had been made to new models of broom, to Healing Charms, and to many useful household spells in their time. The important thing was that this potion could *help* people, and it filled him with wonder and awe and gratitude, to have been a part of the making.

"Why are you smiling so much?"

Harry looked up in surprise. Hermione had folded her arms and was glaring at him. Her face still showed the pallor and the dark smudges beneath her eyes that were a sign of her grief, but she had lines of true anger cutting her face beside her nose and mouth. He would do well to answer her before she decided to "persuade" him to talk.

"Malfoy and I think that we managed to brew the Desire potion yesterday evening," he said.

Hermione's breath caught. Then she shook her head a little. "Yesterday *evening?*" she said. "But I thought you went to bed immediately after I did."

"I might have," Harry said, with a small shrug. "But then Malfoy showed up, and he'd had some additional insights about passive and active magic, and Potions masters, which affected the way we brewed—"

A spark of interest changed Hermione's face, and she sat up. "Of course," she breathed. "Passive magic. I should have thought of that myself. The attempts to brew panaceas in the past have usually involved at least a pair of partners, sending their passive magic into the potion so it wouldn't become an antidote for one person's ills."

Harry smiled. He was glad to see that Hermione had *some* reason to have confidence in his and Draco's potion. "And we managed to interact," he said. "I did the magic. He did the actual brewing. We handled different ingredients, and we traded off magical strength when one of us couldn't have accomplished something on our own. And it was—" He sought for words to encompass the *united* feeling he'd had last night, but ended up shaking his head. "I was closer to him during the brewing than I've ever been to anyone," he said. "Even Susan. Even Ginny." His voice fell on the last words.

Hermione gazed at him steadily. "I believe that you're a good person, Harry," she said. "You*don't* need this potion to be one. You never did. That's the main reason why I object to your drinking it, you know. It means you keep thinking of yourself as weak and dependent, and you're not. You could survive without it."

Harry sidestepped the inclination to argue back. They'd had this discussion many, many times, and they never came to any sort of agreement. "Well," he said. "Last night was—intimate. I think Malfoy was angry with me when I ended it." That was a slight falsehood. He *knew* Malfoy had been angry. But since it had been the best thing for both of them, he wasn't sorry. "But it also produced a potion that we can be proud of. Nothing inferior could come out of a brewing like that."

Hermione smiled wanly. "Why, Harry," she said. "Is that enthusiasm for Potions as a subject that I hear in your voice? After you swore up and down you hated it for itself, not just because Snape was teaching it?"

"If they were all like that, I wouldn't have minded so much," Harry said, refusing to be baited. "And besides, you know full well what I'm trying to do, and it's *not* show that Malfoy's made a convert of me to his art." He reached out and put his hand on hers, holding her eyes. "Will you, Hermione?"

Her eyes dropped, and for long moments she picked at her toast with one thumb, brushing crumbs away when they caught under her nail. Harry waited, and watched, knowing his patient silence was already cutting at her resolve to resist. When she bit her lip and swallowed twice, and her eyes began to glisten with tears, he thought he could count on a victory won.

"I just—we can't know that it's *safe,* Harry," she said. "I think we should test it more before—"

"But there isn't really any other way, Hermione," Harry said. "We have to test it on a witch or wizard to know if it will work on a witch or wizard. But I trust Malfoy to take all the necessary precautions to make it as safe as possible *before* anyone drinks it." He lowered his voice and stroked the back of her hand. "What I'm asking is whether you'll drink it at all, assuming Malfoy manages to render it safe."

Hermione shut her eyes and shivered. "The thought of being rid of this is compelling," she murmured. "But Harry, what if there are side-effects we don't know about? You know very well there are some side-effects to your potion. Look at your magic, for example."

"That will require more testing," Harry said. "But I'm sure that Malfoy can mitigate those, too. I just—" He shook his head, unable to explain how much yesterday's brewing had increased his respect and admiration for Malfoy's skill. "I trust him," he finished finally, and hoped the look in his eyes would do what his words couldn't.

Hermione again swallowed. Then she nodded. "If he can assure me it's safe, I'll *try* it," she said.

Harry hugged her, a swift, sudden, hard motion that made her squeak. He closed his eyes and held her for long moments, confident that the sunshine outside at the moment couldn't be warmer than what he felt.

Draco stared hard at the bottle of thick potion shimmering on his table. The potion had turned an aqua color as it settled—not so very different from the green of Potter's concoction, but with a definite blue tinge. A simple, plain glass bottle would suit it best when they began to market it, he thought. Or perhaps a combination of a dark cork and a glass bottle. Dark colors would look good next to that explosion of purest blue-green.

His thoughts left marketing strategies and the half-made list in front of him that contained fellow apothecaries who might be interested in carrying Desire. His mind hovered, instead, over the ultimate test.

You know what you have to do if you want other people to drink this potion. Besides, you want to taste it, and find out what you most loathe about yourself. What better way to fulfill both need and longing than to drink it?

But Draco had not made his fortune and attained his position—precarious though it sometimes could be when his creditors came calling—by rushing ahead like a certain Gryffindor idiot he could name. Brewing was one thing; there, dancing on quaking ground was part necessity and part beauty. But he would *not* poison himself simply because he was sure there were no side-effects and he wanted to see what the potion would do to him.

He rose to his feet and walked around the table, carefully peering into the bottle from all sides and casting another series of analysis spells that would tell him if there were improper, poisonous sediments in the mixture. Nothing revealed itself. The Desire potion did slosh slightly with the currents of magic curling through it. Draco licked his lips.

He had cast every spell he could think of. His night had been spent in feverish reading and re-reading—he hadn't been about to ignore the lesson he'd had the day before, that he was missing out on the basics in favor of thinking about the complex abstractions—and cross-referencing spells and combinations of ingredients and symbols he was unsure of. And he had done his best to resist the lure of the delusion that, just because the brewing had been perfect, the product had to be.

Potter.

Draco felt his lip curl for a moment, as he snarled silently to himself. Potter hadn't appeared to consider the consequences of cutting the connection off like that, and that was enough to prejudice Draco against him, but had he considered what would happen the next time they had to brew together? The Desire potion needed them both working together to make it, and they would need to produce enormous quantities. Perhaps in time they could simplify the process, but it wouldn't happen yet.

And each time, they would experience the connection between them. Each time, if they were repeated, Potter's hasty actions could hurt them both and cause resentment in Draco that neither of them needed.

Draco took a deep breath and blew his anger away. He had to consider the Desire potion, and whether he was really ready to drink it.

But he could think of no other precaution, obvious or non-obvious, that he was missing. He had eaten three hours ago, which meant his stomach was nearly in the ideal state to receive a new substance, especially one that contained unusual ingredients. He snorted a bit and picked up the bottle.

He had to swallow hard as the potion poured down his throat. It was thick, and sluggish, rather like trying to eat marmalade without a spoon. Draco made an absent note in his mind to work on reducing the viscosity, if they could do that without affecting the potion's magic.

The coldness spread along his neck. Draco thought he had swallowed as much as one of Potter's normal doses, so he set the bottle down. He waited a moment for his balance to sway, or for his memories to change, or for his confidence to suddenly rise to undreamed-of heights; at times, he had thought that he most hated being a coward.

But instead, his perceptions sharpened. Draco reached out to place a hand on the back of the couch and took a breath of surprise. The room opened *wider*, and the air shimmered and turned to crystal. He could feel the arrival of a thought before it got there. He could trace his own emotions down to the subconscious impulses. Everything else in the world seemed to be moving very slowly and deliberately; he himself was moving quickly.

Draco tilted his head back and laughed aloud as he realized what had happened. What he most hated about himself was the indecisiveness that sometimes plagued him—overcaution. He had lost chance after chance for glory and good business because he had paused, hesitated, spent a day too long in researching or shown too obviously that he mistrusted someone. He could claim it had kept him balanced and alive where some of his competitors had faltered, but that hardly mattered a thing when most of those competitors did manage to survive and even do better than he did on individual transactions and corners of the market. If he could only know when caution was warranted and when it wasn't, he would be able to corner most of the market and present a calm, confident face to his creditors. He would know who was a friend and who was an enemy.

He would be perceptive enough to see dangers coming before they got there.

He had achieved a balance that he had not thought he ever would, and now he could act like a *methodical* artist, creativity running in harness with reason.

Someone knocked on the door of the shop below.

Even as Draco turned, his mind was speeding, unfolding the suppositions and analyses that he would have presented himself with in far less time than normal. His shop had been visibly closed for nearly two months now, so there was no reason for an ordinary patron to arrive at this random moment. And Potter would not seek him out; he preferred to communicate by owl still. His friends and family never stopped by. If they could pretend Draco didn't actually run an apothecary and engage in common *money-making,* they seemed to think they could make his profession cease to exist.

That meant one of his creditors. And which creditor was most likely to come by just now, when he had paid his latest round of Galleons to the others on time?

Draco went below smiling, and bowed a little to Cordelia Nott when he opened the door. He saw the way her eyes flickered, and knew she didn't expect to be invited in, though she would consider it an insult to be made to stand on the threshold. When he moved out of the way, she frankly stared for the minutest second before her face caught up with her emotions and shuttered.

"Draco," she said, with a nod of her own, as she stepped into the lower part of the shop. "I'm afraid that my schedule has changed somewhat. Rather than requiring the potion of you by the summer solstice, I need it by next week at the latest."

Draco was sure, from the half-teasing note in her voice and the way she held her head, that she didn't mean it. She only wanted to rattle him, and when he was spinning satisfactorily on his tentative thread, she would snap him back into place and explain she was only kidding.

And he *would* have been rattled. He couldn't see behind her mask often enough to know when she was teasing and when she wasn't.

Instead, now, he only nodded with an expression of polite interest on his face and said, "Indeed. How much will you need, and by what day?"

Cordelia's hand paused as she reached towards a barrel of dried dung beetles. Again, it was only a moment's hesitation, but it was *there*, and as she toyed with the scoop that projected above the rim of the barrel, Draco rejoiced that he had confounded her in turn, but let no trace of that rejoicing slip through his mask.

"Come now, Draco." Cordelia had dropped the jesting tone. "We both know that your potion isn't ready yet."

"In fact," Draco said, calmly—so calmly, he *loved* being able to do this—"we perfected it last night, Harry Potter and I. But still, the brewing takes considerable magical energy, and some hours for each batch to cool. If you tell me when you need it, and how much, then I will know how much brewing we must do each day, and how soon."

Cordelia had a faint green tinge to her face for a moment, as if she would be ill. Then she laughed softly. "Considerable magical energy? I hardly think this potion will repay your investment in it, then, Draco, no matter what it may do."

"Would you like a test sample?" Draco asked. "I could give you an ordinary vial, and you could see—"
"I've never known you to be such a prey to nonsense." Cordelia leaned towards him, her eyes narrowed just slightly. "You do *not* have such a potion in your room upstairs, Draco, or in Potter's flat, or anywhere else. You know as well as I do that you haven't actually invented it yet, and may not be able to do it even by the summer solstice. I appreciate the Slytherin finesse for game-playing, since I was one myself, but even the best games have to yield to reality."

"You're right about that." Draco folded his hands contemplatively. "Which is why it gives me such great joy to say that, in this case, the potion is the reality, and trifling about it the game."

Cordelia went very still. Not even Draco's potion-enhanced mind could be sure about what extreme emotion she was hiding, but the very fact that she had to hide one, and that he could tell she was, gave him an advantage. He waited, smile abstracted, eyes cool, as though he were looking across the distance to another patron's approach and only wished this one would decide what, exactly, she wanted.

Cordelia finally said, "You will find that this potion may have costs you have not anticipated."

Draco nodded. "Getting hold of some of the ingredients alone—"

"Not monetary," said Cordelia, revealing a bit of valuable information in her hand and a threat at once, which *proved* she was thrown off-balance, and then turned and passed out of the shop. Draco triggered the wards that listened to footsteps, letting him know when she reached the end of Diagon Alley and Apparated away. He shut the door and leaned against the wall, breathing softly, listening to his own racing heartbeat.

One test passed. The next, I suspect, will be whether Granger drinks this or not.

Harry had to give Hermione credit. The moment Malfoy entered the flat, his hands carefully cradling a corked bottle of the Desire potion, and announced that he'd tested it and it was safe, she was on her feet, one hand extended commandingly.

"I'll drink it," she said. "Give it to me."

Malfoy paused and gave Harry a fathomless look. "What?" he drawled. "No endless moral arguments about this first?"

"I'm doing it because I promised Harry I'd *try*," Hermione snapped, and snatched the vial he held out to her, and then vanished into the loo. Harry heard the distinct click that meant she'd locked the door behind her.

That left Harry alone with Malfoy. Because he knew it wouldn't last very long, he was willing to endure the isolation. Malfoy stared at him, but he'd done that before. Indeed, if Harry couldn't put up with stares, he should have changed his appearance and moved to the Muggle world already. He leaned on the wall and stared back.

He was fine until Malfoy said, "Since we're alone, I can ask you this. What in the world was your idea, cutting off the magical connection the brewing established between us so fast?"

Harry blinked and licked his lips. Malfoy just waited in silence, though, his gaze slightly averted, as if he knew Harry would do this better without eyes focused on him. Harry *did* feel as though he had more time to collect his thoughts, and after a few moments of struggle, he let the words stumble out, inadequate though he felt them to be.

"I—it has to do with the reason I take my potion. Besides, it's one thing to be comfortable and connected whilst we're brewing, and another to continue that afterwards." Harry felt himself flush at the memory he was relating now. "I *licked your wrist,* Malfoy. Surely you aren't comfortable with that?"

"At the moment, it felt good. Nearly everything did. You know that. You were part of it."

"But afterwards?" Harry looked straight on at his former rival. "We had to use Veritaserum and a blood oath to trust each other just a week ago. That's not something friends do. And I don't feel comfortable entering a strange half-relationship, not friends and not business partners. I want *rules,*Malfoy. I want to know what offends you, what hurts you, what pleases you and what actively damages any bond we build. I want to *know.* And just letting the connection urge us into something we hadn't considered and that didn't have rules doesn't fit my definition of knowing."

Malfoy closed his eyes completely. Harry wondered why. Perhaps he had to struggle to master his emotions, and didn't want Harry seeing them. Well, Harry could understand that.

"Do you know," Malfoy whispered, "what you described yourself as wanting *does* actually resemble a friendship?"

"Er," Harry said. But Malfoy was right. He had certainly known what subjects not to bring up with Ron—a brief throb of loss traveled through his gut—and he knew how to keep Hermione comfortable and happy, whether it was in her depressed state or her normal one.

"And friendships can survive shocks, once they're established," Malfoy went on, opening his

eyes. They didn't pierce Harry. They just regarded him calmly, and he found himself relaxing under that gaze as he had relaxed around no one in a long time. "For now? We'll go slowly. But I do think we need friendship, at the very least, when we're going to spend an awful lot of time brewing this potion and becoming intimate with one another. Imagine severing the ties as suddenly and shockingly as you did *each time,* Potter. Does that appeal?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"Well, then." Malfoy smiled and stepped forwards, holding out one hand. When Harry hesitated, he added, in a tone more like his normal one, "Oh, for God's sake, Potter, we won't change everything at once. And this relationship will hardly be without its difficulties. But I want this, and it would make sense for the business we need to accomplish."

Harry blew out his breath and clasped Malfoy's wrist. "All right, then," he said. "We'll try."

The door to the loo flew open. Harry dropped Malfoy's hand in shock and wheeled around, imagining that Hermione had been poisoned or hurt by the potion.

Instead, she was smiling. Really *smiling*, for the first time since Ron's death. And she whispered, "Harry, it's gone. The mountain's gone. I want to—" She shook her head, curls bouncing around her, eyes wide with wonder. "I want to *read.*"

Harry sprang forwards and flung his arms around her. He felt himself choke as his head dropped onto her shoulder. He was relieved and gratified and washed with delight and startled and—

And *happy.*

For the first time in what felt like a long time, terribly happy.

Draco felt like curling his lip as he watched Potter and Granger, but the impulse was only a faint one.

All the words he had spoken had been true. *And* they had been the ones most effective to opening Potter's heart.

His potion-quickened mind had warned him when he should keep insulting remarks back, and when he was tempted to add some innuendo to Potter's innocent statement about pleasing him, it had counseled him to stay silent. Draco had exercised a modicum of self-control, and what did he have in return?

A brewing partner. Someone who might become a friend.

Someone who, if he did, had the political and the magical power absolutely *necessary* to face the challenges that would pour in from every quarter when they began to market the potion.

Draco folded his arms and smiled at Potter's back.

We are going to change the world, you and I. And I'd like to see someone stop us.

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Chapter: 12

Thanks again for all the reviews!

This is the last chapter of *A Potion Named Desire.* However, **it *will* have a sequel,** to be entitled *An Alchemical Discontent*, which will probably start in about a week.

Chapter Twelve—What Harry Needs The Potion For

Draco lowered the newspaper slowly, frowning.

On the one hand, it was just an article in the *Daily Prophet*, which half the time got the news it reported wrong, and a quarter of the rest of the time made lies up to render their articles more exciting. Draco could investigate and probably find out that the "truth" of this article was the result of a concatenation of exaggerations, miscommunications, emphasis, and inflections.

On the other hand…

He stared again at the article. Why had the *Daily Prophet* thought it important to announce, on their front page no less, than notorious independent apothecary Robin Lockswood was going "moral?" He had priggishly pinned up, on the front window of his shop, a list of potions he would no longer sell. That included love potions, philters that were supposed to make an insecure person look better in the eyes of a straying lover or critical parent, and "any potion that unduly influenced the psychological state of a person's mind. You might as well *call* them second cousin to the Imperius Curse."

That last description—well, not the second sentence, of course, because Draco knew damn well Desire didn't have any addictive properties, and no one could be *forced* to take it—fit their potion very well.

Draco tapped his fingers slowly against the photograph of Lockswood standing with his arms folded outside his shop, an expression of pious "morality" on his face. Such men's reformation was never permanent. Lockswood had just shut himself away from three enormously profitable areas of the market. He'd backslide soon enough, when he found public approval less tasty than the profits he was now missing out on.

And he had been one of Draco's competitors, not a distributor. Oh, Draco had put his name on the list of people he might contact about the Desire potion, but it had been far down that list. He had plenty of other people who would be interested in Desire and do a better job of selling it besides.

Still.

Very interesting. Especially since Lockswood refused to discuss exactly what had effected his conversion from black-market brewer to upstanding public man.

Draco folded the newspaper, put it aside, and picked up Granger's letter. She had suggested several improvements to the brewing process, ways that might make it take less magic and less time. It was a substitute for her actual presence, since she wouldn't be there during the brewing this time, either. She was at the Ministry, convincing them she felt well enough to return to work.

Potter had suggested they delay the brewing, but Draco didn't want to. He wanted some extra vials of Desire on hand to tempt Cordelia, when she finally broke down and came back to him, and he wanted to have some samples to send on to the distributors he'd contacted, who had responded with cautious interest and a determination to see what the potion did before they'd sell it.

And he wanted that deep, drugging connection with Potter again. This time, with the Desire in his veins clarifying his thoughts on the other man's reactions and letting him anticipate some of those reactions at the same time, he might be able to ferret out the secret of what *his*potion, the base, did.

And we're friends now, aren't we? He should have less of a compunction against telling his secrets to friends. Granger certainly knows.

"What do you *mean,*he doesn't know?" Hermione's voice was so sharp that Harry knew her eyes would flay him if he turned around.
So he didn't turn around, but kept his eyes on the work in front of him. He had finally had to realize, forcefully, that his isolation with Hermione and Malfoy would have to end soon. Hermione was moving back to her own flat tomorrow, and Malfoy had owled to say that he had already made a few improvements to the brewing process which meant they'd have to spend less time together. Harry would take up his business of making film for wizarding cameras again. He had gone today to several shops in Diagon Alley and bought the latest ingredients he'd need.

He had lingered by Malfoy's shop, staring up at the shuttered windows, but finally forced himself to turn his back and hurry away. He'd see the git in a few hours, after all. No reason to hurry the meeting.

Hermione's hand gripped his shoulder and spun him around. Harry just barely managed to lay down the small pane of glass he held in time. He had forgotten what strength a recovered

Hermione might have.

"You *have* to tell him," Hermione said forcefully. "Any changes to the brewing process could be dangerous, now that he's taking Desire. And of course he'll need to know it for the marketing, so that he can warn people who *buy* it." She spoke now of the sale of Desire as a necessary, but regrettable, occurrence.

"And then he'll want to know other things," Harry said, hunching his shoulders. "He'll want to know exactly why I take it."

"And are you going to hide that from him forever?" Hermione closed her eyes, every line of her face etched with frustration. "Harry, I told you, it isn't as awful as you think it was—"

"You *weren't there.*"

It had only been him and Ginny. It was one of the many, many things about the Incident Harry hated. If only he had invited Ron or Hermione, or both, to come with them on their way back from that pub in Diagon Alley. If only he had invited *Dean*, for heaven's sake, whom Ginny was dating now and seemed happy with.

"Then tell him about the side-effects without telling him about what happened between you and Gin," said Hermione. "I don't care. But he has to know, Harry. Promise me you'll tell him before you start brewing today."

There was really no choice, Harry knew, and not just because Hermione was asking him to. He could be risking Draco's life by keeping silent. He wouldn't do that.

"I promise I'll tell him," he said. "But if you come home and Malfoy's gone to his shop and I'm drinking enough to drown my liver, it's *your*fault."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and glanced away. "From what you told me, Malfoy did worse things during the war, Harry."

"Only because he had to." Harry stared unseeing at his hands. He was seeing, as always, Ginny's face when she realized exactly how much danger she was in. She had been too scared even to *speak.* "It wasn't because of the monster inside him, just the monster outside ordering him to torture people—Ouch!"

Hermione had slapped him smartly upside the head. Harry rubbed his temple and stared at her. Yes, he knew the Desire potion was having an effect on her, but he didn't know it would be *that* much of an effect.

"You're not a monster," Hermione said lowly. "And much as I still dislike Malfoy, I think you're trivializing his experiences during the war." Her eyes flashed. "Tell him about the side-effects. If you take my advice, you'll tell him about what inspired you to take the potion in the first place,

too."

"You know he'll only mock me." Harry realized he was whinging, but he really couldn't care. The mere thought of Malfoy discovering what he*really* was—or rather, what he would be without his potion—was enough to bring up self-loathing like bile in his throat.

"I don't think he will," said Hermione. "And if he does, so what? It's not the end of the world. That should just prove that he doesn't consider this that big a deal. Which it *isn't*," she added sharply. "For God's sake, Harry, it was five years ago and more. Ginny got over it. Don't you think you should?"

"She got over it the way you get over losing a limb, Hermione. Did you see the way she looked at me when we went to the Burrow the other night?"

"Frankly, no, as I was dealing too much with the mountain in my mind at the time." Hermione cast a *Tempus* Charm and tsked under her breath. "My appointment with Shacklebolt started five minutes ago. I have to *go*, Harry." She swept towards the door.

"I'm sorry," Harry called in a muted tone after her.

Hermione paused and looked back at him. Her eyes softened, and she said, "I know you are. And I'll never think that you aren't a good person, Harry. You took care of me when I most needed it.

"But you ought to realize that striving frantically to be a good person at all times is *silly.* You changed your whole life around on the off-chance that something like what happened with Ginny *might* happen again. That says to me that you're living in fear. And it's the same thing with refusing to tell Malfoy what happened. You're rendering it more significant than it actually was. And hasn't it occurred to you that that will make him more curious?"

Harry ducked his head and said nothing as Hermione shut the door of the flat behind her. She often said things like that, but this was the most open and sustained lecture she'd given him in some time.

Of course it is. She's had to deal with her own problems until recently.

Malfoy knocked on the door then, and Harry looked up with a deep breath. He could do this. He would give Malfoy all the information in his notes about the side-effects. That ought to be enough. The Incident was no one's business but his own, and Ginny's.

He had blasted Hermione for not being there, but in truth, he was glad she hadn't been. It was one more face he didn't have to look into and see blame radiating back at him from. Why in the world would she assume that he wanted to make Malfoy's face one of those?

Malfoy knocked again, sounding impatient this time. Harry started and moved to answer.

Draco narrowed his eyes the moment he saw Potter. The idiot was pale, except for two high dots of color near his cheekbones. Draco stepped inside carefully, glad that he had chosen to float most of the new ingredients behind him instead of carrying them. If Potter suddenly snapped and attacked him, at least those ingredients wouldn't be ruined.
But the chances of brewing the new potion may be.

Draco put everything on the table as if he had noticed nothing wrong. The Desire potion was working in him now, telling him that Potter was on edge, anticipating a taunt from Draco. Draco would just have to wait for Potter to make the first move.

It wasn't an appealing prospect, considering how stubborn and reticent the other man could be, but it had to be done.

"Malfoy." A gulp, which Draco could hear from across the room. "Draco."

Finally. And it didn't take that long, really, but I reckon it would have taken longer if I'd said something. This potion really is magnificent.

Draco turned around, making sure to keep a mildly interested expression on his face. "Did you have something to say, Potter? I was under the impression that we were brewing a potion today."

"We are." Potter scrubbed his hand across his mouth. His breath was coming shallowly, and Draco had a mild fear that he'd faint out of sheer anxiety before he got to the main point. But he lowered his eyes once, then glanced up and acted as though he were finally ready for a clash of opinions.

"The potion has side-effects."

Draco forgot about self-control, and the compassion—or feigned compassion, anyway—that the potion was telling him to have. His lips drew back in a snarl, and he stalked a few steps closer to Potter, who shuffled his feet nervously but refused to back away. "*What* did you say, Potter?" he hissed. "I can't have heard you right."

"I said the potion has side-effects." Potter pushed a hand through his hair, baring the scar on his forehead, and then let his fringe drop back again. Draco briefly imagined that Potter was emphasizing who he was, but the theory was stupid. Draco knew perfectly well who he was, and Potter knew Draco well enough to realize he wouldn't be affected by any such stupidity. "At least, the potion I take does, and I imagine that the Desire potion is the same way."

"And you never thought to mention this *before* now?"

Potter nodded a little, looking as though he had anticipated this explosion and even welcomed it. "Be as angry with me as you want. I deserve it."

Draco swallowed the more pressing part of his anger. He was still too furious to do exactly what

the Desire potion advised and calm down, but on the other hand, he would be a fool to alienate Potter by yelling when he could use this to get what he wanted. "I am angry," he said, precisely. "So angry I can barely breathe. Do you know how much danger you've put me in? This entire *project* in?"

Potter's head hung like a broken daisy's. "Sorry," he whispered. "How—how can I make it up to you?"

Oh, yes. And he'd even asked the question of his own free will, without Draco having to force him into it.

"I want you tell me why you go to all this trouble," said Draco, and made what he thought was an elegant and restrained gesture with one hand, but which in fact flew a bit wider than he intended it. Well, with Potter's head bowed, he wouldn't see more than the shadow of the movement anyway. "Why in the world do you take this potion? What*made* you want to restrain—whatever it is that you want to restrain?"

Potter's head snapped up at once, and his eyes blazed. "Oh, no," he said softly. "I'll tell you many other things. I'll let you see all my notes on the side-effects, so that you can be sure I'm not leaving anything out of my account. But I won't give you my most important secret just because you want it."

Draco narrowed his eyes and studied the other man for long moments. This was not going the way it should, and his Desire potion gave him little to no guidance. Potter's jaw had set, so Draco knew he was angry. But he didn't know why, and he didn't know how to get past that barrier of stubbornness.

"Listen," he said. "Granger told me that whatever this was made you think of yourself as a bad person, unable to judge right from wrong anymore."

Potter's jaw just got a little tighter, and he didn't reply.

"I won't mock you," Draco said softly. And he realized it was true even as he spoke the words, not just a convenient promise to make Potter talk to him. He *wanted* a friendship, the brewing partnership he'd dreamed of the other day. They couldn't conquer the world if there were large gulfs of mistrust lying between them. "I won't promise not to be revolted, because it could be a revolting thing, for all I know. But I think we should be more open with each other, yes. And that includes not just practical information like the side-effects. I need to tell you how much I'm in debt to Cordelia Nott. I *need* you to understand, and not just because we might both be in danger from her. And I need to know what happened to you, because I think it'll help me understand you." He dared to edge a step nearer. "Please, Potter—Harry?" A risky move, one that the Desire potion would have advised against, but acting like a Gryffindor around Gryffindors had benefited him in the past. And this wasn't all about benefit, strange though that was to contemplate. "I want to *know.*"

The other man shook his head, but his eyes had gone soft and uncertain, and he rubbed his brow with his hand again, as if to force away a headache.

"What would it harm to tell me?" Draco was now only a few steps away. He could reach out and touch Harry's arm if he wanted. "It would benefit us both greatly. I'll tell you my part of the truth right now. I'm twenty thousand Galleons in debt to Cordelia Nott. There are other creditors to whom, combined, I owe even more, but she's the biggest single one. I'm not proud of that, but there you are; I had to have money to establish my shop. And now I think she's moving against us, because of some things I said to her whilst under the influence of the Desire potion. We need to come up with plans to work against her." He paused. "Now. Will you tell me *your* truth?"

Potter's jaw worked, and he kept his eyes averted. "What if I refuse to, even though you took a risk?"

Draco kept his temper with difficulty. "I won't force you, but it will make it that much more difficult for us to work together."

Silence.

"I don't think it's anything completely revolting or terrible," Draco said. "Because you're obviously ashamed of it, and you went out of your way to brew a potion that would keep you from doing anything remotely like that again. That tells me it's revolting to *you*, a Gryffindor, but probably not to other people who weren't there." He paused, and then managed to mingle command and entreaty when he spoke again. "Tell me."

Harry's heart had never had such a battle against his will in five years.
He *wanted* to talk. He'd wanted to do that before, to mention it to other people who weren't Hermione or the Weasleys, usually his girlfriends. But practicality and reluctance had kept him silent, hugging his secret.

Now he could talk about it. Now he could loose some of the blistering poison and, at the same time, show Malfoy that this *was* serious, not some Gryffindor obsession. Maybe Malfoy would understand in a way Hermione hadn't. Maybe he would support Harry in his own brewing and agree he needed the potion to stay a good person.

Harry would do a lot to have that.

"All right," he said at last, softly, unsteadily, forcing himself not to listen to his own words. He would get horrified and stop if he did. "The side-effects first. It lessens my control of my magic. I can still*keep* control, but it acts wild. You've probably noticed that during the brewing. I'm—in closer touch with it, maybe. Some barrier usually present between a wizard's magic and him is broken in me."

Draco said nothing at all. Harry couldn't tell what he was feeling from the sound of his breathing, and he *refused* to look at the other man's face, either. There would be frustration and anger there,

and Harry had enough for both of them.

"Like I said, it's *potentially* dangerous. Doing delicate brewing whilst taking the potion for the first time wouldn't be a good idea. And yes, I did plan to tell you that before we started brewing again, the moment I realized you'd taken Desire."

Silence.

"Do you have questions?" Harry asked, mainly to force Draco to speak.

He wasn't rewarded. From the corner of his eye, he saw the shadow of Draco's head shake. *Not about that part,* hung clearly as words in the air between them.

And Harry took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, and plunged into his story. There was so much he'd never be able to put into words. It might be better this way, though, telling the tale to someone he *knew* would be unsympathetic.

"I was dating Ginny Weasley for more than a year after the war ended. I always expected we'd get married someday. We weren't *passionate* all the time, but there was just something there, you know? That kind of steady presence you can count on more than you can count on an infatuation that lasts a few glorious months and then wears off. And I knew I loved her, because I was so worried for her whenever she hurt herself, and there were times we never went anywhere, just stayed home and cuddled together. We could be in the same room and not speak and still be perfectly all right—"

"Harry."

And Draco was right, Harry acknowledged miserably to himself. He had to hurry out of the happy time and into the darkness. It was the only way that the story made any sense.

"There was just one problem, the way I saw it. Ginny was good friends with Dean Thomas, whom she'd dated in school. Hell, *I* was good friends with Dean. But she always flirted with him, and spent a little too much time with him, and laughed at me when I got jealous. Secretly, I think she liked my jealousy. She went through periods where she liked the way things were between us, and periods when she wanted some more excitement."

Draco made a considering *hmmm* noise in the back of his throat.

Harry swallowed. "We went to a pub in Diagon Alley one evening. Never mind which one. I got a little pissed—no, I won't lie, I was *really* pissed. And then Dean came in, and Ron was talking to me about something else, and I got distracted and didn't look around for Ginny for a few hours.

"When I did, I saw her kissing him. I thought for a moment it was just a brother-sister kiss, or one of her little displays to get me jealous again. And maybe it was. It probably was. Ginny

always said later that it was—"

"Harry."

"Right. Sorry." Harry took a deep breath and rubbed his hands on his trousers. He thought he should probably open his eyes and look at Draco; that would be less difficult than watching the images playing out on the back of his eyelids. It was also impossible. "But it didn't *look* that way. I marched over and wrenched her off him. I hurt her arm. And I gave Dean a look that made him practically run into the back of the pub.

"We came home. I started snapping at Ginny, drunk with—well, drink, and with my jealousy. And she told me that I worried about it too much, and she could *basically* do whatever she wanted, it wasn't like we were *married* or something, and kissing Dean was just a harmless bit of fun. She hinted that maybe we should separate for a little while, so she could 'have fun' and I could see if there was another woman I liked better, too. She said she was bored with me and wasn't sure she wanted to be with me permanently anymore.

"I—lost it."

That was no phrase for the darkness that had risen in him, and stormed through him, and reached out towards Ginny. His lust and his jealousy and his rage, all three of them had blended, and then together all three of them had infected his magic. Ginny had fallen back, eyes wide, but his shadow and hers had joined together like chains and bound her arms, preventing her from moving. Harry had advanced on her, and he had wanted nothing so much as to *devour* her, ensure that she could never leave him, that she wouldn't even *think* about Dean again.

He hadn't said the words, but his magic and his expression had told Ginny the truth. She was too terrified to make a sound, but she had begun to cry, hopelessly, silently. Not even that had stopped Harry. It wasn't until he had taken her arm and wrenched it around again and she had closed her eyes in despair that he had finally seen what he was becoming.

And *stopped.* He had dropped to his knees, the shadows melting away and the magic subsiding back into his body, as Ginny had run away up the corridor and then Apparated to the Burrow. Harry had felt pain at her going, but of far more importance was the new burst of self-loathing.

So that's what I am. That's what I'm naturally like.

"What do you mean by 'lost it,' Harry?"

Draco's voice pulled him back to the present. Harry forced his eyes open, his throat dry, his voice raspy, but steady. He had lived these memories so many times that they had lost *some* of their power over him. The memory of his horror at the end was stronger than the memory of Ginny's face. "I nearly hurt her. Badly. Lust and jealousy and rage." He laughed without humor. "Did you know that Muggles think they're three of the seven deadly sins? Well, they're certainly three of mine. They came through my magic, and then I physically hurt her, and God knows what would

have happened next. Rape, maybe. I could have beaten her, quite possibly. I remember wanting to *eat* her, *consume* her, swallow her alive. Isn't that what monsters do?

"We broke up the next day, of course. And then I set out to find a way to *control* myself. God, I'm a monster without this potion." He turned his back to Draco, unable to bear any kind of close contact, even that which came from facing towards him. "It suppresses some of my emotions. Not all of them. The ugly ones. And even though it also weakens my control over my magic, it doesn't destroy it. Besides, I'm less worried about my magic than about those emotions. I'm not dangerous as long as *they're* gone.

"So." He cleared his throat again. "You know what my story is, now. Anything else you wanted to ask?"

He heard soft footsteps crossing the floor behind him. He tensed, wondering if Draco would walk through the door of the flat and be done with him. That would be bad, worse than the reactions he had already predicted.

Then Draco's hand came to rest on his shoulder. And he whispered, "Has it occurred to you that you *didn't* hurt her?"

"Yes, I did," Harry said fiercely. "Grabbed her arm and jerked her, and, more than that, shoved her face-to-face with a glimpse of darkness that she isn't ever going to forget. Taught her there's still horror in life with Voldemort gone. That's almost worse than the physical pain, Malfoy." He was recovering now, pulling himself backwards, preparing *again* to fight the battle that he had fought over and over again with Hermione. He hadn't thought Malfoy was sympathetic enough to decide he didn't need the potion. "I won't chance that again, not with any woman I want to date."

"That's the reason you shoved me away when we brewed the potion together, isn't it?" Malfoy asked.

"Yes." Harry swallowed. "I was feeling lust. God knows what would have happened next."

"*Nothing.*" Malfoy gave him a little shake. "Don't you see? You had the self-control to hold back in the face of everything. I don't think you need the potion because you *stopped.*"

"But I *intended* to—"

"Intentions matter less than actions."

"I can't agree to that." Harry was finally working some saliva into his mouth. He moved away from Malfoy's hand, because the touch was weakening him. "Look. I've done fine on this for five years. It's not something that should matter when we brew, because now you know the truth, and we can *both* end the connections before I feel something too—evil. Your curiosity should be satisfied now, too." He turned around, and finally dared to lift his eyes to Malfoy's face, which was oddly blank. "There's no reason for this revelation to change anything else, unless you

decide to walk away."

Draco wanted to reach out, grab Harry's shoulders, and *shake* him into sense. The idiot was so blind it was aggravating. Why didn't he see that he*had* held himself back, and that was more significant than feeling his desires in the first place? Why didn't he see that so much worse could have happened?
Draco had thought, for once, that Harry was justified in keeping some deep and dark secret. And now it turned out, surprise, to be as unjustified as every other worry the Gryffindor had.

He opened his mouth to say that—

And then he closed it again, and thought very hard. Maybe it was the Desire potion telling him this, but Draco hoped not, because he was getting off the damn potion as soon as he could, and never taking it again. He simply couldn't afford not to have *complete* control of his magic when he brewed.

He wanted Harry off the potion, yes, both because it was ridiculous and unnecessary and he valued common sense in his friends, and because he *wanted* what had happened between them when Harry licked his wrist the last time. Draco himself enjoyed being pursued, enjoyed his partners being jealous over him, enjoyed someone so overcome with lust that he or she just couldn't *wait* to take Draco to bed. Maybe it would never come to anything more than friendship and business partners with Harry, but Draco would not mind if it was more, either.

But berating Harry would accomplish nothing. He too obviously had defenses honed and ready for that, thanks to what Draco did not doubt were Granger's frequent lectures. He had to hold back and be patient, if he really wanted Harry out of this bind he'd put himself in, this utter terror of his own passions.

Besides, wouldn't it be better if Harry stopped taking the potion of his own free will, because he had finally seen the light? Maybe with help, yes, but it had to be his decision.

Draco blinked. *Wow. I really do think of him as a friend, don't I?*

As casually as he could, he said, "Shall we discuss the next marketing steps for the potion and the threat from Nott and Diggory, then, since we can't brew today?"

Harry spun around and stared at him with his mouth hanging open. Then he blinked, and smiled, and Draco could see the relaxation going deeper than he probably intended, since he had been braced to expect a collision.

"Yes," Harry said. "I would like that."

And then he stepped up, and shook Draco's hand firmly.

Draco smiled down at the top of his overly oblivious head. *We'll see if we can't solve your*

problems at the same time as mine, but there's no reason to rush this.

"To a long and profitable association," he said, and didn't need the potion's advice to leave *pleasurable* out of it. There were some things you just didn't say to someone in the wake of a confession like that.

Harry said fervently, "I hope so."

"Action is worth more than hope, too." Draco moved most of the ingredients on the drawing room table gently aside and leaned over the list of improvements on the brewing process Granger had sent him. "Let's see which of these will make good advertising copy."

Finite.

As I said, I'll start posting the sequel in about a week. Thanks for reading!