HAPPY H/D HOLIDAYS, __HIBISCUS!

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Title: Harry Potter and the Problematic Partnership

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco, casually-mentioned-once-but-not-seen Ron/Hermione

Summary: Forced to work together on an important case within the Ministry, Harry and Draco find that if they're not letting their animosity get in the way, they might actually be brilliant together. For as long as the assignment lasts, at least.

Rating: R

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Warning(s): Swearing, a slight bit of physical fighting, and more Potions theory than you likely ever wanted to know.

Epilogue compliant? Not at all.

Word Count: Approaching 25,000.

Author's Notes: Epic amounts of thanks to L for her help with this, from unlocking the key to the whole thing with a simple phrase, to directing me towards the appropriate places for research, to just plain having answers at the ready when I needed them. I'd also like to thank my recipient for her lovely prompts, and the mods for matching me up with her. Gina, dear, I hope this is the sort of thing you were wishing for, as I did so enjoy the journey! Here's hoping you do, too.

(Harry Potter and the Problematic Partnership)

If there was anyone Harry could not stand, it was Draco Malfoy.

It wasn't exactly a secret, either. His best friends had known about it for years. Many of his professors had known it. His colleagues in the Auror Corps knew it. The referees for the Ministry's Intramural Quidditch League knew it. Even Malfoy himself knew it.

But just in case he needed reminding, Harry was going to make it clear once again. Possibly with his fists.

"Looks like even the Ministry's best and brightest is dull and subpar today," Malfoy crowed, holding the Snitch in front of Harry's face. "Such a pity you're not living up to everyone's high standards, Potter. Must've hit your peak at seventeen."

"Shut your fucking mouth, Malfoy! If your team hadn't got away with so many uncalled fouls, we'd have been so ahead of you in points it wouldn't have mattered who caught that thing!"

"Uncalled foul my left ball, Potter. We're the better team, and you know it. Perhaps you lot are just suffering from a lack of foresight. Of course, given half of you have been unlucky enough to sustain on-the-job injuries and hexes in the last month, I suppose no one should be surprised you can't dodge a pair of competent Beaters, not to mention get anywhere near our Chasers." Malfoy smirked, rolling the Snitch between his fingers. "Besides, even without all that... I'm still the one that caught this. I beat you!"

Harry lost sight of everything that wasn't the infuriating git in front of him. "I'll show you a beating!" He lunged at Malfoy, dropping his broom in the process. The haughty smirk left the great prat's face as he stumbled backwards, tripping over the end of his own broom. Harry fell on him heavily, fuelled by pure rage. He was going to make Malfoy eat the damned thing, if he could. At least shoving it down his throat might shut him the hell up.

"Get off of me, you imbalanced brute!" Malfoy shouted, and then he was out from underneath Harry's legs and trying to get Harry onto his back in the grass. He was quick and slippery when he wanted to be, which only infuriated Harry more.

"I'm tired of this crap, Malfoy!" Harry said, now rolling around the pitch, locked in Malfoy's grip and trying to get in one good, solid punch. There was an easier way to do this – several easier ways in fact, most of which had been taught to the entire Auror Corps during their first weeks of training – but Harry was irate enough to have forgotten all of them, settling instead for physically accosting the person annoying the hell out of him. Besides, there was something inherently satisfying about using one's hands. "Someone's got to teach you to play fair. Short of that, someone's got to teach you to keep your damn mouth sh—oof!"

Malfoy grinned savagely as his fist connected with Harry's jaw. "I'd watch your own mouth, if I were you!"

Harry's jaw throbbed, and he could taste blood where he'd bit his tongue hard at the impact. "Fucking twat!"

"Brainless wanker!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" a voice above them bellowed, and then Harry felt multiple sets of hands grab him and lift him bodily away from Malfoy. Someone had hold of his right arm, someone else his left, and a third person had wrapped their arms around his waist. Malfoy appeared to be getting similar treatment, and was struggling just as much as Harry was before someone who had hold of their temper cast a set of binding and silencing spells, and the two men were forced into silence and stillness.

Auror Franco appeared in front of Harry, looking nearly purple with anger. "We have all had it with you two! Nearly every bloody match, something happens, and we have to physically separate the two of you. I suppose we're just lucky, given the departments involved, it hasn't come down to who's learned the more creative hex! Well, this is the last time we step in, you hear me? You were an inch away from breaking Unspeakable Beltran's nose when he stepped in to help just now, and last time, Unspeakable Malfoy did punch Auror Ketterling in the ribs! Stop the bloody fighting, or next time, you're both completely on your own. And if you cause more paperwork due to Quidditch Violence-related death, so help me, I will meet with every Unspeakable in the Ministry to find a way to make you two pay from beyond the grave! IS THAT CLEAR?" he roared.

When moments passed and neither man agreed, causing Auror Franco to go a slightly darker shade of purple, Harry heard an embarrassed "oh, shit, wait" muttered somewhere off to his side. A moment later, he felt his muscles go lax, and he sagged in the arms of the men still restraining him, nearly bashing his head on the ground because they'd apparently forgotten they actually had to support his body weight. Harry heard something thud on the ground, followed by grumbling and swearing. He grinned slightly as he stood up, hoping Malfoy'd been dropped on his face.

"Now, gentlemen," Franco said again, looking very much as if he was millimetres away from using Harry and Malfoy as targets for beginners' Spell Practice. "Is what I said just now perfectly clear?"

Harry tried to find a way to respond that wouldn't get him sacked... or worse. Malfoy wasn't that far away any more. One good lunge, or maybe even a wandless spell, and Harry could get a good shot in, to make up for the one he'd taken to the jaw. But with this many Aurors and Unspeakables standing so close... No. Best not to risk it. "Yes, sir," Harry said, trying to at least appear sincere.

"Unspeakable Malfoy? Was it clear to you as well?"

"As fucking Veritaserum," Malfoy grumbled, running a hand over what looked like a good-sized knot on his forehead. The sight cheered Harry a little.

"Good." Franco tucked his wand away. "I suspect you'll be back to ignoring each other's presence in the Floo queue by tomorrow morning, just as always. And if you're not, you'd better pretend to be. Now, everyone clean up and get the fuck home, or back to work as the case may be." He walked towards the changing rooms with the majority of the players, muttering about not needing to have children of his own to know what parenting was like, and Harry rolled his eyes and headed the other way. All he wanted right now was a stiff drink, a good meal, and maybe a long, hot shower. And he wanted those things as far from Draco Malfoy as he could get. Any time spent near the man was too much time.

* * *

Work the day after an Intramural Quidditch match was always a bit rough, but at least this time Draco had the memory of catching the Snitch – and Potter's subsequent expression of fury – to help him through it.

It made the pain and soreness almost tolerable. He rubbed gently at the bruise on his cheekbone and winced. That was going to be tender for a few days, no question. Healing charms didn't work on one's self, and he wasn't about to see a Healer for something so trivial, especially when they would ask him how he sustained his injury. True, he could simply point to his job title and remain silent on the subject, but he wouldn't put it past either his supervisor or Potter's to cheerfully share the truth, if the opportunity presented itself, just to instil some shame. Unspeakable McNamara was a right bastard that way, and Draco got the same sort of feeling from Auror Franco.

"Unspeakable Malfoy!"

Draco turned towards the voice to see Unspeakable McNamara headed his way, interoffice memo in hand. "Think of the fucking devil and he appears," Draco muttered, stepping away from the ancient book in front of him. As soon as he stepped out of the circle of light around the podium it rested on, the faint humming sound the pages emitted fell silent. Draco sighed in mild relief. That hadn't been helping his headache at all. "What can I do for you, sir?" He sincerely hoped he wasn't in for another reprimand over the post-match fight yesterday. McNamara had already given him hell in the shower, completely negating any positive effect of the experience.

"I have an assignment for you, Malfoy. Direct from the Minister himself."

Draco caught the seal of the Minister on the memo in his supervisor's hands and forced himself to remain nonchalant. An assignment direct from Minister Shacklebolt? Those didn't come often. The Unspeakables had a fair amount of autonomy in terms of reporting to various officials, and while he wasn't nearly as clueless as past Ministers had seemed to be, Minister Shacklebolt was generally happy to leave them to their work without too many unnecessary hassles. An assignment direct from the Minister really meant one thing to Draco: it had the potential to make – or break – his career.

And really, he'd had a hell of a time getting into the Unspeakables in the first place. Whatever this was, it was important, and deserved the best effort Draco could provide.

"The Minister's personally given me an assignment?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. Something's come up, the details of which are rather sensitive. The Ministry has need of someone with a particular area of expertise, as well as the ability to keep their fool mouth shut about things. In this particular case, Unspeakable Malfoy, you were the only person to fit that bill."

Draco allowed himself a split second to silently gloat about that. "What is the assignment?"

McNamara brushed him off in that infuriating way he had. Director of the Department of Mysteries, he

never answered something until he was ready to do so – and never in a way he didn't want to. "Do you know Damocles Cragg?"

Draco blinked. Of course he did. It was there in his case file, the contents of which had been under intense scrutiny when he'd applied for his position. Besides that, Draco caught glimpses of the man headed to and from the stairs on level nine, as he headed into the Department of Mysteries and Cragg headed towards Courtroom Ten. "Not well, but yes. Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Why?"

"You understand, everything I tell you from this point forwards is subject to Statute Two-Thirteen-B, section—"

"Yes, yes," Draco said impatiently. "I understand. It's a secret. Unspeakable. You don't have to recite the damn statute every time you want to mention official business. Everything we ever discuss falls under that statute." He couldn't think of a single exception. Even that one time they'd chatted briefly about an upcoming Quidditch season hadn't been exempt, and it had killed Draco a little that he'd not been able to place a bet in a particular match, thanks to that damned bit of legalese.

Perhaps that was why there was so little small talk amongst members of the Department, but especially when Unspeakable McNamara was involved. It just wasn't worth it.

Fixing him with a cross look, McNamara sighed. "Fine. You've already been assigned, anyhow. Damocles was admitted to St Mungo's yesterday morning. He'd been feeling poorly for several days and thought it was just a bug or something equally inconsequential. But when he didn't get any better, his wife convinced him to see someone. Instead of being diagnosed and sent off with a potion to take at home, he was carted off to the third floor."

"Third floor? He was poisoned?"

"That's what his Healers say."

"Bloody ineffective poisoning, wasn't it, if he thought he had a minor bug?"

"That's where things start coming 'round to you, Malfoy. The Healers are absolutely lost. They're positive he was intentionally poisoned, but they can't identify the poison to save their own lives – or jobs, in this case. They also can't pinpoint when or how he was poisoned, which, as you can imagine, makes life difficult for the Aurors, when it comes to apprehending the person responsible. Because, given that not only is this man a Ministry official, but the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, appointed just after the end of the war, the Minister is adamant the criminal be brought to justice."

"So the case is being handled through the Aurors. I understand that. Where, exactly, do I come in?"

"I've already told you, the Minister has hand-selected those he wants working on this case, due to their strengths. First and foremost, the person has to have shown a passion for their work." McNamara sighed. "Yes, Malfoy, he believes you've done that. Second, anyone assigned to the case has to be able to keep mum on the details, and as an Unspeakable, that makes you one of those considered. Third, due to the nature of the case and the inadequacy of even St Mungo's most brilliant Healers, the Minister wanted a certified Potions Master. Draco, you're the only Unspeakable who's ever attempted the certification, let alone attained it. No one else has had the necessary level of all-around enthusiasm for the entire subject, regardless of what they've been able to do in a potions lab. Unspeakable Jonas is perfectly capable with a cauldron, and was the other Unspeakable considered, but he loathes the theory and research aspects, which means it falls to you."

"It appears it does." Draco wasn't thrilled to hear Jonas had been considered for the position, possibly even before he himself was, but still, he'd won in the end. Let Jonas put that in his cauldron and boil it. "It's an honour, in any case, Unspeakable McNamara."

McNamara smirked slightly. "So long as you don't foul it up and end up sacked, anyway. Best gather your things and put your current assignment on hold, Malfoy. Level two awaits .You're due up to meet with your new partner on this case."

Draco's stomach sank so low it might have been one with the floor beneath them. "My partner?" Of course he wouldn't be working alone for this sort of thing. He'd need other people to help him, so they could pool their talents and experience and Ministry-granted permissions. He could share in the glory when the case was solved, really. As long as the person he worked with wasn't —

"Harry Potter."

* * *

"You're making me work with who?"

Harry fervently hoped the headache he'd woken with had somehow affected his hearing within the last thirty seconds. He could have sworn Auror Franco had just told him he would be working with—

"Unspeakable Malfoy."

"Unspeakable Malfoy," Harry repeated flatly. "Draco Malfoy."

"There's no other Malfoy working for the Ministry, Potter. In fact, the only other Malfoy with a Potions Master certification at all is Harmonius Malfoy, who is at present three hundred and sixteen years old, half blind, mostly deaf, and living in France with his great-great-great-granddaughter." He raised his eyebrows when Harry gave him a baffled look. "Between the Aurors and the Unspeakables, do you think we don't have access to this sort of information? Unrelated, by the way."

"This isn't a joke, is it?" Harry managed after a moment. "A punishment for what happened after the match yesterday?"

"No, Auror Potter. I do not consider this case a joke. Minister Shacklebolt does not consider this a joke. And I can assure you, Chief Warlock Damocles Cragg does not consider this a joke. This is a very serious case, potentially quite complicated, involving the intentional poisoning of a high Ministry official. The Minister himself hand-picked those he wants working on the case. If you have any doubts regarding his judgement, perhaps you should bring them up with him."

Harry groaned. He liked Kingsley a lot, and with very few exceptions, Harry thought he made the best, soundest, and most reasonable decisions as Minister of Magic. Harry had only ever once been upset enough to question Kingsley's reasoning since being allowed into the Auror training class just after the end of the war, and that... well, it hadn't ended prettily. Kingsley hadn't used the same dismissive 'what

do you know, you're just a child, and I'm the Minister' tone Fudge had so loved, but by the time Harry had walked out of the Minister's office, he knew that there were some arguments he was simply not going to win, no matter who he was.

"I take it you don't feel up to the task?"

"Not exactly."

"Best get over your petty little Quidditch rivalry, Potter. You've got work to do soon."

Demonstrating the fact that even though he'd managed to get the better of one of the Darkest Wizards in history and frequently avoided harm in his work as an Auror, his sense of self-preservation still took the occasional leave of absence, Harry snorted and opened his mouth. "If the Minister hand-picked those he felt were the most capable, why aren't you the investigating Auror?"

Auror Franco's lips nearly disappeared, he pursed them so hard. "Watch yourself, Potter. You know very well I don't get the opportunity to do much field work and investigating. Managing you lot takes a load of work you don't see. Besides, the Minister had numerous reasons for choosing you, and the reasons really don't matter in the end. Now get your arse into the briefing room. Unspeakable Malfoy will be here any moment, and you have a case to familiarise yourself with so we can hand it over, reasonably certain it's in competent hands. Or so help me, I will speak to the Minister and take this case over myself."

Harry picked the case file up off Auror Franco's desk and headed towards the briefing room without another word. He knew this was an important case for a number of reasons, not least of which was because Kingsley thought so. He would not fuck this up. And if Malfoy gave him any sort of trouble in solving it, Merlin help him, Harry would make him pay.

* * *

It wasn't his first time getting a look at a case file from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but it was definitely a new experience to spend time poring over the information, locked in the briefing room in the Auror Department, with no one for company aside from one very disgruntled Auror. Over two hours into it, Draco was ready to bind Potter to his chair and walk out.

"I don't mean to be rude," he began, looking up from the surprisingly thick stack of parchment, and then rethought. "No, I probably do, because it's you, Potter. Regardless. Are you actually planning on doing anything at all about this case?"

Potter caught the bottle of ink he'd been tossing up into the air neatly in the palm of his hand. "What exactly do you want me to do? You've been sitting in front of that damned file since we arrived this morning. How is this solving a case?"

"Well, you could actually try to familiarise yourself with the specifics of the case, you dense —"

"Already done," Potter huffed at him.

"Bullshit."

"Really. Don't believe me? Test me."

Draco sat up a little straighter. A chance to show Potter up somewhere off the pitch? Perfect. "What caused Cragg's Healers to give an intentional poisoning diagnosis?"

"Lack of detectable magical bug, either viral or bacterial, followed by negative tests for spell damage, hexes, curses, or artefact accidents. Simple food poisoning or other biologic causes, such as injury or migraine headaches or neurological damage also ruled out," Potter said easily, leaning back in his chair and resuming his tossing and catching game. "Presence of particular signs when Potion and Plant Poisoning ran their standard diagnostic spells. Come on, give me something harder. Any Auror trainee could recite that, given two minutes with that file."

Damn it. Well, that only really proved Potter had read the first page of the information gathered from St Mungo's. They had much more than that to go through. "That could be true of most accidental poisonings, Potter. Why the specification of intentional?"

Potter stopped playing with the bottle and took a moment to answer. "They found lodestone in his system."

"So?" Merlin, Draco felt like he'd used his Potions Master certification to teach after all. Had Severus Snape always been so sour because he'd had pupils like Potter trying his patience all day, every day?

"It's only really used to attract or make something stick – to keep the body from breaking down certain substances once ingested .... Right?"

Well, that was a turnup for the books. Potter had actually been paying attention in Potions now and then. "In Potions applications, yes." He hated having to admit the other man was right about something. "If you know this, why are you just sitting there?"

"Because I'm bored. If I wanted to spend time with someone who had their nose stuck in research files, I'd ask Hermione to lunch. It's not that Aurors don't do things like go over relevant details, Malfoy, but most of us are best at doing things. Questioning people. Scouting crime scenes. Reading body language, or disarming spells, or finding things that are hidden. I passed my O.W.L.s and then my N.E.W.T.s in Potions to get my job, all right? But that doesn't mean I'm going to sit there and stare at a load of jargon and know the hundreds of little things it might mean!"

"What'd you get on your Potions O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s?" Draco asked after a moment, after trying to fathom Potter doing anything other than subpar work with a cauldron.

"Really?" Potter sighed. "That matters? We both already know you're the one they tapped as the expert."

Draco rolled his eyes. If Potter had got into the Aurors the traditional way and not been allowed in simply by virtue of what he'd... well, who he'd killed, it meant he'd got at least an "Exceeds Expectations" on both exams. How was a mystery, but he supposed it mattered very little now. "That's correct." He sighed. "Look, the reason they assigned me to help you is because I can sit here and stare at jargon, or lists, and see a number of possibilities, while you can't. And the reason I'm not doing this alone is because I don't

have the necessary experience reading people, or handling potential criminals, or having years of experience in knowing when something someone says simply feels wrong. That's you, Potter, loath as I am to admit it."

Potter raised his eyebrows, as if he was expecting an insult to follow. "And?"

"And... And nothing, really. The Minister believes you're good at what you do. He believes I'm good at what I do. And he is expecting us to solve this thing, correct?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Well, then, we need to figure out the best way to actually work together, because neither of us is getting much of anywhere without the other. And for right now, that involves me going through the information from the hospital once or twice more, and trying to figure out, to begin with, when this poison got into Cragg's system, and how. Once those things are settled, we can start narrowing things down and delving into who had the opportunity to poison Cragg. That would be where you come in, with the questioning."

Potter sat up straight, the front legs of his chair slamming down onto the briefing room floor. "So, you learn more about the potion and then we get to get the hell out of here and actually do something?"

"Yes. Exactly." Maybe now Potter would stop being so irritating and let him take proper notes.

With a relieved sigh, Potter hauled himself up and crossed to the door, undoing the four locking charms Draco was positive he wasn't supposed to know how to undo. A small smirk crept onto his face. He himself had only known how to disarm three of them, though he knew it prudent not to mention to Auror Franco when they'd been locked in here this morning. "Then I'm going to go and get something to eat and leave you to it. Hermione always said I was distracting when she was trying to work something out. Let me know when you've found something for me to go on."

"Yes, yes," Draco muttered, already settling in to read through the file again. "Leave, I don't care. Just let

me work."

Potter said something in reply, but Draco's attention was already focussed back onto the task at hand. When he looked up next, it was to find a full cup of coffee next to his wand, and Potter resting at the other end of the table, head in his arms, very possibly napping.

When the fuck had he even come in?

And what had he done to the coffee he'd set in front of Draco?

"Sleeping on the job, I see," Draco said, shifting the lukewarm cup of coffee further away.

"Not hardly," Potter told him without moving from his position and sounding wide awake indeed. "Just thinking." He did look up then. "And yeah, Gryffindors do that from time to time, before you say anything."

Draco tried to look as if he hadn't been thinking that very thing. "Well, it might interest you to know what I've managed to find in these files."

"You found something?" Potter looked suddenly very alert and intense, and Draco blinked for just a second, startled at the change in his demeanour. "What is it?"

"First, I'm nearly positive that the reason the hospital staff couldn't pinpoint the poison used isn't that they didn't perform the correct tests, but because whatever was used isn't a known potion. They were able to identify a few of the ingredients in their tests, but not nearly all of them, and rather than call in a dozen specialists who wouldn't keep their mouths shut about theories and speculations, they handed everything over to us, at the Minister's demand. What that means, Potter, is that there's a good chance I can figure out exactly what is in the potion Cragg was given. Also, luckily for us, one of the five ingredients they did manage to identify is somewhat of a speciality item. It's not so rare that we can find the suspect based on that alone, but it might help us narrow down where they got their supplies, or what time of year, because I have reason to believe this poison was in the works for quite a while before

it found its way to Cragg."

Potter's eyes were bright, and Draco could practically see his mind racing away in there, like a mouse in a wire wheel. "It might be time to visit an apothecary then." He looked at the watch he'd pulled from his pocket. "Tomorrow morning, anyway. Too late tonight to do anything but go home."

Draco nodded. "You might actually be right. Or at least, not completely wrong."

He couldn't help but chuckle at Potter's face when the other man shot him a dirty look, and he declined to say anything when Potter stood, took the cold cup of coffee from the desk and Vanished it, and then left without another word.

"Might not be the worst task I've ever been assigned," Draco muttered, gathering the file from the desk and securing it away. "Especially not if I get to make the four-eyed git make that face on a regular basis."

* * *

On the second day of work on the Wizengamot poisoning case, Harry found he could actually be in Malfoy's presence without immediately giving in to the overwhelming urge to harass him. It was a significant revelation, and definitely noteworthy, but likely not the sort of thing their supervisors (let alone Kingsley) wanted an update on. So Harry kept the information to himself and kept at his work. It was what he was best at, anyway.

"Hello," he said cheerfully to the girl dusting bottles behind the apothecary counter. "Is the owner in?"

The young witch looked at him, wide-eyed, as she surveyed his Auror's robes and badge, and then her eyes tracked up to his face, and she went a bit pale. "I didn't steal it, I swear! I just broke the bottle and couldn't mend it. It's in the bottom of the bin, if you want proof. I can show you!" Her lower lip trembled precariously.

Harry furrowed his brow. "Really, I'm just here to ask Mister Mulpepper some questions about some ingredients. No one's reported anything stolen." The witch behind the counter – who couldn't have been

any older than seventeen, really – looked immensely relieved. "But if you've broken something, perhaps you should inform someone."

"Oh, yes sir, I will! He's in the back, you know. I'll go and get him for you. Is he expecting you?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Malfoy enter through the apothecary doors, navy blue Unspeakables' robes swirling around his legs as he moved. Without acknowledging Harry in the least, he headed for the back of the shop, peering into bins as if he were searching for something in particular. For all Harry knew, he might be. Harry watched Malfoy wander slowly around the shop for a moment while pretending to examine the scar on the back of his right hand, as if it had changed at all in the last several years. By the time Malfoy had moved out of sight, hidden behind some rickety-looking shelving, the shop's owner had popped his head out of the back room. "Ah, Almeric!"

"Mister Potter!" the man exclaimed, looking pleased to see him. "Griselda didn't say you were the Auror looking for me. How can I help you? More Dittany? Burn healing paste? Instant Wound Patch? Or do the Aurors need something for the department? Veritaserum? Calming Draught?"

"No, no, nothing like that today. I just have a few questions for you."

"Anything for you, Mister Potter."

Harry smiled. He'd long since given up on getting Mulpepper to call him "Harry". "I appreciate that. I was just wondering, do you get all of your ingredients from a regular set of suppliers?"

Mulpepper blinked in surprise, obviously not expecting this line of questioning from him. Harry'd never asked about anything of the sort before, really only caring that the things he bought – remedies or fully-complete potions, almost all of them – were effective. "I do have particular people I repeatedly use, yes. Is there a problem with someone I might use? The new fellow at Cronk's Creatures has been hounding me to switch to them for my hummingbird tongue, but I just thought —"

"Oh, no, no problems that I know of. I just mean, you get all of your ingredients from people you trust,

correct?"

"Well, I would hardly consider buying anything from some stranger off the street, Mister Potter. For one thing, I couldn't be certain of its potency and purity, and for another, I'd have no idea where it came from or how it was acquired. I assure you, I have all the necessary documentation for everything I carry."

"I'm sure you do," Harry said with an easy smile, and Mulpepper relaxed visibly. "Never had reason to think otherwise. I'm not here to dig around the specifics of your establishment, really. I just needed to talk to a competent apothecary shopkeeper, and you were the first person I thought of."

"Oh. Oh! Well, thank you. I do love this business, you know. Grew up in it, as did my father and his father. What else would you like to know?"

"Well, if there was an ingredient you didn't normally carry – something rare, or too expensive, or too perishable to keep in stock regularly – how would you go about getting it for a customer?"

Mulpepper hesitated, and Harry felt the little tingle that meant he should pay extra attention. "Well, that depends entirely on the ingredient," he said slowly, speaking quietly enough that Harry had to lean in to hear him. "There are certain things – completely legal, mind you – that are of a sensitive nature to some. Sometimes, they want to pick it up after hours, so no one knows. I only do that for loyal customers, after what happened to that poor fellow in Leeds."

"The clerk who was assaulted and robbed?" Harry asked, vaguely aware of the incident. It had been four years ago, but it had created enough of a stir with the local business owners, many of whom were in the habit of doing special favours for the customers they wanted to keep.

"Yes, poor boy. The criminal made off with thousands of Galleons of product, too, though most of it was recovered upon his arrest. But it's made me a bit wary of doing special favours for people I don't know, you understand."

"Of course."

"But as far as getting the item into the Apothecary itself goes," Mulpepper continued, "I know my regular suppliers keep items I do not regularly order, and so I would check with them. If there's something they don't have access to, chances are good they know who would. But again, it depends on the item in question. My methods for acquiring a rare flower would be different from acquiring an extract, or insects, or stones, you see."

"What sort of processes do your supplies go through between arriving here and being available to the public?"

Both Mulpepper and Harry both looked up in surprise. Malfoy was standing at the end of the counter, peering into a bin of what looked like snake skin remnants. "I'm sorry?" Mulpepper said, a little stiffly. "What exactly do you—?"

"It's all right, Almeric," Harry said, giving Malfoy a look for interrupting and ruining the rhythm he'd been able to foster. "This is my partner for this case. Anything he asks is like me asking."

Mulpepper eyed Malfoy critically. "Oh. Well. Forgive me for not realising, without the Auror's robes. Or badge," he said a bit sharply, as if Malfoy were rude in not wearing the same easily-identifiable uniform. "In that case. Would you clarify the question?"

"When a shipment comes in," Malfoy said deliberately, as if he was talking to someone exceptionally slow-witted, "what happens to it between the moment the box enters your shop and the moment someone walks out with the purchased item?" Harry wanted to reach over and shake him. Perhaps he had been wrong about being able to resist the urge to harass his temporary partner.

"It again depends on the item, sir. Pre-made potions are already sealed, and go out on the shelf as is, unless something doesn't look right. Individual ingredients are inspected visually, and with a basic spell or two if it's deemed warranted. If something is from a new crop, I check it myself for potency and consistency. In some cases, as you can see, the product is in bins and the customer bottles or bags it themselves, and I weigh or count it in order to charge them. In others, they must ask one of the clerks to measure it out and package it for them. Those ingredients, as you might have noticed, are sealed with safety and stasis charms, or are found behind the counter, and sometimes in the back room."

"And your staff has been trained on handling procedures for every such item?"

"Yes." The old man's answer was stiff, and Harry wanted to shove Malfoy's head into the bin full of beetles' eyes for making this more difficult. "And for some of the more sensitive or hazardous items, my son and I are the only ones able to gain access for customers. Not everything is trusted to every clerk." He looked over his shoulder, where the young girl was now pulling small bottles to the front of a display. "Especially not when they're clumsy enough to break bottles of Moonlight Elixir."

"Ah, I see," Malfoy said dismissively. "Well, that's the only question I really had. Potter, do you have any others?"

"No," Harry ground out. "That's it for this time."

"Well, then we'd better be going. Other places to go, other facts to check." He held open the door and gestured for Harry to exit first. He did, but only because he wanted out of there before he caused a scene in the little shop. "Oh, there is one more thing," Malfoy said from behind him, still holding onto the door. "You don't happen to carry Kali's Eyebrow, do you? I didn't see it on the shelves or behind the counter."

Harry spun around to see Mulpepper's surprised expression. "Kali's Eyebrow? No. It's highly sensitive and a bit volatile. I've ordered it for customers once or twice, but usually I send them over to Marius' shop. Marius Bobbin doesn't seem to mind taking the necessary precautions to keep just a little bit on hand. You can try there if you need some. But it won't come cheaply. Marius overcharges for even the simplest things, and that's anything but."

"Money's not an object, but thank you for the warning," Malfoy said breezily. "Thank you for your cooperation, Mister Mulpepper. I do believe I'll be back next week for some Galangal root. My personal supply is a bit low, and yours looks to be excellent quality."

"Oh, yes, any time," Mulpepper called, suddenly sounding as if he hadn't been offended by Malfoy's line of questioning at all. "Always have it in stock, and nothing but the best here!"

"What the fuck was that about?" Harry exclaimed when they were outside the shop with the door closed behind them.

"What do you mean?" Malfoy asked, looking quite pleased with himself.

"I didn't realise you were browsing with the intention of shopping! We were supposed to be there on official business."

"And we were, you git. I got the answers I wanted. He gets his supplies from a group of regular dealers, he's reluctant to change suppliers, even if offered a better price, due to concerns over quality, he knows what kind of precautions need to be taken with common and rare ingredients alike, and he weighs the risks of specialty items against their profitability and hassle. Also, he wasn't the one to sell our attempted murderer Kali's Eyebrow, which was one of the five identified, if you'll recall. Or if he was, it was a considerable amount of time ago, which means our suspect might have indeed been working on the poison for quite a long time. But my money's on the bloke from the other shop he mentioned, if he didn't harvest it himself. And that last comment was simply to stroke his ego. Although, I am low on Galangal root, and that was honestly the best-looking batch of the stuff I've seen in nearly two years." Malfoy looked at Harry with his eyebrows raised. "What? Why are you giving me that look?"

Harry forced himself to take a deep breath, relax his posture, and cease looking at Malfoy as if he could black his eye just by glaring hard enough. "No reason. Come on, then. Guess we have someone else to question, don't we? But one thing, for next time?"

"What's that?"

"Let me know your strategy before we walk in? It does me no good to get someone to open up and be friendly if you're just going to ask questions that undo everything. And if you want to be a prick about things, well, I can do that, too. Just a heads up first, all right?"

Malfoy smiled slightly. "I suppose I could grant you that favour. And truth be told, Potter, I think I'd like to see you be a bit of a prick to someone other than me."

"Wanker."

"Ah, there's the Harry Potter I know. Come on, now. We have time for a bit of food before that other place opens for the day."

Harry threw his hands up in the air. Malfoy was fucking impossible. "We are not stopping for breakfast!"

"What about coffee? You did indicate you'd prefer it if I were friendlier. I'm friendlier with coffee in my system."

"Then why the fuck didn't you drink it back at Hogwarts?" Harry muttered, rolling his eyes and feeling in his pockets for his money, charmed to fit inside a small pouch tucked into a hidden pocket. Ah, there it was.

"I heard that, you know. Sounds like someone else could use a cup, too."

"I swear to Merlin, Malfoy, if you don't shut up, I will dump my coffee all over your head."

"So we are going for coffee," Malfoy said triumphantly. "Good. It might keep me from hexing you before we even reach the other apothecary."

Harry sighed. "Fine. Yes. Coffee." He hadn't had time for his customary cup this morning, and he did feel more irritable than usual, though that was likely just Malfoy himself causing the effect. "But we're going where I choose for it." He grabbed Malfoy's arm and Disapparated them both, smirking when Malfoy's protests were cut off by the sudden force of Disapparation.

* * *

The Ministry, one had to remember, might be a powerful force, capable of both great and terrible things

– but it was also most definitely a bureaucracy. Never was that more clear than when Draco needed access to files.

Funny. He had regular access to a number of things the average person couldn't even fathom, but a simple stack of personnel records took stacks of paperwork and notes of permission and privacy oaths to acquire. "Two-minute hindrance to get into the Planet Room for the first time," he muttered, files safely secured under his arm, "but five bloody days to get the personnel files of oneMinistry employee, even with Auror and Unspeakable permissions. If that isn't a prime example of bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake, then I'm buggering a house-elf."

There was a small, startled cough from behind him, and Draco turned to see one of the secretaries for the Auror Department looking rather alarmed. "Oh, for the love of Merlin," he sighed. "I'm not buggering a house-elf. I'm not buggering anyone lately, but I assure you, my standards are much higher than that."

The woman gave him a look that said she clearly thought he needed to be on a List of some sort – the kind that had Aurors keeping tabs on your actions – and walked into the furthest lift from him. Draco leaned his forehead against the back wall of the lift. "Join the Unspeakables," he mumbled to the wall. "Research the great mysteries of the universe, but still stick your foot in your mouth around complete strangers."

Why wasn't this day over yet?

He made it to his office without further incident and settled comfortably into his chair to peruse Damocles Cragg's personnel file. The man had been with the Ministry for nearly seventy years, in one capacity or another, and there were hundreds of sheets of parchment to go through.

Five incredibly boring hours later, Draco had at least skimmed through the entire file, reading a few things in greater detail, and decided two things.

One, there must be a department full of Ministry officials who were paid per pointless form they filled in and stamped and filed, because so much of what was in this file was said in other places, on nearly identical forms, but initialled off by a large number of people. There couldn't honestly be a need for half

of this documentation.

And two...

He needed Potter's input.

He hated to admit it, but though he'd come across some things that started his brain thinking of nebulous reasons for someone to poison Damocles Cragg, this wasn't especially his strong point. This was connecting dots, which he was good at, in a general sense. But this wasn't jumping from one fact to the next and extrapolating possible outcomes from there. This was looking at a series of dots that appeared to be scattered, and seeing the string that tied them all together. This was about feeling and hunches and intuition (which Draco could do, in an average capacity), much more than it was about logic. Logic could be used to solidify the theories and give them weight and credibility, he knew. But he needed someone to work through those hunches to create those theories first.

Which meant he needed an Auror. And who was his partner, if not the best?

Merlin, he hated admitting that, even to himself. He could really only make the concession because Potter had already made a similar one about Draco's Potions expertise. Which meant he'd been the one to crack first. That made Draco feel a little better.

"All right," Draco said aloud in his empty office, hearing how flat his voice sounded in the deserted area. It was late, and there would be few people around the Ministry at this hour. "Time to find Potter. If this is the one night he's gone home early, I will never let him hear the end of it."

Some small part of him almost hoped Potter had gone home, just so he had something to hold over him. Old habits died hard – if they died at all.

* * *

Harry'd had difficult cases before, but this one was driving him a bit spare. So much of it seemed to be sitting around, waiting. There wasn't a quick list of people to interrogate, or an abundance of physical

evidence to catalogue and run spells over. What they had, at this point, was an extracted, distilled sample of the poison that had been in Damocles Cragg's blood, pages of clinical notes from his Healers, a vague and utterly unhelpful statement from Cragg himself, and sheaves of parchment, covered in Malfoy's neat, almost prissy handwriting – notes about potion ingredients and possible potion theory to investigate, notes on a handful of apothecaries and their business practices and their suppliers, and... well, not much else, really. Which meant that in all actuality, Harry couldn't really do anything.

Which was exactly why he'd been in the Training Room for the past three hours, exhausting himself in an effort to get rid of his pent-up frustration. Not that it had got rid of it much, really, but it was something, and at least gave him a shot at sleeping through the night without thinking of anything at all.

"Fucking wild goose chase, is what this is," Harry muttered to himself, wiping at his face with the neckline of his T-shirt. It did little good, soaked as it was, and in frustration, he yanked the shirt off and tossed it to the floor. "Hundreds of possible suspects, just counting the ones Cragg's put in Azkaban or otherwise punished, plus their loved ones. Not to mention every jilted lover, or political rival, or anyone else he's managed to offend." He stood up to spell the weights back into place and staggered when the edges of his vision went black. Too fast. He'd been at this for three hours, much longer than the safety guidelines deemed he should be. He sat back down on the wooden bench and sighed. Fine. He'd rest a few minutes.

What they really needed to solve this case, Harry was grudgingly capable of admitting, was more information on the poison itself. Any other leads had fizzled. Cragg's wife had quickly earned herself a pass as a suspect, and there had been no recent cases where those on trial had made threats to Cragg's life, and no notable disagreements with colleagues. He hadn't even fired anyone recently — either at the Ministry, or at home. They needed more information on the potion in order to narrow down any possible suspects, or suggest one they had yet to think of, and that just wasn't his area of expertise. For that, he needed Malfoy.

Harry snorted and got onto his hands and knees, crawling towards the mats where he could stretch his muscles and do some push-ups. He needed Malfoy. The concept was maddening.

If we have to work together too long, Harry thought, leaning slowly forwards until he could touch his wrists to his toes, I might just poison Damocles Cragg myself, as repayment for the torture. He laughed aloud, slightly out of breath. If he wasn't careful, he was going to have to put himself on the list of people who had cause to poison the man.

* * *

Draco was beginning to suspect that Potter had indeed gone home after his second glance around the Aurors' bit of the DMLE. But his cloak was there, laid across the back of his chair, and there was a half-full cup of coffee (from that place he preferred) on his desk. And untidy-looking as he usually was, Draco knew Potter wouldn't leave either of those two things sitting out if he didn't plan on coming back. So either he had been kidnapped – unlikely from within the middle of the Auror offices – or he'd stepped away. Hesitantly, Draco reached out to touch Potter's coffee. Stone cold. How long had he been gone, then?

"Step away from that desk and tell me exactly what you were doing!"

Draco jumped slightly. He hadn't seen anyone else in the office, though he knew whose voice had just barked at him. "Calm down, Weasley. No need to get your knickers in a twist."

"Oh," Weasley said, sounding less like he was ready to perform any number of intensely painful hexes. "It's you, Malfoy. Still, what are you doing here? And what were you doing with Harry's drink?"

"I was only checking to see if it was still hot. I figured if it was, he'd be back any minute. It's cold, though. But it doesn't look like Potter's gone home."

"Oh, yeah," Weasley said, rolling his eyes. "He's still here." He reached into his pockets and pulled out two wrapped butterscotch drops. "Want one?"

Draco shrugged and took one. He'd spent three days with Weasley last year, alternating with Jonas in giving the Auror some Potions lessons when his supervisors discovered Weasley wanted some help in learning more about common antidotes. In that time, he'd learned that Weasley could be a decent bloke if you talked up the Cannons, he was head-over-heels with his wife, for some reason Draco didn't think he'd ever understand, he had good reason to be interested in poison antidotes, and he always had sweets stashed in his pockets, and if in a good enough mood, he'd happily share. "Thanks. So, where's Potter? Interrogation room or something? Working on multiple cases at once?"

"Nah. Franco demanded everything else either be put on hold or handed off to someone else. Order from Shacklebolt, I think. He's in the Training Room, if you really want him." Weasley looked up at the clock on the wall. "Actually, someone should probably pull him out of there, before his heart explodes or something. It's been over three hours. We're supposed to be limited to two."

"Why don't you go and do that, then?" Malfoy asked, sucking on the butterscotch disc. "I'll wait here."

"Fat chance, Malfoy. He might be my best friend, but the last time I tried to pull him out of there when he was frustrated about a case, he nearly bit my head off. But you're welcome to give it a go. You are his partner for now. Room'll let you in."

"Oh, fine. Where is the Training Room, then?"

"More of a wing, really," Weasley said, crunching down on his sweet. "Down that corridor. All the way down. Only door towards the end."

"Thanks." Draco paused, feeling as if he owed Weasley some other sort of pleasantry. "How – How's the wife?"

"Oh, she's brilliant. Got another promotion. And she's pregnant!"

Draco cringed inwardly. Oh, Merlin, another generation of Weasleys to overrun England. "How many children is that for you two?"

"Oh, shut up, I know what you were thinking," Weasley said, rolling his eyes. "It's our first. Now, go. Might as well get Harry now. Maybe you can convince him it's not healthy to be in there so long. That, and he's making the rest of us look bad."

Draco snorted. "Not hard with some of you."

Weasley grinned and patted his middle, which didn't appear to be too pudgy. "Some of us lucked into wives who can cook. But I put my time in in the Training Room. And on the Quidditch team. Pity I missed the last Auror-Unspeakable match. Heard you and Harry went at it again and Franco told you you're on your own next time, if you're so intent on killing each other."

"Something like that," Draco allowed, catching the sweet Weasley lobbed at him. "Thanks for the sweets, Weasley. I'll see you around."

"Yeah, Malfoy. Good luck with Harry. He's been in a mood lately."

"Wonderful," Draco groaned, heading for the corridor Weasley had indicated. It was awfully hidden. That was all he needed – Potter unreasonable and in a foul mood, just when he could use some assistance.

The doors to the Training Room opened as he approached, without even requiring him to touch them or answer any questions. Huh. Well, Weasley had said he'd be allowed in. "Potter?" Draco called as he entered the room. "It's time to —"

He stopped abruptly. When Draco heard the term "Training Room", he thought of the small Ministry fitness facility some of the Intramural Quidditch players used to keep themselves fit, perhaps with the addition of a padded area for Aurors to practise duelling or other such techniques. This wasn't a room. It was a bloody cavern. There were weights and ropes and mats along one half, and one wall had a secondary wall in front of it, made of brick in one area, and chain link fence in another, and plain picket fencing farther down, as well as wrought-iron and something smooth and reflective that Draco couldn't properly see from here. All sorts of fences and barriers an Auror might need to know how to scale in the event he needed to chase a suspect on foot, Draco realised. "No wonder you bastards are so fit and built for endurance," he murmured, looking at all of the equipment. He couldn't even claim it was an unfair advantage, as it was common knowledge Aurors were killed or permanently disabled in the line of duty more often than they were sacked or quit. Training of this sort was a legitimate need.

Draco finally spotted Potter across the room, oblivious to the fact that someone had entered and called his name. He was propped up on hands and the tips of his toes, doing calisthenics in nothing more than baggy shorts and Muggle trainers. He was sweating profusely, which wasn't surprising, if he'd been in

here as long as Weasley said he was.

What was surprising, though, was how bloody arousing the sight was.

He could see the muscles in Potter's arms and back clearly, much more defined than Draco would have guessed. It did explain some of the heft to him, though, which Draco remembered quite clearly from the moment Potter had fallen on him and tried to pummel him after the last Quidditch match. Sweat made his skin glisten underneath the lights, and the harsh panting sound of his breathing made something deep within Draco stir in desire. He bit down hard on the last of his butterscotch, biting the side of his tongue in the process. Fuck. He needed to get a shag, and soon. He should not be having these sorts of thoughts about Potter. The only thing worse would be having these thoughts about Weasley – no, worse, about Unspeakable McNamara, who was as far from Draco's type as anyone with a cock could be. Or perhaps the witch who had given him his last physical, who looked eerily like Umbridge. That did it. Draco felt all the blood that had been headed south in his body suddenly reverse direction.

Suitably disgusted, Draco shook off his body's reaction to seeing and hearing Potter in such a state. "Potter! Hey! Get up off that damn floor and listen to me, would you?"

Potter didn't look at him, but he did stop pumping himself up and down rhythmically – and forcefully – with his arms, which made it a bit easier for Draco to concentrate without having to use such drastic distraction techniques. "Malfoy?" he panted after a second, sitting back on his haunches and shoving his glasses up from the tip of his nose. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Draco had a split second of replaying his name said in that worn out, worked up way Potter's voice was currently working, and then he was professional again. "Apparently keeping you from killing yourself with overexertion."

"Guess I have been in here a while," Potter admitted, and Accioed a bottle of water from somewhere Draco couldn't see. He drained the entire thing without stopping, breathing hard in a way that went straight to the dirtiest part of Draco's brain. Oh, he definitely needed to get a shag. This was most certainly not acceptable. "I just hate not being able to do anything, you know?"

"Yes." Draco waited a minute while Potter stood, wobbling for only a moment before regaining his

balance and summoning his shirt as well, mopping his bright red face with the material. "I also came to ask for your help."

"You did?" Instead of scoffing, Potter looked relieved. Well, relieved and exhausted. "What can I do?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. Potter seemed almost... almost eager to help. Then again, this case was just as much his as it was Draco's. "Well, first, you can shower, because I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around with you smelling of sweat." He neglected to mention that the smell wasn't completely repellent. "Then we can find somewhere to sit and go over Damocles Cragg's personnel file, because I think there's a chance you might be able to see some connections I don't."

Potter looked at him sharply. "You got the file?"

"Yes. Took bloody forever, but I got it. I was this close to using whatever methods it took to obtain a hair from our unfortunately bald Minister and Polyjuicing myself into his form in order to get them, but thankfully it didn't become necessary."

"What methods would you...?" Potter began, and then turned slightly pinker, which Draco hadn't known was possible. "Never mind. Don't tell me; I don't want to know. I'll go and shower. Just meet me in the briefing room in twenty."

Not certain twenty minutes would be adequate time for Potter to thoroughly clean himself up, Draco nodded. "I'll be there." He left the Training Room hoping that he was right in thinking Potter might be able to spot something that would move their investigation forward.

He might also have been thinking of the way sweat ran down the small of Potter's back and into his waistband and places below, but that was neither here nor there.

* * *

After four solid days of going through Cragg's personnel file and peeking through a few others they were able to get their hands on without a ridiculous amount of further paperwork, Harry thought they had a

fairly good list of reasons someone might want to kill (or at least incapacitate) the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Unfortunately, they weren't really any further in nailing any particular suspect than they had been before acquiring the personnel files. They just had a much better idea of why an attempt had been made.

And though he had never spoken to the man in person, short of a very brief Healer-supervised interview almost a week ago, Harry was fairly certain that Cragg wasn't the friendliest bloke. He might not have been actively hated, but he didn't appear to be overly adored, either.

"So, as an overview," Malfoy said late on Friday night, his voice sounding rough and in danger of breaking, "we have three main theories as to why someone poisoned Damocles Cragg."

"Yeah," Harry said, stifling a yawn. It was nearly eleven, and short of the Aurors and support personnel for the department, the Ministry was deserted. Malfoy had led him down into his office inside the Department of Mysteries after only the briefest of raspy warnings about not mentioning anything he might see. Harry had let him know this wasn't exactly his first trip into the department, though it was his only authorised one, and Malfoy had given him an exasperated look and sighed heavily. As they'd wandered through the circular room with all the doors and the long and winding corridors upon their exit, Harry could only come to the conclusion that either Malfoy was setting him up for something (which was no longer the option his brain latched onto, though it certainly would have done so three weeks ago), or he...trusted Harry.

Department of Mysteries, indeed.

"Current theories," Malfoy continued, attempting to clear his throat and having no effect on the quality of his voice, "are that the suspect wanted to take over Cragg's position on the Wizengamot, they were upset about a personal matter having nothing to do with Cragg's position here at the Ministry, and, most likely, given everything we've been able to find, they poisoned him as a form of revenge for a verdict in a trial – wrongly condemning them, someone they love, or failing to condemn someone they believe was deserving of such."

"Those are the main ideas," Harry agreed. "Along with the half-dozen less-likely ones."

"Right. Then in that case, what w—"

He was cut off by a fit of coughing, grimacing and pressing his hand to his throat. Harry furrowed his brow. He wasn't becoming ill, was he? "Are you all right? If you're sick, maybe we should—"

"I'm not sick," Malfoy croaked, producing a small bottle from his desk drawer and placing a single drop under his tongue. He made a disgusted face and cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice was slightly more normal. "Fucking Beater for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office ploughed into me this afternoon and I took his elbow to my throat. I'll be fine, after the swelling goes down."

"Why didn't you have someone at St Mungo's take care of it for you?" Harry asked, shaking his head. "It's probably an easy fix for a Healer." He did have to give Malfoy credit, though. He was obviously battered and in pain from the evening's Intramural Quidditch match, but he was still here working, and putting in a number of extra hours.

Malfoy waved him off. "Didn't want to waste the time waiting. Besides, it'll go away soon enough on its own. I wanted to get back here after the match. As I was saying: I think we've got about as far as we can go with tracking motives. We already know there are few people completely enamoured of Cragg. I think, given everything we have, that our best bet lies in working with the poison."

Harry let his forehead hit Malfoy's desk with a thud. "I was afraid you were going to say that," he muttered. It was almost comfortable sitting like this, if you didn't mind the corner of some Potions text digging into your temple. Harry thought he could probably sleep like this.

"Well, I'm open to hearing other options, if you have them." When Harry didn't reply, Malfoy sighed. "Right. Thought not. Listen, we're both tired. Let's go home, sleep, and come back in the morning. Meet me on level nine at eight in the morning. The Unspeakables have a Potions lab in the back of the Department. We do some research there — sometimes for other departments, and sometimes for our own needs. There's only really one other person who ever uses it, so we won't be bothered."

"I don't know what makes you think I'll be any help whatsoever," Harry muttered, face still pressed into Malfoy's desk.

"I believe you told me you'd passed your O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s with the necessary marks," Malfoy said dryly. "You can't be an utter moron, if that's the case. You can stir and chop and take measurements. And maybe you can keep me from going completely out of my mind if Unspeakable Jonas starts in on the rules of Muggle football or whatever that other sport he loves is. Grasshopper."

"Cricket." Harry yawned. "It's called cricket."

"Whatever," Malfoy sighed. "Seriously, Potter, get up. I'll not have you sleeping here in my office, drooling on my reference books. Drool on whoever shares your bed. They might not mind it so much."

Harry snorted, but lifted his head up anyway. "What makes you think I have someone to go home to?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Why wouldn't you?" he said simply.

There was an awkward moment of silence, and then Harry decided that yes, sleep was probably a good idea, cold, empty bed at home or no. "Eight in the morning, you said?"

"Yes. Level nine, outside the lift." He escorted Harry out of the office, extinguished the lamps, locked up, and rode the lift with him to the row of fireplaces connected to the Floo Network. "Get some sleep, Potter," he said wearily, and then he was gone in a roar of green flames.

Harry held tightly to his cloak and tossed Floo powder from the pot into the tiny flames flickering in the fireplace. He was scarcely out of his own Floo before falling asleep, dreaming of grasshoppers playing Quidditch.

* * *

He was hot, he was tired, he had a blister on his right index finger from shelling hazelnuts, but Draco was also more and more certain he was onto something regarding the poison given to Damocles Cragg. He was, in effect, building the potion backwards. For nearly a week now, he'd been testing infinitesimally

small portions of the distilled extracted poison Cragg's Healers had handed over as evidence. Cragg himself was out of St Mungo's, still not feeling one hundred percent better, but up and around, and, most importantly, forbidden from coming to work or interacting with anyone but his wife and the few friends on the list of those who had definitely been cleared as suspects.

Potter had been helping where he could, and was surprisingly useful when it came to things that needed a hands-on approach – stirring, peeling, slicing, chopping, mincing, and grating (though they had had to throw out one batch of burdock root when Potter managed to grate his fingertip and bleed into the supply). But when it came to interpreting what certain colours and viscosities of many of the test potions might mean, he was considerably less help. Draco could do the work, but it would have been nice to have someone to confer with. Unspeakable Jonas was little help in that regard, and had in fact been fairly scarce anyway, supposedly busy with procuring ingredients for another experiment.

"I don't fucking understand this," Draco burst out late one evening, making Potter jump. He should probably be careful not to make his partner do that when holding a knife, lest they have to start another part of the process over or begin decontamination procedures if Potter managed to get blood into the potion he was standing beside. "Sorry," he muttered, bending down to pick up the quill he'd thrown onto the floor in his anger.

"It's all right," Potter mumbled, finally managing to slice his petrified phoenix egg in half. "I'm sorry I'm not more help, but we've already been over where our strengths lie."

"No, I know that," Draco said, running a hand through his hair. "It's just that sometimes I feel like I'm so close to figuring out what the missing ingredients are, or how some of the ones I do know were combined with other things they shouldn't be able to mix with, but then the tests come back wrong, or don't follow a crucial aspect of how poisons work. It was obviously brewed by someone with a significant amount of Potions knowledge, that much is obvious. But some of the theory just doesn't make sense."

Potter laid aside his knife and came to peer at Draco's notes. "But you think you'll figure it out." It wasn't a question. What's more, the tone implied he also thought Draco would solve it.

"I certainly fucking hope so," Draco muttered, pulling away from Potter, who shrugged and went back to his table full of ingredients for the next test potion. He really wanted this case solved. Not only because it would be a huge asset to his career, and prove to his supervisor and even the Minister himself that he

was good at what he did, and there had been no mistake made in hiring him, but because it was taking away from his other work, which he loved. There was something about knowing you were closer to understanding the universe's mysteries than anyone else ever got a chance to be that just made him feel so... Well, something. Not elite, really, because he knew that feeling. It was invigorating, and sometimes, in the midst of time in some of the rooms within the Department of Mysteries, it was humbling and soothing while also being a bit terrifying.

It was also quite severely putting a damper on his social life. He'd already turned down one potential date – some bloke met while buying a bottle of wine to send to Blaise Zabini, congratulating him on his exceedingly attractive new bride (not that she did anything for Draco, personally, as she more or less lacked the necessary equipment for that sort of thing, but even he could see how gorgeous the woman was). He'd seemed like an okay bloke, really: educated, slight Italian accent, mannered, and most importantly, very tactile without being too pushy.... But Draco had given up last night's opportunity at relieving some of his pent-up sexual frustration in favour of coming back to this lab and listening to Potter hum to himself while he stirred half a dozen cauldrons and taking notes on the results. Clearly, he was losing his mind.

"What was it you were humming last night?" Draco asked suddenly, earning him a surprised and possibly pleased look from Potter. "You called it a theme. From the telly-something."

"Muggle television," Potter said, smile now more pronounced. "It's the song they used to play at the beginning of a show my cousin watched on the telly all the time. Stupid thing, really, but a lot of television was. Still is, from what I hear. I don't watch it much now."

"What was it called, though?"

Potter shrugged and dumped shredded ginger root into one of the cauldrons, spelling the flame hotter. "It's just the theme from Danger Mouse. A show for kids."

"Oh." Draco had had the damned tune stuck in his head when he woke this morning. "It's catchy."

"Most themes for children's shows are," Potter agreed. "I should Pensieve one of them for you sometime. You think Muggles are odd now, wait till you see that." He chuckled. "On second thoughts

maybe I shouldn't. You'll only go off on some anti-Muggle tirade."

"I would do no such..." Draco began, and then sighed. He'd changed a bit after the war – everyone had, on both sides – but he hadn't changed completely. "All right, perhaps I would. Let's drop the subject. Forget I brought it up. Finish up that base potion and set a stasis charm on the others. We'll continue tomorrow. I just want to go home, have dinner, and get some actual sleep for once."

Potter counted out a number of monarch butterfly wings and dropped them carefully into his potion, which turned green, then purple, and then light pink. With a nod, he preformed a series of stasis charms on the cauldrons around him. "I think that sounds like a damned good plan, Malfoy."

Draco snorted and waited for Potter at the door to the Potions laboratory. "Of course it does. It's one of mine."

* * *

Harry knew he and Malfoy had been working together too long when he was able to correctly anticipate which particular smirk Malfoy was going to give him at any given moment. The fact that he knew Malfoy had a number of smirks, let alone could differentiate between them, was something else that was worrisome. He could even anticipate when Malfoy was going to open his mouth to insult him, which was no longer "every time he decided to speak". And that was also odd – Malfoy wasn't as thoroughly insulting as he used to be.

Maybe he could chalk these new things up to the fact that he wasn't feeling well. And even if he couldn't, that was the story he was going to stick to. Because the very thought that he had actually missed Malfoy's sarcastic comments and pain-in-the-arse remarks the night before was too bizarre for words.

But he had. At least, he thought he had. Harry had been awfully tired lately. They had both been putting in a number of late nights on this case, because it was easy to lose track of time in the Department of Mysteries, which might be a mystery in and of itself. As might be Harry's shift in feelings towards Malfoy, and the apparent reciprocation. Malfoy no longer seemed to be going out of his way to make Harry's life difficult. It was a nice change, some moments, even if it was a bit disorienting.

"Feeling any better?" Malfoy asked out of nowhere, ladling a small amount of one of the potions into a ceramic bowl and dipping a bit of Grindylow hair into it. When the liquid made a noise that sounded almost like a whistle, Malfoy nodded and jotted something down. "Doesn't make sense," Harry heard him murmur. "I mean, it does, but..."

Harry sighed and addressed the question he'd been asked. "Not really, no. I think I just need more sleep. Or to finally catch a break in this case. Cragg's getting a bit irritated about not being allowed back to work, and he actually sent me a Howler this morning. At five a.m."

"Five?" Malfoy scoffed. "Lucky you. Mine came at quarter to four."

Harry winced. "Sorry. What about your night, though? How was dinner with your parents?"

Malfoy shrugged, and Harry could envision the expression on his face without even needing to see it – bored and carefully uninterested. "It was dinner. I couldn't talk about ninety percent of what I've been doing here, as usual, and once my father heard your name..." He straightened up. "Let's not discuss that, all right? There are better ways I could have spent the evening, though my mother still arranges a wonderful menu, and her favourite house-elf still makes the world's best pudding."

"All right." Harry yawned hugely. He hated feeling useless like he was this evening. Normally, he'd go and kill some time in the Training Room, but with the way he was feeling – tired, fuzzy-headed, and just a bit achy – he knew it was a bad idea. He didn't even have other cases to work on, thanks to Franco flat-out forbidding him from working on anything else until this case was solved. He wondered if Malfoy's supervisor had put a similar restriction on him, because if they weren't at home or together, Harry had the feeling that Malfoy was simply holed up in this potions lab or at his desk, poring over notes and reference books.

"Are you really going to yawn the entire evening?" Malfoy asked, tensing.

Harry suddenly realised just how on edge the other man was about this case. His shoulders were taut, and though his voice had been indifferent for much of the evening (when he spoke directly to Harry and

wasn't muttering into a potion, anyway), Harry realised it had all the signs of being very deliberately presented that way. There was an underlying strain to the tone, and had he been feeling himself, he would have caught it easily. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise, you great tosser," Malfoy sighed, setting down the clipboard that may as well be fused to his hand these days. "You're tired. Possibly ill. Hell, I'm tired. But I've got to check these potions every two hours for the next six before I can cool and bottle them. You should just go home."

"Yeah, right," Harry scoffed. "Leave early while you stay and work. Like I want that getting back to Franco. Or Kingsley, for that matter. I'll stay."

"And do what? Sit here and keep yawning?"

"You mean I'm not keeping you entertained with my witty conversation?" Harry said, trying to look insulted.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and gave one last stir to the cauldron in front of him. "Berk. Get your cloak. We're going for coffee. I don't have anything to do for nearly two hours, anyway. I am not going to listen to you yawn or risk you falling asleep in here that whole time."

Coffee did sound appealing. It was only mid-afternoon, but a hot caffeinated drink sounded like the best call in the world. "All right, fine. But we're going to that place I like."

"Have we been anywhere else for coffee since we started this case?" Malfoy grumbled, shooing Harry out the door and securing the lab. "Always your way with things. Spoiled, that's what you are."

"Spoiled? Look who's talking!" Harry smacked Malfoy in the arm, earning him a very pointed look.

"Oh, shut up and get in the lift."

There wasn't much of a queue for the coffee shop at this hour, and Harry had their drinks not long after Malfoy had grabbed them a table at the back and cast a Muffliato, which Harry had taught him the week before. "Here. Quadruple latte, no foam, shot of caramel," he said, handing over the large drink and plunking himself into the chair across from Malfoy. He bent his head over his own drink and breathed deeply – black coffee with two shots of espresso and just a bit of vanilla syrup to cut the bitterness. He liked this place. They didn't try to tell him he should be careful consuming so much caffeine, and they usually gave him a discount whenever he was wearing his Auror robes. Also, the people behind the counter were friendly, but not annoyingly chipper.

"Aw, Potter, you know my drink order," Malfoy said, fluttering his lashes. "Be still, my heart."

Harry rolled his eyes and blew on his drink. "Funny, Malfoy. Just drink your coffee." Several moments of silence went by as they sat at their table and drank their coffees slowly. Harry was starting to feel somewhat less thick-headed when Malfoy took out a quill and small piece of parchment and jotted something down. "What are you writing?"

Malfoy didn't look up. "Love note. You know, thanking you for all the late nights and the coffee dates. It's notes on the case, you idiot. What else would it be?"

Harry sighed. "I cannot believe I've been thinking you're not so annoying lately," he muttered. "You're definitely still a prat. I swear to Merlin, someone must have got hold of me and tried to force me to think you're not so —" He cut himself off. Malfoy's eyes had suddenly gone very, very wide while the rest of him went still as death. He looked almost as if someone had Stunned him, and Harry actually found himself looking at Malfoy's chest to see that he was breathing. "What? What's wrong?" He wasn't experiencing caffeine-induced heart palpitations or something, was he?

"Shut up!" Malfoy hissed, suddenly scribbling furiously on the piece of parchment, and then reaching for a napkin and giving it the same treatment. After several moments in which Harry was afraid to move or even breathe too loudly, he shoved quill, paper, and napkin into his pocket, drained the last bit of his drink, and stood up. "Harry Potter, if this turns out to be something, I could bloody well kiss you!"

Harry just sort of blinked at his partner. "Um... Okay?" Malfoy had gone mad, no question about it. He looked frenzied, with his cheeks pink and his eyes wide and bright. He might even be attractive, if you

didn't mind insane, sarcastic, and slightly insufferable. And then Malfoy positively beamed down at him for a split second and bolted out the front door of the coffee shop, Disapparating just outside the doors.

"What the fuck was that about?" Harry muttered to his cup of coffee, as if it could give him an answer. Also, he might want to check into inspecting this place for putting drugs or potions into their drinks. Because Malfoy had obviously gone off the deep end, mentions of kissing aside, and Harry had to wonder about his own mental fitness. For a moment there, when Malfoy had given him that blinding smile that showed nearly all of his annoyingly perfect teeth, Harry had actually thought that, without question, Malfoy actually was attractive.

Yeah, this place was getting a surprise inspection from the Aurors tomorrow. Most definitely.

* * *

As much as he loved tinkering in a Potions lab and researching the theory behind different combinations of ingredients and learning their effects, there was one thing Draco hated about Potions as a subject.

Sometimes, you had to wait bloody near forever for the results.

"Glare at that cauldron any harder, Malfoy, and you might scorch the contents."

Draco looked up and fixed Unspeakable Jonas with a dirty look. "Oh shut up, you, and mind your own potion."

"Not much to mind at the moment," Draco's colleague said, sounding bored. "Now it's just waiting. Listen, are you going to be here a while? I've been in here for the last ten hours, and the fire was ridiculously hot for the first nine. I'm sweating like a damned pig. I need to go home and shower and nap." He sniffed at his robes and grimaced. "New robes after the shower, too. These smell like crushed stinkbug."

"Charming," Draco muttered, once again glaring at his cauldron as if that would speed the reaction he needed to take place. Jonas had been off on some project, collecting ingredients for his latest

experiment, which did smell foul. Stinkbug wasn't the worst of it, either. There was a distinct aroma of fermented fruit and charred meat. And something rotting that might have been the entrails Draco had walked in on him slicing. He'd almost had another look at his breakfast.

"Yeah, I know. Seriously, will you be here for a while? That thing needs three good clockwise stirs every two hours. I've just done it, so it can wait another two."

"Yes, fine, I'll stir the damned thing," Draco said, waving him off. "Just leave and clean yourself up."

"Right. Remember: three full stirs, clockwise, every two hours."

"I've got it, Jonas. What is it, anyway?"

Jonas looked around. "Statute and all that, right?"

"We're in the bloody middle of the department, in a secured Potions lab. Of course this falls under the Statute." Jonas was almost as bad as McNamara with the secrecy paranoia, for the love of Merlin. It was in the damned job title, and if you couldn't grasp the concept with a clue that large, then you were simply useless.

"Self-actualisation potion. Or a variation of it, if it goes right. Trying to work out how to make the effects last longer, for one thing. Plus, I've added some ambergris and some passion flower."

"Passion flower?" Draco repeated, his interest finally piqued. "Why on earth would you add that to something meant to help someone self-actualise?"

"Well, as I said, it's not strictly a self-actualisation thing – only a variant. But the ginko biloba sap will help hone what's inside but not at the forefront of your mind. And theoretically, the passion flower and ambergris combination will give you some sort of signal that you've hit upon the key. Sort of like a reward for body and mind. Small chance it'll work, you know, but it doesn't hurt to try. I'm hoping to call

it 'Epiphany Elixir'." Jonas stretched and Draco tried not to gag at the smell wafting off him. "All right, I'm off. See you this evening, Malfoy."

"Only after you've washed the stench off," Draco muttered as the other man went through the door. Disgusting.

He had been alone, periodically stirring his own cauldron (and once, Jonas'), doodling on a scrap of parchment, and adding a few additional ingredients to his potion, for nearly four hours when the door to the lab opened up. Draco held his breath as he finished counting out Erumpent tail hairs, in the off-chance Jonas hadn't managed to wash away the stink.

It wasn't Jonas who entered the lab, though, and Draco let himself breathe normally again, adding the hairs one at a time, twenty seconds apart. "Potter? What are you doing here? Thought all you Aurors had a meeting?"

"Been over for nearly an hour now," Potter said with a shrug. "Thought I'd come and check to make certain you hadn't managed to trap yourself in here. You never leave this place."

"I do so," Draco huffed. He hadn't today, but that was beside the point. "Do me a favour, would you? Stir that iridescent blue potion three times, clockwise?"

"All right."

Draco was almost done adding the hairs when he caught the scent of wintergreen and something that smelled even more familiar. It only took a short moment for his brain to alert him to the potential problem, and he nearly dropped the rest of the Erumpent tail into the cauldron. "Potter! Have you ingested or applied any wintergreen recently?"

Potter looked up, spoon still in hand. "Yeah. Splitting headache. One of the secretaries gave me that and some rosemary oil to rub on my temples, why?"

"Bloody dim-witted git," Draco breathed, adding the last hair and sprinting over to where Potter stood. He grabbed the man by the back of his robes and yanked – hard. Potter stumbled backwards into him, elbowing Draco in the stomach as they hit the table behind them both.

And all for nothing, really. He'd been too late.

* * *

Things got very confusing, very quickly.

One moment, Harry was standing in front of a cauldron of something that smelled vile but looked amazing, counting his third clockwise stir. The next moment, Malfoy was coming at him like the hounds of hell were at his heels. And one disorienting moment after that, Malfoy had hold of him by the robes at his back and was jerking him backwards so forcefully that Harry's teeth clicked together and his almost-dormant headache flared back to life.

"Oof!" Harry heard the sharp exhale of breath as Malfoy ended up sandwiched between Harry's back and whatever they had fallen into. "Potter, you incompetent bastard," Malfoy wheezed. "Don't you realise what...?"

There was more, Harry was certain of it, but sound had suddenly become very slow and thick, and spoken words lost any meaning they might have had. His headache was back with a vengeance, throbbing so hard behind his eyes that things looked foggy. It took him a moment to realise that his vision wasn't actually obscured by the pain in his head. There was a thick mist rapidly flowing towards them, greyish-blue and moving like oil over water. Harry watched as the mist seemed to wrap around his hands and get darker, especially around his fingertips. And he felt the moment it hit his lungs – it displaced all the air in them and he gasped, trying for more oxygen and only getting more of that heavy mist in the process. Panicked, he wondered if it was possible to drown in fog.

And then, just like that, he could breathe again.

But something wasn't right. He felt... funny. Not 'oh, God, I think I'm dying' funny, but definitely not right.

Malfoy shoved at him from behind then, and Harry slowly turned around to see his partner's eyes widen. He looked utterly panicked, and then his pupils rapidly went very large, then very small, and then went back to normal. Malfoy's face smoothed out and, in an interesting and new experience, he actually looked almost happy.

Malfoy stood up straight and rubbed at his stomach. "How do you feel?" he asked anxiously. Harry wondered what kind of punishment the Unspeakables might inflict upon Malfoy if Harry ended up dying down here from some random potions accident. Nothing good, that was certain.

Harry paused to consider the question. He still felt odd, but, really, he also felt sort of good. He felt looser, and maybe a bit warm, like he'd just finished a good massage in a steam room. "I think I'm okay," he said, and even he heard the weird floaty quality to his voice. It was the way Luna sounded to him – sort of light and other-worldly.

"Are you positive?" Malfoy asked sharply. His eyes shimmered like liquid silver, only smoother – like mercury, Harry supposed. He grabbed Harry's chin roughly with one hand and peered into his eyes. "Let me look at you."

Harry's instinct was to wrench away from the touch, and under normal circumstances he would have. Only the moment Malfoy's fingers touched his face, Harry's entire body felt as if every nerve had just received a gentle and incredibly pleasurable caress. He shuddered and bit back a moan.

Oh, fuck.

* * *

Draco felt Potter shiver, heard the ragged gasp of air, and watched his eyes roll back into his head a little as he bit down hard on his lower lip. He would have asked what was wrong, except he knew. He knew, because he felt it too.

Oh, this was not happening. It couldn't be.

Draco let go of Potter's face, feeling every nerve in his core light up and gradually fade once the contact ceased. Neither of them was in imminent danger, and that meant his next step was to check on both potions to ascertain they hadn't been ruined in the reaction. With legs that felt awkward and stiff, he ran a few spells over his own cauldron, holding his breath until he got confirmation it had been unharmed. After another moment, he got a similar confirmation on Jonas' potion, which bore no trace of the blue mist that had flowed out from the cauldron, now that Potter wasn't hovering over it.

"What the fuck happened?"

Potter's voice was rough, the voice of a man who was under the influence of more hormones than should be legal to possess. It was what he might sound like just before orgasm. Draco closed his eyes for just a moment and forced himself to adjust the fire underneath his own cauldron. He knew what he'd breathed in, or had a good enough idea, anyway, but that didn't change the effect. And it was surprisingly hard to concentrate when the only thing he really wanted to do was get naked and rub up against Potter for a while.

"The rosemary and wintergreen oil on your hands that you used for your headache reacted with the fumes from what my colleague was brewing. The result was that mist we both inhaled." Draco forced himself to take a deep breath. "Those sensations you're feeling are the effects of that mist. This is why you don't fuck around in Potions labs, you git."

Potter clenched the table he was leaning against, his knuckles going white. "It'll wear off, though, right?"

"Yes." Draco did a few quick calculations based off rough estimates and tried to ignore the building drive to lay his hands on Potter and touch everywhere he could reach. "I'd say within forty minutes or so."

"Forty minutes," Potter repeated, eyes shut. "That's not so bad. I mean, it's not like this is the Cruciatus."

"No," Draco agreed. There were definitely worse sensations they could be experiencing. It was just that he had been perfectly capable of ignoring any passing physical attraction to Potter before this, and now, no matter what his brain said, his body insisted he absolutely could not ignore it any longer. "We'll simply stand here and wait for it to wear off. Forty minutes is nothing. "

"Right," Potter said with determination, and Draco thanked Merlin that he was stuck in here with someone of fairly strong will. "So," he said after a while, clearing his throat. "How long's it been?"

Draco looked at the clock on the wall. "Two minutes."

"Fuck me," Potter sighed. Draco wished he'd chosen something else to say, because given the circumstances, his body was entirely too willing to take that as an invitation. It wasn't just that he was turned on (which he was)... There was an urgency to it, as if every shred of his existence depended on touching Potter for survival. If he just touched Potter again, his body insisted, things would be better. That mounting pressure would lessen. Definitely.

Looking down at the table, Draco saw that his right hand was inches from where Potter's left one was still clamped down on the tabletop. If he just had contact, he could relieve them both of this feeling. He felt... he felt good, in a way, but he – they, really – could feel better, and all it would take was just the slightest bit of touching.

Draco managed to hold out for another three minutes before he couldn't take it any longer. He felt as if insects were crawling under his skin, and by the way Potter's hands were repeatedly tensing and the frustrated face he was making, Draco knew he was just as bad off, if not worse. He had, after all, got a larger dose of that fucking mist. With as much control as he could muster, Draco slowly slid his hand to the right until his little finger touched the side of Potter's hand.

He felt something all right, but it was not what he expected. Potter's knees buckled, pressing him against the table, and Draco whimpered, unable to help himself. It was as if, instead of the centralised feeling of someone lightly stroking his erection, the sensation was transmitted throughout his entire body.

"Shit!" Potter gasped, still holding himself up by the tabletop. "I thought we were just going to stand here and wait."

"I'm sorry, really, I am," Draco moaned. How bloody embarrassing. "I just felt like if we touched, the pressure would dissipate."

"Doesn't seem to be true, now, does it?" Potter asked, talking more to the table than to Draco.

"No, definitely not." Fuck. Thirty minutes left of this, and that was if his estimates were correct. Maybe, if he and Potter could manage to Stun or Bind one another...

"But that was amazing, wasn't it?" Potter opened his eyes and looked at Draco, his eyes greener than they'd ever been before. They shone like well-lit emeralds in a jeweller's case. "Is there any reason we can't take advantage of the situation?"

"You mean other than that we still have to work together after this?" Draco ground out through clenched teeth. "Just stand there and don't move. I'll do the same."

"Fine," Potter replied, breathing heavily. Draco wished he would stop that. It was giving him visuals he couldn't handle. Even with his eyes squeezed shut, he could see Potter how he'd looked that evening in the Training Room, sweat making his skin glisten, muscles flexing as he lifted the whole of his body weight, supported by his arms, and even the fucking way he'd smelled. Thirty minutes, give or take. Thirty minutes, and his body would behave properly once more.

Though some miracle, both men managed to make it through another thirty-four minutes without another word, and with only a few involuntary moves towards each other. As Draco watched the clock and wondered just how off his calculations had been, Potter groaned. "I can't, I can't, I can't," he chanted under his breath.

"Can't wha—?" Draco managed, and then Potter's fist was twisted into the front of Draco's robes and his other hand was pressed to the back of Draco's neck, pulling him in close.

If he'd meant to resist at all, Draco no longer cared. Potter's mouth found his and Draco moaned at the sensation of Potter's tongue slipping into his mouth, swirling and sucking, and then the feeling of Potter fucking breathing in as Draco breathed out, and breathing out as Draco breathed in as if they needed each other's very breath. Draco's left hand slid up Potter's back and his fingers threaded through thick black hair that was surprisingly soft as his other hand settled against the small of his back and pressed

them together, in contact from the knees up.

For as fucking amazing as this felt, Draco was surprised that neither of them seemed to be even remotely hard.

He'd been wrong about the forty minutes and he'd been wrong about their hands touching relieving the pressure, but no part of this kiss felt wrong in the slightest. This felt like everything he'd ever want, ever need, and if the Potions lab suddenly exploded and killed them both, it would still be all right, even if it did open up the possibility of a very awkward afterlife when he met Potter on the other side. This was like finally piecing together some bit of understanding from one of the rooms deep within the Department of Mysteries, one of those moments of euphoria and terror when you glimpsed some bit of the truth you were maybe never supposed to understand.

And just when Draco thought he might black out or go into shock, the fire in his body – in his very soul – seemed to burn itself into nothing but ashes, consumed and spent and utterly depleted.

* * *

Harry had been through all manner of things since discovering he was a wizard on his eleventh birthday, feeling everything from elation to despair. He'd had all three Unforgivables cast on him before he'd even reached the age of adulthood in the Muggle world. He'd defeated the darkest wizard in history, made the best friends the world could hold, and excelled in a job he loved. He'd fallen in love, fallen out of love, and taken a hard look at what he really wanted and what he was willing to do to get it.

But this...

Kissing Malfoy was the epitome of all of those positive experiences. At least, until the thrumming in his nerves faded and his brain told him that what they were doing... well... wasn't exactly in line with any other interaction they'd ever had.

Malfoy seemed to come to the same sort of conclusion just before Harry did. He pulled away slowly, looking dazed and dull-eyed. "Over?" he asked, voice flat.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Think so."

Without another word, Malfoy stepped quickly over to the cauldron he'd been working at when Harry had walked into the lab an hour ago. "Still all right," he murmured, dipping a glass ladle into the potion and pouring it slowly back into the cauldron with the rest. He whispered something else, an incantation of sorts, from the sound, and once again picked up his clipboard to write something on an increasingly crowded sheet of parchment.

Several minutes passed without Malfoy so much as looking in his direction, and Harry couldn't take it any longer. Now that whatever he'd breathed in was out of his system, it was easier to think. But no matter how he looked at it and examined what he felt, Harry found he didn't exactly regret what he'd done. But it appeared as if Malfoy did.

"Hey, Malfoy," Harry tried, standing behind his partner. "About what happened... I just wanted to apologise."

"Not now, Potter," Malfoy said, waving him off and unscrewing the top from a tiny phial of liquid in his pocket. He added two drops to the potion, which changed from pink to copper-coloured. "We're both adults. We can move on. It's not as if we're both aware it was the potion's influence. No fault to anyone. You didn't know what you were using for your headache would cause a reaction, and I didn't manage to warn you in time. It happened, and it's over."

"Yeah, but —"

"But nothing. Now be quiet. I'm trying to think. I added powdered dragon claw, but I just don't know if... Maybe some fluxweed...." He walked back over to another table and flipped through a massive textbook.

Harry sighed and leaned against another table. He watched as Malfoy muttered to himself and continued to ignore anything that wasn't the cauldron, the potions text, or his own notes. If he was so upset Harry had kissed him, the least he could do was —

Only that wasn't it, was it?

Malfoy had been the one to give in and touch him first, which meant he knew full well what that potion felt like. He had also returned the kiss with a load of enthusiasm, and he hadn't even managed to insult Harry while doing so. Realisation dawning, Harry watched Malfoy's movements a few moments more. He wasn't avoiding.

He was working.

Malfoy's cheeks were flushed pink, and Harry didn't think it was a holdover affect of the mist. He was still muttering to himself and flipping through that book with all the handwritten notes in the margins. After several more minutes, he put his hands on the small of his back, leaned backwards until several vertebrae popped in quick succession, and yawned. Harry took that as his cue.

"Malfoy," he tried again and this time, Malfoy actually looked at him. "Look, I know you're busy, and I'm no help whatsoever. I feel like shit with this headache. I'm going to head home. It's late."

Malfoy rubbed at his eyes. "Is it?"

"Yeah. Look... Just... Just let me know as soon as you figure something out."

With a shake of his head, Malfoy sighed. "What makes you think I will?"

Harry smiled slightly. His head hurt, yes, and he had a dozen questions running through his brain after their little experience with the potion reaction and the fumes they'd breathed. But he knew the look on his partner's face. He'd seen it on Ron's. And Hermione's. And even Auror Franco's. And he definitely knew it from his own face in the mirror. "Because I do. Call it instinct. You're close. Fuck if I know what you're close to finding, but you're almost there. Just keep at it." He squeezed the spot between his eyes as a flare of pain shot through his head. "Seriously, Malfoy. The moment you know something

significant."

He left the lab, Malfoy staring after him with a peculiar look on his face, and thought that tonight might just be the night they both learned a lot of things.

* * *

It was two in the morning when Draco got the confirmation he'd been waiting four days for.

He knew why no one had had any luck in identifying the poison Cragg had ingested. They'd all been looking in the wrong place, trying to fit the clues into the wrong mould. And in the end, it was Potter's offhand comment that had cast everything in the correct light, illuminating the cracks and true shape of the thing. One simple little sentence, completely out of context, but it had been enough to get Draco's mind working. And after he'd come up with the theory, it had only really been a matter of waiting to prove it scientifically.

But he'd done it. His part of the case was done. The rest was up to Potter.

Potter.

Last night had been a distraction, but no harm had come to his work. Had any come to their partnership? It wasn't as if they would be seeing each other again, outside of the occasional convergence in the Floo queue, or Quidditch matches between their departments. What did it really matter, in the end?

Except that Draco was now afraid he wanted it to mean something.

"Jonas?"

Unspeakable Jonas looked up from his magazine full of scantily-clad witches. He'd come back to the lab an hour after Potter had left, smelling more human than swine and looking quite a bit more cheerful.

The two of them had barely spoken since then, Draco in favour of triple-checking his results against the remaining sample of the poison from Cragg's Healers, and Jonas in favour of reading questionably work-appropriate material while the contents of his cauldron simmered away and made occasional chorus-like sounds in the key of what Draco thought might be D major.

"You're not going to report my reading material, are you?"

"No, not as long as reading's all you do," Draco warned. "I just wanted to ask you about that potion you're working on. 'Epiphany Elixir', you called it?"

"Well, that's just a name I've been tossing around. Even if I get it to do what I want, I'd have to jump through hoops like a trained kneazle to get McNamara to even consider letting me market it, no matter how well-controlled it was. Why, don't you think it has a nice ring to it?"

"Yes, yes, it's fine. I'm more interested in some of the ingredients and the theory. You said you'd used ambergris and passion flower. What else was in there as of last night?"

"Vervain, pomegranate, yarrow, silverweed, ginseng, gardenia, and orris root, mostly. Some hummingbird feathers, a bit of dragon's blood, bit of powdered unicorn hoof. Oh, and the coriander. Last thing I added."

Draco could feel the blood drain out of his face. "Coriander?"

"Yes. Steeped in strong wine for a fortnight, first."

"You added wine-steeped coriander to something with ginseng, passion flower, and ambergris? Fuck, man, are you trying to induce lust-induced seizures?"

"What? No. I told you, I was working on a rewards system or a signal. Once the person using the potion got closer or reached their moment of epiphany or self-actualisation, they'd get a nice, pleasurable

sensation to clue them in. Like a runner's high, or maybe the endorphin flood after a massage to a sore muscle. Even a good scratch to an unbearable itch. The yarrow and the bit of oxalis and ashes from burned holly leaves I added this morning would temper the love and libido enhancers. Though really, if I've done it right, the potion will let you know if you're with someone complementary. Don't want anyone who's finally figured out what they are and have the potential to be saddled with a loser, now."

Draco swallowed hard as he decanted his mimic potion into large phials. "What do you think would happen if you added rosemary or wintergreen oils?"

Jonas looked at him sharply. "You didn't add any oils to my cauldron, did you?"

"No." It wasn't a lie. Nothing had contaminated the actual potion itself. But the fumes from Jonas' cauldron had mingled with the essence still on Potter's hands (and likely, around his head) and created that thick, temporary fog. "Theoretically, though, what would happen?"

"Well, it would depend. Wintergreen on its own wouldn't do much to the finished product. But before the yarrow was added, it might heighten sensation to one's nerves – enhance physical touch, perhaps. Nothing unpleasant. But the rosemary..." Jonas tapped his chin. "Well, that's another matter. Oil, you say? Not dried or fresh herb?"

"Right." Draco had the feeling he knew the answer. He just couldn't bear to admit it, because that meant he might have to admit other things. "Oil."

"Well, I suppose it would depend on the dose. You add a lot of it, it would mix with the yarrow and the wine and coriander. You use yarrow to find and then keep love, and you use the coriander to either promote peace between people who can't get along or induce lust. If there's enough rosemary, you might end up shagging your partner – the right partner, granted, given everything else in there – until one of you had a heart attack or stroke and just dropped dead. But if it's only a little rosemary... I suppose you'd have one hell of an aphrodisiac. But only if a complimentary partner also drank the potion. Sort of your body's way of trying to clue you in that this person's good for you."

Draco thought that over, his stomach in knots. With effort, he managed to keep his hand from shaking as he filled five tiny phials with his last and most important test potion. "So, if two people did have a dose,

with just a hint of rosemary, there would be no effect if they weren't compatible in some way?"

"That's my assumption. But you're the Potions Master here, Malfoy."

"Yes, but I don't know amounts or method and every ingredient used," Draco said, trying to sound irritated instead of worried. "Besides, this is really a hypothetical. So before tempering the lust aspects of the potion, you'd draw and bond two people together?"

"No. Not in this formulation. There's no drawing in the traditional sense. There has to be something there, first. This isn't like Amortentia, which creates out of nothing until it's out of your system. In the scenario you're speaking of, it would have to build off a mutual attraction, or the potential for one. And if there was a reaction, if it was true and not just brought about by the other short-acting ingredients in the potion, there would be a slight lingering sense of the effect. Sort of like that little tingle you get when a witch flashes her tits and winks at you, I'd imagine."

Draco's stomach twisted on itself again, and only partially because the thought of his colleague's tingly feelings in response to being shown a set of breasts. If Jonas had worked the theory out correctly – and there was always the possibility he was wrong – then Draco and Potter had only experienced what they had because there was some underlying thing between them that the potion believed was sexual compatibility, and possibly something deeper. "Oh, fuck me," he muttered quietly, shoving a ream of parchment and one of the tiny phials of each potion into his robes. "I see," he said to Jonas, who was suddenly peering at him curiously. "If you'll excuse me."

"Not off to go and add rosemary to a sample of what I had last night, are you?" Jonas said with a little laugh.

"No. I've got to see Potter. I think I've finally cracked this thing, or near enough to warrant dragging him out of bed at three in the morning. Oh, and Jonas?" Draco added, looking over his shoulder as he exited the lab. "You might want to consider putting a warning on that stuff if you ever do market it. What if someone taking something for a headache or respiratory ailment used that at the same time?"

Jonas' eyes went wide. "Fuck, you're right." He reached for his quill and some parchment. "Good catch,

Malfoy, really. I can't imagine..."

But whatever else Jonas said was lost as Draco made his way through the corridors of the Department of Mysteries. He had to get to Potter. He was positive he'd figured out where they'd gone wrong before on this case, and now that he had the answer, he needed Potter's bank of knowledge to get them the rest of the way.

Now, how best to rouse him?

Given the hour and the way he'd looked a bit unwell, Potter was almost certainly at home, sleeping soundly in his bed. Draco knew where he lived – there had been some offhand comment about Grimmauld Place, and Draco had recognised the name and looked it up in some of his mother's old things while visiting for dinner not long after – but he had never been there. He was confident he could get there, but what about once he was? Potter was an Auror. There was no way he would neglect to put up wards on his own residence. And he had known how to get through that one locking spell Auror Franco had put up on the briefing room, intending to lock them in. Granted, Draco knew how to undo three of the four, but if Potter knew the one he did not, he likely knew of others.

After Apparating outside Grimmauld Place and watching the house appear between two others, Draco had decided that he could simply try knocking or ringing the bell. And if that did not rouse Potter, who had seemed quite insistent that Draco let him know the second he found what he was looking for, then he would try his luck at getting through the wards. Besides, there was always the chance Potter was a bit lenient with some of them. He seemed the sort that would allow close friends (Weasley and his wife, for instance) quick, easy access to the place if they needed it for any reason.

If he was really in there, Draco decided after pounding on the door so forcefully his hand hurt, Potter was one hell of a heavy sleeper. Or perhaps he liked to listen to music while he slept. Or shower at odd times of night. Or what if... what if he was truly ill?

"Potter!" he shouted, banging on the door once more. None of the lights came on in the Muggle homes surrounding Potter's, which meant Potter either had good privacy charms, or deaf neighbours. "I've tried this the polite way, and I'm tired of it! I'm coming in!" He ran a few spells to detect hexes and boobytraps and only came back with two. Granted, those two would be quite unpleasant to be caught by, but one was easily disarmed if you knew the counterspell (which, granted, was uncommon knowledge). The

other, oddly enough, would only activate if the person passing through the door intended malice. Draco should be able to get through that one easily enough.

Probably.

It only took a few minutes to get past the locking charms on Potter's front door, and then it was simply a matter of figuring out where Potter might be sleeping. There was a Muggle television in one room, but Potter wasn't in the easy chair in front of it, nor on the sofa nearby. He wasn't in the first three rooms Draco peered into, calling his partner's name in hopes that Potter would hear him and not immediately hit him with a hex for intruding at such an hour.

"Oh, fucking finally," Draco sighed as he reached the end of one of the hallways on the second floor. There was a soft light coming from under the door, and Draco thought he could hear movement, as if someone was shifting in bed, trying to get comfortable. "Potter, you could at least answer the bloody door when someone pounds on it – at your request, I might add – during the night," he exclaimed, striding into a comfortably cosy-looking bedroom.

Potter froze in bed, looking positively shocked. "Malfoy? What the fuck? How did you even get in here? Why –?"

Draco waved his hand. "Don't ask stupid questions. Look, you demanded I let you know the second I found something, and I did, so shut up and listen to me! I've figured it out! I know why we couldn't figure out what sort of poison Cragg was given – why none of the traditional models of poison theory fit the ingredients or amounts or methods. Don't you see?"

Potter was still looking at him in shock. His face was pink, and he was breathing funny. The covers were pulled up over his shoulders, and Draco stepped back from the situation for just a moment – but long enough to realise he might have just burst in on his partner in mid-wank. "See what?" Potter said, sounding incredibly frustrated, which might have been equally due to Draco barging in on him and being interrupted before orgasm. "You're not making any sense!"

"Cragg wasn't poisoned, is what I'm trying to say!"

"Of course he was! That's the only thing we'd really figured out, and every one of his Healers agreed!"

"No, I mean, he was, but that wasn't the intent! He was dosed with a potion, and it had a toxic effect, but that wasn't what the person who slipped him the potion meant to do."

"I swear to God, Malfoy, you'd better start making more sense. I'm not feeling well enough for this sort of thing this late at night. Spit it out!" Potter shifted irritably and the covers fell from his shoulder. He was, Draco couldn't help but notice, at least naked from the waist up. Probably all the way down, too.

Draco took a deep breath and reminded himself that as good at general Auror-work as Potter was, he still didn't have the training of a Potions Master. "Damocles Cragg," he said slowly, trying to get Potter to grasp the whole scope of what he'd found, "was not given a potion with the intent of killing or incapacitating him. He was given a completely original potion of our culprit's design, which was intended to be Liquid Imperius."

Potter was sitting bolt-upright in bed before Draco could even blink. Merlin, he was fast. Must be all that time in the Training Room. "You're not fucking kidding, are you? Someone was trying to control Cragg using a potion instead of a spell?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

There was much movement underneath Potter's bedcovers, and then the duvet was being thrown off his legs and Potter was standing and stepping into boots, still shirtless. "Come on, back to the Ministry. I have a hunch who might have done this, but I need to check some of the interviews first." He Summoned his Auror Robes and slid into them with ease. "If Cragg's controlled with a potion and not the actual Imperius Curse," he said, doing up the buttons of his uniform, "then the culprit's not technically using an Unforgivable. Which means, even under Veritaserum, they wouldn't admit to using an Unforgivable. It also means Cragg might not be aware of the signs of such, once he came out of this person's control. The feeling would be different. Fuck, that's going to complicate matters for the Wizengamot during the trial." He paused to straighten his glasses while Draco admired the speed at which Potter's mind was suddenly working. He wouldn't have guessed Potter could be so quick-witted, really. "How the hell did you come up with this theory, anyway?"

"Your comment over coffee the other day," Draco said with a grin. "You said that you'd started to think I wasn't as bad as you'd always believed and muttered something about how someone must be forcibly changing your mind. It just set me thinking. Pieces started clicking together. At that point, I just had to weed some things out, change the formulation, and wait for results."

"I almost think you might be a bit brilliant," Potter said in awe. "Now come on." And with that he grabbed Draco by the wrist and Disapparated them both so quickly Draco thought he might have left half of himself still standing in Potter's bedroom, not two feet from the man's bed.

* * *

"It makes sense, doesn't it? Or can you find any indication I'm wrong?"

Malfoy shook his head, looking down at the files Harry had spread across the table in one of the Aurors' briefing rooms. "I think you've got it," he said slowly. He flipped back to another page for the seventh or eighth time, as if they didn't both nearly have these interviews and reports memorised. "Alexander Keitch. There's no one else who fits. He worked in his father's apothecary until he was thirty-seven. His mother was a Potions Mistress. His older sister was not only a Potions Mistress, but used to give lessons to those who wanted to acquire the certification. He contributed articles to Potions Quarterly back in his twenties and thirties. He's been with the Wizengamot since he turned sixty, longer than Cragg has by two decades. And he's been one of the few dissenters to some of Cragg's rulings and policies."

"Not to mention, someone said they saw the two of them arguing in the lifts a month before Cragg sought treatment at St Mungo's. And with the amount of times different members of the Wizengamot took lunch together, Keitch would have had plenty of opportunities to slip him a potion. Cragg drank what, half a dozen cups of tea a day?"

"That's what another witch on the Wizengamot said. Whinged about him always needing to take breaks to use the loo. Seemed more than a bit irritated about it."

"Ophelia Odenkirk," Harry said, nodding. He remembered that interview quite clearly. With as snippy as she was about answering questions, both he and Malfoy had put her down as someone to look into a bit more, though nothing ever came from it. It appeared she was just generally cranky with everyone, and

with some quite a bit more than she was with Cragg.

"What's more," Malfoy said, pointing to a small note in his handwriting on Alexander Keitch's personnel file, "he was in Trivandrum for holiday two years ago. You can get Kali's Eyebrow here in England, Potter, but it's expensive and somewhat heavily controlled. Not every apothecary owner wants to fuss with it. You saw that yourself, when I asked Almeric Mulpepper about it. But it grows wild along the southwest coast of India. You just have to know what you're looking for."

"And by that time, Cragg and Keitch had already had quite a few differing opinions on some of the more public trials. Not that others hadn't as well," Harry admitted, which was part of what hadn't flagged the man sooner. "But Keitch seemed to me to be the kind to hold a grudge –"

"And to be willing to wait years to get even," Malfoy finished. "I'd say it's a very Slytherin trait, to be honest, but the man was Ravenclaw."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Did you just say that was a Slytherin trait?"

"What?" Malfoy huffed. "I can admit that some of us are perfectly content to wait a few years until things play out the way we believe they should. It might not be flattering, but it damn sure comes in handy. Besides, sometimes your opponent will self-destruct without any help at all from you, and you're free to just take it in and enjoy the moment."

"I'm not certain if that's opportunistic, or just being a dick."

"Call it whatever you like," Malfoy said with a little shrug. "It works. Now. You're as confident as I am, aren't you? Are we ready to approach the Minister with this?"

Harry signed and nodded. "Absolutely."

"Then first thing after he arrives in the morning –"

"The hell with that!" Harry exclaimed. "We're getting this information to him now."

"Are you mad?" Malfoy asked, his eyes wide. "Do you really plan on barging in on the Minister for Magic? At home? Before sunrise?"

"You did it to me," Harry reminded him.

"Yes, but you're not the bloody Minister! I don't exactly feel like being sacked for overstepping boundaries here, Potter!"

"Oh, you won't be sacked," Harry assured him. "I'll take the blame."

"Ever the self-sacrificing hero," Malfoy muttered. "Fine. Just don't blame me if you get taken out by security detail or whatever protective wards the man has."

Harry chuckled. "Who do you think helped set some of those wards?"

Malfoy just gaped at him. "You're joking."

"I am not. Now close your mouth and let's go."

It didn't take Harry long to get onto Kingsley's property, and though he could have Apparated straight into the man's bedroom if he'd wanted, he didn't figure that would make the Minister all that willing to listen to whatever he had to say. So in the end, he settled for sending his Patronus up into the master bedroom while he and Draco waited outside on the porch.

"This had better be good, Harry," a bleary-eyed Kingsley demanded upon opening the door. He was still in a nightgown and cap. "Waking up to a bright silver stag standing at the foot of my bed doesn't exactly put me in the best of moods."

Malfoy nudged him sharply, but Harry ignored it. "We know who poisoned Damocles Cragg."

Kingsley yawned. "I assume you have all the necessary evidence and aren't just jumping to conclusions. Fine. Come in while I make a cup of coffee. Explain it to me. Prove it. On a case like this, I'm not moving without proof."

Dragging Malfoy by the arm into Kingsley's home, Harry nodded. "Of course, sir. I understand." He waited until Kingsley had the coffee brewing before he said anything further. He took a deep breath and looked at Malfoy for a bit of support. Malfoy, however, was staring at Kingsley's feet. Harry glanced down and saw what had his partner distracted. Great fluffy, bright pink slippers with silver pom-poms on top of the toes. Oh, for the love of Merlin. He stomped on Malfoy's foot as discreetly as he could manage, pleased when that finally readjusted his partner's focus. "It's Alexander Keitch."

Eyebrows raised, Kingsley looked at him long and hard. "You're certain? He's a member of the Wizengamot, Potter. Been with the Ministry in one form or another longer than I've been alive. This is a serious charge, to accuse him of trying to murder the Chief Warlock."

"But that's not exactly what happened," Harry said quickly. "He was given a potion, but it wasn't meant to poison him. Tell him, Malfoy."

Malfoy glared at Harry before turning to Kingsley. "He's right, sir. Alexander Keitch concocted his own potion, using a number of complicated theories. He wasn't trying to incapacitate or kill Cragg. He was trying to control him. A Liquid Imperius, if you will."

"Liquid Imperius?" Kingsley said, much louder than Harry expected. Both he and Malfoy jumped. "And just how did he manage that?"

"Well, technically, he didn't, sir," Malfoy said, gaining confidence as he spoke. "The potion Cragg's Healers distilled out of his blood indicated he had a good, solid attempt at it, though. The cinquefoil shows he was trying to balance all manner of luck, and gain control over the five most important aspects of Cragg's mind. It's supposed to help manifest ideas. Chicory helped remove Cragg's psychological barriers and obstacles, and made Keitch's influence nearly undetectable. Dogwood was for keeping things secret, and Uva Ursi helped him deepen his hold on Cragg's mind and behaviours."

"And what about the poisonous elements?" Kingsley demanded. "Wolfsbane was one of the things his Healers identified, was it not?"

"Yes, sir," Malfoy said quickly, as if he'd anticipated this. Harry thanked his lucky stars he was keeping a cool head. He'd seen other Aurors tremble under Kingsley's fierce tone and imposing posture. Harry knew it was generally an effective tactic at weeding out uncertainty, but Malfoy wasn't uncertain about this in the slightest. "Wolfsbane is generally poisonous to most humans. It's used in such a way to render it safe to consume for those suffering from lycanthropy, though. And Keitch took that approach with it in his potion, but added snake skin to further add to the undetectable nature of his influence in Cragg's mind."

"Then why didn't it work?" Kingsley asked. His voice was harsher, and Harry knew that one more logical and correct answer would have him convinced. Just trying to rattle them now, one last attempt, but there was nothing to rattle. And he thought Kingsley knew it.

"The Acromantula hairs," Malfoy said simply. "In most potions, they combat physical resistance and aggression, or make them docile. In this, I assume he wanted Cragg to be as pliant as possible, or even forthcoming, in case they interacted in person. But he used them with mermaid's tears. The effect is toxic, leading to headache, fever, nausea and vomiting. What's more, the interaction of those two elements negates the cinquefoil, and thus negates the even balance of control. I can prove everything," he said, pulling two small phials of pink and purple liquid from his robes. "All you need are these, compared against what's left of the sample from Cragg's Healers."

Kingsley ignored the offered potion samples and reached for his wand; a moment later, a sleek, silver lynx appeared at his feet. "Tell the Aurors on duty to meet me outside Alexander Keitch's residence, and to be prepared to arrest him," he told the Patronus. "Tell Auror Franco to prepare the documents

necessary to search Keitch's home. I want everyone there within fifteen minutes."

"Sir?" Malfoy asked, looking a bit startled as the lynx bounded out of the room. Harry supposed the sudden change from loud and demanding to calm and acting on what he'd just heard without further challenge was a bit surprising if you didn't know Kingsley's habits.

"Thank you very much for all your work, gentlemen," Kingsley said, heading out of the kitchen and towards the bedrooms upstairs. "I will be certain your supervisors know just how appreciated you are. You may go home. Get some sleep. Take the day off, if you wish. Potter, you especially. You still look a bit under the weather."

Harry bristled. This wasn't how this was supposed to work. He and Malfoy had put in all the time on this case, unable to even work on anything else for over a month. Yes, he was tired, and that headache was still lingering behind his eyes, but that he could chalk up to the tension. "With all respect, Minister, I would really like to be there when Keitch is arrested."

Kingsley looked him up and down. "If you insist, Harry."

"I'm coming, too," Malfoy said suddenly. Both men turned to look at him. "What?" he asked defensively. "I've put in just as much work as Potter has. I want to see this through. And I won't be a liability."

Kingsley sighed. "Fine. You heard my orders. Twelve minutes now. I'll meet you there."

"Quickly," Harry said to Malfoy. "Before he changes his mind."

"You know, he's right," Malfoy said as they headed for Kingsley's front door before Apparating away. "You do look like you could use some sleep."

"I'll sleep when this bastard's in custody," Harry told him crossly. "Now let's go."

They made it to Keitch's house just as a handful of other Aurors arrived. "Potter," Augustus Ketterling whispered, looking quite surprised. "Didn't know you'd be here. Ready to get this over with and relax before your next assignment?"

"Something like that," Harry murmured back. The half-dozen Aurors were stationing themselves around Keitch's property, setting temporary anti-Disapparation charms around the house several dozen metres around the entire place. They would only work for twenty minutes or so, but that would be enough. Most times, the charms weren't even needed; once a number of their suspects saw Aurors' robes surrounding them, they tended to come along without much fight. But there were always those that tried.

Malfoy stood nearby, silently watching everyone else prepare for the arrest. He stepped back when Auror Smyth nearly walked backwards into him, murmuring an incantation that would keep all physical objects on the property from disappearing for the next few hours. Typical procedure. Only when Malfoy shifted backwards, gathering his robes so neither he nor Smyth would get tangled in them, Harry saw something that wasn't right.

Keitch.

"There," he hissed, and both Malfoy and Smyth heard him. Smyth looked towards Harry, but Malfoy looked directly at where Keitch's feet could just barely be seen behind the shrubbery. Huh. Maybe Malfoy would have made a decent Auror, after all. Or maybe the two of them had just been spending so much time they'd each picked up a few things.

After a split second, Smyth cottoned on and focussed where both Harry and Malfoy were looking. He looked back at Harry, who nodded. This was it. They didn't have nearly the element of surprise they'd hoped.

Both Harry and Smyth moved quickly towards Keitch. Not two seconds later, Ketterling joined them. Keitch broke into a dead run, and then everything seemed to slow down even as it sped up. He could hear Ketterling's cry, see as the Impedimenta missed its mark by under an inch. He saw Smyth fire another spell, and saw Keitch cast something that blocked it. And as he got closer, almost close enough to get a clear shot without hitting Auror Peasegood, he saw Keitch raise his wand over his shoulder and

shout something that sent a bright purple bolt of light directly his way.

And after that, Harry saw nothing at all.

* * *

The second Potter and his colleague had started to move towards the man they were here to arrest, Draco dropped back and out of the way. He knew a good number of counter-curses and wasn't bad at defensive spells, but Minister Shacklebolt hadn't been especially thrilled he'd insisted on coming along, and he had promised he wouldn't be a liability. He had every intention of keeping as far away from the Aurors as he could, leaving them to their own devices.

That plan evaporated the second the flash of violet light hit Potter in the chest, dropping him to the ground like a ragdoll.

If things had been a bit frenzied before, now they were positively chaotic. Alexander Keitch had five Aurors on his heels and a sixth heading towards him from the front. All seven men were firing spells. There was running and shouting and multicoloured bolts of light everywhere in slowly-lifting darkness.

No one, however, went back for Potter.

It might have only been three seconds since the man hit the ground, but to Draco, it felt much longer. Potter lay supine, his legs folded awkwardly beneath him, wand still in hand. His eyes were closed, glasses slightly askew, almost giving him the look of someone who'd dozed off while trying to do an important yet boring task. But as Draco hit his knees at Potter's side, he saw the grey shading of his face and the blue tinge to his lips.

Fuck.

<"i>Rennervate!" Draco called out amongst the din. Nothing happened. Panicked, Draco grabbed his partner by the chin and tilted his head to get a better look at him. Two things happened then, both of

which badly startled Draco.

The second his hand came into contact with Potter's face, his entire body flooded with warmth and soft satisfaction. This was nothing like when he'd grabbed Potter by the chin in the Potions lab, that immediate flood of lust and longing and intense pleasure. But in some way, it wasn't much different. What was even more surprising, however, was that Potter flinched and gasped at the touch, though he made no other response. Draco recoiled as if he'd been burned. No. Or perhaps...?

An odd combination of terror and elation hit Draco then, almost as powerful as a punch to the stomach. Jonas had mentioned a lingering effect, but only if... Draco swallowed hard around a lump that might have been dread but might equally have been relief. Potter was alive. Potter was alive, and whatever the fuck that had been, whatever it might mean for them both, he had felt it too.

"Rennervate," Draco tried again after a moment, voice almost a whisper as he pointed his wand at Potter's chest. Sixty seconds since the man had fallen, but those sixty seconds had told Draco everything he needed to know, whether he wanted to know it or not.

After only a second or two, Potter's eyes fluttered open and he moaned. "Fuck, that hurt." His eyes finally focussed on Draco's face and confusion crossed his face. "Malfoy? Malfoy. Where's Keitch? Did he —"

Draco shook his head. "It's fine, Potter." He held out his hand and helped his partner – well, former partner, at this point in time – to sit up, unable to ignore another infusion of warmth, this one weaker than the last, but still quite present. "Look." He pointed across the yard at Keitch, who was sufficiently – and perhaps a bit too enthusiastically, by the amount of rope involved – restrained with three Aurors guarding him.

"What the hell did he hit me with?" Potter asked, rubbing at his chest. "Stunning spells don't hurt like that."

"Couldn't tell you. Might want to get checked out at St Mungo's, though. Reckless git, getting yourself hexed," he added. "Could have got yourself killed."

"I could always get myself killed," Potter said, struggling to his feet. "Part of being an Auror. Don't you Unspeakables take risks in your profession?"

"Of course we do," Draco snapped. "We hang out with Aurors who are perfectly happy to go chasing after criminals." Potter blinked at him, looking almost hurt, and Draco sighed. "We also confront mysteries no one understands, you wanker," he said, a bit more gently. This whole thing had him mixed up. It wasn't Potter's fault he was feeling these things – at least, not directly. If he'd gone his whole life without knowing them, he would have been perfectly fine. But now he did, and he had to live with that.

But it didn't mean he had to share everything with Potter, now, did it? It was better – safer – not to share the knowledge that might change everything.

"Come on," Draco said, after a moment. "Let's go home. I just want to sleep. I don't know how long I can stay upright." When was the last time he'd slept properly? It had been at least a week. And the shock of seeing Potter hit – which probably should have been his first indication that there was more at work than just the potion they'd inhaled – coupled with the physical reaction he'd had when they'd touched only made him feel more off-kilter. He needed to lie down, sleep for a couple of days straight, and maybe then he could think about things. But he certainly couldn't do that now.

Potter shook his head. "I can't. Not yet. I have to talk to Kingsley and file my report. And I want to make certain Keitch makes it to a holding cell." He looked steadily at Draco. "You go home, though. I feel... invigorated, I guess, after coming to. I'm going to be awake for a while anyway. I'll start filling in paperwork when I get back to the Ministry."

There was something Potter wasn't saying, but Draco couldn't pick it out from between the words he did speak. After a moment, he sighed. "All right, then. It appears our working relationship is at an end, or nearly so." He paused. "It... it hasn't been as awful as I expected."

Potter offered him a slightly crooked grin. "I suppose I could say the same thing."

Draco nodded, resisting the urge to reach out once more and shake Potter's hand just to see if that

sensation would repeat itself a third time this morning. Even if it didn't, he sort of wanted to touch Potter again, and that worried him. "I'll see you around the Ministry, I suppose. Take care of yourself."

When Potter only murmured a "you too" before being pulled away by Auror Franco, Draco bit his lip and Disapparated home. He knew he should feel better about helping the Aurors in a case that was so important to the Ministry, especially since Minister Shacklebolt had all but promised a glowing report to Unspeakable McNamara, but he just couldn't summon the enthusiasm.

* * *

Still rubbing his sore chest, Harry watched Malfoy disappear from Keitch's property. He hurt like he'd been hit with a well-aimed Bludger, but he felt surprisingly good, otherwise. He felt almost content, and it had nothing to do with catching the bastard, because in all actuality, he'd been out for the best bit of that. But as he went about filing statements with Kingsley and Franco, the contentment faded, and Harry missed it. Almost as much as he missed Malfoy standing beside him, giving him sarcastic little expressions and snide remarks.

Harry was more than a bit afraid he couldn't explain missing Malfoy on the effects of whatever hex Keitch had thrown at him. And though he couldn't explain all of the theory or details behind it, he knew that the pleasant feeling stemmed from Malfoy's touch. And he was almost certain it wasn't a purely physical thing, like it had been back in the Department of Mysteries potions lab. It might be easier to accept, if it was.

By the time Kingsley ordered him home, threatening to Stun and Bind him and carry him home bodily, if that's what it took, Harry was kicking himself for letting Malfoy leave without... well, without saying or doing something. He hadn't even said thank you – not that Malfoy had, either. Fuck, if he was upset he hadn't thanked Malfoy, something was certainly up. When they saw each other tomorrow, Harry would see about remedying that, playing it a bit by ear to avoid the sharper side of Malfoy's tongue.

But five days had passed since Keitch was hauled into the Ministry under Auror supervision, and Harry still hadn't seen Malfoy. The paperwork he'd left with Franco, signed with his name and Auror badge number, had since been officially filed, signed off by Malfoy and the head of the Unspeakables at some point Harry couldn't pinpoint. A stack of parchment had appeared on his desk out of nowhere as he finished the last of his coffee this morning – startling him badly and nearly causing him to spray said documents with the lukewarm liquid – covered in Malfoy's small, neat handwriting. The moment Harry had signed the last indicated space, they disappeared just as suddenly. Surprised, curious, and

admittedly a bit impressed, Harry just blinked at the empty spot on his desk.

He needed more coffee to deal with this sort of thing. The caffeine would be nice, but really, something warm and comforting was just what he needed. And the swill from the communal pot was simply not going to do it.

It felt a bit odd to walk into the coffee shop on his own now. He'd been frequenting the place a few times a week for the better part of four years, sometimes with Ron in tow, but most often on his own. But after a number of trips with Malfoy over the past month, he realised he'd grown used to the routine – ordering his drink, waiting near the counter for it to be ready, and sitting at a table in the far corner of the place as they drank their beverages and discussed the case. Funny how things that had been an irritation and inconvenience at first were now so ingrained that it felt wrong when they were absent.

He was coming out of the loo around the corner from the counter when he heard the barista call out Malfoy's signature drink. Surprised, Harry scanned the handful of patrons waiting around the counter, most scanning the day's issue of the Prophet or chatting with their companions. No one came forward to claim the drink, and Harry nearly shrugged it off as coincidence. But then he caught the back of a white-blond head at a nearby table, so absorbed with scanning the people walking past outside that it didn't appear he'd heard his drink order.

Without over-thinking things, Harry picked up the drink and headed for the table, standing behind Malfoy for several seconds before he could think of anything to say. He finally tried the simplest approach. "Hello."

Malfoy whipped his head around, brow furrowed. "Potter! I didn't see you here when I.... Is that my drink?"

"Yeah. Guess you didn't hear when they called it." He handed it over, slightly frustrated that he no longer had one of his own, and thus an excuse to perhaps sit for a moment and chat. Malfoy's fingers brushed his, and Harry felt a little thrill go through him so faint he might have imagined it. But imaginary or not, it made up his mind on something he hadn't been actively aware he'd been considering. "What are you doing Friday evening?"

Malfoy's eyebrows arched in surprise, then quickly settled into a position that meant he was about to retort with something sarcastic. And then, surprisingly, they smoothed out. "Nothing after leaving work at six. Why?"

Over-analysing had never been his strong suit, being better left to people like Hermione, so Harry did what had always served him best and went with his gut feeling. "How would you like to do something after work? Dinner, drinks at a pub, whatever."

Malfoy looked as if someone had just asked him if he knew he was part house-elf. After a moment, he cleared his throat, coffee in his hands apparently forgotten. "Are you... are you asking me on a date?"

He was, wasn't he? Not a meeting as friends, because they certainly weren't that, but an actual date, where there was an indication of attraction on some level. "Yeah, I think I am. Interested?"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth quirked up. "I just might be. Owl me tomorrow and we'll see for certain."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, all right." He waved a casual goodbye and walked out of the coffee shop, a bit surprised at himself. He'd asked Malfoy on a date. And there might actually be a chance that things would go well.

Besides, what was the worst that could happen?

* * *

Six Weeks Later

"Cheating bastard!"

"Won it fare and square, you tosser!"

"Like hell you did, Potter! That fucking Snitch was mine!"

"Well, as I'm the one with it in my hand, I beg to differ," Harry said with a smirk. "If you think it's yours, why don't you come and get it?"

"Oh, you're on," Draco growled, lunging towards Harry, his face pink and indignant.

"The hell with this!" Unspeakable McNamara shouted as Harry dodged Draco's advance, taunting him with possibly the rudest thing he'd said in months. McNamara looked at Auror Franco. "On their own this time, as you stated, right?"

"Absolutely," Franco agreed, face furious. "Everyone the hell out! Leave them to it! If they kill each other, I'll just fucking deal with the paperwork." He gestured to the rest of the Auror Intramural Quidditch Team, who readily hightailed it away from the pitch, every last one of them looking relieved they wouldn't be required to pull the Seekers away from each other. The Unspeakables looked equally thrilled to be ordered out of there. Across the pitch, both Draco and Harry continued to argue, each of them getting more and more worked up. By the time "self-important wanker" was shouted, they were alone on the pitch.

"Sore loser much, Malfoy?" Harry asked, eyes shining once they were alone. "Not my fault you can't handle the broom between your legs." He poked Draco in the chest, smirking even more.

Draco caught Harry's hand and yanked him close. "I'll show you how I handle the thing between my legs," he breathed, pulling him into a forceful kiss that went on for quite a long time.

"Promises, promises," Harry whispered, still-gloved hand reaching down and cupping the erection growing beneath Draco's robes. "Let's see you try."

Laughing, Draco tore off his own glove with his teeth and ran his hand through Harry's sweaty hair. "Clear your fucking schedule, Potter."

"Since when has there been anyone else on my 'fucking schedule', you prat?" He moaned as Draco sucked lightly on his lower lip. "No need for anyone but you."

"And it's going to stay that way," Draco told him, pulling Harry into the equipment shed and sighing as Harry pressed him up against the wall, quickly moving to undo the series of straps and buckles keeping him trapped in his Quidditch gear. "No matter what I have to do to make it happen."

Fin.