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Chapter 1 to 45

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Chapter: 1

Title: Soldier's Welcome

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

Rating: R

Pairings: Harry/Draco preslash, Ron/Hermione

Warnings: Violence (and plenty of it), profanity, references to sex, takes account of DH but ignores the epilogue, heavy angst.

Summary: It's the first year of Auror training for Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and…Draco Malfoy, But with Hagrid, Snape's second Pensieve, rogue Death Eaters, Auror classes, and someone trying to start a second war to worry about, Harry might not have the time to pay that much attention to Malfoy. At first, anyway.

Author's Notes: This story is the first in a trilogy called *Running to Paradise,* which takes its title from a W. B. Yeats poem. Each story will be novel-length, and each will cover a year of Harry and Draco's training as Aurors. Though there are a lot of fics out there about them acting as Auror partners, there aren't as many about their training, so I hope to cover some original ground there. I'm indebted to a reader named SP777 for suggesting a training fic for me to write.

Soldier's Welcome

Chapter One—Onward Bickering Soldiers

"All *right*, mate!"

Harry barely managed to lift one arm into the proper position before Ron crashed into him and hugged him ecstatically. Then he had to laugh at the expression on Hermione's face. She sat across the table from them and refused to look impressed as Ron whooped and pounded Harry on the back.

"That means that all of us got into Auror training!" Ron whirled away from Harry and performed a dance around the table in the middle of Grimmauld Place's kitchen that could be called a war-dance. Harry laughed again as he watched Hermione clamp her mouth tight and shake her head. Ron refused to notice. He practiced a few kicks in the air instead that he probably imagined were the kind of thing they would learn in the Auror classes, then turned and beamed at Harry. "I *told* you that they weren't going to hold your Potions NEWT score against you!"

Harry flinched. He hated being reminded of the fact that maybe he wasn't good enough to be an Auror and had only been accepted because he was the Boy-Who-Lived. He didn't knowthat that was the reason they had chosen to give him a chance at training, but what if it was?

Ron didn't even take the Potions NEWT, he told himself, but that only made him suspect that they'd taken Ron because he was a war hero. He coughed and said, "I know we have to take different classes. Do we get to choose them, or will it be like first year at Hogwarts and they pick them for us?"

Luckily, that both gave him something else to think about and distracted Hermione from the angry speech on maturity that she was about to hurl at Ron. She glanced at Harry and smiled. "A bit of both. There are five classes that everyone has to take, but they supplement that with three other classes that are concentrated areas of study. You can choose any one of the three." She tapped a piece of parchment in front of her that looked like a Ministry informational pamphlet. "Or more than one."

"No prizes for guessing how many Hermione's going to take," Ron said, and rolled his eyes at his girlfriend.

"Don't be silly, Ron," Hermione said, in a muffled voice as she buried her head back into the stack of paper she'd gathered. "I don't have a Time-Turner, and one of the extra classes doesn't sound very interesting. I'm only going to take seven, not eight." She glanced up at him. "On the other hand, I fully expect that I'll be busy enough that I won't be able to do your homework for you."

Ron gave a loud sigh in her general direction. "Did I *ask* you to? No, I didn't."

Hermione's face turned stormy. Harry spoke as loudly as he could, because once one of their arguments got going, no one else would be able to think or talk about anything else for hours. "What are the five classes that we have to take?"

Hermione promptly pulled out a list on what looked like glossier paper than normal and slid it across the table to him. "Honestly, Harry, I know that you got a copy of this," she said in a

scolding tone. "If you paid attention to your things and kept them in order, then you wouldn't need to depend on me to keep them in order for you."

"But then what would your purpose in life be?" Harry asked as he picked up the list.

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation, but didn't attack him the way she would have attacked Ron for a similar comment. That increased Harry's suspicion that she got so testy with Ron because he was her boyfriend, rather than her friend, and she didn't want to make excuses for his childishness any more. Harry had tried to tell Ron that it was something like that and that he was in danger of losing Hermione several times over the past year as they finished up the classes they had missed during the Horcrux quest and sat their NEWTS at Hogwarts. Ron had loftily ignored him.

Harry hoped he would pay attention soon. Ron and Hermione bickered worse than ever now that they were dating, and he would hate to see them break up.

The list of courses proved to be less informative than he'd wanted, since it was just the titles of the classes without descriptions. Harry raised one eyebrow. "All right," he said. "I think I know what Defensive and Offensive Magic, Battlefield Tactics, and Battle Healing are, but what about Auror Conduct? And Hand-to-Hand Combat? Why do we need to learn that when we have wands?"

"Oh, *Harry,*" Hermione said. "How do you think Aurors learn what regulations they're supposed to obey and how to work together with other Departments in the Ministry? That's what Auror Conduct is about. They'll teach us what spells we aren't allowed to cast, and what penalties there will be if we do, and how to arrest someone, and how to do interrogations." Her eyes were bright.

"That's going to be her favorite bloody class, I can see it right now," Ron grumbled into his hand. "Because it's all about the bloody *rules.*"

Harry was getting tired of playing peacemaker, so he joined in with Hermione's glare at Ron before he added, "And Hand-to-Hand Combat is for the situations where we drop our wands, then, or can't reach them." He felt silly for not thinking about that before.

Hermione nodded. "And for the situations where we can't cast magic because we're in front of Muggles," she said. "Or close combat situations where most spells would hurt our friends and allies as well as the criminals. Really, I wish that I'd known how to do that when we were hunting the Horcruxes." She reached across the table to stroke the paper as if it were the textbook for one of the classes. "We could have used it several times."

Harry peered at the list of optional classes, in part because he would start thinking about the war again if he listened too hard to Hermione's words. "Observation, Battle Brewing, Recognizing Dark Magic…why do we have to have separate classes in observation and recognizing Dark magic? Isn't that something that we'll learn how to do through the other classes anyway?"

"Yes," Hermione said, in a tone of strained patience. "But those classes are for people who want to learn the skills all in one big lump." She tilted her head to the side. "I don't think I'll take Observation, actually. I need more practice with recognizing Dark magic and brewing potions in the middle of battle."

"I think Battle Brewing is actually about brewing potions that you use *for* battle," said Ron, around a mouthful of cereal.

"Maybe you're right," Hermione said, glancing away with sharp lines around her eyes.

Harry sighed and intervened *again.* "Well, I'll choose Observation, then. I don't think I need much more skill at recognizing Dark magic, and Potions is always going to be my worst subject. We'll probably learn the most useful ones in Battle Healing, anyway. But it would have been an awfully good thing if I'd been a better observer at some points in the past." He fell silent, and wondered if he could have done better if he'd noticed years ago that Snape wasn't really a slimy, irredeemable git or that there was something unusual about Dumbledore's wand.

Then he locked the thoughts away. What-If was a fun game to play at night, when he couldn't sleep anyway. He refused to play it during the daylight hours. "What about you, Ron?"

"Recognizing Dark Magic," Ron said, and leaned over Harry's shoulder to look down at the schedule. "I'm *very* observant. For example, right now the two of you are looking at each other with that special expression that means you think I'm hopeless."

Hermione hastily blinked. Harry laughed in spite of himself and settled back in his chair, looking fondly from one to the other of his two best friends.

He'd thought it was a dream come true when Hermione changed her mind about becoming a lawyer right away and declared that she wanted to train as an Auror instead, because she wasn't ready to start doing good from behind a desk. Then he'd wondered if it really was when he saw the way Ron and Hermione fought.

But at the moment, he felt bright and hopeful again. Ron was giving Hermione one of the soft smiles that made Harry sure that everything would be all right for them, and he had a tight hand on Harry's shoulder. No matter how close Ron and Hermione became, they did their best to make sure that Harry didn't feel left out.

Except, of course, as much as was inevitable.

Harry sighed. There *was* one game that he played with his mind during the day, and that game was called, "Let's Not Think About Ginny." He began playing it again as he asked if Hermione had a more detailed description of the classes, and Hermione fetched out another pamphlet.

Harry grinned as he read that Auror Conduct was taught by Hestia Jones, who had been a

member of the Order of the Phoenix. If classes that boring *had* to exist, then it was for the best if a friend could teach them.

"I do not understand why you are doing this, Draco."

"That's all right, Mother." Draco didn't look up from packing his books into a bag. He'd chosen carefully among the books that he still possessed from Hogwarts. Some of the older Potions books had sentimental value, which meant he was ruthlessly going to leave them behind. He wasn't venturing out of the Manor and into the wider world for sentimental reasons. But he would take the Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions books from his last three years of classes. He weighed his newest Herbology book thoughtfully in his hands, wondering if it would be useful. "Father doesn't understand, either."

"Draco…"

That was a tone of voice he had to respond to. He wouldn't be his mother's son if he didn't. Draco looked up, then reached out and clasped her hand when he saw it extended to him. He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Narcissa smiled tiredly at him. She had looked weary ever since the day when the Wizengamot had pronounced a sentence of two years in Azkaban for Lucius and a year of being without a wand for her. As long as she stayed in the Manor, with house-elves ready to do anything she asked them, she wasn't helpless, but Draco knew that wasn't the point. The loss of a wand crippled a wizard, no matter what the other circumstances. The best that could be said was that the Ministry hadn't snapped her wand, only removed it from the Manor. Minister Shacklebolt himself had promised it would be kept in a secure location. With that, Draco reckoned, they had to be content.

The upshot of his parents' agreeing to accept those punishments was that Draco himself had had to do nothing but make a solemn promise that he wouldn't use Dark Arts again and then surrender his wand to be "tested" for a month (once he got it back from Potter, who had been abrupt but decent about the thing under the circumstances). He'd been able to study privately for the NEWTS and sit them, and he'd had the courage—and the determination to show everyone that the Malfoys were no cowards or criminals, to feel chastened by the Dark Lord's loss in the war—to apply to Auror training.

Now he'd been accepted, and he'd had to face his share of bewildered stares from his parents in the past month, as well as weary smiles and soft attempts to persuade him otherwise.

"I have to do this, Mother," he said, rubbing his fingers across her knuckles. They were white, he noticed. Of course, they were white all the time now. Narcissa seemed to take a harder grip on things around her as her hold on what had been essential truths for so long slipped away. "For one thing, it's good to show our enemies that we don't feel *guilty.* We didn't do anything wrong. We didn't kill people and torture them for fun, like Aunt Bellatrix did." His mother flinched a little. She was still sensitive about Bellatrix's death. Draco had tried to be honest with himself

since the final battle under the impression that it was self-deception that had been his father's downfall. In the spirit of that honesty, he didn't know if she was more upset about a sister she once loved being killed or a Weasley being the one to kill her. "We didn't want to invite those people into our Manor. Everyone knows now that the Dark Lord compelled me to hurt people." Draco grimaced. That had been the most painful part of his confession in front of the Wizengamot, listening to himself blurt intimate details under Veritaserum while the watching faces assumed expressions of self-righteous pity. They had no *right.* "The Ministry has declared our tolls paid. Why shouldn't I show them that we have as much right to participate in the wizarding world as anyone else?"

"I can understand that," Narcissa said. Draco waited. He had come to know that those words usually preceded a refusal to understand. "But why must it be Auror training, Draco? Why not wait a few years and then resume our rightful place?"

Draco hesitated. He had wanted to avoid distressing his mother, and so he hadn't told her the truth. He spent more time outside the Manor than she did, and saw more. But now he didn't think he could avoid it.

"That rightful place will never come back," he said. "Not unless we fight for it. People who were Father's friends for years turn away with a sneer when they see me. Most of the committees or charities he donated to have altered their records to say that no Malfoy money ever reached them. I know, because I checked," he added, as Narcissa lifted a devastated, disbelieving face towards him. "We can't wait for power to return to us. We have to seize it."

His mother shut her eyes and stood in a listening attitude for a long moment. Draco didn't disturb her. He thought she was bidding farewell to her dreams of normality.

Then she stood, and gave him a sharp nod. "As my ancestors did, when they saw a power vacuum and determined that the Blacks should be the ones to occupy it," she said. "I am proud that you are living up to your heritage, Draco."

Draco kissed her cheek and reached again for his books, relieved. She had taken the news much better than his father, and hadn't even demanded that he explain his other reasons.

Those reasons were related less to his family and more to himself. Draco wanted to show that he was more than the pathetic little Slytherin, Harry Potter's shadow, that he knew most people thought of if they remembered his first six years at Hogwarts, and more than the Dark Lord's torturer. Someone powerful and dangerous in his own right, someone with skills that had to be respected or run away from.

And then there was the minor fact that no Malfoy had ever been an Auror before, so Draco was walking down a new path none of his ancestors had trod.

I am going to be a Malfoy, but I am also going to be myself.

"What's *Malfoy* doing here?" Ron hissed into Harry's ear.

Harry blinked and glanced around. "You were right," he muttered, barely spotting the familiar blond hair whisking behind the shoulder of a tall, burly man with a black beard eating half his face. "You don't need to take the Observation class at all." He shrugged. "And does it matter? If he's only here to watch and dream of what he can never have, it shouldn't be a problem."

"And what if they actually accepted him as a recruit?" It was Hermione who said that, and not Ron, to Harry's surprise. Her face was tense. "I don't want someone who thinks I should curl up and die training with me. He might decide to make it happen."

Harry shrugged again, helplessly. "Well, I don't think Kingsley or anyone else would let him actually *say* it—"

"But if he thinks it?"

Harry didn't get a chance to respond, because seven wizards Apparated into the front of the enormous room where all the trainees were gathered with a series of bangs that called immediate attention. The pink smoke that billowed up around them from someone's wand didn't hurt, either. Harry craned his neck, trying to get a good look at everyone. These were probably the Aurors he would spend the next few years training under. He was just hoping not to see a Death Eater.

The Head Auror, Gawain Robards, was easy enough to recognize. Harry had met with him several times over the past few months to discuss his experiences during the war, because those experiences had been helpful to the Aurors in deciding who to sentence harshly during the Death Eater trials. He wasn't big, but he was *broad*; he had arms that looked as if he could carry a house on them. His hair was pale brown and swept his shoulders. The delicate spectacles on his face looked out of place, given that. He looked up and down the rows of recruits and nodded once, deliberately. Harry had no idea what he was nodding at, but he tried to stand up straighter and suck in his stomach anyway. With no more Voldemort to run around after, he was afraid that he was starting to gain weight.

The second most striking figure was the one who stepped up beside Robards and spun her wand through her fingers, smiling unpleasantly. Harry shivered. She looked like McGonagall without the glasses and without the kindness. She had grey hair that was twisted into a braid that probably gave her headaches and a dark line under her neck that dived into her robes. Harry wondered if that was a scar or the chain of a locket. This was probably Alice Holder, Robards's second-in-command and disciplinarian.

He had time to see that the other people on stage were three women and two men before Robards put his hands to his mouth and whistled sharply. The last chatter died down, and Robards nodded again.

"I would say that I am here to welcome you to Auror training," he said, "except that at best I can give you only a soldier's welcome." He flicked his wand, and a spinning ball of fire appeared

above his head, casting his face into radiant light and the rest of the room into shadow at the same time. Harry stared in fascination. He hadn't ever heard of a spell like that. He could hear Hermione muttering under her breath beside him, probably wishing for parchment and ink so that she could write her observations about the spell's effects down.

"Make no mistake," Robards said, lowering his voice a bit to emphasize his points, though Harry thought no one else in the room could possibly look at or listen to anyone but him. "Being an Auror is more like being a soldier than anything else. There's a reason that several of your courses have the word 'Battle' in the title. We are the first line of defense against Dark wizards, and even ordinary wizards and witches who might be cursed and not responsible for their actions. We are here to defend the innocent, to lock away those who might break the laws and try to impose their will on the wizarding world, and ultimately to prevent the outbreak of another war like the one that so many of us remember so well." He clenched his hands and bowed his head. "It is our failing that the Aurors played so small a part in winning that war."

Harry found himself wanting to protest, even though he knew better than anyone that the Aurors hadn't helped that much. He bit his lip and was silent. Robards was certainly convincing. Harry could see why he was Head Auror.

Robards lifted his head with a defiant toss that told any watching Dark wizards without words to go fuck themselves. "But we will be an organized and disciplined array from this moment forwards," he said, with a sound of gathering thunder. "And I do promise that you will become part of that array strongly and gracefully." He shrugged, and his face had an expression of chilling indifference on it. "If you cannot, or if you try to struggle for your own personal glory and power, then you will be dropped from the program."

"Well, that's Malfoy taken care of," Ron muttered to Harry.

"For now," Robards said, stepping aside, "I will leave it up to Auror Holder and your professors to distribute your schedules and inquire about your choices for optional classes. Regular training does not begin until tomorrow." A smile flashed across his face, so quick that Harry would have missed if it he'd blinked. "Welcome to Auror training."

And then he was gone, banishing the ball of flame as he went so that regular light came flooding back. Harry whistled under his breath and focused his attention on Holder and the rest with renewed determination. He was going to show everyone that he was good at serving the wizarding world and not just taking risks or having wild adventures.

If he could do that, then maybe he could fill the hole in himself that Voldemort's death seemed to have left behind.

Draco tightened his hold on the strap of the bag over his shoulder. The announcement had shaken him, but he was still determined to exercise his personal ambition here and rise to the top of the Auror ranks. As long as he kept up the veneer of a public servant on the surface, why shouldn't he achieve power and glory? The world was more complicated than someone like Robards

understood, particularly for someone like Draco.

I'm going to do this. They won't drive me away, no matter what happens. Potter himself can't drive me away, if he's here.

So he listened closely as the disagreeable-looking Auror Holder stepped towards them and began to speak, but without fear. He was done with being a coward, with being a child, with being anything that he didn't want to be.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Meet the Teachers

A day should have been long enough to get his balance and feel somewhat at home in the Auror trainee barracks, Harry thought—especially because they had bigger rooms than the Gryffindor boys' rooms at Hogwarts, and only two people had to share them. (He and Ron were together, of course). The barracks weren't incredibly exciting, but they had carpet on the floors and no scenes of violent and bloody death on the walls, and that was enough for him. He didn't know exactly where they were, since the only access was by Floo, and all the fireplaces he could find led straight back to the Ministry.

Not a very strange place, not one that would offer the answers to a lot of questions. The mysteries and the training would take place in the Ministry, and he should have been content with that.

But he still felt as though he'd lost his footing when he, Ron, Hermione, and a group of perhaps twenty other trainees stepped into the room that would hold their Hand-to-Hand Combat class. Maybe it was the way that he knew almost no one, and only Ron and Hermione's bickering was familiar. Maybe it was the way that a lot of other people seemed tense and nervous and solemn, suggesting that he should take Auror training a lot more seriously than he'd ever taken the classes at Hogwarts.

Maybe it was the nightmare last night, he thought, and rubbed his forehead, and told himself that his scar not hurting was a *good* thing, and paid attention to the rest of the room.

The floor was a soft springy material that they could walk easily on but which, Harry thought, probably wouldn't hurt to be thrown on, either. The walls were brilliant blue tile, with mirrors recessed into them and covered with protective, transparent wards. The light came from soft,

drifting balls of silvery smoke that stayed near the ceiling and in fairly solid shapes. The better to avoid breaking them, Harry reckoned, and they took up less room than fireplaces or torches.

There were no chairs or desks. Harry saw Hermione notice that, look disappointed, and put away the parchment and ink she'd already taken out.

Then the door opened and their teacher strode into the room, looking around the crowd and appearing to count them with her eyes and recognize them in the same way, though Harry was certain he'd never seen her before.

She was a tall woman, probably in her late thirties, with ruffled brown hair that relaxed Harry a little. He recognized someone else with hair that wouldn't ever be tamed. She wore Auror robes, but trimmed short so they wouldn't interfere with her movements. Harry couldn't see what color her eyes were from the middle of the room, but they were sharp, and that was enough for him.

And she moved as lightly on her feet as a tiger that had learned to dance.

She came to a stop and faced them with a motion that sent her robes swirling around them and which Harry thought even Snape could have learned from. When she tossed her head back, the muscles in her neck made a snapping sound. "My name is Auror Astraea Gregory," she said, "and this is the class where you learn how to use your bodies and brains instead of your wands."

Hermione stood up very straight, as if she wanted to prove that she could do that. Ron was looking at Gregory in admiration and nodded. Harry slouched down a little. He would be just as happy if no one noticed him.

Because Gregory was probably a sadist in her spare time, his movement drew her attention instead of deflecting it. She smiled and snapped her fingers. "Harry Potter," she said. "I've heard all about your adventures." She paused. "Most of them seem to rely on luck."

A few people in the class tittered. Harry glared at her. He was reminded of Snape, except that he thought this woman was more impersonal than Snape had ever managed.

"Come up here and show me that you can do more than that," she said, softly, tauntingly.

Harry sighed and made his way to the front of the room. When he turned around near Gregory, he could see Malfoy at the back of the group, staring at him without expression. Harry scowled. *Of course Ron would have to be right, and of course Malfoy would have to be here to see me humiliated.*

"I will teach you how to handle yourself in battle situations where you cannot reach your wands," Gregory said casually, pacing back and forth in front of Harry. Harry watched her closely and tried to ignore the feeling that she could kill him with two fingers. "How to escape from your bonds using purely physical means. How to train yourselves so that you are a match for those criminals who are larger, stronger, and faster than you are by nature. How to—"

She whirled towards Harry, and lashed out with one foot, catching him in the kneecap. Harry groaned and staggered. Gregory took another step and this time curved her foot so that she him in the back of the same knee. Harry fell. He'd heard something pop, and he didn't want to know what it was.

"Pay attention when someone is trying to distract you," Gregory finished, without sounding as if she'd ever lost her place in her sentence. "And how to fall." She looked down at Harry and rolled her eyes. "You're already getting slightly out of shape, Potter," she said. "We can't be having *that*. On your feet, and this time, do your best to counter me."

Harry shut his eyes tightly as he scrambled back up. He had known that life wasn't fair from the time he was two years old. No need to start wishing it would be fair to him now.

"Welcome."

Draco examined the Auror who had stepped into the front of the large, cool, grey room critically. He was hoping to see someone who fit the profession of teacher better than Gregory. Draco knew *that* one's soul. She cared only about the subject and not about the way that she hammered it into her students' heads.

By contrast, Auror Daffyd Dearborn, who taught Offensive and Defensive Magic, was a model of decorum. He wore muted robes and a single onyx ring on his right thumb that Draco knew marked someone who had taken high honors at the private Wizarding Philosophy School in Wales. He had a philosopher's face, coolly inquiring, as he watched the class that Draco had been assigned to—which included Potter, of course—settle itself into the array of benches and desks in front of him.

"You are here to learn magical theory," Dearborn said. "The Ministry makes distinctions between defensive and offensive magic that can seem arbitrary to most. They are not. They are simply based on systems and principles that are no longer widely taught or understood." For a moment, the mild cousin of a sneer crossed his lips. "Once, they were part of the structure of courses at Hogwarts, but the Board of Governors in their *infinite* wisdom decided that such ideas were too difficult for tender young minds."

Potter groaned under his breath and let his head slump down towards his desk as if Gregory had kicked him in the temple instead. Weasley looked bewildered. Granger was scribbling breathless notes.

Pleased that he would learn something *interesting* for once, about history and structures of power, Draco began to take his own notes.

"I know that you're all expecting this class to be boring." Hestia Jones held up one solemn hand. "So help me Merlin, I will do my best to make sure that you learn the rules and yet aren't bored to death as it happens." She grinned, showing dimples in either cheek. "What good will it to be to

you if you come out of this class with a head full of cotton instead of rules because I put you to sleep? Doesn't reflect well on me, or on the Ministry, either," she ended, with a confidential wink.

Harry leaned back in his seat, grinning. This was more like it. He was sure Gregory was a perfectly capable teacher—when she wasn't interested in intimidating her students—and Dearborn reminded him of McGonagall with the fun sucked out of her, but sometimes you wanted someone who was *personable.* And Hestia looked plenty personable.

He heard a soft sigh from behind him, and correctly identified the sound as disgusted and the person as Malfoy without even looking. He waited until Hestia was calling on other people and matching names to faces and then turned and glared at him.

Malfoy, who for some reason had taken a seat right at Harry's shoulder, arched an eyebrow back. He looked from Harry to Hestia for a moment, and then a faint smirk touched his mouth. "What's the matter, Potter?" he whispered. "Concerned for the honor of your little girlfriend?"

"Malfoy, Draco!"

Harry couldn't have planned a retort half as good as Hestia calling Malfoy's name right then. It made him have to sit up straight and answer politely, in a tone that said he had been distracted talking to someone else. Hestia gave him a skeptical glance and a small headshake that caused Malfoy's face to darken at once. Pleased, Harry turned towards the front again and responded cheerfully when his name was called.

Hestia reached Ron's name a moment later and nodded in pleasure as she laid down the parchment with the list on it. "That's the lot, then," she said. "Now, first of all…" She whirled her wand above her head.

Harry watched in delight as several pink strands coalesced together above Hestia's head, creating an intricate series of images. Auror Gregory hadn't used her wand at all, of course, and Auror Dearborn seemed to think that wands were only for putting increasingly long series of notes on the board. It was about time that they got to see some magic that other people outside the Aurors didn't practice.

A small stick figure with wizard robes took its place in the center of the design. A moment later, it started running down a corridor, its robes flapping and its face distorted into a worried frown. Harry squinted and saw that it was holding a piece of paper in its hands.

"This is the kind of thing that happens when you don't pay attention in Auror Conduct," said Hestia, shaking her head ruefully. "Auror Jobs is on a case. He needs to get permission to investigate a Muggle area. It's a matter of life and death, and time could be important! But his partner is sick, and the Head Auror is in an important meeting where he must not be disturbed. Where does he go?"

The stick figure reached the top of a flight of stairs and looked around in agony for a moment. Then its face brightened, and it started down one corridor of a pair that opened up in front of it. The next moment, it turned around again and scratched its head, looking longingly down the other corridor. It took one step back, then another forwards, and finally stood still in indecision, waving its paper over its head. Harry wasn't the only one to laugh; he heard Ron, too, though Hermione was whispering something indignantly about "learning with pictures instead of words."

"He doesn't know," Hestia said. "Maybe he should go to Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, because he suspects there might be a Muggle artifact involved in this case. On the other hand, Magical Catastrophes might have jurisdiction over this, since it's a building catastrophe. And yet again, maybe the Obliviators need to know, because Auror Jobs is almost certain that magic is going to come into sight of Muggles soon. What to *do*?"

Auror Jobs bit his lip and darted off down one of the imaged corridors, vanishing from sight. A moment later, a series of scribbled words that dissolved before Harry could read them rose from both corridors at once.

"He chose the wrong Department," Hestia said, shaking her head. "And now not only are the people he disturbed for no reason upset, but the Departments that should have been alerted are, too, and the Auror Corps are embarrassed—because this is the sort of thing Auror Conduct was designed to take care of." She turned around and wagged her wand at the class. "*Pay attention.* Though no one will say it who's high up in the ranks, this class is designed to cover your arse in the event of an emergency. It should be called Covering Your Arse, but then we'd get a whole bunch of people wanting to take it for the wrong reasons."

Harry led the laugh this time, which was enough, at least for him, to cover the snort from Malfoy behind him.

"Good afternoon."

Draco was relieved again. It appeared that Battle Healing, a class he thought *should* be taken seriously, was to have the input of someone almost as reserved as Auror Dearborn. The room where they met was large and white, covered with beds, reminding him of the Hogwarts hospital wing. A stool sat by each bed, which at least split Potter apart from his disgusting friends and ensured that he couldn't whisper and giggle with them. Draco, as the first one into the room, took his seat and studied the teacher as the rest scrambled around.

She sat on the stool at the head of the semicircle of beds, turning her head from side to side slowly, as if she didn't want to disturb the heavy braid of black hair coiled around her temples. Her skin was dark brown, her eyes black, her features aristocratic. She wore Auror robes slashed with Healer's green, and the crossed bone and wand of St. Mungo's on her left shoulder. A green scarf clung to her hair by what seemed like the tiniest wisps, which might be another reason that she moved her head so slowly.

"I am Battle Healer Maryam Portillo Lopez," she said, when the last scrambling bug of a trainee was seated. She didn't raise her voice; she didn't have to to get attention, any more than Professor Snape did. Draco swallowed against a prickling of tears that he didn't want to experience right now. Her words had a medium-thick overlay of a gentle accent, which Draco reckoned was Spanish. "I will instruct you in the arts of healing in a battlefield situation. None of you in this class will acquire more than the rudiments of the art, but I will make sure that they are *graceful* rudiments, at least."

The young, unrefined Jones woman would have smiled after those words, and ruined them. Portillo Lopez did not. She spread her fingers instead, and a transparent dummy appeared on each hospital bed. Each one had a ragged wound in the left forearm—the exact place, Draco couldn't help noticing, that someone would have a wound after trying to dig the Dark Mark out of his skin.

"I prefer to let students experiment on their own and then discuss technique afterwards," said Portillo Lopez. She waved her fingers again, and bandages appeared next to the dummies. "Dress the wounds, and then explain why you have done so in that particular fashion."

Draco picked up the bandages and applied himself to the task with a good will. Two things made this class his favorite immediately: the way Portillo Lopez trusted her students to act on their own first and tell her what they had done later—

And the way Potter hesitated, looking from the bandages to the wound, not seeming to have the first bloody clue what to do.

Wait, Draco thought in amusement, as he watched Weasley trying to wrap bandages around the dummy's arm and soaking them with blood in the process. *There's a third thing that makes it my favorite.*

Harry hesitated and looked up and down the large room that was supposedly the one they would have Battlefield Tactics in. There were balconies curving out from the walls, staircases that led up from the floor to the balconies—or looked as if they did, since all of them twisted halfway up—softly glowing stones set into the floor that he wouldn't want to step on, and floating boxes and stones that made him want to duck. What there wasn't was a sign of seats to sit on, or their teacher.

"This is different," Hermione said, cocking her head back so that she could look up between the boxes and stones. "A teaching environment focused distinctly on the idea of practicality and motion. I think something like this would work better for Hand-to-Hand Combat."

"Right, Hermione," Ron said, in the tone that meant he was *obviously* humoring her and about to say something stupid. Harry turned around to intervene, but he wasn't in time. "Because they should include all the things that belong in Battlefield Tactics in the Hand-to-Hand Combat class."

Hermione turned around, glaring at him. "I know that we'll probably learn to cope with different environments here," she snapped. "But we'll be using wands in this class most of the time. I'm just saying that I think we should also learn how to fight hand-to-hand in different environments, and that practicing on flat ground in the open isn't the best way—"

"Catch!"

The cheerful voice came from a balcony above them and to the right, and the next moment, a weight was hurtling towards Harry from it, sliding along a rope that he hadn't seen, so thin and fine was it. He didn't have the time to move out of the way, so he lifted his arms, braced his body, and hoped for the best.

The weight crashed into him. Harry grunted and staggered, and then the knee that Gregory had kicked that morning tried to go out from beneath him. He managed to stand, but it was a hard struggle, and the weight that had hit him—which turned out to be a person unclipping himself from a harness attached to a rope—didn't help, thrashing and turning as it was.

The person's boots hit the floor at last, and he grabbed Harry's hand and squeezed it happily. "Thanks," he said. "You didn't do bad as someone with no forewarning and no experience in this sort of thing." Then he rocked back on his heels and studied Harry's forehead, grinning when he saw the scar. "Or maybe you do have some experience in this sort of thing."

Harry gave a reserved smile back as he examined the man, trying to decide what he thought of him. He was a compact black man, with some of the same grace and strength that Gregory showed, but a far more open face. His hair was short and dark, and he had blue eyes that darted in so many directions Harry took a subtle step away from him.

Of course, with his eyes moving so fast, the man noticed that and swept him a small bow. "I don't blame you," he said. "It can be overwhelming. But when you've done tactics as long as I have, then maybe you'll look the same way." He turned and saluted the rest of the students with a hand clapped to his forehead and an abrupt nod. "Samwise Ketchum, at your service."

Hermione let out a brief, started laugh. Ketchum grinned at her. "You've read *The Lord of the Rings* too, then? My parents liked it a little too much for their own good." He rolled his eyes. "At least Samwise shortens acceptably, and at least they thought *he* was the real hero of the book and not Frodo, because he resisted the Ring." He clapped his hands together and spun around so that he was looking at the rest of the class. "Before you can ask, yes, I'm Muggleborn, and yes, I'm your Battlefield Tactics teacher, and yes, I will expect you to learn *everything* I teach. I'm certain that you all can."

Harry wondered whether he should laugh or shake his head. Most of the class was doing both. Malfoy looked as though he had swallowed the world's largest pickle.

Ketchum swung around, sweeping a hand grandly up towards the balcony he'd swung from. "We're going to start with indoor environments," he said, "since statistically we confront more

Dark wizards in houses and other buildings. I want you to find the fastest route that you can up to that balcony—keeping in mind that you could be seen from up there, and so you'll need to think about cover as well. I have several assistants, second-year trainees, who will be more than happy to launch hexes and jinxes at you in case you forget." He grinned and jumped back. "Off you go."

Harry selected the first staircase he saw and placed a foot on the bottom step, looking up cautiously. He thought he saw the edge of a trainee's robe and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself without even thinking; it had become an automatic reflex after the last several months of the Horcrux hunt. A Tripping Jinx flashed past him in the next moment, confirming his decision.

"Very good, Potter!" Ketchum called, as the Tripping Jinx hit Malfoy. "No one *said* that you couldn't use magic," he added, probably because the rest of the class was staring.

Harry grinned and started up—

And a second Tripping Jinx caught him and rolled him down the rest of the stairs with a jarring thump.

"Oh, well," Ketchum said, "no one said that my trainees weren't good at seeing through Disillusionment Charms, either."

Draco groaned as he dropped into his seat at the front of the next class. After the disaster that was Battlefield Tactics—he had four new bruises and a swelling on the side of his face to match Potter's swollen knee—he had hoped for a normal teacher for Observation. He was taking both that class and Battle Brewing, having decided that he needed instruction in both.

Instead, the man at the front of the classroom had flyaway grey hair, spectacles too big for his face, and an expression that reminded Draco of Dumbledore's customary befuddled one. Not only that, but he was examining a leaf through a magnifying lens. Draco shook his head and leaned back in the chair as the rest of the class filed in behind him. *Fuck, all I wanted was a quiet year, and it doesn't look like I'll get that at all, what with a crazy Mudblood in Tactics and this man, who'll probably have us watching leaves.*

The professor waited until everyone was seated—or else he just didn't notice they were there. Draco knew which one *he* was willing to wager was true. Then he turned around, blinked mild grey eyes at them, and held up the leaf. "My name is Francis Pushkin," he said, "and I want you to tell me what you see."

Draco squinted at the leaf. He waited for someone else to say something, but they all stared with their jaws hanging open, as though the leaf was the most wondrous sight ever. He sighed wearily and raised his hand. When Pushkin nodded to him, he said, "It's a large green leaf, of an oval shape, with equally large veins. And by the way that it shines in the light, it would be useful in a limited number of Potions."

Pushkin had been nodding along, but he paused when Draco finished speaking and raised an eyebrow. "And is that all?" he asked.

Potter snickered. Draco closed his fingers tight on the wand and thought again of the way that Potter had rolled down the stairs in Tactics and utterly failed to match Gregory in any noticeable way in Combat.

A few other people added tentative observations, and each time Pushkin didn't seem to hear what he'd expected. He sighed at the end and said, "I shall teach you to observe *everything*, and then to make sense of your observations." He waved his wand, and a glass case at the front of the room opened. Twenty other leaves, exactly like the one he held, floated out and landed on their desks, accompanied by magnifying lenses. "Now, you will examine your leaves for the next hour and create a list of one hundred facts about them."

Draco stared at Pushkin. Given the mild, stubborn expression on his face, it seemed that he was entirely serious.

Draco groaned piteously and turned to his task. It seemed that he should have taken just Battle Brewing after all.

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—The Large, Hairy Hand of the Past

"You've been working too hard!"

Harry didn't want to notice the words. When Ron shouted them in his ear, though, he didn't have much choice. He reeled against the back of his chair and blinked stupidly at his best friend for a long moment. Then he sighed and said, "Yes, well, that's rather the point of Auror training, isn't it?" and bent again over the leaf that Natural Philosopher Pushkin had given them in Observation. He only had sixty facts so far. He needed to find another forty before the weekend—or, as Pushkin had said in his mild way, he would be very disappointed in Harry.

"But working too hard dulls your brain." Ron danced around his chair the way that he'd danced around the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place on the day that Harry received his acceptance letter. Harry found himself smiling in spite of his weariness and irritation. Maybe Ron was right. It was only Tuesday, and that meant he had three whole days to find the forty facts he needed.

Ignoring the immediate reminder that he would be busy with other classes most of the hours of those days, he folded his arms and shot back, "I dare you to say that to Hermione."

Ron sighed loudly. "Her brain is a freak of nature. We can't be expected to share it." He tugged at Harry's arm impatiently. "Come on, let's go drink at the Hog's Head."

Harry concealed a snort of laughter as he stood up to fetch his cloak. "*That's* your grand gesture of rebellion? Something we could have done at Hogwarts?"

"We're not supposed to do it *now*," Ron said. "And give me more time. I'm sure that I'll think up grander gestures later." He pulled at Harry's arm again.

"Down, Rover," Harry said gravely. "Be a good dog and you can have a biscuit when we come home."

"Oh, shut *up*," Ron said, but he still held open the door as Harry ducked out of their room.

It wasn't hard to leave the trainee barracks, once you knew where to look for the hidden doors. Harry had assumed at first that the Floos really were the only connection their rooms had with the outside world, but Hermione had explained patiently to him that that was stupid, and unsafe in the event of a disaster that collapsed the fireplaces or which meant magic wouldn't work. Each corridor had a cunningly hidden panel that would open if you stood in front of it and recited a paragraph of the Auror Code of Ethics at it. It took a while to figure out what paragraph worked for the one closest to their rooms, of course, but an extremely serious trainee named Darien had discovered it after a long night of non-stop reading and had taught it to the rest of them.

Harry thought that doors of this sort didn't really answer Hermione's objection about a disaster that meant the end of all magic in the immediate area, but he was too exhilarated to care as he ducked out into the cool night air with Ron right behind him. This *was* like being back at Hogwarts again.

Ron winked at him and nodded to his pocket. "You have your Invisibility Cloak, mate?"

Harry patted his robe and felt the silky cloth wrinkle. "Yeah." Most of the others would ignore anyone who left at this time, six in the evening, but coming back after nine was frowned on by the older trainees. Probably because most of them looked as if they'd eaten lemons for breakfast all throughout the past year, Harry thought rebelliously.

Ron grinned. "Let's go, then!" He raised his wand and Apparated to the Hog's Head, with Harry a breath behind him.

The pub was quiet when they made their way into it, but Harry at once spotted a familiar face. He nudged Ron so that he would look in the right direction. Ron immediately began to wave and clap his hands. "Hagrid! Hagrid! Over here!"

Hagrid sat upright and gave them a guilty look. The next moment, he seemed to realize who it was and smiled with genuine pleasure. "'Arry!" he called, lifting his hand. "Ron! Come over 'ere and be introduced!" He turned to the figure who sat beside him under a heavy dark cloak; it was too small to be Madame Maxime, the way that Harry had automatically assumed it must be at first.

Harry could feel his back stiffening as he and Ron made their way over to the table, Ron bellowing an order for Firewhisky along the way. He couldn't help it. Dark cloaks reminded him of Death Eaters.

He thought he was being overly paranoid until he recognized the crook of Ron's elbow under his robe. Ron was holding on tight to his wand. Harry relaxed and felt a little better about sitting down across from Hagrid.

The figure in the cloak didn't look up or try to identify itself in any way, though Harry caught a glimpse of white hair and a strong smell of horses. Hagrid beamed at him. "'Arry, this is Mister—"

The figure reached out and laid a hand on Hagrid's arm. Harry tried to see what the hand was like, but a thick glove covered it.

Hagrid's face fell, and he coughed. "Er, right. This is Mister, uh, Nemo."

Harry blinked. He actually recognized the word, much to his surprise. Hermione was "doing a bit of light reading in Latin to keep my brain occupied," and he'd happened to see her dictionary open at the proper place to define "nemo." It meant "nobody."

Ron didn't seem to notice. "Pleased to meet you, Nemo," he said, and leaned back in his chair and waved his hand. "What do you have to do to get decent service here?" he complained.

A sullen-looking server finally carried the Firewhisky over to them. Ron opened it and took a drink that made Harry wince to watch it; he was certain his throat would be scorched if he tried the same thing. "Ah, that's better," he said. "Now, Mr. Nemo, where did you say you were from? You don't look English."

Harry hid his smile in his Firewhisky. Ron was no fool, but he was very good at looking like one.

Nemo made a short motion with his hands, as though he was trying to fend off Ron's eyes from looking at him, and then he gave a dry, rasping cough and said, "I have been many places in my time, including England. And I think our business is done here." He rose and gave a formal bow to Hagrid.

Harry leaned back in his chair in imitation of Ron and tried to focus on Nemo as if he were a problem in Observation. What would Pushkin tell him to look for? What were the five most prominent facts that Harry could tell about him?

One. He kept the cloak swept close around him so that none of his face showed. That suggested he was worried about being recognized, maybe as non-human, if anyone could see a single feature, instead of worried about preventing someone from seeing a scar.

Two. He was stooped even after he rose to his full height. Maybe that was natural; maybe he was trying to conceal how tall he was.

Three. His back was rippled along the spine for a short distance. Harry thought that came from a braid of hair.

Four. He'd been meeting with Hagrid. That was bad news, especially considering that Hagrid had received Norberta's egg from Quirrell in this same pub.

Five. His cloak had frayed edges to it, which Harry only noticed when Nemo turned away. The edges looked like the marks of teeth. Harry smiled a bit. If he'd come to sell an exotic animal to Hagrid, it seemed that he hadn't got away from the animal's lair unscathed.

"So," Hagrid said, obviously eager to distract them from Nemo. "Auror training! How yer doin' with it?"

Ron started talking about Battle Healing, which was currently his least favorite class because he was too impatient with the way that he wrapped the bandages and Battle Healer Portillo Lopez had started to single him out for criticism. Harry rubbed his knee and thought about talking about Gregory, but Ron was in full flight for the moment and Harry didn't want to interrupt him. Hermione had already got tired of his complaining and told him to talk about something else, and Harry had buried himself in his work so that he wouldn't have to listen to it.

Besides, he wanted to study Hagrid.

Hagrid was listening eagerly, but every now and then his left hand went down below the table to his pocket, as though he wanted to make sure something was still there. And then Harry noticed that he was carrying small crumbs of bread and meat with him when he reached down.

Harry stifled a sigh. *Ten to one that he's violating the Ban on Experimental Breeding* again.

"Hagrid," he said quietly, once Ron paused to take a drink of Firewhisky and he could. "Are you sure that you're all right?"

Hagrid's eyes turned to him with a slightly panicked, slightly guilty expression that didn't reassure Harry at all. But then Hagrid beamed brightly and nodded. "Completely fine," he said, while his smile grew into a wide one that wouldn't have fooled Professor Trelawney.

"There isn't anything in your pocket, for example?" Harry persisted.

Hagrid's smile froze, and his hand patted down a little too hard on the pocket in question, resulting in a damp squeak. The next moment, the pocket squirmed, and a bright orange head showed itself in the firelight. Harry stared. It looked like the head of a Chinese Fireball dragon, but with a sharp beak instead of a muzzle, and the legs he could see hanging over Hagrid's pocket were bird talons.

"'Is name's Chester," Hagrid said promptly, defensively, putting a hand on the little monster's head to shove it back into his robe. "'Is mother was a dragon and 'is father was a 'ippogriff and they were going to kill 'im just because 'e was *'imself*! I couldn't let them, could I?" He cradled Chester closer and looked at Harry imploringly.

Harry put a hand to his forehead and sighed. He knew that he really shouldn't let Hagrid walk around with Chester. It would cause trouble in the end and Hagrid would probably nearly be sacked again.

On the other hand, what would happen if he reported it? Chester would be taken away and destroyed, and Hagrid could be sent to Azkaban for violating the Experimental Breeding laws. At the least, he would be heavily fined, and he might have to leave the position of Hogwarts gamekeeper. Harry knew that he would never be happy anywhere else, and the thestrals and Fang and the hippogriffs would miss him.

"All *right*," he said. "But just make sure that you keep him safe and somewhere where he can't hurt anybody, Hagrid."

Hagrid reached across the table to give Harry a hug that left him gasping for breath. "I *knew* you'd understand!" he said, and wiped away two large tears so that he could blink and smile at Harry. "Yer a wonder for a wizard, 'Arry, always willing to look beyond yerself—"

Harry coughed sharply and urged the conversation in a new direction, because he'd had quite enough of excessive praise since the war and because Ron was starting to look jealous. "How's Olympe?"

Listening to Hagrid talk about his wife wasn't the most *pleasant* diversion in the world, but at least it got them safely far away from the subject of Chester and whether Harry was a good wizard or not.

There was a steady thumping down the corridor that was preventing Draco from studying the map of the Battlefield Tactics classroom he'd created the other day.

After the fifth thump, Draco put the map aside, stood up, and crept carefully towards the door. Though he hadn't yet managed to find his way to the upper balcony that Ketchum wanted them to reach, he'd learned a great deal about moving silently and trying to avoid the trainees that way. The Mudblood was a good teacher if you listened to his offhand comments and ignored the inane chatter about Muggle culture that he kept exchanging with Granger.

When he peered out the door, he had to catch the wall to keep from collapsing in laughter.

Potter was dragging Weasley down the corridor. It looked as though Weasley had tried to walk leaning on his shoulder at first, but they'd obviously had too much Firewhisky for that. Now Potter was trying to smuggle Weasley under his Invisibility Cloak, but that ugly orange hair stood out like a beacon. And besides, Weasley was staggering so badly that Potter would have had to use the cloak like a multi-layered Shield Charm to keep him out of sight.

"Well, well," Draco said, taking up a negligent pose with his arms folded and his legs crossed. "Potter and Weasley, out after curfew during the second week and openly drunk."

Potter started guiltily and looked over at Draco. Weasley slumped to the floor and lay there, softly giggling. Draco smiled. He would be left to negotiate with Potter alone, then, which was the way he liked it. Weasley preferred to let fly with his fists, but Potter was always good for an insult or two.

Potter tilted his head back, his throat working. His jaw clenched, and he said with coolness that Draco would have admired in anyone else, "Malfoy. I reckon that you came out for the company."

Draco bared his teeth. It was well-known that he was the only first-year trainee to have a private room, not because he'd paid for it but because his assigned roommate had refused to share with him. He tapped his finger on his cheek and made himself look thoughtful, refusing to lose his temper the way Potter wanted him to. "Let's see. I think there was a list of items that trainee Aurors are not supposed to possess. I think—yes, I *think* that Invisibility Cloaks were on it." He smirked and leaned back, waiting for the counter to *that* one.

Potter too obviously couldn't think of a response. He stared at his feet instead and fetched out a large, noisy sigh. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

Draco paused, startled. He hadn't expected Potter to give in so quickly, and so he hadn't thought ahead of time about what Potter could, clumsily of course, offer him.

Draco studied him quickly, too aware of the need to get out of the corridors before some of the second-year trainees came along to want to linger. A pity; he would have preferred to take his time staring at that defiant face, still wrecked by the scar on Potter's forehead, and those angry green eyes.

"Private dueling lessons," he said at last, hoping his voice sounded as adult as he wanted it to.

Potter blinked. "Excuse me?"

"We won't get to dueling until next year," Draco said, "and I don't want to wait that long. I know that you taught your little club at Hogwarts some tricks. I want to learn what you taught them."

Potter raked his hand through his hair, back and forth, meditatively. Draco had to look away before the sight of such a mess made him physically ill. "I didn't teach them a lot, Malfoy," Potter said at last. "Patronus Charms, and some other common defensive magic. You'll probably learn just as much in Dearborn's class."

Draco faced him, reveling in the rare sensation of having Potter entirely in his power. "Then you'll just have to come up with new things to teach me, won't you?"

Potter's jaw clenched. Draco sneered at him. For a moment, he did look longingly at the Invisibility Cloak clutched in Potter's other hand and thought about demanding to borrow it, but he doubted that Potter would give it up without a fuss, which might attract the attention of other trainees. Besides, there was every chance that he would turn around and report *Draco* for having a contraband item during the time he was borrowing it. Draco was no longer interested in making things easy for his enemies.

"Fine," Potter said at last, in a clipped tone that indicated he was probably realizing how big a time commitment this would be, given the rest of their classes. "When do you want to meet?"

"Wednesday evenings work fine for me," Draco said, and Potter grimaced in resignation; Wednesday was tomorrow. But he nodded. "And I think we can work something out in my room, since, as you pointed out, it *is* a private space where no one is likely to intrude on us."

Potter surveyed him narrowly a moment more, then nodded again. "Yeah, Malfoy, all right. And in return, you don't tell anyone that you saw us out." He took a step forwards, as if he would start a duel right here and now to secure Draco's silence.

Draco fell back a pace and raised his hands. "See you? I spent all evening studying in my room and trying to better myself. The thing," he was compelled to add, "that we *are* here for, rather than testing our Firewhisky-drinking capacity."

Potter gave him a thin smile and hauled Weasley into their room, tossing the Cloak after him and shutting the door. "Go make that reality, then," he said, leaning against the door with his hand on his wand.

Draco choked on a laugh. Potter was heroically protecting his drunken best friend while Draco was still out here, though if he knew anything about Slytherins, he should have realized that Draco would see no point in striking when he'd driven home a bargain. "Later, then, Potter," he said, with a small bow, and turned back towards his room.

An even louder thump sounded from down the corridor.

Draco whirled around, his wand out of his sleeve before he thought about it. A moment later, his perceptions caught up to his instincts, and he shuddered. From the direction of the thump came the stench of Dark magic so foul that it surrounded Draco like a veil of greasy smoke. He coughed, putting his arm across his mouth to muffle the sound. If the Dark Lord or the Death

Eaters had heard him coughing like that during some of the torture sessions he had watched, they would have murdered him.

"What *is* that?"

Draco was pleased to see that Potter at least had the sense to keep his voice soft. His right hand was on his wand, his left hand pressed to his forehead. When he lowered the left hand to shift himself into a better battle position, Draco saw that his scar was bright red. He stared at it in terror. Immediate doubts about whether Potter had *really* managed to kill the Dark Lord flooded him, and he found himself unable to move.

Potter glanced at him, seemed to understand the expression on his face without explanation—remarkable in itself—and shook his head a little. "Not what you think, Malfoy," he whispered. "Since Voldemort died, my scar reacts like that to any Dark magic. I promise that he's dead." He hesitated, then brushed one palm across Draco's shoulder for a moment, shaking his hand afterwards. "I'll go investigate this. Go back to your room. Alert someone, maybe." He began to prowl tensely forwards, his footsteps soundless.

Draco caught his breath, and his pride flared up as the images of the Dark Lord lurking down the corridor, waiting to punish him, fell away. Right behind the pride came humiliation. Potter had seen him terrified. Draco had to do something to make up for that, or Potter would see the same thing whenever he looked at Draco.

"I'll come with you," he said, and started following Potter.

Potter glanced over his shoulder with a tight mouth, but seemed to understand that it was stupid to complain about it. Instead, he nodded and faced forwards again, weaving his wand in front of him. It must have been a nonverbal Disillusionment Charm, because a moment later the sight of his body dimmed. Draco whispered the words to the Charm—he hadn't mastered it nonverbally yet—and crept up beside Potter as his took effect.

Potter brought his mouth close to Draco's ear, making Draco shiver. He hadn't been this close to Potter since they both became adults and their magic fully matured. It was like being pulled into an envelope of warm water. Maybe Potter had the ability to feel Draco's magic, too, because he hesitated inexplicably before he whispered, "Just around the corner, I think. And the Dark magic is getting stronger."

Draco nodded. He was on the verge of holding his breath; it was an effort to make himself keep breathing that corrupted air. He slid a bit closer to Potter, and Potter's magic reached out and welcomed him. The next few breaths he drew were sweeter.

Despite the situation, Draco took the chance to close his eyes in disbelief. The first person with compatible magic he met after he was adult *would* be Harry bloody Potter.

Potter, he saw when he looked again, obviously didn't know the source of the comfort he was

feeling from Draco, if the way he eyed him was any indication. But he turned back to the threat they would be facing, and gripped his wand, and moved on. Draco hesitated for only a moment longer before following him.

The sight before them when they rounded the corner made Draco stop, his heart hammering so hard that he thought he would faint, the air gone sour again despite Potter's closeness.

This section of the corridor was broad and open, a long stretch of blank wall between the end of the first-year rooms and the beginning of the doors that belonged to the second-year trainees. An excellent place for someone to set up a display that demanded attention—and after one glance, Draco was sure that was what this was meant to be.

To one side of the wall hung a ghastly illusion, a hanged man twisting back and forth, his head slumped forwards, his tongue standing out black and swollen. His legs were baggy and bloated, as though he'd been drowned before the hanging. The rope that contained him was a strangling snake, itself dead and slashed with multiple wounds. If Draco hadn't noticed, from the beginning, the transparency that indicated it was an illusion, as well as the fact that the snake simply hung in midair instead of being slung over something, he would have fled screaming.

The wall itself bore five giant letters in a liquid that possessed a color somewhere between black and red, like a mixture of oil and blood. *NIHIL*.

That was Latin for "nothing." Draco knew that. He clung to the knowledge to hold back the scream that was trying to bubble its way up his throat anyway.

Potter took an immense, choking breath. Then he stepped in front of Draco and aimed his wand at the illusion of the hanging man. "*Finite Incantatem*," he said.

The illusion blew apart into writhing black streamers that headed straight for them. Draco fell back into Potter's side, ducking his head so that his mouth and nose were sheltered from the magic in Potter's cloak. He didn't want to breathe in the Dark magic any more than he already had.

Potter bellowed another *Finite*, and his magic spread around Draco like a beam of intense sunshine. The Dark magic, as he could see when he dared to peer up from his shelter, had burned away.

The letters on the wall glowed a moment more, then dissolved, dripping, into globules of tar that ran away into hidden corners. In a moment, nothing was left.

Potter stood where he was, breathing harshly. Draco leaned against him, a hand clamped on his shoulder, and wondered if he knew that his power was anathema to Dark magic in general, not just to the Dark Lord.

And then, of course, doors began to fly open along the corridor and voices started abusing them,

and they had to deal with the consequences of being heroes.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Nihil and No Rest

"I want you to tell me again what you saw."

Draco sighed. At least they had brought in Auror Dearborn to question him. The Auror instructors were nominally responsible for the first-year trainees, since they taught their classes, and of all of them, Draco found Dearborn the most understandable. The man had *heard* of elegance, while the word didn't appear to have ever touched the eardrums of Jones or Ketchum.

But Dearborn's fondness for precision did mean that Draco had sat here for hours answering questions about the Dark magic he and Potter had sensed and why they had rushed to confront it instead of shouting for help.

"Potter sensed the Dark magic first," Draco began, "and tried to order me back into my room."

Dearborn held up a hand. The onyx ring on his finger caught Draco's attention, and he found himself peering at it in approval. The gold band was both finer and less ostentatious than he had thought. "I am certain that I know that part of the story. I wish to know again what you saw when you came around the corner."

"I saw an illusion floating in front of the wall," Draco said, "to the right side as one faces it." Dearborn gave a small smile and nod to show that he appreciated the detail. "It resembled a man hanged with a snake, but the body was puffy, as though he had spent time in water before he died. From the transparency of the body, I knew it was an illusion."

"That is more than Potter managed to sense," Dearborn mused. "He said that he thought it was real at first, until the stench of Dark magic convinced him that someone had poured much power into making the image."

Draco relaxed and smiled. So Dearborn thought him smarter than Potter, did he? That also showed the man was capable of appreciating reality.

On the other hand, harping on the difference between them would not tell Dearborn what he wanted to know, and might convince him that Draco was still obsessed with a petty rivalry from

his schooldays. So Draco continued the story as he would have if Dearborn had not interrupted him. "The letters on the wall were written in what looked like a mixture of oil and blood. Nihil, they said. I saw no other letters. I am unaware whether this was a message or part of a name. The letters melted and ran when Potter cast his *Finite.*"

Dearborn paused a moment, as though he needed to stir Draco's words in his mind through a medium compounded of other ingredients, and then leaned confidingly forwards. Draco felt a tingle of excitement, and had to hold himself still with an effort. They were seated on a pair of stools in Dearborn's office, behind a tightly warded door, so Draco was at least sure that no one else could intrude or overhear.

"Potter was the one who dissipated the spells, then," Dearborn said. "Is there, do you think, any way that he could have been involved in their creation?"

Draco stifled a sigh. A few years ago, he would have greeted such an opportunity to discredit Potter as sweeter than many fruits he had eaten.

But in this case, the strikes against it were two: not only had Draco felt how hostile Potter's power was to Dark magic, which would have given him trouble casting spells that complicated, but he also knew that Potter had been out with Weasley and drinking shortly before they discovered the images. Alcohol would have destroyed the delicate control he might have relied on to cast the spells completely.

"No chance, sir," Draco said. "I heard the sounds Potter made in the corridor when he came out of his room immediately. I'm sure that I would have heard him casting such spells. He never can be quiet," he added. "And besides, sir, I don't know if you've felt his magic at close range, but it's oriented against Dark Arts, towards protective and defensive charms mostly. I think he kept the magic from hurting us more than it otherwise might have done, when he ended the illusion and the remnants of it raced towards it. There is no way that he could have created the illusion in the first place, however."

"I accept your judgment, Trainee Malfoy," Dearborn said, with a formality that made Draco look sharply at his face in case he had overstepped his bounds. But Dearborn merely looked thoughtful, not condemning. "And your magic? Do you believe that you could have either dissipated or created those spells?"

Draco lifted his head with a deep breath. He would not lie to himself, or to others, especially when the Aurors probably possessed spells that would let them figure out someone's strength anyway. If *he* was in charge of the Auror program, Draco would certainly have researched a spell like that.

"No, sir," he said. "My main talents lie in Potions. My strength is middle-of-the-road when it comes to incantations."

Dearborn sat staring at him for so long that Draco wondered if it had been the wrong thing to say

after all. But then Dearborn smiled slowly.

"You are more courageous in your honesty than most of the trainees I have met so far, Malfoy," said Dearborn. He hesitated for a moment, then continued. "As I am sure you are aware, particular trainees establish mentor relationships with full Aurors in their second and third years of education. They may help them teach and train the first-years, as Auror Ketchum's do, or they may mark first-year essays, or they may learn special skills if their mentor feels that they need exposure to subjects outside the common classes."

Draco nodded, his heart pounding so hard that his throat felt full.

"I have not taken a disciple in years," said Dearborn. "I have found that few students have talents for the sort of magic I teach, in all its variety, and I have found few who are honest about their strengths and weaknesses in that area. I would rather have no one under me than someone who is striving vainly to impress me."

Draco licked his lips. Honesty had been the right choice so far. "I don't know that I'll ever be talented enough to be worth your time, sir."

"There are other things I can teach than simply offensive and defensive magic." Dearborn waved one hand, his ring flashing again. Draco admired the effect. He wore it at an angle that didn't make it flare with every movement, which would be vulgar, but it was prominent enough that one couldn't ignore it, which was proper for a sole ornament. "At the moment, I cannot explain more fully, because there are second-years who are still looking for a mentor and would try to latch onto me if they believed that I might be willing to entertain the notion. Can I trust you to keep quiet about this for now while I consider?"

"Of course, sir," Draco said, and then took a risk. He knew that Auror Dearborn had a cousin who had died in the first war against the Dark Lord, presumably killed by Death Eaters. Draco had to know how he felt about pure-bloods in general and Draco's family in particular before he put himself at the mercy of someone like this, older and with more knowledge of magic. "Malfoys know how to keep secrets."

Instead of squinting or hesitating, Dearborn tilted his head back and laughed aloud. "I am certain that you do," he said. "The last time the Aurors investigated Malfoy Manor, they could not find the end of the hidden holes and cabinets that Dark artifacts must be contained in. They needed to rely on your father's good faith." He gave Draco a speculative look. "Which makes me all the more intrigued that a Malfoy decided to become an Auror."

Draco smiled with his eyelashes lowered and didn't answer. It would do him no harm to keep a few of his *own* secrets.

Harry sighed and stared at the exam in front of him. He thought it unfair that they were having an exam in the second week of classes, but Hestia had said that the only way for her to be sure that they were keeping all the rules of Auror Conduct in their heads was to test them regularly.

Harry had been up late last night, answering question after question from Battle Healer Portillo Lopez, who seemed convinced that he had really cast the Dark Arts spells in the corridor that he and Malfoy found, or at least dissipated them with suspicious speed. When she was satisfied that he was innocent, she had still given him a lecture about the importance of evidence and destroying evidence.

Then Harry had gone to bed and found that no Silencing Charm he cast seemed to stand up to Ron's thick snoring. He'd had probably three hours of sleep.

And now the words were blurring on the paper in front of him.

He sighed and resisted the temptation to glance over at Hermione. She'd explained with some smugness the rules in Auror training about cheating. A trainee would be assigned double the amount of work in class for the first offense and kicked out of training for the second. Harry knew that there was no way he could survive those punishments. He was struggling to keep his head above water as he was, and the extra lessons in dueling with Malfoy would be enough of a burden.

If he was kicked out of Auror training, then he had nowhere else to go. His best friends were there.

Harry looked up and blinked suddenly. Hestia gave him a stern look, but since Harry immediately turned his face to the wall, she seemed to assume he was only staring off into the space in the middle of intense concentration. Harry caught the edge of her smile of approval.

It's a pretty pitiful reason to want to stay in Auror training, Harry thought, scratching his nose, *if the only reason you can think of for trying is that your best friends are doing it, too. What happened to protecting people? What happened to learning this because you want to keep fighting Dark wizards, and you need to know these things to fight Dark wizards?*

Harry nibbled his lower lip for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and turned back to the exam.

He'd just learned something about himself that he didn't particularly like. Maybe his motives for taking the training were mixed instead of pure after all. Maybe he had less direction and less strength of will than he'd always suspected.

But at least he could try to do his very best now that he was here, and not get kicked out through sheer incompetence.

"I would have thought that you'd got enough practice dueling as it was, Malfoy."

Potter's voice was neutral, and he removed his trainee's robes without any insulting slowness or quickness. Draco still narrowed his eyes, watching as Potter draped his robes across the back of a

chair, because where Potter was concerned, an insult was inevitable.

Potter's face was set when he turned around, though, and the way he flourished his wand and raised an eyebrow just spoke to someone having to do a job that they didn't particularly like. Draco decided to accept the mask as the truth for a moment and answer. "Not in dueling as such. Running away isn't good at teaching that, and most of the Death Eaters who were supposed to 'train' me did no such thing." He sniffed as he stripped to his own shirt and trousers. "The Auror program is far superior in that respect."

Potter stared curiously at him. He wore a white shirt that had seen better days and dark trousers that looked as if a white cat had rolled on them. "Why *did* you become an Auror anyway?"

"My steadfast good nature," Draco said in a completely inflectionless voice as he hung up his robes on the hook in the wall. "It flows out of me in boundless copiousness and must be shared with the world."

Potter rolled his eyes and dropped the subject, to Draco's surprise. "How many standard dueling spells do you know?" he asked, pacing across the room until he was almost on the other side of it, and standing opposite to Draco.

"Tell me what you define as a standard dueling spell, and then I'll answer the question." Draco cast a minor protective charm on his robes. He didn't want them getting scorched and stained by Potter's enthusiasm.

"What the NEWTS called it," Potter said, his voice changing slightly. Draco stared at him. The words were broader and more polished at once. He kept his eyes on Draco's face, and for once, there was no mockery in them. He looked almost handsome when he relaxed like that, Draco thought. "A spell used to incapacitate an enemy, cause them minor pain, defend yourself, heal minor wounds so that you can continue fighting, or alter the immediate environment for purposes of incapacitation or defense." He spun his wand through his fingers, as though he were trying to think of any categories he was forgetting, then snapped his head down in an odd, bow-like nod. "That's it."

"Not major pain, then?" Draco knew plenty of curses like that, and let his voice imply so.

As he had hoped, Potter's face wrinkled in disgust like the skin of a withered berry and the odd appealing aspect to him disappeared. "Of course not, Malfoy," he said. "The purpose of a duel is supposed to be to bring down and demonstrate your superiority to an opponent, not kill him."

Draco felt his eyes light up. Surrounded by people who looked at him sidelong and wouldn't stay in the same room with him, as well as by Aurors he didn't dare show less than humility in front of, it would be very *satisfying* if he could demonstrate his superiority to Potter.

"Yes, I thought that would intrigue you," Potter said, with a tolerant look that Draco didn't like at all. It suggested that Potter *knew* him in some way, and that was simply not true. "Now tell me

how many you know."

"The basics of defense," Draco said. "The Shield Charm and spells like it. Body-Binds and the Stunner. *Petrificus Totalus* and its variants. Some hexes and jinxes such as the Jellylegs and the Tripping Jinxes. Nothing of minor healing spells or defensive Transfiguration." He shrugged when Potter stared at him. "That wasn't the sort of career I thought I was training for at the time."

Impossibly, Potter's eyes softened, and he gave a single nod. "Whereas I was," he said. "And I can't imagine that a lot of the people here know more than you do." He moved on while Draco's soul still rang with the lightning-shock of a compliment from Harry Potter. "Can you do the Patronus Charm?"

"I'm not likely to have much use for it, am I?" Draco countered. He knew that Potter could produce the Charm quite well, having been on the receiving end of it at one point, and had no desire to give the man much room to flaunt his expertise for the sake of flaunting it. "Since we'll mostly face Dark wizards rather than Dementors."

"All knowledge is worth having," said Potter, with a pompous expression.

Draco scowled. It was one of Auror Dearborn's favorite maxims and most frequent sayings in class, and so Potter had neatly trapped him. "All right, then," he said grudgingly. "Show me."

"A happy memory first," Potter said, lifting his wand. "That's the fuel for the spell." He drew in a deep breath, as if he thought that the spell wouldn't respond if he didn't say it loudly. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silver stag leaped out of his wand and circled the room once. Draco had more chance to see and admire it when it wasn't chasing him down, and had to admit it was impressive. The stag halted, looked towards him, and flicked its ears in interest before turning back to Potter as if to ask what he wanted of it.

"You can command your Patronus to carry messages, too," Potter said, without taking his eyes off the stag. His expression was open and peaceful now, and Draco tapped his tongue thoughtfully against his teeth. It came to him that it wouldn't be amiss for him to relax a bit in Potter's company, as long as he kept enough of an edge to be instantly alert when Potter attacked. "So they're useful even when you're not battling Dementors."

He extended his hand towards the stag. "Go tell Ron that I'm busy studying tonight in a private place and won't join him for dinner, please."

Draco caught his breath on a sneer; he wouldn't tell a piece of his own magic *please*. But as the stag bowed its antlers and then leaped past him and through the wall, Draco caught a whiff of Potter's magic like a gentle breeze. He licked his lips. This time it came to him as a taste more than a smell, tart and pleasant at once, like a peach just beginning to become overripe.

"Did you want to try that first?" Potter asked. "Or something else?"

Draco turned around to stare at him again. The reminder of their compatible magic had put him off-balance; that had to be why he said what he did. "You're being an awfully compliant teacher when I forced you into this, Potter."

Potter's head rose and his eyes flashed. "I happen to like instructing people who want instruction," he said coldly. "Of course, Malfoy, if you prefer to resist and taunt me, then it's all the same to me if I leave now."

"I'll report you to the Aurors," Draco said.

Potter gave him a silent look of scorn, and Draco felt himself flush. That had sounded childish and he knew it.

"Did you want to try the Patronus Charm first?" Potter repeated, after a moment's tense silence. "Or something else?"

Draco cleared his throat. "That first."

Potter fell out of the way, and Draco aimed his wand in front of him. He focused his mind at once on the most intense memory he had, the one he had used to comfort and warm himself when he was forced to torture people: the memory of his mother sitting with him and reading him stories one morning when he was four. They had sat on the green grass of the Manor, and the peacocks had stalked around them and tapped gentle beaks against Draco's head, and the sun had been so bright that sometimes Draco needed to shield his eyes from it.

He waited until he could feel both the sunlight and his mother's love for him, bright and coiling around him with the same level of warmth. Then he aimed his wand and shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Nothing happened, except a faint trickle of silvery mist from his wand.

Draco glanced at Potter, expecting to see him snickering, but Potter simply shrugged when he saw Draco staring. "That happened to me the first hundred times I did it, too," he said. "Even though I was concentrating as hard as I could on a happy memory. You can't expect to master all the defensive spells quickly. Try again."

Draco did. And again. And again. On his last attempt, he thought the silver smoke was a bit brighter, but otherwise, there was no change. He turned at last on Potter, glaring and expecting to see him looking either bored or angry.

Harry was more and more sure that something strange was going on, at least as related to him and Malfoy.

When Malfoy began to cast, it was as though every hair on Harry's body stood to attention—as though someone had called his name and started cooking his favorite thing to eat at once. Harry had fought the temptation to take a step forwards, astonished. He knew that nothing like that had ever happened before.

His first thought was that Malfoy had cast some spell that forced Harry to respond to him like a child, but when Harry glared at him, he found Malfoy too involved in the failure of his Patronus Charm to take any pleasure in Harry's confusion. He certainly would have been watching and smirking if he'd cast a spell like that, so Harry was forced to conclude that it was something else.

When Malfoy finally grew too disappointed at his non-success to hide his disappointment and whirled around, Harry was busy with a question that should put aside his temper tantrum. "Why do I feel comfortable when you use your magic?" he demanded.

Malfoy blinked, shut his mouth, opened his mouth, and then said, "Because our magic is compatible."

"I never felt anything like that at school," Harry argued, and then blinked himself. "What's compatible magic?"

"Of course you didn't." Malfoy sneered at him. Harry found himself relaxing. He'd missed that expression when Malfoy looked frustrated, the way that Harry remembered feeling when Remus tried to teach him the Patronus Charm. Malfoy had looked too human.

(*Remus,* said the sharp voice of his grief, and tried to drag him underwater and into a fit of memory. Harry resisted. He didn't have the time to have a fit in front of Malfoy and explain to him everything that involved. Fuck, he hadn't had time to explain it to Ron and Hermione yet).

"You would only feel my magic like that after both of us came of age," Malfoy explained, and then went on to answer Harry's second question as well, which was unexpectedly generous of him. "Basically, it means that two wizards have a similarity in their magic. Not a similarity in talent or strength, but a similarity in the way it feels." He probably saw Harry's skepticism, because he rolled his eyes. "I didn't exactly choose to have your magic heal and refresh me either, Potter."

Harry gnawed his lip. "What are the practical consequences, though?"

Malfoy sounded extremely reluctant, but he answered after a moment. "We can cast together, and combine our magic, in the way that you usually need a ritual to do. But we can only do that after we get used to each other," he added quickly, as if he thought Harry might want to try it right now. "And we'll feel stronger and more comfortable in each other's presences. Usually, wizards with compatible magic become friends."

Harry laughed. "Well, not much chance of *that.*"

"Exactly," Malfoy said, sounding relieved to be rid of the subject. He smiled slightly, which Harry decided definitely should not be encouraged. It made him even more human than the frustration. Ferrets didn't smile like that. "I consider it an unfortunate coincidence that there should be no reason to encourage. Now. I will return to the Patronus Charm, but I want to see you cast it again first."

Harry cast it comfortably enough. The stag galloped around the room and then stopped and stood staring at him, waiting for orders. Harry sighed. If he looked long enough, the stag would remind him of the past—his father and the silver doe that had come to lead him to the Sword of Gryffindor.

(The memory of Snape caused the worst fits, but luckily Harry had always been alone when they came. And anyway, he didn't need to think about them, any more than he needed to think about the rest of the war).

"I think I have it," Malfoy said, and gathered himself so that he could whip his wand down.

Harry watched it and thought about asking whether the compatibility of their magic had made it easier for him to use Malfoy's wand.

But that wasn't something they wanted to pursue or which had anything to do with their being in the Aurors. So why should he care about it?

If I'm going to be here, then I need to rededicate myself to the purpose of protection and defense, anyway, and not go wandering down side-paths of speculation about Malfoy. He's not that interesting.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—A Bagful of Troubles

"Will you come with me, Harry?"

Harry paused and blinked as he realized that Ron was standing in the door of their room, his hands clenched so hard around the corners of the doorframe that his arms bulged. Harry glanced around, trying to determine if something in the room had caused Ron to look like that, but the room was the same as always: brownish carpet, pale blue walls, the Quidditch posters he and Ron had put up, the big orange splash of a Chudley Cannons banner on the bathroom door, and

the tables and desks that had come with the room.

"Come with you to do what?" Harry asked, turning back to his friend. His heart was hammering and buzzing, and he realized that he was deeply afraid Ron would say that he wanted to drop out of Auror training.

"I need to speak to Portillo Lopez." Ron was biting into his lip and causing a faint trickle of blood from it. "There's no way I'll pass that class unless I can get *some* kind of help from her!"

Harry relaxed. At least Ron knew there was a problem when he couldn't even tie bandages correctly, much less cast a healing spell, and was willing to do something about it. "I'll come with you. In fact, I need to talk to her myself."

Ron's mouth dropped open slightly. "But you're doing well in that class!"

Harry grimaced and shook his head. "At the cost of so much effort that it leaves me exhausted all the time. I think she only really wants to teach natural students, but since everyone has to take the course and not everyone can be perfect, there must be some method that she has for people who can't learn as easily." He picked up his cloak and his scroll of parchment covered with notes from the Battle Healing class that day. Sometimes Portillo Lopez looked at him as if she suspected him of not studying. Harry wanted proof that he was *trying* to do the work.

"Thanks, mate." Ron gripped and almost crushed his hand.

Harry smiled back at him. "No problem."

"So," Ron said, stumbling to a stop over his words every few seconds, "we would really like it if you could help us. Please."

Harry didn't blame Ron for being intimidated. Portillo Lopez seemed interested in an implacable silence that stretched on and on. She hadn't moved a muscle in her face since Ron started his plea. Harry found himself clenching his fists at his side as he waited. Did she *want* them to fail?

Then she smiled. Harry nearly fell over with the shock. He realized now that he had never seen her do that before. Even with her most favored students, the only ones she seemed to think were worthy of encouragement, she nodded and lifted her eyebrows.

"I am simply surprised," she said, her voice low. "Very few students come to me to ask for help. They seem to have a horror of looking stupid in front of others that outweighs their desire to pass the class."

"But you must see that a lot of people are struggling in there," Harry said, unable to keep silent even if he sounded disrespectful.

Portillo Lopez shook her head. "I once assumed that every student who struggled wanted help,

and offered it. They despised me for it." Her mouth hardened for a moment, and Harry wondered what she wasn't saying. Maybe people had despised her for her accent, even though it wasn't hard to understand at all. "They thought me weak and afraid to judge. And many of them believed that they did not need to learn any healing at all. In time, I accepted that they took my art seriously only when I was severe. So, if someone does not ask questions and does not ask for help, I assume they do not need or want it. It is easier that way." She inclined her head when Harry stared at her. "Am I to be a mind reader, or assume that everyone will hold faster to common sense than to pride?"

The solution didn't really satisfy Harry, but at least Portillo Lopez was beginning to tell Ron that his problem was his impatience, which meant that he never wanted to tie the bandages properly, and that was a start.

"Concentrate harder."

"I am concentrating as hard as I can." Draco forced the words out between clenched teeth. He had almost been in the state of mind necessary to produce a Patronus, he was sure, and Potter had the nerve to interrupt him.

"Then try something else." Potter ran a finger around the shell of his ear and shook his head at Draco in despair. "Another memory, maybe. The show you've been putting on so far is just *pitiful.*"

Draco turned slowly to face Potter, his body quivering with tension. They had spent most of the night in his room, with the air thick and still—something had gone wrong with the circulating charms, and none of the air-moving spells that Draco cast in compensation were enough—and Potter sighing and rolling his eyes. And now, *this*. When Draco had poured so much effort into something that he hated automatically because he saw how easy it was for Potter.

He had tried. Potter was being as unreasonable as Ketchum, who would congratulate Draco on a victory achieved in Battlefield Tactics and then hand him a new puzzle to solve. Perhaps he didn't want to try any longer, if Potter made an instructor as poor as the rest of them.

Except Auror Dearborn, Draco's loyal mind pointed out.

He poisoned the loyalty and buried its corpse. He did not feel like being reasonable right now.

"You call me pitiful, Potter," Draco said, edging to the side so that he would have a clearer angle to strike, "when I survived the Dark Lord."

"So did I." Potter pushed his hair back so that his scar showed. The gesture was far too easy and practiced for someone who really hated the scar for marking him out, Draco thought in triumph. There was proof that Potter didn't mind his celebrity as much as he tried to make it seem he did. He wondered what Pushkin would say to *that* observation. "So did lots of people. It doesn't make you special."

"You have no idea what I suffered," Draco hissed. He could feel his fingers clenching down on his wand, but what he really longed to do was to spring at Potter and bite and hit him. There was a satisfaction in raw physicality, a brutality at the heart of it, that couldn't be found anywhere else.

And that rawness is what makes it uncivilized.

The voice of his good breeding joined the corpse of his loyalty in a shallow grave.

Especially when Potter sneered at him and said, "And if you had the slightest idea of what I went through to finish Voldemort, then you wouldn't dare speak to me of *suffering*."

That was enough. Draco flew at Potter with a cry that he barely remembered to turn into a curse instead of a punch when he saw that Potter had also lifted his wand.

Draco's curse emerged as a sickly bolt of yellow cloth, Potter's as a spreading purple light. They met and merged in the middle of the room, struggled wildly against each other for a moment, and filled Draco's head with a drumbeat and his mouth with a foul taste. He was lifting his hands to his ears when both spells blazed and vanished.

"What does that mean?" Potter demanded, his voice too loud. At least he winced and clutched his head a moment later.

Draco wanted to laugh when he realized the truth, and then to spit. The truth left his tongue coated with more bitterness than the clash of their spells had.

"It's the compatible magic," he said. "It's not easy for us to hit each other with spells. If we were in a life-and-death situation, it would work. But we're simply quarreling like idiots over something that doesn't matter, and so the magic refuses to act. Or," he added, when Potter gave him an incredulous glance, "if you don't believe that magic can choose what to do, we simply can't put enough force behind the spells when they're directed against each other and when we aren't serious about defending our lives."

Potter swore in a vulgar manner, without great depths of imagination, stomping back and forth. Draco watched him in elegant silence, and waited for him to realize that they also had another problem.

Potter whirled around at last, his eyes wide and his hair standing on end from the way that he constantly ran his fingers through it. He would look much more handsome if he could refrain from that gesture, Draco thought, but he didn't expect that realization to ever arrive in Potter's head. "What happens when our instructors ask us to duel in class?"

"Yes," Draco said. "That *is* a problem, isn't it?"

"And here," Potter continued, as if he hadn't heard Draco. "How can I instruct you if we can't actually duel?"

"Show me defensive and healing magic," Draco responded instantly. He kept himself from saying *Because that's all you'll ever be good at, given the bias of your magic,* by remembering that Potter was doing only a little better in Portillo Lopez's class than he had been. "That doesn't require an attack. And if we fight together against conjured enemies…well." He lifted his shoulders and dropped them in a small shrug that he hoped would suffice to explain the matter.

It didn't, of course, and Potter was glaring skeptically at him in the next instant. "How will fighting together help?"

"Must I lead you to *everything*?" Draco snapped, no longer afraid of the way Potter bristled. "Our compatible magic will make us stronger if we're trying to fight side-by-side instead of attack each other. It more or less makes up for our inability to use offensive spells in a personal duel. We can't stab each other in the back anymore—" *with magic* he refrained from saying, because if Potter couldn't figure that out, Draco wasn't going to tell him "—but we can fight back-to-back with much more ease."

Potter's nostrils flared. "I want proof of your word." He turned away before Draco could express the offense he felt that Potter refused to believe him and began casting with neat flourishes of his wand that Draco hadn't ever seen him make. If he was half that neat in his notes for Auror Conduct, then he would do much better in that class.

Shadows appeared along the opposite wall. Draco raised his eyebrows, reluctantly impressed. Most spells that conjured enemies followed the same basic formula, creating what were essentially animated wooden dummies. Potter didn't appear to have studied those spells, so he followed the call of his own originality instead. *These* dummies were less bulky, grey instead of brown, and moved with shadow-like grace as they slid away from the wall and stood on their own.

They were also carrying wands, which wasn't usual in the training duels that Draco had ever seen. He gave Potter a narrow look. "We have to duel their spells?"

Potter shrugged, his attention on the dummies as he stepped up to Draco's side. "They only know a few. Mostly hexes and jinxes."

Draco kept his opinion to himself—that it was extremely unusual for training dummies to know spells at all—and stood beside Potter. The warmth of his magic reached out and enveloped Draco. Draco rolled his eyes when the temptation to relax flooded him. This was hardly going to be productive in battle. He wondered if compatible magic was more trouble than it was worth, and if there was any way to get rid of it.

Then Potter's conjured enemies stepped towards them, firing off Tripping Jinxes as they came, and Potter said in a tense voice, "You take the ones on the left, I'll take the ones on the right.

Go!"

And Draco discovered exactly why so many books were always babbling on about the advantages of compatible magic.

When he lifted his wand, he could tell exactly where Potter was, by the feeling of the magic that came with him and the way the warmth shifted closer or further away. That would be dead useful in the middle of a crowded battlefield, Draco had to admit, or at night. He could also feel the power gathering like a halo around Potter's head and wand before he cast. With some concentration and practice, Draco thought he would be able to sense what spell was coming.

Potter shouted, "*Commuto aream!*" A long spray of white shot out of his wand, changing the floor in front of the dummies to ice. They advanced mindlessly and slipped, scrambling and flailing their arms. Draco had a moment to think that real enemies wouldn't be that stupid; they would take some measures to avoid the ice.

The backblast of Potter's strength caught him.

Draco gasped, his body humming with energy, fizzing and sparking up his wand and demanding to be let out as magic. He barely managed to aim his wand in the right direction before he cast the spell—the first time he had ever managed it nonverbally—and watched as one of the dummies burst into flame.

It burned fiercely, sending sharp-edged shadows sliding around the room. In two seconds, the dummy was gone, seared away to a fine grey ash that scattered around the room and into the corners. Potter turned to gape at him. The other dummies kept mindlessly marching forwards, which Draco knew wouldn't really happen in battle, either. Fire that consumed one of them had to give most sane people at least a *little* pause.

"What the *fuck*, Malfoy," Potter said in reverent tones. It didn't take much concentration at all for Draco to find the admiration and awe in them.

He lifted his head and preened slightly, then laughed as a Tripping Jinx got through the distracted Potter's defenses and sent him to the floor. Curious to see if the effect would work in the other direction, Draco lifted a Shield Charm to defend himself against jinxes coming from more of the dummies.

At once Potter hissed out a *Finite* that countered two of the other jinxes zipping towards him, and then his Shield Charm almost blinded Draco as he brought it up. He shook his head as though he were wondering about the immense surge of magic that Draco knew he must be feeling, and managed to stumble to his feet. He was looking at Draco from the corner of one eye.

Draco had no time to preen about it, because four of the dummies launched spells at once and his Shield Charm vibrated and weakened. Draco dodged to the side, aware all the time where Potter was as though it were some strange new sense he had picked up, and cast more spells that would

bring down the dummies and deprive them of limbs without burning them all. He didn't want the fire to get out of control. So far, the compatible magic seemed to give them increased raw strength, not finesse.

But we will learn to control it.

Draco curled his lip as he watched Potter cast spells that dissolved the magic holding the dummies together and made them vanish. *Did I just think about doing something in common with Harry Potter that doesn't involve beating him up?*

But he had. And he decided that it would be easier to use the compatible magic than to struggle against it, especially since it seemed unlikely to vanish.

In a few more minutes, all the dummies were gone. Potter spent a few moments panting. Draco decided, smugly, that a year of studying for NEWTS had done Potter no favors in the exercise department. Draco, meanwhile, had made sure that he had gone for runs and regular flights on his brooms even when he was deepest in his studies.

Then Potter straightened up and turned to face him.

The expression on his face was wary. Draco laughed at him. "I promise, Potter, compatible magic doesn't allow me to murder you in your sleep. Pity," he had to add, when Potter's mouth widened a bit in outrage. "I can think of times when I would have wanted to do that."

Potter entirely ignored the implications of that statement, which, for Draco, were a signal that he *didn't* want to murder Potter in his sleep anymore. "Is it always going to be like that when we fight?" he demanded.

"In time, we will gain some control over it, I hope." Draco shuddered at the thought of being bound to Potter's level of interaction with magic for the rest of his life. "But I suspect that we will always be able to sense each other's direction and draw on each other's strength when one of us casts a spell."

Potter sighed and shook his head. "Well, at least it isn't likely to come up outside of these private dueling lessons."

Draco stiffened. "Have you forgotten that we're both Auror trainees, and may have to face each other, or fight beside each other, in our classes in the future?"

"But not until next year," Potter said quickly, "and by then, we should have more control of it, like you said. I don't see us ending up as partners."

Draco shook his head. "Of course not." As convenient as it would be to fight beside Potter in duels, or battles, or when capturing criminals, he couldn't live with Potter's personality while he did it. "Now, do you want to try again?"

"Of course," Potter said, with a grin that burned straight into the center of Draco's soul and made him smile back. "And then, we can go back to practicing the Patronus Charm."

At least he said "we," Draco thought crossly as he watched Potter conjure more enemies. *Of course, that might make it worse, since he knows well enough that he needs no bloody practice. Condescending bastard.*

Harry closed his eyes and lowered his forehead onto his hands. His head was full of a buzzing, sparking tension, and every sound around him seemed muffled, as though it had to come through several layers of cotton. He knew exactly what that meant, especially since his sleep had been filled with an ominous silence last night instead of nightmares.

But what could he do about it? His problems didn't have the grace to show up on the weekends. This was a day of classes, and a particularly heavy one, since they would be having exams in three of the classes—Conduct, Battle Healing, and Offensive and Defensive Magic—and a sharp workout in Combat. At the moment, they were in Combat, the first class.

He would have to endure, that was all.

He made himself think about times when he was shut up in the cupboard at Privet Drive and needed to use the loo and no one would let him, and the time when Voldemort had bound him to the altar in the graveyard and taken blood from him. Both of them were harder than this. Living in a tent in the wilderness while Death Eaters hunted them was harder than this.

This was only a few eyes.

"Potter!"

And Auror Gregory, of course.

"Get to the front of the class, Potter, and fight West," Gregory snapped.

Harry stood up and walked slowly to the front of the classroom. The silence in his dreams traveled with him now, flickering around his head, so that he could hardly hear anything at all. His breathing moved his chest up and down, but he felt as if he were moving through a dream, or as if someone had turned him into an Inferius. He turned to face Darien West, the trainee from his group who had discovered the passage through the magical door nearest their rooms, and nodded to him. Darien, a tall man with pale brown hair who never seemed to stop washing his hands in nervous motions, nodded back and took up the stance that Gregory had told them to use so many times. He did it naturally. Harry did his best to follow suit, and hoped that Gregory hadn't told him to do something else, because he wouldn't hear her.

The world narrowed down in front of his eyes, and the weight of silence and guilt and sorrow turned around and fell on him.

Snape lay on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, and stared up with empty, accusing eyes. Harry knelt beside him with an aching heart. He hadn't told the others that he was going back for Snape's body; Ron and Hermione had thought he was taking advantage of a brief spell of privacy to sleep.

"*I'm sorry," Harry whispered without any sound. "I'm sorry that you tried to protect me and I never knew. I'm sorry that you loved my mother and I thought the only thing that mattered to you was hatred of my father."*

But no matter how many words he whispered, Snape couldn't hear him. He had gone where he would never hear anything again. And if Harry tried to atone for his ignorance in the socially acceptable ways—such as by making sure that people remembered Snape as a hero of the war—it still wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't undo Nagini's bite or give Snape the ability to know that he was honored now.

Everything Harry could do, even living itself, seemed so useless in the face of death.

"Potter! *Potter!*"

Harry shuddered and flinched, scrambling back from the voice that was yelling at him. He had one arm over his face before he considered what that would look like, and ripped his arm free, gasping.

Auror Gregory stood over him, staring down with narrowed eyes. Darien stood beyond her, blinking the way he always did. Ron and Hermione were trying to get close, but a crowd of interested people held them back, all gaping at Harry.

Harry wanted to close his eyes and retreat into the silence that had surrounded him and was dissipated now. He'd had another of his fits, when memory and grief overcame him and reminded him that, no matter what he did, he had still failed a lot of people and he would never be able to make up for that.

And this time, everyone had seen.

The worst thing, when he looked again, was the piercing light in Gregory's eyes, as though she had just learned something that would make it all right for her to despise him. Hermione's horrified concern and Ron's blank incomprehension weren't much better.

Disturbing in an all-new way was the steady stare Malfoy gave him, as he stood with his arms folded beyond Hermione's shoulder and looked into Harry's face.

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—A Shaking Up

Draco hadn't been looking in the right direction at first to observe Potter's fall, or fit, or whatever it was; he'd been focusing instead on the way that Darien West held himself ready for battle. Or failed to, which was Draco's estimate of most of the students in the class. Gregory had announced that today she would choose students to fight in pairs only near the beginning of the class; then the winners of each paired fight would compete against each other. Given how so far Potter had failed to please Gregory in any way, Draco was sure that she would declare West the winner. And from certain narrow-eyed glances that she gave into the crowd, Draco was certain that she would choose him for West's opponent.

But then West's mouth hung open and he blinked. Draco followed his gaze and found Potter on the floor, shuddering.

People surged to their feet, Potter's friends cried out in worry, and there was general chaos and confusion. But Draco had been in a good position relative to Potter to begin with, and so he could continue to see what was happening while moving very little.

The idiot was shivering as though someone had cast a Freezing Charm on him and then thrown him into one of the Manor's ice cellars. His fingers trembled independently of his hands, and his arms wobbled as if they were full of jelly. Draco blinked. He'd never seen a reaction like that. He wondered if someone in the class had cast a curse on Potter, but the chance that someone would dare do so in front of Gregory was remote.

Then Potter stiffened and gave a gurgling, choked cry. The next moment, his arm fell away from his face and he was blinking at everyone as though he didn't know what had happened.

The hot fires of humiliation swept up his cheeks, and he froze. Draco folded his arms and looked thoughtfully at him. Potter looked ashamed, yes, but not surprised or disoriented to find himself sitting on the floor. That suggested that attacks like that one had happened before.

What secrets are you hiding, Potter? So many newspaper reporters followed Potter's every move and he was so bad at hiding his emotions that it intrigued Draco to think Harry Potter might have unexplained, unexplored depths.

"Potter." Gregory's voice clashed with the private things Draco was feeling like the caw of a crow. "On your feet."

Potter stood up, his arms folded like Draco's, as though he could prevent everyone from seeing

what had happened by covering his heart. Already he had a haughty expression, and Draco felt a mixture of incredulity and derision.

He'll try to brave it out. He'll try to pretend that nothing happened, when he has to know that everyone saw.

"Yes, ma'am?" Potter asked Gregory, his chin thrust forwards a little too much and his voice a little too loud to be respectful.

Gregory surveyed him in silence for a moment. Then she shook her head and asked, "Do you really think that will work with me?"

"I was only asking what you wanted me to do, ma'am." Potter's voice was lower this time, and he unfolded his arms as if he realized for the first time how confrontational he looked. Draco snorted. That wouldn't work. Potter noticed the sound and shot him a furious glance. Draco only raised his eyebrows. Potter was the one who had chosen to shake now and let out his little secret. Draco had nothing to do with revealing it.

"Explain what just happened to you." Gregory leaned forwards on one leg, her gaze roaming from Potter's face to his hands. Draco had no idea what clues she expected to find on his fingers, but then, he wasn't the Hand-to-Hand Combat instructor.

"I had a fainting spell," Potter said.

Draco blinked. *Maybe my impression that he wanted to brave it out was mistaken.*

"What caused it?" Gregory shifted close, her face bright and hungry. Her eyes shone in a way that would have impressed Pushkin with her powers of observation as she examined Potter's tight lips and flushed cheeks.

"I don't sleep very well at night," Potter said, with a small shrug. "That's one of the ways that my stress expresses itself. When the insomnia builds up over enough nights, then it tends to result in me falling to the ground. Particularly when I try to engage in physical exercise," he added, with a glance around the Combat training room. Draco wondered if he was the only one who could sense the contempt in those glinting eyes.

For long moments, the rest of the class stared between Potter and Gregory, awaiting her opinion. The Combat instructor straightened up from her leaning posture and looked into Potter's eyes as if she could force the truth out of him. Potter looked stubbornly, innocently back. Even Draco, sure that Potter was lying, was not sure if he could have convinced anyone else of that.

"Very well," Gregory said at last. "Since you fell to the ground, I am declaring that you lost the fight to West, because that is what would happen to you in the field. You would die, or be captured." Her voice resumed the familiar bark. "You must pay attention at all times," she said, and whirled around. Her students instinctively shoved back from her, jostling and crowding

Draco. "And be aware for weaknesses in your partners and enemies as well as in your own body." She cast a glance of searing scorn at Potter.

Potter went to a position at the back of the class, where Gregory banished people who lost fights. He brushed past Draco on the way, and Draco touched his shoulder. Potter twitched and turned, the way Draco had known he would.

"You're lying," Draco breathed, watching Potter's eyes and face carefully. "I know you are."

"Malfoy, pay attention," Gregory said. "Get up here and fight West."

Potter gave him a triumphant glance and went by. Draco went up to the front of the class to fight West, who did not turn out to be a hard opponent; he danced back and forth, clearly fearing physical contact and physical pain, and earned Gregory's scorn for himself. Draco could let his mind dwell where it wished, on that bowed black head and still body at the back of the classroom.

Potter could lie when he wished. He might not have fooled Gregory completely, but he had done well enough that she was content to accept what he said. If she had felt she had proof of a lie, she would have turned him inside out with sharp words and compelled him to confess everything before the class.

Potter had secrets.

Potter was interesting in ways that went beyond compatible magic.

"We have finished with the section on theory," announced Auror Dearborn, as he gathered up the pieces of parchment he'd had them write the answers to his questions down on. "Now we begin practice in Defensive and Offensive Magic."

Harry blinked, caught off-guard for a moment. He had become accustomed to thinking of Dearborn's class as his most boring, because Dearborn seemed to assume they wanted to hear about ancient scandals and blood feuds more than they wanted to hear about why the distinctions in magic mattered. And Harry had accepted without thought the older trainees' taunt that they wouldn't get to duel each other until next year.

Now it appeared that was wrong, and it had only taken them until the middle of October to reach this point.

Harry found himself quickly turning from excited to nervous when he thought about what might happen if he had to duel Malfoy. He glanced over his shoulder and found Malfoy already looking at him. Malfoy gave him a wry, twisted smile, and then narrowed his eyes as if he wanted to give Harry some secret message.

Hermione's voice interrupted any attempt Harry might have made to receive that message. "But,

Auror Dearborn, how are we supposed to put all the ideas that you've shown us into practice? We've learned the theory behind the categories of offensive and defensive magic, but not many incantations that actually appear in them."

That was Hermione, Harry thought, turning back to the front of the classroom to see that she was staring anxiously at Dearborn and he was giving her a kind smile. Hermione and Malfoy were his favorite students. Of course they were, Harry thought. Dearborn clearly liked people who took a lot of notes and paid strict attention to what he was saying. The ring on the Auror's finger flashed as he leaned forwards.

"Each class has different accumulated knowledge and gaps in that knowledge, Trainee Granger," Dearborn droned, like the bore he was. "That means that I have to come up with different training strategies for each one, and make sure that I am not doing them a disservice by trying to force them into a preformed schematic."

"Speak bloody *English*," groused Ron next to Harry. Harry found himself nodding in agreement. Hermione, of course, followed everything with bright, wide eyes. Harry suspected she had a crush on Dearborn, though nowhere near as open and embarrassing as the one she'd had on Lockhart.

"I understand, sir," she said breathlessly. "So you want to make sure of how much offensive and defensive magic we already know."

"He could have *said* that," Ron complained.

"Exactly, Trainee Granger." Dearborn's gaze brushed across Ron and Harry in a way that made Harry suspect they weren't quite as unheard as he had hoped they would be. But he turned his soft eyes and dazzling smile back on Hermione again right away. "And so I would like you to begin with a demonstration. Fight in pairs, one attacking and one defending. In such a general battle, one easily sees common gaps in the class's knowledge and common areas of strength." He flowed to his feet and added, "I will assign pairs. West and Upperthorpe, Granger and Timrawn, Weasley and Merion…"

Harry knew what he would say before it happened, and the sound of his heartbeat was even more audible to him than Ron's disappointed groan at someone else being paired with Hermione.

"Malfoy and Potter," Dearborn said, his face expressionless.

Draco sighed and stood. The necessity for explaining their compatible magic had come much sooner than he thought it would, and it irritated him. He had wanted to establish himself as the superior student to Potter in every class—not hard to do in this class, Gregory's, and Portillo Lopez's, but strangely hard to do in Observation, Battlefield Tactics, and Auror Conduct. Probably because Potter did nothing but gape witlessly at things and sometimes absorb the impressions of his eyes, and because Ketchum and Jones were shameless about their liking for the Boy-Who-Lived, Draco thought resentfully.

He knew the compatible magic would link him and Potter for good in the minds of their instructors. But he had wanted his own individuality, so that he would not be swallowed up immediately by the fame of the Chosen One. It did not look as if that would happen now.

Draco ruthlessly crushed his disappointment as he moved opposite Potter to stand in front of Dearborn. The rest of the class, who were spreading out into pairs, turned to stare at them curiously. Draco swallowed and wondered how Potter had borne the humiliation of being stared at in Gregory's class earlier. It was only hard concentration that enabled him to avoid blushing.

"Sir," he said quietly, "Potter and I have compatible magic. We can fight side by side, but not duel without the spells canceling each other out."

Dearborn caught his breath and stared from Draco to Potter. There was an odd expression in his eyes, as though he had just suffered some great disappointment. Draco blinked. *Why?*

And then a horrible thought overtook him. *What if Dearborn doesn't want to train me unless I can really stand on my own?*

Draco swallowed and lifted his head. If that was the truth, then he would simply have to put up with it. There was no getting rid of compatible magic, anymore than he could alter his father's imprisonment.

Dearborn was silent for long moments. Then he nodded shortly. "You will work as a team, and duel me," he said, stepping back and drawing his wand. He raised his voice to speak to the other trainees. "Before you begin, perhaps a demonstration? I have heard that Harry Potter is skilled in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Draco Malfoy has an eclectic education." Draco looked closely at Dearborn, searching for some mockery in his voice, but Dearborn's eyes were steady enough, if shadowed. "I would like to see how well they work together against a fully-trained Auror."

Draco appreciated the fact that he hadn't announced they had compatible magic, though someone might have overheard them talking, and there were some people in their class who would probably recognize the effects once the duel began. He wondered why it had happened, though, even as he stood next to Potter and other trainees backed away to make room for them. Did Dearborn think it should be their choice to reveal the magic? Did he think it could be dangerous?

Not that things being dangerous around Potter is new.

Potter was nervous; Draco could tell that from the way his magic flickered back and forth, less warm than usual. Then he seemed to steady. Draco glanced sideways and found him exchanging a glance and grin with Weasel.

He should pay attention to his partner, or at least to our enemy, Draco thought, and straightened his back as he waited for Dearborn to throw a curse.

You'll do fine, Ron had mouthed, and Harry knew it was true. This was essentially Defense, and he had always been good at that. Not even Umbridge had managed to ruin his pleasure in the class.

And having Malfoy on his side was essentially like having a magical battery with him, wasn't it?

When he looked at Malfoy, he was focused and so calm that someone could have thrown a Killing Curse at him and he wouldn't have flinched. Harry grimaced. He wondered if he could take lessons from Malfoy in ways to look that cool, that collected—

Then he saw the bright flash of a spell coming towards him from the front.

He reacted without thought, bringing up a Shield Charm that bounced the spell so hard Dearborn had to duck. Harry shook his head and forced himself to pay attention to the fight. He couldn't always depend on his instincts, as the Dark magic he and Malfoy had found the other night proved. It would have been better of him to leave the illusion and message where they were so that the full-fledged Aurors could use them as evidence.

Meanwhile, he had something to prove to cool-eyed Auror Dearborn, who had already prepared his own Shield Charm and his next spell.

Then Malfoy came to life next to Harry.

And it was *glorious.*

Harry felt Malfoy's magic like a rush of cool air to his lungs. Malfoy took a step forwards and lashed out with his wand sideways. Harry didn't know the spell, but he could feel its effect. It thickened the air in front of them, so that Auror Dearborn suddenly seemed to swim in stone. His wand hand slowed considerably.

Malfoy barked out a sharp word that didn't sound like Latin, and a white shape leaped out of his wand, forming into a tiny dragon as it flew. It blew flame around the edge of Dearborn's shield, and he shouted as his hair caught fire. The slowing charm dissipated.

With its ending, strength flooded Harry, strength that he had to use before it could burst out of his ears and his hair.

He chose a defensive spell again, since Dearborn had said that one of them in each pair was supposed to demonstrate defensive magic and one offensive. He concentrated hard on a spell that Snape had shown them during their sixth year and which he hadn't studied since, and muttered, "*Navitas.*"

He gasped as energy zipped through his body, making him aware of fleeting motions glimpsed from the corners of his eyes, of the hairs on his toes and the nape of his neck, of rippling and

colliding and coiling currents in his muscles. He tried to swallow, and the motion was easier than he was used to. Next to him, Malfoy was moving faster as he snapped out another spell and Dearborn was lifted from his feet and flung backwards to crash against the wall.

Malfoy didn't pause. "*Incarcerous*," he said, and ropes sprang from nowhere and tied Dearborn in his undignified position.

Again the strength swept back to Harry, and he had to use it or die. "*Alo fines!*" he snapped, the words torn out of his mouth and zinging against his teeth thanks to the magic. He shivered as he watched the ropes around Auror Dearborn's ankles and wrists grow firmer, tying him in place so that it would take several people to get him down. Harry wondered a moment later if it was the best spell he could have chosen, when someone would *need* to get him down before the class could continue, but there was little else to be done once the spell presented itself to him.

Only as the magic drained out of him could Harry think of something else.

Namely, the silence around them.

And the way the other students gaped, or looked envious.

Or the way that Ron was staring back and forth between him and Malfoy with an expression of *comprehension* this time, and deep dislike.

They were *incredible* together.

Draco had never felt such confidence. He had never summoned spells so fast, speaking them as if Latin and not English was his native language. His heartbeat pounded with happiness and the readiness for another fight. He shivered and rubbed his hands up and down his arms, wondering when the next duel would be.

He could see why wizards with compatible magic usually became friends. They felt a rush being around each other.

He turned and looked at Potter—

Only to find him looking at Weasley *again*.

Draco shut his eyes hard on a pang of jealousy. He had spent far too many of his days at Hogwarts being jealous of the red-haired freak when he didn't deserve Draco's envy, or the slightest bit of attention from him. That had been because Weasley had Potter's friendship, certainly, but also because he seemed to get away with trouble that landed Draco in detention when he tried it, and because he had no sense of his or his family's proper place in the scheme of things. Ambition was all very well when one had the money and pride to support it, but the Weasleys had neither.

In the meantime, Auror Dearborn was speaking in a composed voice. "If you would release me, please?"

Draco claimed Potter's attention with a hand on his shoulder. Potter turned around at once, with a small gulp. He met Draco's gaze, and Draco nodded at Dearborn. "It'll take both of us to get him down," he said casually. "Are you up for it?"

Challenge flared in Potter's gaze, and Draco congratulated himself for not having lost the knack of infuriating him. "Of course," Potter said, and turned to face Dearborn. Draco found it ridiculously easy to raise his wand at the same time as Potter's and cast. They even chanted the words together, though they hadn't agreed beforehand about what spell they would cast. The magic seemed to touch Draco's mind and tell him the incantation.

"*Finite Incantatem.*"

The ropes loosened suddenly, and Dearborn slid down the wall but regained his balance before he could fall. As he climbed to his feet, his gaze went back and forth from Draco to Potter, and it was quietly satisfied.

Draco took a deep breath of relief. Perhaps the compatible magic had not made Dearborn reconsider his plan to mentor Draco after all.

"That was the work of a well-qualified team," Dearborn told the rest of the students, not sounding at all upset that he'd just been bested by two trainees, "one wielding defensive magic and one offensive. You will notice that Trainee Malfoy cast the spells that directly hit and tied me, but he would not have had the speed to do so without Trainee Potter casting the spell that gave him energy. I might have escaped my bonds if Trainee Potter had not strengthened them, likewise." He nodded at Draco. "Trainee Malfoy took some risks in casting no defensive spells, especially not a Shield Charm. I might have hit him if I had chosen to concentrate solely on him rather than trying to divide my magic between two. They knew I would, so perhaps Trainee Malfoy was wise in not attempting defensive charms. But in real-life battle, you usually will not know your enemy's intentions that well.

"Now spread out. I want to see how you can duel each other. Remember what the demonstration showed you." He inclined his head to Draco. "Step aside, Trainee Malfoy. You and Potter have done well enough not to need to participate for the rest of class."

Draco willingly sat down against the far wall so that he would be out of the way as the dueling pairs practiced. He had never been fond of doing extra work when it seemed as though there would be no need.

Potter sat down next to him and yearningly tried to catch Weasley's eye. When he couldn't, he sighed and leaned his back on the wall. Draco looked at him and felt a stirring of impatience. He would have expected at least a secretive grin as Potter enjoyed their victory with him, rather than this brooding.

"Afraid that Weasley's figured something out?" Draco asked, keeping his voice low on purpose.

"Of course he has," Potter said. He opened his eyes, looking exhausted. Draco wondered why. He felt exhilarated still, if not quite as high-flying as he had immediately after the fight. "And he won't like it."

"Who cares?" Draco snapped. "You can't choose compatible magic." He immediately moved on to what really interested him, and what he thought Potter might be more willing to talk about without an audience. "What happened to you in Combat this morning?"

Potter stiffened. For long moments, he simply blew his breath through his nostrils, saying nothing. Then he turned towards Malfoy and pointed his finger at him. Draco tried to look frightened. He didn't think he succeeded very well, especially since Potter couldn't hurt him with magic anymore.

"Don't talk about that, Malfoy," Potter said. "So far as you're concerned, that kind of fit doesn't exist."

"Fit?" Draco pounced on the word. "That sounds serious. And what happens if you have one of those in our private lessons? What am I supposed to do for you? Get help? Revive you in some way?"

Potter shook his head. "They don't exist," he said again, and turned away to watch the trainees. Nothing else Draco could say would draw him out.

At last, Draco scowled and sat back as well. *Fuck you, then, Potter. We'll go on working well together while you clutch your little secrets and isolate yourself. Then someday you'll want my sympathy, and it'll be my turn to remind you that I offered it and you disdained it.*

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—How to Confront Your Best Friends

"*Talk*, Harry."

Hermione's words had weight, Harry thought. They lay on his skin like stones, and on his tongue, too. He stared at her sitting in a chair she'd conjured across from Harry's bed—because

she didn't trust the rickety excuses for furniture in their room, she'd said—and leaning forwards. He thought she would have been putting her hands on her hips if it was possible with the position she was in. She was so expectant that every time he tried to think of the words, his memory failed him.

"*Well*?"

"Give him a chance to talk, Hermione," Ron snapped. He was prowling around the far side of the room, his hands nervously fiddling with the Quidditch posters. Harry could see the small flying players in the nearest poster looking apprehensively at Ron, as if they were afraid that he would rip them off the wall if he didn't stop flipping the edges of the paper like that. "I think he'll need time to think of anything that can explain what happened to him in Combat, *or* in Offensive and Defensive." He turned around and settled his back against the wall, glaring skeptically at Harry. His arms were folded.

Harry swallowed. "I meant what I said in Combat. That—shaking—happens to me when I'm under too much stress."

"But you never showed it in the past year," Hermione said, and then paused.

Harry groaned silently. He knew, from the way her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, that she was mentally traveling through all the times in the past year when he'd said that he needed to be alone and excused himself, especially when Ron and Hermione already had private plans for the evening. Most of those times had been when he thought another fit would come on, but not *all* of them.

"It's not as bad as you think," he began.

"But what happens to you during them?" Hermione insisted. "We could only see that you were shaking, but it's more than that, Harry, isn't it?"

Harry sighed and bowed his head. "It's more than that," he agreed reluctantly, even as he tried to figure out how much he could tell them without rousing further concern. Hermione would probably try to get him to go to a counselor or a Mind-Healer or whatever the wizarding world's equivalent of a Muggle psychologist was, and Harry didn't want to. There wasn't anyone out there who could treat him fairly if they knew who he was, he thought, and the treatment would be useless if they *didn't* know who he was. He hadn't noticed anyone else having trouble like this since the war, so that must mean it was Harry's problem and only Harry's problem. Maybe it was connected to killing Voldemort, or being the master of the Elder Wand, or dying and coming back. He really had no idea.

And no desire to explore it. He wanted a normal life. He didn't want yet another reason for his name to become famous, or infamous.

That meant deflecting Hermione was the most important thing.

So he lifted his head, smiled a bit, and shrugged. "One of the reasons I avoided telling you is that it's so silly," he said. "It looks worse than it really is. Yes, you see me shaking, but inside my head, I'm just tired."

"Tired?" Hermione leaned forwards and surveyed him. Ron watched him with dark eyes. Harry didn't think he really needed to worry about fooling Ron. He was much more interested in what the fuck Harry was doing sharing compatible magic with Malfoy than he was in the fits. Harry knew that much from the way his best mate had looked at him in Dearborn's class, and, more to the point, looked away.

"Yes," Harry said. "I don't know how to explain it. I see hallucinations, and floating colors, and feel the urge to yawn until my jaw cracks. I feel like I would be all right if I could just yawn." He shrugged helplessly. "I know those are signs of sleep deprivation. I think everything would change if I could just get more sleep."

As he had known she would, Hermione seized the rather large hint for a solution and leaped to her feet, beaming. "Of course! I'll make sure that you can have some Dreamless Sleep Potion, and that should solve your problem."

Harry played along, making his expression deep and serious. "But isn't Dreamless Sleep addictive? I don't think I like the sound of that, Hermione."

Hermione laughed at him. "It's only addictive if you take it for long periods of time and without proper supervision. There's a lesser potion that you can take in between the Dreamless Sleep, and it doesn't keep you in a coma-like state the way that Dreamless Sleep does, but it does make it easier for you to dismiss nightmares." She was bouncing on her toes, her eyes shining. "I'll ask Auror Roto right away."

Harry was about to ask who Auror Roto was, and then remembered: the instructor in Battle Brewing. Well, if anyone would know something about potions and probably be receptive to what Hermione wanted to do, it was him. He was the opposite of Snape in temper, according to Hermione.

Let her do it, he thought, smiling at his friend and enjoying the way she smiled back. *It'll make her happy, and on nights when I really do need to get some sleep, like before an exam, it'll make things easier for me, too.*

In reality, he wasn't sure that he wanted to block the nightmares. It was the days after the nights *without* dreams, like today, that he had the most intense fits.

Hermione bounced to the door, and then Ron cleared his throat pointedly. "Harry still hasn't told us what was happening in Dearborn's class," he said.

Hermione blinked and turned around. "That's right, Harry. What happened? You and Malfoy

acted like you had fought together before." By the end of the sentence, she looked her usual combination of suspicious and interested when she was determined to find out a secret.

Harry groaned in silence. It would have been easier to tell the truth to Ron alone than both Ron and Hermione. He and Ron would probably have a fight about it, but in the end they would patch up the fight, and Ron could break the news to Hermione. Now he had to worry about both truth and Ron's happiness at once.

He wondered again if he really wanted to be an Auror. It was so much *work*, and there was so little reward, so far. Most of his teachers wanted more effort from him, he made his best friends angry and worried, and he had to spend time with Malfoy, his least favorite person in the world now that Voldemort, Snape, and Bellatrix were all dead. Maybe it would be better to just go live in a nice quiet cottage somewhere.

And then he remembered that he would have to live in the cottage without Ron and Hermione.

And without Ginny.

Let's not think about Ginny, he chanted to himself, and nodded. He had to tell the truth now, at least, because he knew that Ron had probably recognized exactly what the compatible magic was thanks to a pure-blood education. So he would do that and worry about placating Ron when he'd spoken the truth. "Malfoy and I have compatible magic. We discovered it by accident when we found that strange illusion and message in the corridor together." That sounded plausible, and it kept Harry from having to tell them about the private dueling lessons. Ron would be so angry about *that* that he would start shouting, and their fight would last longer than it would if Harry could keep him calm at first. "So we can't directly fight each other. We can't even hex each other," he added, putting his anger at the situation behind those words. "We knew that we couldn't duel when Dearborn asked us to. But we work very well together."

"Of course you do," Ron muttered, his voice low and ugly and sad. That last was the hardest part for Harry to deal with. "Of course, if you had to have compatible magic with someone, it would be that slimy Slytherin instead of me."

Harry turned to face Ron and told the truth as fiercely as he could, because it would make Ron happy this time. "There's no one I would rather have compatible magic with than you, Ron. Malfoy's a git, I hate him, and I hate that I can't change this and I have to have this—*this* with him."

Ron licked is lips and blinked. "But I've heard that wizards with compatible magic usually become friends," he muttered. "It feels so good to fight like that, in tandem with someone, that they don't have a choice."

"I always want to have a choice," Harry said, wincing at the thought of being forced to feel any differently for Malfoy than he did now. "But even if I had to like him, mate, do you think it can really stand up against all the fighting we've done together, and the pranks, and looking for

Horcruxes, and sharing those years in Gryffindor?" He reached out, grabbed Ron's shoulder, and shook it. "Because it can't for me. Malfoy can't have the position of my best friend. It's already taken."

Ron reached out and hugged him. It was brief—Ron always made it that way—but Harry valued it anyway, because he could count on one hand the number of times Ron had hugged him. Most of the time, he left that up to his mother and Hermione.

"Thanks, Harry," he said, when he pulled back. His face was calm and bright both at once, as though he had swallowed a mouthful of Felix Felicis. "I'll tell the prat that if he tries to say something to me."

"Do." Harry tapped his shoulder with one fist and smiled. "He needs some humbling anyway, since he seems to think that he's the best trainee in the Auror program."

"Oh, *Harry*," Hermione broke in then. It sounded as if she had been forcing herself to restrain her curiosity until he and Ron had somewhat made up the brewing argument between them. "There's so much I want to know. What does compatible magic feel like? Why could you fight so well with Malfoy when you'd never fought next to him before? Magic alone shouldn't do that. I think it would depend on personality, and you know how much your personalities have always clashed, and I don't think your history…"

Harry caught Ron's eye as Hermione rattled on, and they smiled wryly at each other. They all had their places in this friendship, and Hermione's was to ask a million questions at once.

Harry was feeling happier than he had in the month since Auror training started, in fact, as if he were back in Hogwarts. He wondered for a moment if, since telling the truth about the compatible magic had made him this happy, if perhaps he ought to tell Ron and Hermione the truth about his nightmares and his fits, too.

He shook his head at once. The difference was that keeping his friendship with them was important, and the fits weren't.

"I still wish you could come home more often, darling."

Draco smiled reassuringly at his mother through the fire. Narcissa looked worn and anxious. Draco hoped that she wasn't spending every day in such a state of stress. "You know that I can't, Mother," he said comfortably, shifting until he was sitting in front of the fire instead of kneeling. His legs ached after a hard day of Combat, and later this evening he was supposed to have one of his private duels with Potter. "I have to work, and when I'm at home, your conversation is so fascinating that I never do."

His mother smiled, as he had meant her to do, and smoothed her hand down her hair. "How can I resent your absence when you make up for it with such charming words?" she murmured.

"I hope that you'll never resent my absence," Draco said honestly. His home was one of the few havens he had left in a world that he no longer understood, given his father's imprisonment and his family's loss of honor. *Or perhaps I comprehend it too well, and do not wish to.* "Instead, think of me as doing something that no Malfoy has ever done, and earning respect by it."

Narcissa fixed him with a disconcerting gaze—disconcerting because it was direct and his mother had not given anyone such a direct look in months. "If I could only be sure that it would contribute it to your being happy as well as unique," she murmured.

Draco blinked and then laughed. "I'm not always happy, Mother," he admitted. "But no one is. I don't think that you should worry about the fleeting moments of what I feel. Look towards my ultimate goals instead."

Narcissa smiled, but it was a distant smile, and a few moments later, after an exchange of farewells, she ended the Floo call. Draco leaned back on his heels and spent a pleasant minute thinking of what the Aurors would say if they knew that Draco had easily worked around their spells designed to keep the Floo connections in the trainee rooms private so that he could communicate with his mother.

Then his satisfied smile faded into what he knew was a frown of annoyance.

He still had no idea what to do about Potter. It was obvious that his fits could not be allowed to continue, because they were linked now in the minds of their instructors. Portillo Lopez had been watching them with narrowed eyes, and Draco knew that she was wondering how well Potter's magic, biased towards Healing, might work with his own. Ketchum had spoken briefly of pairing them together when they came to team tactics, but they were not there yet. Even Pushkin had watched them with elevated eyebrows, though how compatible magic might work with Observation, Draco had no idea.

And this morning, Gregory had made them fight each other in Combat.

Potter had struck with grim determination, mouth set in a thin line, as if he wanted to prove that *part* of him could still fight Draco—never mind how inferior his physical combat skills might be to his wandwork. Draco had won the fight, but not easily. What Potter lost in simple lack of coordination and those damn glasses slipping down his face, he made up for with sheer stubbornness and a high pain tolerance. When Draco had held out his hand to help him up, on Gregory's orders, Potter had grunted and stood without looking Draco in the eye. He had limped away at once to sit beside Granger and Weasley. Weasley thumped Potter on the back and shook his head at Draco, as if scolding him for doing what he was actually supposed to do and inflicting pain on Potter.

Draco scowled and crossed his arms. Whatever Potter had said to Weasley, it might have redeemed him in the eyes of his unworthy friend, but it had set Weasley against Draco more firmly than ever.

And then there was the fact that Potter would have one of his fits again in public someday, and that would reflect badly on Draco, particularly if they lost a practice duel because of it.

It seemed to Draco that Potter was following his old procedure of plowing blindly forwards, ignoring all the evidence that might give him another perspective on the situation. He had accepted the compatible magic because he had no choice, but it was becoming only too clear that he wouldn't accept anything beyond that. He didn't ponder the implications. He didn't think about what would happen if one of them did something to disgrace the other, and how their professors would think of them as a linked, marked pair, even if they tried consciously not to. The friendships that compatible magic formed were so deep and often so famous that it was impossible not to consider *them* as pairs.

And Draco knew, because Dearborn had told him so, that some of the instructors had the ambition to help in the formation of another pair of heroes.

His life could be wonderful. He might become famous. He might become admired. He might have an assigned partner before the end of his first year, where most of the other trainees had to wait until their third. He might be able to show everyone that, no matter what his name, he had the talent and the ambition to succeed at anything he did.

But that potential future depended on Potter, who seemed ill-disposed to embrace it. The mere thought made Draco want to grind his teeth. He rose and turned to pace his room, wondering if perhaps that would make him feel better.

Someone knocked on the door. Draco turned around with a sense of relief. That would be Potter, and Draco could translate his whirling thoughts into direct words.

But instead, when he opened it, he found a tall, narrow former Slytherin called Aurelius Kensing waiting with an awkwardly wrapped package in his hands. Draco stepped back warily, one hand on his wand. Kensing had left Hogwarts three years before Draco had, and he had been known for his pranks; he had even been daring enough to try them in Professor Snape's class.

This time, though, Kensing just looked at him, a leisurely look from bright brown eyes, before he gave a small bow and handed the package over. "This is for you," he said. "I saw the owl struggling and decided to take it away."

Draco glanced automatically for some sign of a tear in the package, then reminded himself that Kensing was an expert at making things look untouched and he should trust to a spell that would let him detect hexes instead. "The owl didn't wait for a reply?" he asked as he cast the spell nonverbally.

"No," Kensing said. He seemed to be losing interest, though he had smiled briefly when he saw Draco's wand move in the spell to detect hexes. No doubt he recognized it. "I don't know who it was from, but I didn't find any Dark Arts on it. You know the list of items that first-year trainees are forbidden to have in the rooms?" His voice was stern, and Draco wondered if he really cared

about the list of rules or not.

"Yes, I do," he said. "You're more likely to break those rules than I am."

Kensing just gave him a lazy smile, as if to say that it was completely appropriate for Draco to bring up ancient history but he would remember it, and turned and strolled away. Draco watched after him to make sure he turned the corner before he shut the door and set the package down on the table in the center of the room. It was heavy; he thought it was made of metal.

He took a good few steps back and cast an unwrapping spell that his mother had taught him, useful for opening packages and for disabling any nasty surprises that unwanted or unexpected gifts might bring.

The package's paper fell apart. Draco was not sure what he expected, but it wasn't what revealed itself.

The Pensieve that now sat in the middle of his table was filled to the brim with liquid silvery memories. They must have been charmed to keep them from spilling; Draco had no illusion that they would have survived a ride with an owl otherwise. He walked around the table carefully, staring, but there was no mark that identified the Pensieve. He would have thought it was a gift his mother had sent him, but she would have mentioned it, and she would have sent it empty.

No, wait. There was a single mark close to the rim of the Pensieve on the side that Draco was now facing, since he had walked halfway around it. He took a step closer and bent down so he could see it more clearly. It was an engraving, and hard to make out at first against the bright silver.

Property of Severus Snape.

Draco swallowed, and his eyes traveled slowly from the words up to the memories that looked ready to spill over the rim. Then he took a step back, instinctively putting some distance between him and the dangerous gift.

Professor Snape was dead, of course. Draco had visited the Shrieking Shack and tried a few spells on the body just to make sure. He'd even experimented with a bezoar, though he'd never heard it was effective against the bloody wounds from a giant snake he was sure had destroyed his Head of House as much as the poison had.

But he could have arranged to send this Pensieve to Draco before his death, specifying that it should be delivered at a certain time.

Today was Halloween. Draco had never known that was a day of special significance to Snape.

Hesitantly, he approached the Pensieve until he stood staring down into it. Of course he could see nothing in the memories clearly when he was looking at them from the outside like this. Taunting

colors and glimpses of shapes danced beneath the surface, but he knew that his eyes and brain were the ones forming patterns in them.

He wanted to plunge his head into the memories, and he did not want to. He knew something of Snape's story now. It was sure to be a harrowing one.

Another knock on the door, and this one had the arrogance that Draco expected of Potter. He conjured a dark cloth big enough to enfold the Pensieve and cast it over the thing. Potter would be curious, but with Draco in the same room, he would not intrude.

Potter strode through the door when Draco opened it and gave him a brisk nod. "I thought we would go back to practicing with the Patronus Charm again," he said.

Draco, about to answer, narrowed his eyes. "How strange," he said. "I was sure we would duel." They had done that for the past fortnight, since the day in Dearborn's class when they'd been forced to reveal the compatible magic.

"Well, today I don't feel like it." Potter faced him and lifted his chin, folding his arms. Draco sneered at him.

"Why? Did Weasley issue you some injunction telling you that you're not allowed to duel with me anymore?' Draco took a step closer, watching Potter's face, ready to pounce if it turned out that he was right. The thought of Weasley daring to interfere with him infuriated him more than usual.

"There's another reason," Potter said instead of snapping, though he had flushed bright red at Draco's words. "One that doesn't concern you and that you don't need to know about." He lifted his wand and cocked an eyebrow impatiently at Draco. "Are you going to ever learn to do the Patronus Charm properly?"

Draco considered pressing forwards. Potter's lips were tight, his eyes too brilliant. He looked over Draco's shoulder and at the far wall as if he would prefer to tutor it.

In fact, he looked the way he had after his fit in Combat.

Draco made a decision not to press. Potter would refuse to discuss it, and they would waste the lesson. Perhaps, in time, Potter would remember his forbearance kindly, especially since his friends would probably try to get to the bottom of his fits sooner or later.

"All right," he said, and closed his eyes to concentrate on his happy memory.

He didn't close them all the way, however, and so had them open enough to see Potter's look of surprise and suspicion and speculation—dancing, bright emotions that had deeper roots than Potter knew.

Draco smiled, and began to conjure his Patronus.

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—Black and Red

Fine, Harry thought, as he leaned against the wall of Malfoy's room with his arms folded and tried to pretend that he wasn't interested in the thing sitting wrapped on the table. *This is fine. We won't ever talk about anything that really matters. We'll fight beside each other and I'll teach him spells and he'll eventually master those spells and won't need me anymore. He's perfectly willing to let it go.*

But as Harry shifted again and again, feeling as though his curiosity had taken the form of ants biting at his ankles, he had to admit something he hadn't admitted so far.

I'm not willing to let it go.

How could he? He'd kept his head down in the past few weeks, doing all he could to soothe Hermione's anxiety about his fits—which kept happening—and keep up in his classes and stay close to Ron. He'd barely let Malfoy intrude into his thoughts at all. When he had a dream about Malfoy, which wasn't a nightmare but was frustratingly hard to define, he deliberately forgot the details instead of retaining them as he did with his nightmares. (He thought he could understand the nightmares if he considered them long enough). No one could accuse him of trying to take advantage of the accident of incompatible magic and get closer to the git.

But he kept noticing Malfoy in class anyway, listening for his voice when it was silent, watching the way he moved in Tactics and Combat. He had seen that Malfoy had faint wrinkles around his eyes when he squinted in Observation, and he was alternately smug that the prat displayed his age and angry with himself for noticing at all.

He didn't need any more distractions than he had already had, given that the classes kept increasing in difficulty and Hermione and the instructors watched him with narrowed eyes. Harry couldn't figure that last part out at all. It was natural for Gregory to distrust him, but why Ketchum and Hestia? Harry hadn't always done well in their lessons, but he hadn't done anything to make himself suspicious. Did they still think that he was behind that illusion and that message about Nihil somehow?

He needed mental space and clarity so that he could deal with those more pressing things. That,

he told himself, was the only reason he spoke up now.

"Malfoy."

Malfoy turned away from his latest wisp of silver smoke and gave Harry an impatient look. He didn't speak. *Probably thinks he's too good to waste his precious words on me,* Harry thought, his rebellion rising again.

"Does the compatible magic do other things to you besides making it impossible to attack the person you have it with with magic?" Harry asked, because the glance of those grey eyes made him forget any other question he could have asked.

Malfoy stared at him for a moment, then smirked. "Your sentence is a marvel of non-articulation, Potter," he said.

"You know perfectly well what I mean." Harry bristled and wondered if he would regret the impulse to interrupt Malfoy's concentration.

"Outer appearances are at least as important as meanings." Malfoy adopted a pompous expression, then let it dissolve and rolled his eyes, presumably because he could see Harry's impatience. "To assemble the question that you flung at me as a jumble of stones into a coherent wall, Potter, yes, compatible magic does other things. It increases the chance of friendship. I told you that already. And it can resonate back to the other partner to create shared magical strength in duels, as you have seen."

Harry shook his head in irritation. "That's not what I mean. I mean—" He hesitated. He hadn't clearly realized before that admitting he had noticed Malfoy in class would mean, well, admitting he had noticed Malfoy in class.

"Oh, this *must* be good, to make you stammer and flush so." Malfoy's voice had dropped low with delight. From observing him, Harry knew it was the tone he used when some complicated problem had fallen out the way he wanted it to. He bit his lip and wished he didn't know that. "Out with it."

"All right," Harry said, stung and deciding that any humiliation a few minutes in the future was better than standing here like this and enduring Malfoy's mockery. "I catch myself staring at you in class now. I know how you move, what makes you smile, what you look like in private moments. There's no rational reason for me to do that, so I thought it must have something to do with the magic. That's all."

He linked his hands together behind his back for courage and faced Malfoy unflinchingly, waiting.

Draco stared into Potter's steady eyes and refrained, with difficulty, from licking his lips.

So Potter felt drawn to him, did he?

The truth was, Draco had no idea whether such things were the result of compatible magic—which had some irregularities in its manifestation for each pair of friends it created—or simply because Potter was paying more attention to him *because* of the compatible magic. But either way, he could use this fascination.

In a moment, he had altered the battle plan he had hastily conceived when he saw Potter trying to ignore him. He would go straight through Potter's barriers instead of over or around them. It was such an unfamiliar tactic, coming from a Slytherin, that he did not think Potter would be able to anticipate and counter it.

"Well," he said, and deepened his voice to see what effect that would have on Potter. Potter shifted uncomfortably. *Too little evidence to know whether the fascination has its sexual side or not,* Draco decided with some regret. "The magic could cause such things, if they happened often enough. How much do you stare at me, Potter? You're more subtle than I thought you were." The compliment cost him nothing when he was about to gain so great a prize.

Potter heaved a deep breath and stared at the floor a moment, as though someone had asked him to hand over the contents of his Gringotts vaults. Then he gave a tiny nod at no one Draco could see, and looked up. His eyes blazed, but Draco found himself pleased by that rather than otherwise. Now that Potter couldn't hurt him with his wand, it was rather interesting to see the flames that danced and flickered through his eyes.

"Every class," Potter said. "There's something about you that pulls me in. You don't have to be casting spells or scrambling up stairs in Tactics. Or showing off the way you do in Combat," he added, because apparently a speech that passed without an insult to Draco wasn't a speech worth making. "You can be staring at one of those stupid flowers that Pushkin gave to us the other day and I look up from my flower at you. It's like I can't keep my eyes away." He swallowed. "So it's the magic, right?"

"Of course," Draco said. He didn't need any preparation to lie smoothly and plausibly; his parents had trained him well enough for that. "What other motive would you have to look at me?" *Poor naïve fool. I reckon that I shouldn't have thought Potter was insensitive to perfection. It just takes him years longer to notice it than other people.*

"Oh, good," Potter said, and sighed out noisily. "How do we get it to stop?"

Draco rolled his eyes as all his irritation with Potter came jumping down his throat again. "It's like the force that keeps us from hexing each other," he said. "We don't stop it. We live with it."

Potter gave him a withering stare. "I don't want to fail my classes because I'm so busy staring at you all the time."

"Then do something that can substitute for staring," Draco suggested smoothly. *Now to turn the*

conversation where I want it to go. "The lore on compatible magic suggests that the magic sometimes exerts force indirectly on the physical plane, because it can't exert force directly on the mental plane."

Potter snorted like a donkey, so hard that he blew his fringe off his scar. "In English?"

"It's making you stare at me because that's a form of connection between us," Draco said, irritated again. He wished that Potter and Granger could have exchanged brains. On the other hand, that would mean that Potter would spout a lot of meaningless Muggle blather, so perhaps matters were better as they stood. "Find another form of connection between us, something as powerful, and the impulse to stare should stop."

Potter folded his arms so tightly that Draco heard his elbows creak. "But what would that be?"

"Tell me the truth about your fits." Draco gave him a charming smile. Most of what he said about compatible magic wasn't true, but it would give him what he wanted, and how likely was Potter to go and look the truth up?

Potter spun around as though he suspected that Draco might try to stab him through the chest. His voice was clipped when he said, "No."

"They're going to interfere with us in the future." Draco made his voice as delicate and reasonable as he could. His hand was twitching to grab his wand and let a curse fly, but that impulse would do no good if he did give into it. "When we have to fight and you fall to the floor shaking and screaming."

Potter glanced over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised. He had a sneer on his face, and that was how Draco found out that he thought the expression unnatural and disfiguring for someone like Potter. "Why would talking to you about them change that?"

"Because, you *idiot*," Draco said, his voice sparking in spite of himself, "that might give me some clue of what causes them and how to stop them."

"You know what causes them," Potter said. "No one can stop them. I've tried. Good-bye." He marched across the room and flung the door open.

Draco opened his mouth to remind Potter that all he had to do was mention was the truth of Potter and Weasley's drunken escapade the other night and the instructors would take Potter's cloak away at the very least—

And then Potter fell back in front of the racing ribbons of black and red magic coiling through the door, and Draco grabbed his wand and charged to his side, glad of a responsive target for his anger.

Harry heard his mother's scream as a trailing edge of the black magic coiled around his throat.

He felt the cold fingers of Dementors gripping him as the red ribbons joined the first one. He heard Voldemort's laugh, and saw green light cutting the blackness, and felt the same overwhelming love of life that had consumed him when he realized that he would have to die to destroy the Horcrux embedded in his scar.

The world around him trembled and vanished. He stood outside the Shrieking Shack and saw Pettigrew race into the distance, taking the last chance for Sirius's freedom with him. He heard Hermione scream as Bellatrix tortured her. He saw his father grin and turn Snape upside-down, using the charm that would reveal his pants. Sirius tumbled through the veil, Aunt Petunia shut the door of the cupboard in his face, Cedric fell to Wormtail's wand, Remus and Tonks lay motionless in the Great Hall, Fred hit the ground as a corpse with a dazzling grin. The memories closed hands around his throat and squeezed.

Harry tried to fight back against them the way he tried to do against a fit, reminding himself over and over that this wasn't real, that it had happened before and he was alive while they were dead and he would wake up—

But the memories squeezed and squeezed, and he screamed in misery and hatred, and then stopped breathing altogether.

Malfoy came for him.

Harry saw his wand like a streak of light cutting the darkness, a streak of light that turned over and brightened into a sword. Malfoy's voice rose in a steady chant, shaking the memories that crowded in about Harry like dropped stones. His hand brushed Harry's shoulder, no more than a glancing touch, but one that made the clutching hands fall away from his throat. Harry drew in deep, grateful gulps of air.

Then he surged to his feet, pushing Malfoy away from the ribbons of red and black that reached for him. Malfoy kept a hand on his shoulder, so that Harry had to follow, swearing and stumbling all the way. They came together in the middle of the wall nearest the door, backs to the stone and shoulder to shoulder, both their wands aimed at the red and black mass in a gesture so natural Harry almost thought the compatible magic had nothing to do with it.

The magic curled back in on itself, seething. Harry squinted at it, trying to use the Observation skills that Pushkin had drilled into him, but could make out nothing solid at the center of it. It looked the way water would if it was different colors and was able to do what it wanted instead of obey the law of gravity.

"It's like fire," Malfoy breathed. "See the way it shifts?"

Harry gave a private, inward roll of his eyes. It seemed that he and Malfoy were doomed never to see things the same way, no matter how often they fought beside each other.

"Yes," he said. "And it's bloody awful when you touch it, like fire." He shuddered and gripped his wand tighter.

Malfoy gave him a quick curious glance. "What was it doing to you?"

"Making me relive memories." Harry kept a wary eye on the water-fire as he talked. So far it wasn't charging forwards to hurt them, but then, he hadn't expected it to be outside Malfoy's door, either. He should probably expect it to do unexpected things. "All the people I love who died in the war. And so on." He wasn't about to tell Malfoy anything about his mother's scream or how terrified he still was of Dementors. The git would think it was a great idea to dress up like a Dementor in class, the way he had on the Quidditch field at Hogwarts.

"That's odd," Malfoy murmured, his voice distant. "It looked like it was choking you to death, and it shouldn't have to make you relive memories to do that."

"Well, that's what it did." Harry managed to hold back his impatience, even though it was hard. After all, they needed to know more about what the magic did in order to defeat it. "How do you suggest we get rid of it?"

Draco stared at the black and red ribbons. He wanted to shake his head. He'd seen tinges of those colors in other curses. The black was in spells meant to induce despair, the red in curses meant to kill.

He'd never seen this combination before. In fact, he hadn't known it was possible to combine them—or necessary. The despair spells traditionally were used when one wanted a slow death that would look natural from the outside. The red curses killed quickly and bloodily in order to intimidate.

He hadn't the least idea of how to go about dissipating them when they were wound together like that. So far as he could see, every black ribbon turned red somewhere along its length, and vice versa, and there was no way to disentangle them.

Draco licked dry lips and told himself to rise to the occasion. They had to do *something*, or the magic would just attack when it liked and kill them. And a Malfoy was never helpless in the face of an enemy the way that this magic wanted to make Draco helpless.

Let's begin with the magic that you would normally use on despair and blood curses, he decided, lifting his wand. *At least it'll show me conclusively what happens when I try to treat it like a combination of those spells.*

"Potter," he said. "Listen to me. I need you to concentrate as hard as you can on the spell you're speaking. We'll need to cast at the same time, instead of letting the magic bounce from one to the other of us, because your magic is biased towards getting rid of Dark Arts and my magic is biased towards combat."

Potter gave him a narrow glance, as if he was wondering how Draco knew that about his magic, but didn't interrupt him to yap nervously about it. He seemed to realize that the power in front of them was the greater immediate danger, wonder of wonders. He nodded. "All right. Do you want me to cast *Finite*, then?"

"Yes." Draco aimed his wand at the left side of the shifting mass, and noticed that Potter had chosen the right side. He couldn't help giving him a quick approving smile. Potter grinned back. Draco wished he could ignore the desperate edge to it, because being on the receiving edge of a sincere smile like that would have been agreeable. "I'll cast a spell that is meant to shred immaterial things—hostile ghosts, and the like. We need to cast at the same time, though, or the magic will bounce from one to the other of us like it usually does, and I don't think strengthening just one spell will work."

Potter's eyes lit up. "If we can cast at the exact same moment, then you think it'll strengthen both of us?"

"Yes, I do." Draco reached out and put his hand on Potter's shoulder, needing the physical connection to brace himself as he leaned forwards. *All right, and perhaps the solidity of Potter's body is its own protection.* "So far, we haven't tried to do that, except when we were aiming the spells at each other."

"That's true," Potter said, and grinned even more widely. Then he turned his attention to the magic, which had moved a little closer to them. His face went grim as he reached up and anchored himself with an arm around Draco's shoulders. "The *exact* same time. Do you want to count, or should I?"

"You do it," Draco said, because he was more confident about his ability to take cues from Potter than the other way around. What else had he done during countless Quidditch games?

It was strange, but no tingle of bitterness went through him at the memory. This was simply the truth; they were a matched pair challenging a power that wanted to destroy them, and Draco saw no reason to ignore any aspect of themselves that would make that match stronger.

"All right," Potter said. His voice wavered for a moment, then stabilized as he began to count. "One. Two."

Draco tensed. He could feel lightning racing through his veins, but he didn't strike, however badly he wanted to. The red and black magic drifted a little closer, edged and darting flames reaching for them.

"*Three!*" Potter roared.

Draco felt the pull in his muscles as Potter raised his arm, since his hand was resting there. He responded from the roots of his being, more freely and fully than he had dared to hope he could.

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

"*Spargo imagines!*"

The spells whipped out from their wands, expanding in umbrellas of power such as Draco had never experienced before. Fanning plumes exploded around him, and the magic drew from his stomach, his heart, his brain, his neck. His muscles snapped taut, and he let out a soundless gasp, feeling Potter sag against him at the same moment.

His spell manifested as a throwing star of brilliant purple light, which landed in the middle of black and red and started turning them different colors. The magic writhed, screaming.

Potter's spell launched into it from the side.

The red and black imploded. Draco had a brief, confused vision of blood and bits of black stone raining down, and then it vanished and he was left staring at a scrubbed-clean floor and a table that leaned on a charred, smoking leg. He tensed when he realized that Snape's Pensieve had slid closer to the edge of the table and cast a spell that would keep it in one place and upright. Then he dropped his head forwards and let out a deep, huffing breath, shaking his head.

"That was—incredible," Potter said.

Draco turned and looked at him. Potter was giving him a tired stare and a wearier smile. His face was scorched and his fingers were still white-knuckled where they gripped his wand. But his eyes were alight and open, and he reached out a hand to Draco as though they had always been friends accustomed to clasping wrists.

Draco couldn't let the moment pass so casually. He took Potter's hand and said, in a tone that he also couldn't make conciliatory, "I reckon I'm the right sort now, eh, Potter?"

Potter's head tilted back, nostrils flaring, easy smile wiped away. He studied Draco narrowly for so long that Draco became aware of a pulse of uneasiness. He had expected Potter to storm away or shrug the moment off with a laugh and a grin, as he would do if it really didn't mean anything to him.

Not this scrutiny, this stare that seemed to suggest he really *did* pay attention in Observation, whatever Pushkin thought.

Then Potter gave him a smile that snapped at the edges and squeezed down so hard that Draco felt as though the bones in his wrist would turn to powder. "Yes," he said. "The right sort for fighting with and defeating enemies with." He looked away at the space where the red and black magic had been and shook his head. "For doing incredible deeds with."

Draco closed his eyes, because if Potter looked at him right now, he would embarrass himself.

That had been what he wanted. He was jealous of Potter's friendship with Weasley in school, yes, but more scornful of it—

Except during those times when Potter defeated the Dark Lord somehow and Weasley was along. Then Draco experienced sick and unadulterated envy. He wanted to do great things; it was one of the reasons the Sorting Hat had placed him in Slytherin. To do them at Potter's side would add to his prestige and his fame.

And now Potter, whether he knew it or not, had elevated Draco into the place that Weasley had always occupied.

Draco kept his eyes shut, and after a moment, Potter seemed to decide that he wasn't going to respond. He moved away from Draco with a snort. When Draco looked again, he was kneeling to examine the chars on the table leg, brow furrowed as if he wanted to know what could have done such damage.

Draco let out a rattling breath. In a moment, he would step forwards and add what he knew about the colors of the magic to Potter's knowledge.

In a moment.

I couldn't respond because it was a precious gift you gave me, he told Potter's bowed head and hunched shoulders. *I need to learn how to handle it, how to cradle it and protect it the way it should be protected.*

I need to know how much this changes the relationship between us. It's not the friendship I was hoping the compatible magic would create for us, but it might be better.

Draco knew one thing, and only one thing, for certain: he would fight to preserve this fragile understanding he shared with Potter.

He clung to that realization until it hardened in his mind like coal being pressed into diamond.

Then he stepped up to join Potter.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—An Unsuitable Idea

"You were told to let the Dark magic remain as evidence for your instructors."

"With respect, sir," Malfoy said, standing very straight and with his hands clasped in front of him in a way that made him look intelligent instead of pleading, "the magic had nearly killed Trainee Potter and didn't seem disposed to let us pass. We eliminated it so that we could be sure of being safe."

Then there's his voice, Harry thought, keeping his eyes lowered so that he wouldn't look up and tell Dearborn exactly what he thought of him. *Cool, reasonable as he makes his points, but still sounding as if he respects all the instructors very much and is sorry that he has to distress them. How does he do that?*

Someone sighed loudly. Harry glanced up and saw that it was Portillo Lopez. She sat next to Dearborn at the table in the large, dim room Harry had already mentally labeled as the Scolding Room. She was looking at both of them and slowly shaking her head.

"Is something wrong, Maryam?" Dearborn turned a glance on her nearly as sharp as the one he'd been questioning Malfoy with.

"Yes," Portillo Lopez said, her eyes glittering. "*Twice* now, these young men have been present at the discovery of Dark magic. That suggests to me that someone is targeting them, or at least one of them." She leaned forwards, staring at Harry as if she imagined that her glance alone could inspire him to confess. Harry glared back. Why, whenever he was the victim of something, did people treat him like the perpetrator?

"I am less concerned about the possible targeting," Pushkin said, his voice high with interest, "than the circumstances of the discovery of that magic. They were skimmed over lightly." He folded his hands in front of him in a way that suggested he'd had lessons from the same instructor who taught Malfoy prissy little things, and gave a small, pleased nod.

"Yes," Auror Gregory said, and her voice was ice and she turned her head back and forth like a bird looking for someone to stab. "We know why you were the first to find the message and the illusion last time. But now? You can't expect us to accept that you were so fortunate as to twice blunder into Dark magic that you just *happened* to dissipate before anyone else could study it."

Harry held himself very still and traded sneers with Gregory. *She'd be glad to see me punished.*

Malfoy put a hand on his arm, and reminded Harry that they had more important things to think about than one prejudiced instructor. For example, what they were going to tell said instructor about their private duels.

"Well?" Harry demanded, leaning towards Malfoy.

"I don't see anything for it but to admit the private training." Malfoy gave a shrug, his face

carefully blank. "Since they already know about the compatible magic, it's not as though we'll be springing a large secret on them."

Harry nodded and turned to face the instructors, then paused. *I just let him make a decision that I'm going to abide by. Since when does* he *get to be the leader?*

Then he decided the speculation was unimportant. What mattered was the looks from everyone in front of them. Hestia and Ketchum were the only ones who looked encouraging. Dearborn and Pushkin had interest in their expressions that was too academic for Harry's taste; he thought they would probably drive both Harry and Malfoy to exhaustion if they could, in order to test the compatible magic. Portillo Lopez and Gregory were both stern.

"Since we discovered that we had compatible magic," Harry began awkwardly, "we've been training privately together on Wednesday evenings, so that we can try and master it. I got—angry about something this evening and tried to leave Trainee Malfoy's room. The magic was waiting outside the door." He fell silent, hoping that they wouldn't ask him to describe the magic grabbing his throat and filling his head with memories again. It had been difficult to try and explain while remaining non-specific so that no one could pry into his past.

Gregory snorted. "That's *it*?" she said. "And you expect us to believe that?"

"Observation of their faces does not indicate that they are lying," Pushkin said, giving Harry a squirrel-like glance.

"Private lessons could be dangerous, but they aren't against the Auror Code," said Hestia, and her smile was small and pleased.

"Well, obviously we've got no choice," Ketchum said, waving his hand around his head as if to clear off smoke. "We've got to partner them now."

Harry could *hear* everyone else's jaws shutting as they turned to stare at the Battlefield Tactics instructor. Except Dearborn, of course. He looked solemnly smug, as though he'd woken up this morning and prophesied this would happen. The onyx ring on his finger added to his grin as he swept his fingers towards Ketchum.

"Acquiring a partner early is a *reward*," Gregory said. "Do you really mean to argue that two of the most reckless youths in the program should be placed together early, Samwise?"

Ketchum rolled his eyes. "Sometimes I wonder who taught you English, Astraea," he said. "*Youths*, indeed." As Gregory's eyes narrowed, he turned away from her as if she didn't exist and addressed the rest of the table. "This isn't a reward," he said. "This is pure necessity, for several reasons." He lifted his fingers and began to fold them down. "First, because the compatible magic means that they'll never work well with anyone else. Second, because together they can deal with attacks that *may* be specifically aimed at them. Alone, I don't think they would have survived." He grinned at both Harry and Draco, as if he shared some delightful secret with them.

Harry really wished he would say what it was. "Third, because they're already taking the initiative to train together outside of class. That should be rewarded, if nothing else should." He turned to Dearborn. "And fourth, because you were right; they're meant to be paired."

Harry swallowed. He wished he felt less like he was swallowing soap—more in control and stronger.

"Have I ever been wrong about a new partnership?" Dearborn shook his head back and forth, like some great, shaggy sheep trying to get clumps of wool off its ears, and then gave a complacent smile at the people around him. His ring flashed again. Harry irritably thought about stripping the ring off and throwing it into a far corner. "No. I predicted that they would have to band together like this. And now we see that they need to survive threats even in their own rooms." He looked at Auror Gregory, his voice ice and acid. "It would be plain idiocy not to let them partner."

"We should make every effort to find out who's casting the Dark magic," Gregory snapped, her lips gone thin. "And stop them. No matter who it is or what motive they have for it."

"Agreed," said Dearborn. "But in the meantime, we should take every step that we possibly can towards the *survival* of our students." He paused, then added, "And it doesn't matter a whit if you dislike one of them."

Gregory stood and whirled away from the table, stalking towards the back of the room—or what Harry assumed was the back of the room—in silence. Dearborn watched her go with a rueful crook to the corner of his mouth. Then he faced Harry and Draco again and said, "Well. How do you feel about being partnered?"

Harry clenched his fists. His mind was bubbling so fast he found it difficult to speak. There was the fight that he and Malfoy had been through, the fact that the Aurors were considering them for an honor that he knew no other trainees would get—

And the picture of Ron's face in his mind. Ron, who would be disappointed beyond measure that Harry wasn't partnered with him, and jealous that Harry had achieved another distinction that he hadn't, even though Harry didn't want this.

"I think it's a rotten idea, sir," Harry said at last, the words pressed out of him.

Dearborn frowned. "Really? Why?" He looked as if he was prepared to listen to intelligent objections.

Harry stared up at him and wished that he had some.

He licked his lips and forced himself to ignore the frigid silence from Malfoy. "Because," he said, hoping that he could appeal to the other instructors on this basis even if he couldn't appeal to Dearborn, "I think I have too much attention and I'm too singled out from the other trainees

already." Gregory couldn't be the only one who had a bit of Snape in her, he thought, and who believed that he had all sorts of luxuries that he didn't deserve. This would be another thing that he didn't merit. "Besides, just because we have compatible magic doesn't mean that I'm the best partner for Trainee Malfoy. He's doing better in the classes than I am. He needs someone who can complement him."

There, Harry thought. *I even said something nice about him. He can't possibly object to that.*

Draco bit his tongue. It was the best way to avoid screaming insults at Potter, which would not help to achieve his goal of convincing the Auror instructors that they were right to partner him and Potter, whatever the idiot said.

He could not *believe*…

Oh, yes, he could, he thought bitterly a moment later. He'd seen the sheep-like look on Potter's face, that terribly *earnest* expression that meant he was thinking about the Weasel or the Mudblood. Of course he would wonder how his partnership with Draco would affect them, instead of thinking properly of his own interests or of Draco, who was the other person immediately concerned in this match.

It would have been so simple for Potter to lie. Tell his hangers-on that the instructors had ordered them to become partners, and he was sorry, and he couldn't do anything about it, and did the Weasel have to pout like that? It would have satisfied all concerned.

Instead, he did this.

But Draco knew, from raised eyebrows and frowns up and down the table, that very few had bought Potter's excuse. If they thought him spoiled, the way he was probably hoping, then they would think it out of character to demand an exemption from the spoiling. Or they would decide it was false modesty.

Draco waited, hands linked together behind his back. Dearborn seemed inclined to take the lead in disputing Potter's claim, but it was Ketchum who leaned forwards, head shaking slightly. Draco didn't like the Mudblood; still, he could have blessed him for the words that flowed from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Potter. True, you're singled out from the other trainees, but did you think you really wouldn't be, with that scar on your forehead?" He gestured towards it, smiling. "We should acknowledge great deeds when true greatness is manifest behind them and they're not just bids for attention. In this case, I can see the greatness. You have compatible magic. Maybe you don't know what that means. I do. We would be fools to assign you to other people when there's a natural force pulling you together, and idiots to wait when you need your combined strength to survive whatever enemy's targeted you."

Draco lowered his eyes so that no one could see his satisfaction. There might be people among

the instructors who would want to deprive a Malfoy though they didn't object to satisfying a Potter.

"And you, Trainee Malfoy?" Ketchum added then, as if he had realized there was another person in the room. "What do you say about this? I understand that you had a rivalry in school. Will you let that influence your decision?"

Draco twitched with mild scorn. The Mudblood had weighted his words to the point that it was bloody obvious which choice was the right one. He must have a low opinion of Draco's intelligence.

"I accept the decision of the instructors," he answered, turning his eyes up and looking and sounding as much like a good little boy as he could. "Yes, we had a rivalry, but that was in the past, when we were children. We're adults now, and must act like them."

He caught sight of Potter's sidelong incredulous glance, but he didn't care. He hoped that Potter wasn't so stupid as to think that Draco was trying to take care of someone else's interests other than his own. Draco's interests and Potter's were linked in this instance. The moment they weren't, Draco would act for himself.

A thought slid into his mind like a dagger: if they were partnered, it might be a long time before their interests separated. Draco slid the dagger back into its sheath. Not even partnerships were permanent.

"Is there anything else you can say that is a more serious objection, Trainee Potter?" Portillo Lopez had a frown like broken glass on her face. Draco suspected she didn't like this partnership at all. She had struck him as someone who was rather like Granger grown-up, abiding by the rules even if there were excellent reasons for making exceptions to them.

Potter brewed in silence for a minute so long that Draco repressed the temptation to shuffle and break it. His mother had taught him that it was no use displaying bad manners simply because someone else did.

Finally, Potter said in tones that sounded as if he'd bitten them off with jagged teeth, "No."

"Excellent, then." Dearborn inclined his head to both of them and stood up. Draco knew him well enough by now to see the delicate signs of his pleasure: the narrowed eyes, the slack hands that did not look as if they were reaching for a wand. "I shall look forwards to seeing you act together in class." He nodded amiably to them and swept out of the room. Potter sent a heated glare after him that Draco didn't understand.

Oh, wait, yes, I do. Potter has to think in his class.

"I'll be pairing you up in Battlefield Tactics," Ketchum said. "You should discuss your weaknesses and what sorts of exercises you think would cure them." He practically bounced out

of the room after Dearborn.

Portillo Lopez left with no more than a jerk of her head. Jones lingered, and it was at Potter that she looked anxiously. She did attempt a smile. "I'm afraid I can't do much in my class for you that's different from what I normally do," she said, "since we'll be getting to Partner Ethics in a few weeks anyway."

Potter dug up a smile from somewhere and presented it to her. "It's all right, Auror Jones," he said. "Don't worry about it. Thanks."

Pushkin gave them an enigmatic smile as he stood. "Do not expect much that is different in my class," he said. "You will continue to study leaves and flowers. Recognizing the minute differences in them will aid you in tracking criminals in wilderness areas."

"How often does that happen?" Draco thought he heard Potter mutter under his breath, but aloud, they both said the same thing. "Yes, sir."

And then the third-year trainees who had escorted them here—puffed-up brutes who thought their opinions were far more important to Draco and Potter than they actually were, in Draco's opinion—escorted them out of the dim room and into the corridors of the Ministry. Draco adjusted his robe and waited for the angry outburst.

When he looked up, Potter was simply staring at him. His eyes were so ablaze with confused and mingled emotions that they might as well have been blank. Draco didn't think he could make them out.

He opened his mouth to make a comment, but Potter simply turned his back and walked away up the corridor in the direction of the trainee barracks. Draco hesitated, then followed slowly.

His determination to preserve his understanding with Potter could have taken anger and yelling and impatience. It couldn't take being ignored.

People kept wanting to change his life. They came along and said, "Oh, but Harry, you would be best at *this*!" They insisted that he think about things that he had no desire to think about. Hermione seemed to believe that no day was worth living unless you woke up with a resolution to change at least five things about yourself.

They stared at him when he tried to explain his nightmares, shook their heads, and confessed in a soft voice that they couldn't live with someone so damaged—

Harry chopped the thought off. He decapitated it. He hid the body somewhere far away where no one would ever find it and went about his day.

I'm not thinking about that.

But he wouldn't let people change his life. He hadn't been able to live it the way he wanted to for so long because of Voldemort, and he had to acknowledge that going on quests and destroying Horcruxes and killing basilisks and what-not was important to getting that done. But now was supposed to be the time when he got to make his own choices.

He clung hotly, stubbornly, to that thought as he went through his days.

He explained to Ron that he was partners with Malfoy and endured the shouting. Then he said quietly, "I spent some time in the trainee library looking up those parts of the Auror Code that apply to partners."

"Yeah? And?" Ron stared at him from the other side of their room, arms folded. It made Harry ache to see how small he looked—and at the same time, it made him angry. Ron was blaming *him* for this, even though Harry had told him he'd protested and tried to get out of it. Why couldn't Ron see it was Malfoy's fault? And the instructors', but mostly Malfoy's. If they'd both protested, the instructors would have dropped their silly suggestion.

"Partnerships don't have to be permanent," Harry said. "The Aurors just like to talk about them like they are, because it gives people confidence that partners trust each other when they go out into the field." He smiled at the way Ron blinked and his arms fell from their folded position in front of his chest. "We can be partners later, when they've seen how massively unsuited Malfoy and I are."

After that, Ron had been cheerful, though he still rolled his eyes when Dearborn had Harry and Malfoy demonstrate something together in Offensive and Defensive.

Harry couldn't deny the power that burst through him when he and Malfoy fought together against the shadow dummies that Dearborn was especially adept at conjuring, but always the energy faded away after the duel and he was left wondering what they had in common. He was beginning to wonder if Malfoy had wanted to be partners mainly because he knew it would attract the attention and the praise of his instructors.

Does he remember that we won't be in training forever, and that a few Aurors liking us doesn't translate into all Aurors liking us forever and us getting promotions?

Besides, there was at least one Auror who didn't like them. Gregory had started pairing them to fight each other every class, and she seemed as content when Harry inflicted pain on Malfoy as the other way around. When Harry clasped his arms around Malfoy's left leg and threw him—the first time he'd ever managed that particular maneuver that Gregory had shown them—he looked up to find her coolly smiling, holding her hands as though about to applaud.

Malfoy dragged himself back to his feet and caught Harry's eye as he looked away from Gregory. "What she thinks doesn't matter," he said in an undertone that made him sound as if he was carving the words in glass. "Learning matters. You're getting better."

"Yeah, you too," Harry said, and stood up shaking his head. If Malfoy had only wanted the partnership to get in good with the instructors, he was remarkably unconcerned about Gregory's good opinion.

That was another thing for him to object to. Now that everyone knew about their compatible magic and their private dueling lessons, they were encouraged to have those lessons as often as possible. That meant Harry had to spend more time around Malfoy, and he kept trying to understand him.

But Malfoy was impossible to understand. Sometimes he would say things, like his compliment in Combat, that sounded like an invitation to a deeper friendship. Then he would wrench himself back to an icy distance and make short, sharp remarks about Harry not being invested enough in this.

At least Harry could answer him sarcastically when he said things like that, mostly with compliments on how proud Pushkin must be to have such a prize student in Observation. Malfoy stared at him with his cheeks turning a fervent red.

"You realize that we are *linked*, Potter?" he would answer, or something like it, with his eyes so cold that they seemed to try and freeze Harry's, his hands clenching in front of him as if he expected the sight of his fingernails to impress Harry. "That we'll never get rid of the compatible magic and we might as well make the best of it?"

"Oh, yes, I realize that," Harry said, after several duels of being subtle about it. "But I also understand that I have other things in my life, and I've ignored them too long in favor of you."

Their meetings were frigid for some time after that, but Harry didn't care. What he said was perfectly true. So he had to find something to care about that didn't involve Malfoy.

Luckily, he had the perfect candidate.

When he and Malfoy had described the mixture of red and black magic that had assaulted them, more than one Auror had made a sharp motion, or jerked back, or let their eyes widen, but none of them had explained what it was. Malfoy had mentioned that perhaps it was a combination of despair and killing spells, but the instructors had sat there like stone images when he said that. The clearest answer they had received was Portillo Lopez's enigmatic, "Perhaps."

Harry couldn't stand that. If magic was going to attack him, then he bloody well wanted to know what it was and how he should stop it.

But staying around his best friends and Malfoy hadn't yielded any clues so far, so Harry knew that he would have to go further afield. Start listening for rumors among the other trainees. Contact people he knew in the outside world, like Hagrid, who would pick up gossip and pass it along.

The more Harry thought about it, the more he became convinced that *NIHIL* was a name or a message, not just a random word. The name of someone who could sneak into a trainee barracks, use a powerful Dark spell, and walk out again unseen? Harry thought so.

He'd played around with the idea that maybe this was a way of testing him and Malfoy, but discarded it for two reasons. First, there were no magical "tests" like that for any other trainees.

Second, because he had almost died at the hands of the red and black magic, and he couldn't see the Aurors recruiting people for their program very well if their simple magical tests were frequently fatal.

So he made his decision, and started writing letters and trying to seek out friends among the other trainees. Most of them were suspicious at first, but a few were welcoming, like Darien West, whom Harry had been assigned to fight in Combat the day he had his first public fit, and Catherine Arrowshot, who advised him on the best ways to practice Battle Healing out of class.

Near the end of November, he was ready to set off on his first real investigation, and quietly confident. He opened the door of his room to step out.

Malfoy, standing there, ruined it all.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—A Working of Friendship

"Going somewhere, Potter?"

Potter flushed and stared at Draco as if he'd lost the ability to respond to ordinary words. Maybe he had, Draco thought, glad that his arms were already folded and Potter wouldn't notice the way he tightened them across the front of his chest to keep calm. He'd certainly acted with enough blindness in the last month, smugly convinced that Draco couldn't see what he was up to.

Or maybe he was convinced that you wouldn't care *what he was up to.*

Draco thought that the likelier conclusion, but it didn't make him feel any better, because Potter still should have *known* better.

"I—yes," Potter said, and recovered, blinking, as he shoved his glasses up his nose. Suddenly he

was doing his best haughty imitation, which, on a face like Potter's not made for haughtiness, made him resemble a constipated giraffe. "I made a study appointment with Hermione for this evening. She's convinced I'm not working as hard as I could be, so she wants me to come to her room and study under her supervision." He rolled his eyes, apparently trying to put a feeling of exasperation into the gesture. "If you'll excuse me."

He started to brush past Draco. Draco reached out and put a hand on his shoulder to detain him.

Potter gave him such a poisonous look that Draco dropped his hand before he thought about it. And then he was simply angrier, remembering the way that Potter had reached out and clasped his hand after they dueled the red and black magic. The git had been happy enough to touch him a short while ago. What had changed?

Weasley. Draco didn't know for certain, but it wasn't an unreasonable guess. When things went wrong between him and Potter, Weasley was usually involved somehow.

"I know that's not where you're going," Draco said, exercising all the control he had to keep his voice calm and thoughtful. "Granger left the barracks half an hour ago with a bunch of other trainees to attend a special lecture that Jones is giving."

Potter swallowed. Then he said, "Give it a rest, Malfoy, can't you?"

"I thought that's what I was doing for the last month," Draco said, having decided that he needed to speak as clearly and reasonably as he could. He would not give Potter the chance to dismiss him as jealous or hysterical. "Giving it a rest. Letting you have the distance from me that hopefully would have caused you to reconcile yourself to our becoming partners."

Potter whipped his head around, his eyes hot and his mouth open as though he intended to bite Draco's shoulder. Draco could think of contexts in which he would not despise that gesture. "Nothing will reconcile me to that."

"Why?" Draco moved commandingly forwards, until his chest and Potter's were an inch away from touching. If he didn't do something drastic, then Potter would yank his gaze away and scuttle off and ignore him again. Besides, Draco didn't fancy the loss of dignity that would come from chasing after him. "You seemed to think it was a good enough idea when we fought together and the compatible magic showed us what we could do."

Potter snorted through his nose like a bull that understood gelding and turned to stare at Draco again. "Power isn't everything, Malfoy," he said. His voice was weary. Draco decided that was better than raving, and listened. "There's friendship, too. Ron and I have already decided that we're going to be partners. I can't change my mind and desert him like that."

"Partnering with someone else—someone to whom you're better-suited—someone who can work with you like no one else can—is deserting him?" Draco was proud of the polite disbelief in his voice. It was the perfect counter to the nonsense that Potter was spouting, taking his

melodramatic balloons and puncturing them. From the flush that decorated Potter's cheeks, he must have known it, too. "Pardon me for not accepting that. You'll still be his friend. It wouldn't make you hostile or alien to each other if you partnered with someone else."

"He was upset enough about the compatible magic," Potter said shortly. "Over this, I could lose him if I'm not careful."

Ah. Draco moved in for the kill. "Then it's his problem, isn't it, not yours? If he's the one who would reject your friendship after so many years and after everything that you've done together, he's the one at fault."

Potter stared at him with a slightly open mouth. Draco controlled his shudder. No, he didn't want to see Potter's tonsils, but he could put up with it for the sake of getting something else he wanted.

Then Potter looked at the ground, rubbing his forehead as if his scar ached, and whispering, "No, that's not true."

"It sounds like it," Draco said. "I'm not privy to everything that happens between you. I won't ask for more details than you've offered me. But it sounds as though Weasley is the one trying to force you to make decisions that you wouldn't have made if not for him. *He's* the one who wants you to choose between your friends and a great opportunity for you." He folded his arms and stepped back with a satisfied nod, watching Potter all the while for some sign of a fatal wound in his confidence.

Potter rubbed his jaw this time. His eyes flickered with trapped fire. He obviously wanted to deny Draco's words, and just as obviously couldn't find a way to do so.

Draco took a deep breath, and a risk. "Tell me that you want to give up the compatible magic," he said. "Tell me that you really never want to feel it again."

Potter gave a sad half-smile. Draco didn't know who the audience for *that* one was supposed to be. Potter didn't have his little friends here right now, and he couldn't believe that Draco would pity him. "I could try to lie," he said, "but you would catch me at it right away and make me feel stupid. You have a lot more practice in lying than I do."

Draco accepted the words meant to be a blow as a compliment. And a hopeful sign, too. At least they meant that Potter might be acknowledging reality. "Yes, I do. And I know how wonderful compatible magic is. I was right beside you, remember." He took a step forwards again, crowding Potter so that his eyes snapped up defensively. Another risk, but Draco figured there was nothing better he could do around an overemotional Gryffindor than let him know his emotions were shared. "I know what it's like," he whispered. "I want it."

Then he waited.

Potter exhaled. Draco thought he could actually smell the dust of old thoughts on that breath, disinterred from the ancient tombs where Potter had kept them since he was eleven years old. "Ah, *fuck*," he said, sounding discontented. "Yeah. I want it, too."

"You don't have to choose between me and Weasley," Draco went on, still whispering. The whisper made Potter look at him in a way that Draco liked, as if he were half-hypnotized, as if the whisper were a voice that had come to him in dreams and was luring him further and further on. "I'll never make you do that. I'll wait until you can acknowledge this. But I won't wait for *him* to acknowledge this, because his opinion's not the one that's important to me."

Potter narrowed his eyes in thought. Then he said, with a sharp snap of his head that Draco wished Weasley could have been here to witness, "You're right. It's not fair to punish you for something that's Ron's problem."

Draco held back a groan. That one statement released knots of tension that had been tied up in him for years.

"That doesn't mean that you can help me in what I'm doing now," Potter added quickly. "It just means that I'll stop ignoring you in class and work better with you in our private lessons."

"You're going to investigate the source of that Dark magic, aren't you?" A child could have known Potter's intent from listening to the questions he had asked among the trainees—questions they had talked about afterwards. If Potter wanted to make his investigation in secret, then he had a lot to learn.

Potter's eyes went wide in a way that Draco wanted to laugh at. Once again, he held his tongue with some effort. "Yes," Potter muttered, then added fiercely, "But you still can't come along."

"Why not?" Draco played the unfairness card again, since it had worked so well for him where Weasley was concerned. "I'm the one the magic attacked. I'm the one who deserves a chance at revenge or at least knowledge."

"Ah, *fuck*," Potter said again.

Draco let his lips curl in a small, smug smile.

Harry didn't entirely know why he was standing with Malfoy in front of the corner where they had seen the illusion and the message from Nihil cast. Malfoy had spoken some words that Harry had to consider. That didn't mean that he was wise. It didn't mean that Harry had to take Malfoy with him on the investigation.

But that was what had happened. Harry only wished he knew *why*.

If I was going to listen to anyone's arguments, you'd think it would be Ron's. That's what I've always done, and I've known him longer.

Harry ended up shaking his head and crouching over the wall where he was sure the illusion had been. There was an imaging spell Trainee Arrowshot had taught him which he thought it would be interesting to use.

"*Demonstro obscurum*," he whispered.

Malfoy shifted behind him, as if he was surprised that Harry knew that spell. Harry ignored him, keeping his eyes fixed in front of him as he watched the spell form on the wall like a bright blue slug trail. The magic sparked and spat, and wavering tendrils extended away from it. For long moments, it hesitated, and Harry held his breath. Arrowshot had told him that the spell might not work if the traces Harry was trying to detect were too faint. For all Harry knew, Nihil might have managed to sneak in again and cast some spell that would wash away his magic.

Then the spell began moving again, and Harry let out a whoosh of breath. Malfoy clucked his tongue behind him. Harry glared over his shoulder, and Malfoy shrugged.

"You're going to have to learn how to control your emotions," he said. "You display them so openly, and that's hardly wise. Anyone can know whether you're surprised or angry or bewildered right now just by listening to you or looking into your eyes. How do you expect to surprise an enemy that way?"

"Maybe I'll let you take care of them," Harry said, because he thought a reference to their partnership would probably please Malfoy and make him shut up, and then he turned around and studied the magic again.

The blue lines now outlined the trace that Harry had hoped to find. It looked like a footprint, but it would give much more information than that. He had only to touch it.

He shivered and reached out.

Malfoy's hand was right beside his, touching the outline at the same time Harry's did.

Harry whirled around, glaring, and a little afraid. Arrowshot hadn't told him what would happen if two people touched the trace at once. He thought it might not be harmful, but as it was—

"*Malfoy*," he had time to say just before a whirl of colors like a Portkey embraced them and jerked them with the same sharp wrench as a Portkey back in time.

So Potter was upset. Draco didn't care. He knew this spell, and he knew that it wasn't dangerous to have two people use it at the same time, though Precious Saint Potter obviously thought so. The question was where he had learned to cast it and not learned how to use it. It was a good thing to have two sets of eyes look at the images the spell produced, because what it gave was an image of reality that could be played only once, unlike a Pensieve, and a single person was unlikely to notice everything.

Draco made sure to widen and clear his memory as he and Potter "landed" in the image with a slight rocking jolt, the way he would have when he wanted to memorize the recipe for a new potion. The scene in front of him was of a dim corridor. If Potter was pressed about it later, that was probably all he would be able to say.

Draco intended to see, and be able to say, much more.

The image in front of him jounced as though their landing had unsettled it, and then shadows wisped and coiled around the figure of a tall person who was striding up the middle of the corridor. Draco recognized the shadows as a fairly ordinary Mist Glamour. It was not high-level magic, which lowered his opinion of a spellcaster he had rated highly when he saw the despair and the murder curses mixed in the red and black ribbons.

Perhaps it is even better to hide your identity with a spell that won't leave many traces or cause much alarm, though, he admitted to himself.

The figure, so muffled in the mist and the cloak it wore that Draco couldn't make out its face or its sex, halted in front of the wall where the message and the illusion had hung. A few times he paced slowly back and forth, as if considering the width of the wall. Then he nodded and raised his wand.

He cast everything nonverbally, the bastard.

Draco watched nevertheless as the wand flourished, because sometimes one could tell much about a spell by the wrist and finger movements, even without an incantation. The illusion took form before the letters that scored *NIHIL* appeared. Draco didn't know what that meant, but he took note of it anyway. In a situation like this, the smallest details might be of importance. One never knew.

The figure paused when the spells were cast and took a deep breath, one hand rising to stroke the outlines of the illusion. Though Draco couldn't see that invisible face, he imagined it was smiling. The slow caress of the empty, malformed air gave him the idea that this was something the spellcaster had planned for a long time.

He didn't know that for certain. But it looked that way.

Once more, the whirl of colors surrounded them and snatched them back to their own place and time. Draco blinked slowly and reached out to put a hand on Potter's shoulder, to steady him and be steadied. That method of travel was rather disorienting.

Potter stepped away from him as soon as he could, gaze carefully averted. Draco concealed a snort. It seemed Potter, willing to admit that compatible magic held some advantages or not, still was not willing to let Draco touch him.

"I don't understand," Potter murmured. "She told me that the spell would reveal the truth about the past. I thought—I thought it was something like a Pensieve, where you could see things the people involved in the memory didn't notice. I thought we might see someone spying on him, or a betraying clue he left behind, or—something."

This time, Draco let the snort out. He cheered silently when Potter turned around with sparks in his eyes. They were about to have an argument now where a part of Potter's self was in the words, instead of the careful ignoring distance that he had tried to preserve.

"We're dealing with someone who's a careful planner here," Draco said. "Not someone who'll leave clues behind. It's only in novels and Auror training manuals that criminals are thoughtful enough to do that, Potter. We have to look for things that we might not realize are clues, because then there's the chance that the criminals might not realize it, either."

Potter scowled at him. "And what gave you the impression of careful planning? He didn't say a word, and we couldn't see his face."

"He must have practiced those spells a lot to be able to use them nonverbally," Draco said. "This was no spur-of-the-moment decision, no plan that he came up with on a drunken whim and decided to try out. And what about the way he touched the illusion? Did you notice that?" It was pitifully obvious Potter needed someone to come along and be the brains of any investigation he tried—it must be the reason he had stuck by Granger so long—but Draco wanted some company in the thinking. Why should he have to do all the work?

"He touched it like it was a living thing," Potter said. "Like he was fond of it."

Those were not the words Draco would have used, but because of that, they pleased him all the more. He nodded. "Yes. That indicates the illusion has some sort of special meaning to him."

"What?" Potter demanded.

"Well, obviously we don't know *yet*," Draco snapped. "But we know more than we did half an hour ago, and I think that's an achievement."

Potter sighed so hard that his lips flapped. "It's something," he agreed, sounding so grudging that Draco would have liked to strike him. "I just wish we knew what the message indicated." He frowned at the wall as though he still saw the letters there.

"Why the letters and not the illusion?" Draco walked to his right side to see how he reacted when Draco crossed behind him. He thought he saw a flicker of tension across Potter's shoulders, but he didn't turn.

"Because the name is something that someone might use to intimidate," Potter said, "the same way Voldemort was used." Draco flinched in spite of himself. Potter didn't notice. He was now scowling so hard that Draco thought he was trying to force the molecules of the wall to speak

and tell him the truth. "Or something that he might use to recruit people. That would give us more of a trail to follow than the image does."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You *can* think when you let your brain work, Potter," he said. "This partnership could succeed, you know."

Potter tossed him a quick glance. "Thank you ever so much, Malfoy."

Draco sighed. "That was a compliment, Potter." He'd nearly substituted a more insulting name instead, but he had decided at the last minute that that wasn't *actually* the best way to get Potter to listen to him. "I mean it," he added, when Potter looked wary. "We need more than just compatible magic to succeed. We need both of us working at the top of our game. We need our brains working in tandem. We need skills that the Auror classes can teach us. We need—"

All the lights in the corridor vanished.

Harry moved instinctively.

The more he'd thought about it, the more he'd thought that the attack of the red and black ribbons had to have been aimed at Malfoy. Who could have known that Harry would walk outside his door at that precise time? On the other hand, Malfoy was often in and out of his rooms in the evenings, and the ribbons could have flowed over him and strangled him if he was alone. Then they would have dissipated, and everyone would have wondered what had happened and walked about in terror—which Harry thought was what Nihil wanted.

So now he shot through the darkness and stood back-to-back with Malfoy. He'd already tried a nonverbal *Lumos*, and it had failed. So he chose a spell that Dearborn had described but cautioned them not to use, because it was too powerful.

If there's any time to use a defensive spell that's too powerful, it's in the middle of Dark magic that's also powerful.

"*Sol!*"

The sun came and sat on the tip of his wand.

He heard Malfoy yelp about being blinded, and Harry himself had to squint past the intense light so that he could see who the rest of the people in the corridor were and what they were doing. He didn't mind about that, though, since what they were doing at the moment was cowering and covering their eyes.

That wasn't enough to hide that they wore black cloaks and white masks. They looked exactly like Death Eaters.

Rage ripped loose from inside Harry so suddenly that he felt as if he was standing at a distance

from himself. He had tried for a year now to live a normal life and avoid the spotlight and concentrate on what he wanted to be, which was an ordinary Auror. And still the past followed him, and still he was singled out, and now his reasons for being an Auror were all confused. And sometimes he was angry at Ron and sympathetic to Malfoy.

Death Eaters showing up again, when he had been so sure that all of them were in prison or dead or awaiting trial, was *not* something he needed.

He reached out. He didn't know what he was reaching for, but he knew it traveled through him like a whirlwind to reach his wand, and by the time it got there, he had chosen the only spell that could contain it all.

"*Tripudio cum somniis!*"

The spell left him sagging and shaking. Malfoy held him up with a great deal of effort, which was odd to Harry. He was the one who ought to have the most strength; so far, he hadn't cast a spell in this battle.

The whirlwind descended on the Death Eaters and vanished into them. For some instants, they stood motionless, and Harry started wondering that it hadn't worked. Then they began to laugh, and whimper, and claw at their faces. One tore off his mask and revealed a fairly ordinary face, a young man's face with dark eyes and hair and a drooping moustache. He capered in circles, cackling. The woman next to him started to snicker helplessly. Another woman enfolded an imaginary baby in her arms and began to rock it.

Harry felt even weaker with relief. Yes, the spell had worked the way it was supposed to. The Death Eaters were now living through their dearest dreams, and wouldn't acknowledge anything in the outside world, even if it tried to force its way into their attention.

"What did you do?" Malfoy whispered into his ear.

Harry glanced curiously back at him. "Made them think their dreams were coming true. Surely you know the spell?"

"You pulled energy from me," Malfoy said, sounding pleasantly dazed. "Without waiting for me to cast at the same time and without me casting a spell first. You just—reached in and helped yourself to my magic."

Harry winced, his pleased state vanishing. It sounded awful when Malfoy put it like that, even if Harry hadn't known what he was doing. He coughed and shook himself, standing as upright as he could. "Sorry," he said shortly.

"It's intriguing," Malfoy said, and nearly fell. Harry reached out in alarm to catch him. He must have weakened him physically as well as magically when he pulled on him like that. Malfoy yawned. "And I didn't say you could move," he muttered, his eyes drooping shut.

Harry looked up. The darkness in the corridor had dissipated. The Death Eaters were still staggering in circles and nursing imaginary children and beating imaginary foes. The first of the other trainees were coming out of their rooms now, their mouths agape. Some ducked back for their wands when they saw the Death Eaters' dark cloaks.

Sharply striding boots told of an official detachment of Aurors heading their way.

None of that gave Harry an answer about how Death Eaters, of all people, had managed to breach the wards that surrounded the trainee barracks. Then again, he didn't know how the red and black magic or the person who created the message had managed to enter, either.

And because it was the way his life worked, Ron was the one who came around the corner and saw him cradling Malfoy. He stood still for long moments and stared before he came forwards to help carry Malfoy's dead weight. At least he did it, Harry thought. But Ron's mouth had become very small. That was a bad sign.

There was a sharp light in his eyes, too, that Harry didn't know the meaning of until Ginny firecalled him two days later.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eleven—Boundaries

"With all due respect, sir," Harry said, clinging to his temper because striking out at this point would do no good, "I'd like to know how the Death Eaters got inside. I'm more interested in that than anything else right now."

Dearborn sat back in his chair and surveyed him leisurely. He was questioning Harry in his office this time, while Portillo Lopez had taken Malfoy. Harry couldn't help wondering if they weren't deliberately reversing what had happened the first time Harry and Malfoy had confronted Dark magic, but there was the possibility that Malfoy had really needed Portillo Lopez, because of whatever Harry had done to him when he pulled on his magic.

Harry laid aside his guilt for later. (God knew there would always be time for guilt in his life). At the moment, he wanted to know why Dearborn continued to ask him questions about the compatible magic instead of admitting how the Death Eaters had got through the wards. The instructors had conducted a detailed investigation while other Aurors herded the trainees out of

the way, and they'd been conducting that investigation for the last two days. They should have found *something.*

"Potter," Dearborn said. "You are no longer a hero of the war. You are one of our students. And no matter how low the standard may be for professors at Hogwarts, here in the Auror program we strive to take the best care possible of our students."

He gave Harry a peaceful smile. Harry remained quiet, despite the way that he wanted to speak up in defense of his Hogwarts teachers. From the weight of the silence, Dearborn had something more to say.

"We are growing concerned about you," Dearborn said. "Even for someone with your…extraordinary history, three encounters with Dark magic in the span of three months is unusual. We will place a watch on you, Mr. Potter. If someone is tracking you and timing attacks to your movements, then we need to know at once."

Harry clenched his fists next to his sides. It had happened again. He was the victim of an attack and he was being treated like the perpetrator.

"Please answer my question about the Death Eaters," he said. "Were they even Death Eaters? Is this a kind of belated Halloween prank? Please tell me. Sir," he added belatedly, when he realized that Dearborn's eyebrows looked as if they were about to float off his face.

"That is privileged information," Dearborn said. "Until we know whether or not you have tracking spells on you, you understand our reluctance to share it."

Harry growled and tried to think of another question he could ask that would reveal the information to him indirectly. But Dearborn had played this game longer than he had, and Harry had never been good at subtlety. Malfoy would have reminded him of that.

Malfoy.

"Is Malfoy all right?" he asked.

Dearborn smiled slowly and sat up. "I have been waiting for you to ask that," he said.

Of course you were, Harry longed to say. *You supported this ridiculous idea that we should be partners. You're probably thinking of us as puppets that you can manipulate, so each time we'll come closer and closer to making your ideal a reality. I'm symbolic of an idea. I've been that way all my life. But this time, I have a companion in being symbolic, which isn't the way it usually works.*

With effort, Harry clutched his tongue between his teeth and stared at Dearborn. Speaking only seemed to earn him more patient indulgence or refusal. Dearborn had acted the whole time as if he was pacifying a child.

Even now, he couldn't tell Harry the truth straight off, but had to smile at him and shake his head as if chiding him. "I do think that it would be more fitting for you to call him by his first name, after everything that you've been through together," he said.

Harry ground his teeth, and knew it was audible from that overwrought chair that Dearborn sat in.

Dearborn adopted a sadder smile, and regarded him for a few minutes in silence. It aspired to be the kind of silence that Dumbledore had used sometimes, the kind that made you ashamed of yourself, but Harry held out stubbornly against it, and finally Dearborn gave in.

"Trainee Malfoy is fine," he said. "Recovering from physical and magical exhaustion. Compatible magic does not always grant the ability to use a partner's power, at least not without permission, and I feel sure that that is the reason this happened. You will have to be more careful around each other in the future, so that you do not accidentally drain each other."

I don't want to be careful! Harry wanted to yell. *Do you understand that? I want to act carelessly like other people, and suffer minor bumps and bruises, and wake up in the morning with a hangover or a broken leg because I was careless! I don't want all these special consequences and all these honors that people seem determined to pile on me that just turn out to be extra duties!*

But Harry already knew that *no* one understood that sort of talk: not Malfoy, not the Auror instructors, not Hermione, not Ron, not the people he wasn't going to think about. So he simply nodded and waited until Dearborn flicked a languid hand at him in dismissal.

Harry marched back to his rooms in deadly silence, wanting nothing more than to take a few gulps of a concealed bottle of Firewhisky that he kept near his bed and then go to sleep.

Ginny was waiting for him in the fireplace, so *that* was out.

"I begin to wonder if we should have allowed you to partner."

Draco turned his head. Battle Healer Portillo Lopez stood beside his bed again, frowning down at him. It took a few tries, but Draco managed to clear his throat. "So far, all it's meant is a few extra lessons."

"And extra trouble." Portillo Lopez held a silver sphere that Draco didn't recognize above his head and began to swirl her wand around it, reading some message in the flashing lights. One eye remained on him, however, and she was frowning. "Do you not remember what happened to you when you and Trainee Potter faced the Death Eaters?"

Draco choked back his immediate reaction to the last words. No one here was close enough that they deserved to see that. He thought carefully, but could recall only immense exhaustion and the

spell that had blasted the Death Eaters into dreamy uselessness. He shook his head.

"Trainee Potter pulled magic from you," Portillo Lopez said. "It can be done by someone using compatible magic, but usually only with permission. Compatible magic is meant to strengthen both partners, not leave one exhausted and weak."

"I didn't give him permission," Draco murmured, thinking rapidly. If Potter was capable of that, why hadn't he done it before? Possibly he hadn't been as frightened as he was by the Death Eaters, but the red and black magic, if not the illusion and the message on the wall, had been sufficiently threatening.

Or perhaps he simply reached out wildly and snatched the first thing that came to hand, never mind whether that was my magic or not.

Draco snorted weakly. Yes, that sounded like Potter.

"Then we must learn why he was able to do so." Portillo Lopez retracted the sphere from Draco's head. "You are recovering, and may return to your room. I would not advise you to move fast, however, or to cast powerful spells any time soon. You have lain here for two days already, drifting in and out of consciousness."

Draco stiffened his muscles, the only sign of protest he would show as he wrestled himself slowly from the bed and placed his feet on the floor again. He was disgusted that he had wasted two days, especially since one of them had been a class day, but he would not show that to Portillo Lopez.

"Trainee Malfoy?" Portillo Lopez paused in the door of the small, private room which, Draco saw now, was one of those where trainees were brought to recover from serious wounds received in class. "Did you hear me?"

Draco thought he had never lived such a restricted life before, not even when he was a child and his mother had made him ask for permission to walk on the grass in the garden. But this was the life he had chosen, and if he gave up now and retreated back to the Manor, he knew exactly what his enemies would call him. *Coward* would be the least of it.

He nodded and waited a moment while Portillo Lopez examined him with a critical eye. At last she grunted and turned away, and Draco made his escape.

As he walked back to his rooms, he tried valiantly to put together the scattered scraps of memory that remained to him from the fight. Yes, he remembered the Death Eaters. He remembered his contempt, and his disbelief. Anyone who was actually worth anything, anyone who had served the Dark Lord directly, had been rounded up and tried or sent to Azkaban already. There was no reason to think that these were real Death Eaters.

On the other hand, Draco didn't know many people stupid enough to dress up and claim the

Death Eater name, as high as the fame of the Chosen One and the bad reputation of Dark magic were riding at the moment.

They were probably relatives of Death Eaters, people who had told themselves they would do glorious deeds if someone would just let them fight. Every pure-blood family had at least one idiot in the closet, the result of too much inbreeding. Draco knew that some of the idiots could be troublesome if too many members of their family died to keep them under confinement, however. Some of them might even be the heads of their lines now, with so many people dragged off in different directions. His ancestors had had a magnificent idea when they confined themselves to one child as often as possible, and that child a direct heir, so that the idiots would gradually die out. Draco knew he had distant relatives, but there was no one close enough that the wards would recognize them. If the worst should happen and he should die without children, then the Manor would simply close in on itself and refuse to respond to anyone else, no matter how much diluted blood they carried.

Draco liked his theory because it narrowed the suspects down. He could find out, and he *would* find out, who had been playing at Death Eaters and Aurors in the past few weeks. Their game couldn't be that old, because if it was, they would have tried striking at the Chosen One before now.

Could they be behind the other attacks, though?

Draco frowned thoughtfully. He believed Nihil—as he chose to call the man who had left the message and the illusion behind until he learned of a better name for him—a cleverer wizard than that. It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that he was manipulating these poor fools, though, and that he had weakened the wards for them.

That possibility would have to be looked into.

In the meantime, he turned his steps towards Potter's rooms. There were several pieces of unfinished business between them.

"Ginny." Harry tried to make his voice absolutely neutral as he hung up his cloak on the peg by the door. "Hullo. Does Ron know that you're firecalling?" The trainees weren't supposed to make private firecalls. Harry had never been grateful for that rule before, but he was now.

"Of course he does," Ginny said, with a snort that seemed to make the flames ripple around her head, even though Harry was perfectly aware that she couldn't affect the fire that contained her. She leaned forwards, fixing him with intense eyes. "Besides, I didn't call to talk to him. I called to talk to you."

Harry swallowed and sat down on the chair that was furthest away from the fireplace. He had no *need* to go nearer, since they could see and hear each other perfectly well from here. "Oh? What about?"

Ginny shook her head, her eyes gentle but devastating, as piercing as they had been in the moment when Harry confessed the truth about his nightmares to her and she had let him know what everyone else would think of him if he confessed them to anyone else. "You know, Harry. Hiding the truth is unworthy of both you and me."

Harry thought quickly. She *couldn't* mean the fits, because so far Harry still hadn't told Ron or Hermione the truth about them. He'd taken the sleeping potions that Hermione brewed for him sometimes, and luckily most of his fits had been in private since then. So she must mean the situation with Malfoy.

That gave him the strength to face Ginny, luckily. He couldn't do anything about the situation with Malfoy, and if Ron had listened when Harry tried to explain, then he would have known that. He sat up. "I can't help who I have compatible magic with," he said. "And I objected when the instructors wanted to pair us up, and they didn't pay any attention to me at all." He didn't have to work to put contemptuous anger into his voice, not when the thought of the instructors made his blood churn.

"You can help other things," Ginny said, quietly. "Like the private lessons. Like the way that you take Malfoy on private investigations into Dark magic and other things. Ron feels left out, Harry. He feels like he's losing his best friend, and his best friend not only doesn't care about that, he's willingly walking away from him."

Harry put a hand to his head, then dropped it. If he started tearing at his hair, that would only convince Ginny he was "overreacting" again. She had used that word a lot when they were still dating.

"Listen," he said. "I don't want to leave Ron behind. I'm *not* doing that, in anything except this. We can still be friends even if we aren't Auror partners. In fact, it might be better for us. I don't think our magic will let us work together in the same way that I can work with Malfoy—"

"And is that all you care for?" Ginny's voice had sunk into a deepness that warned Harry she was about to say something hurtful, but he still felt he had no warning when the words came. "For power? For honors?"

"You *know* I don't!" Harry shouted, springing to his feet. "If that was the case, I'd tell everyone about the fits and milk them for sympathy."

"I can easily see you hiding a weakness." Ginny brushed her hair out of her face, her eyes never wavering from their fixed stare at him. "I can see you doing that all too easily, in fact," she added, "even when it comes near to wrecking your relationships with your friends. But for power, you'd risk a lot."

"You don't know me," Harry whispered, sitting down again and splaying a hand across his face. He felt as though his strength had washed out of him all at once, both the strength to stand up and to look at her. "We've established that, Ginny."

"I'm still the one you've made more confessions to than anyone else," Ginny said. "You told me that you didn't always think about the effects of your actions, Harry. This is another case of doing that. To try to please Malfoy and the Auror instructors, you'll risk everything else, everything that you have." She paused, and her voice grew softer and warmer. "You're Harry Potter. Your specialty is finding ways out of impossible situations. Do it again."

Draco didn't think he could have moved if one of the fake Death Eaters had appeared in front of him again and tried to cast the Cruciatus Curse at him.

Potter hadn't shut his door when he came in. Draco had sneered at that sign of carelessness and lifted his hand to knock, and then he'd heard the conversation in the room. He knew Potter's voice, of course, but it took him a few moments to place the other, during which his mind drifted towards deepening dislike for no reason that he could rationally explain.

That was, of course, until Potter spoke her name, and then he knew that his dislike was perfectly rational. Malfoys and Weasleys could not listen to one another, or touch each other, or speak to one another, without repelling.

Draco stood there and *listened*, absorbing the words like parched land absorbing rain. It was so fascinating that he nearly forgot that this had any relation to him. He didn't seem like the person the Weaselette was urging Potter to stop being partners with. He was more interested in the hints of secrets that his curiosity discerned under the surface, those mentions of how the Weaselette knew or didn't know Potter and the way that she seemed to think urging him to do the impossible wouldn't be hurtful.

Do none of them know him?

Surely Draco wasn't the only one who had seen Potter flinch and shut his mouth when people called him the Chosen One. Surely he wasn't the only one who knew now that Potter really *was* as modest as he always presented himself, with his ducking away from attention and his distrust of it. The Weaselette, and the Weasel too, speaking of him blithely as a hero had to realize they were inflicting injuries.

Didn't they?

A sharp tingle ran through Draco then, as though he had bitten into a mint leaf without preparing himself for it. *Maybe not. Maybe not. Maybe I'm the only one who sees that and really understands him.*

Maybe his friendship with the Weasel will lessen in force, not because I did anything to weaken it or because we're partners, but because they keep pushing him and he'll eventually reach his snapping point.

Draco closed his eyes. The vision overwhelmed him with pleasure, and for that very reason, he

was less inclined to believe that it could come true.

But when Potter answered in sharp agitation, "Ginny, I *can't*, not if I want them to treat me like any ordinary Auror," he opened his eyes and leaned close to the door, listening intently. Not for the world would he miss the end of this conversation.

"There are ways," Ginny said, and now she was giving him the bright smile that had always been her vote of confidence in him. "There have to be ways. You didn't think that you could defeat Voldemort either, did you, but you managed. And now this is another challenge, a lesser one. It ought to be possible to be Ron's partner and Malfoy's—whatever the term is for someone who shares compatible magic with you." She waved one hand vaguely, making her face flash and blur in the fire. "All Ron wants is to be your partner, and I don't think that's too much to ask."

Harry stared at her, body paralyzed. On the one hand, he wanted to do what she asked. Yes, Ron wanting to be his partner wasn't such a big thing. And he'd certainly fought beside Harry for longer and sacrificed more for him than Malfoy ever could have or would aspire to.

But he also wanted to snap that that *wasn't* all Ron was asking for, that he was demanding a lot more, essentially stifling the normal life that Harry was trying to lead and the way that he was trying to accept the compatible magic. He knew compatible magic couldn't be fought, he'd told Harry that, but he kept talking like it was possible to fight it.

"I don't see why he has to call his sister in to fight his battles," he said at last, when his heartbeat almost deafened him, "instead of telling me the truth himself."

"He *has* tried to tell you the truth," Ginny said, her eyes narrowed now as if she was staring through a wind that whipped dust into her face. "He said that you ignored him and told him some nonsense about how Auror partners don't always stay the same throughout the years of training."

"That wasn't nonsense, it was *truth*," Harry snapped, feeling as though something was snapping inside him. Some conviction or some belief was being ripped up by the roots, and he didn't know what it was or if he wanted to stop it. "I don't know that I'll be partnered with Malfoy forever. I don't want to be. But right now, it's doing some good, and the instructors wouldn't let me out of it without my making a great big fuss—"

"Stop it," Ginny said, not raising her voice, but making it so intense that Harry wasn't able to do anything but what she said. "You refused to deal with your issues from the war, Harry, and you're refusing to deal with this. But we both know that you *could* if you wanted to. You could tell more people the truth. You could get help. You could stop having these shaking fits that make you into a child."

"Don't say that, Ginny." Harry found himself standing up again. It felt as though someone had propelled him to his feet. His vision swayed, and he swallowed. "I *trusted* you with that information, and you turned against me."

"I told you the truth," Ginny said, her face unflinching, her voice steady. *Always so steady,* Harry thought, with a mixture of admiration and loathing. *She's never met anything that made her flinch. Even being possessed by Tom Riddle is something that only made her stronger, not scarred her.* "I did what you didn't have the courage to do."

"Stop it, Ginny," Harry whispered, but his voice was weak. *Like the rest of me,* he thought in disgust.

Ginny knew it, too, and she went back to their former topic of conversation. "I don't want to badger you, Harry," she said in a tender voice. "I only want to tell you to do what's best for you and Ron. You *know* it would be better if you talked honestly to him and explained that you'll give up being partnered to Malfoy. Not right away, of course not, because you explained why that couldn't happen, but eventually. You know it the same way you know it would be better if you told someone the truth about your fits, so that you could get the help you need. What's weak is hiding it, not having it."

Harry raised his head. "Liar," he whispered. "That's not what you said when I first told you about them."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "I'm allowed to change my mind with more information, aren't I? Get help, Harry. And talk to Ron and tell him what you told me."

"I already did," Harry said, feeling tired and sad and frustrated and *old*. "It didn't content him."

"Tell it again," Ginny said. "Use different wording. Promise that you'll do your best to get out of it while you're still trainees, instead of when you're full Aurors. I think that's the part that's disturbing him." She was smiling pleasantly again, tucking her hair easily behind her ears. "You know that I'm right, Harry. My words hurt you so much because they're the same words that you've used to yourself."

Harry shut his eyes. The bloody truth was, she was right. Sometimes he thought he ought to tell someone else about the fits; sometimes he thought he ought to be more truthful about everything and not accept the shit that other people tried to pile on him.

But what if the person he told about the fits reacted like Ginny did? What if the person he objected to reacted like Ron had?

The problem was, he *did* take a risk of trusting people, and then they didn't repay that trust.

"Just think about it," Ginny finished, placatingly. "That's all I ask. It was nice talking to you again, Harry."

Harry heard the whoosh that meant the Floo connection had closed. He continued standing there, though, with his eyes closed, because there was nothing else that he had the strength to do.

Draco's head was afire with dizziness and curiosity and anger and scorn, and perhaps that was why he took one of the greatest risks of his life.

He raised a hand to the door, and knocked.

When Potter opened the door and stood there, looking like a ghost, Draco said simply, "I heard everything. May I come in?"

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—Blistering Honesty

Harry let his head droop forwards. If he hadn't put a hand up to catch his forehead, he thought it would have gone on falling until he was standing with his chin on his chest. He laughed bitterly.

"I don't have the energy to face this kind of shite anymore," he said aloud.

"It's not shite on my part," Malfoy said, his voice as soft and earnest as when he'd declared that he'd overheard Harry's conversation with Ginny. "I promise you that. I think we have a lot of things to discuss, but I'm ready to face up to that discussion and the things I did wrong."

"It's surreal that *you're* the one who's saying things like that to me, and not my so-called best friends or so-called caring ex-girlfriend," Harry said, raising his head and blinking at nothing. His eyes hurt. It was as if he'd tried to suppress tears, but he doubted it could be that when he felt as close to laughing as he did to crying. "The world has turned bizarre. Of course, I should have thought of that when Death Eaters somehow broke into the Auror trainee barracks."

Malfoy watched him carefully, taking a step back as though he thought that Harry was about to lash out at him. Harry sighed. He wanted to punch Malfoy. Maybe that would make everything normal again. He could tell Ron that he'd "rebelled against the compatible magic" and Ron would welcome him back with open arms. Then he could firecall Ginny and she would smile at him and—

Why do you want her smiles?

The anger he'd felt while he was listening to her speak returned full-force, then. Harry clutched the edge of the door with one hand and ground his teeth. How *dare* Ron get Ginny to speak to him instead of coming to Harry with his own problems and doubts, and how *dare* Ginny talk to

him like that? Even if she only meant it for the best, it was unforgivable.

If they were going to do strange things and think they were all right, then Harry might as well do the same.

"Come in," he said roughly, and stepped out of Malfoy's way.

Malfoy ducked past him, looking around the room as if he thought that Harry's friends were waiting to ambush him. Harry rolled his eyes and shut the door with unnecessary force. Malfoy spun around, wand raised. Harry blinked. He hadn't seen Malfoy pull the wand out of his pocket. He was more skillful than Harry had realized he was.

"I'm not going to hurt you unless you hurt me," Harry said. "I'm sure you have questions." He didn't bother to conceal the bitterness in his voice as he crossed the room and dropped into the same chair he'd sat in when he was talking to Ginny. "Ask them." He put a hand across his eyes and drew a deep breath, trying to take his brain back from the whirling of his senses.

Draco raised his eyebrows. He had expected to be welcomed immediately or sent on his way, probably with his face bruised out of all recognition. Either Potter would ferociously defend his privacy or he would seize the chance to pour out his frustrations to someone who seemed receptive.

But when he thought it over again, he realized that this was understandable. Potter had said in his conversation with the Weaselette that he tried to explain things and had them misunderstood. Maybe he so tired that admitting Draco was easier than turning him away.

And he never said that he would answer the questions he invited me to ask.

Draco sat down in the chair across from Potter, taking a moment to make sure the Floo connection was closed. The door stood open, so he spelled it shut. Any intrusion into this conversation would probably shut Potter up in his little shell again. Draco didn't think he would ever have a chance like this again if it vanished.

Then he studied Potter. Potter, as if he felt the gaze, dropped his hand from his face and stared back. His face looked as if he'd spent weeks without sleep. His eyelids looked dusty. His hand shook before he saw Draco staring at it and reached out to clench it down on the arm of the chair.

This would not be as easy as it had seemed in the first moments when Draco was listening to the Weaselette and thinking that he understood Potter better than any of his friends. But the difficult things were the only ones worth doing. Draco cleared his throat and murmured, "What she said was unfair. You can't fight against compatible magic and you have to obey the instructors in some things if you want to stay in the Auror program."

Potter made a brushing motion with one hand. "I know that. It doesn't make any difference to them. You would know that, if you had really *listened* to the whole conversation instead of just

overhearing it."

Already he was sitting up straighter in the chair, and his eyes watched Draco with dark distrust. His arms were folded across his chest, and he was staring Draco in the face as if he could have dueled with him. Draco knew the moment was passing, and Potter would shut himself away from sympathy.

Draco softened his voice and made his face open. Potter's jaw slipped down as he stared at Draco. Draco made sure that he subdued the smile he wanted to give and said gravely, "Yes. All right. I simply wanted to be sure that you *knew* these things and could hear someone else saying them, someone who wouldn't blame you. In the meantime, I also know that you're tired of being a hero, and it's unfair for them to require you to be one all the time."

Potter blinked and swallowed. "But I didn't say that," he said. "I haven't told anyone that. How could you know?"

Draco refrained from rolling his eyes and propped his chin up on his hand. "It's obvious for anyone who knows how to look," he said. "Besides, I can think about what my life would have been like if I'd been a Chosen One. Doing something incredibly hard, mostly on my own? That would be bad enough. At least I would think the fame and the gifts I received because of it were worth the pain." He ignored Potter's shaking head. They were different people, and it was hopeless to conceal that, as much time as they would be spending around each other in the future. "But for everyone to assume that I want to be a hero after that? That because I could do one hard thing, I could do them all? Having lazy people depend on me because they weren't used to standing on their own two feet?" Draco shook his head back. "That would sour the fame for me and make me want to scream at everyone to help themselves."

"My friends helped me defeat Voldemort." Potter spoke slowly, but Draco thought that came from the depth of his consideration, rather than because he wanted to make Draco feel stupid. "They've done great things themselves. I don't think they're lazy. Ron would never have made it this far into the Auror program if he wasn't willing to work and to ask for help with things that are beyond him."

"I know that," Draco said quietly. "But it's harder to repair an argument with someone you care for than it is to do classwork. I would think it would be especially hard for someone like Granger." He would avoid all mention of the Weasels for the moment, because Potter would be more likely to think everything Draco said came from his personal spite against them. "They're used to one kind of thing, and since you've all stayed together instead of separating the way people usually do after Hogwarts—"

"I want to be with my friends." Potter sat up as though Draco had pushed a pin into his arse.

"I know that. I'm not blaming you." Draco stared at Potter calmly until he leaned back in his chair and nodded, almost sulkily, as if he didn't know what to do if Draco wasn't blaming him. "But because they're close to you, it can be hard for them to see what they're doing to you."

Potter lowered his gaze to the floor and sat there in silence for so long that Draco began to worry about the Weasel coming back with his girlfriend and rattling the locked door. Then Potter fetched a long sight from the depths of his belly and said, "I don't know what to *do* about it."

Draco began to breathe more easily. If Potter was asking for advice, then he could insinuate himself in. "That depends on the results you want," he said. "A few days of breathing space? For them to never call you a hero again?" He hesitated, then chose his words delicately. "For those wounds that it seems you talked about to the Weaselette and she inconsiderately opened again to be soothed?"

Potter clenched his jaw. His voice had gone lower when he answered. "I never should have told her about my fits."

"They have to do with the war, don't they?" Draco balanced his voice between remote and sympathetic, or thought he did until he saw the way Potter's arms pulled across his chest as though he were trying to break his own ribs.

"I don't want to talk about them."

"Because she betrayed you, it doesn't mean everyone will." Draco didn't want to push too hard, but all he saw was his chances growing wings and flying into the distance. He cleared his throat and wondered if sounding less eager would appeal to Potter. No, probably not. If anything, he needed more begging. Draco reached out to place a hand on Potter's arm. "You can tell me about them. I'll need to know eventually, because they might interfere when we fight together, but I'm interested in them outside that."

Potter gave him an ugly sneer. "Malfoys don't always get what they want."

"Did you think the war didn't teach me that?" Draco's voice had risen, and it was too late to stop it. Potter was on his feet and pacing back and forth. Draco stood up to confront him. He wouldn't let Potter have the psychological advantage over him that he would if Draco was sitting. "I know that. Of course I know that. But this isn't something I want for myself. I want to help you."

"The last person who said that decided she couldn't help me when she saw what a huge task it was." Potter's hurt steamed off him like the fumes off a fresh fewmet.

Draco shook his head. "And I don't know *what* I can do, because you clutch that secret to yourself like a baby you want to smother."

Harry winced and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. He certainly didn't *have* to confess everything to Malfoy. He could simply go on holding the secret to himself, and eventually Malfoy would get bored and leave.

And then nothing changes.

Any movement, in any direction, was better than where he sat right now, Harry thought. He couldn't trust his friends. He couldn't get through to Ron. He couldn't persuade the instructors to tell him important information. He couldn't fight his enemies. He couldn't keep up in his classes.

At least trusting Malfoy would make things a little *different*, and that meant, in return, that Harry might be able to change other things.

He turned back to Malfoy with his hand on the wand in his pocket. If he told Malfoy the truth and saw a gleam of mocking laughter in his eyes or heard it from his lips, then he would use a Memory Charm on him. He couldn't bear to have someone else know the truth and reject him the way Ginny had.

"All right," he said. "I return to my memories of the war in those fits. They become so intense that I can't concentrate on anything else. When you saw the fit I had in Gregory's class, I was remembering the way I went back for Snape's body." Malfoy paled at the words, but Harry didn't know why. He hoped that Malfoy wouldn't get defensive about Snape's actions. Harry knew he had been a hero. That didn't help with this. He pushed ahead doggedly. "They imprison me in hopelessness. I start wondering what I could have done to make sure that my failures didn't happen, and all the time I know that it's a memory and the failure *already* happened, so I can't change it."

Malfoy watched him thoughtfully. Then he nodded and said, "I can understand that."

Harry blinked. He'd braced himself to resist a strong push of hatred and contempt. "You can?"

"Of course. You lived through so much. It makes sense that they would manifest themselves somehow, the memories of deaths and mistakes and regrets." Malfoy took a step towards him, face like a werewolf's in his eagerness. "But they're not personal failures, Potter. You know that Voldemort killed Snape. You know that your friends died fighting, taking part in a battle that they chose to fight."

Harry stiffened. This was the same kind of advice that Ginny had used on him, only her tone was more condescending.

"Thinking about that doesn't help," he said briefly. "It doesn't soothe the guilt, and it doesn't make the fits stop."

"Then perhaps something other than guilt is causing the fits," Malfoy said. He shifted nearer, his face lean and thoughtful now. Harry blinked. If someone had told him that Malfoy could look thoughtful, he would not have believed it. "Is that impossible? What else have you noticed about them? When do they tend to happen?"

Harry ducked his head , peering at Malfoy from beneath lowered lashes. No mockery yet. Maybe he had learned to be more subtle about it since Hogwarts, but it was also possible—barely—that

he honestly didn't want to mock Harry and was interested in the problem, as he had promised.

Harry took another risk. He didn't *like* the sensation he felt, as if each step he took now was onto a floating platform that didn't exist until he made the step, but it had to be put up with. And Malfoy was the first to suggest a magical source for his fits. If there was any way that could be true, Harry wanted to know so that he could make them stop. They did interfere with his life, and sometimes the effort he put into keeping them secret was more than he could stand.

"I get them most often after nights when I don't have nightmares," he said. "Not to mention that I wake up with a tight feeling, a stretched feeling. I don't think I can describe it better than that," he added, when Malfoy's eyebrows rose. "I always know when they're coming. Put it that way."

Malfoy nodded. "Well, that sounds reasonable. There could still be a magical connection, but it could also be that on nights when you don't have the nightmares to get rid of your accumulated sadness, then the fits come on to make sure that you relive the memories."

"I don't think nightmares work like that," Harry said. "There's not a—a certain *amount* of poison that needs to be dumped each day, and needs either the nightmares or the fits to get rid of it."

Malfoy frowned at him. "How do *you* know?"

Harry laughed. "Because it's *ridiculous*, that's why."

"Plenty of things about the nature of magic are ridiculous," Malfoy said, his voice sharper now, as if he were struggling to hang onto his temper. "Or at least counterintuitive. But they're still true, and they won't go away because you won't believe in them." He paused, then added, "Besides, how do you know what might be true about your fits and what might not be? You haven't taken the time to investigate your fits, have you? You haven't wanted to think about what might be causing them. You haven't told Granger about them, so she couldn't research them for you."

Harry shook his head. "But nightmares and memories sound like they're psychological, not magical."

"*Sound* like," Malfoy repeated. "You're talking like a Muggle again." He bustled on before Harry could tell him how stupid and prejudiced he *sounded*. "We're wizards, Potter. Everything we are connects with our magic. If you have a series of nightmares, then it's entirely possible that they represent some disorder in your magical core."

"I haven't noticed anything else like that," Harry said stubbornly. He didn't want to be interested in what Malfoy was saying, because that would mean that he could have solved the nightmares and fits all the time, and Ginny would be right.

Malfoy smirked at him. "And you know exactly what disturbances in the magical core look like, I suppose?"

Harry touched his wand again. Malfoy noticed the movement, but instead of falling into a defensive crouch the way Harry had hoped he would, he shook his head. "We can't hurt each other with magic, remember?"

And that means I probably can't Memory Charm him.

Harry swallowed and took a slow step away from Malfoy. He hated the idea that he had chanced even more of a risk in trusting Malfoy than he knew. They were really in this *together*, whatever happened. And why should Malfoy keep silent about his secrets in the way that Ginny had? He would probably think it was funny to tell Ron and Hermione and then watch them fuss over Harry or stand around in awkward silence, wondering how to bring up the topic with him.

Malfoy pulled himself up straight, as if he had seen Harry's gestures and understood what they meant. His nostrils flared, and his head was at an angle that made Harry think the stick in his arse must be poking his chin. His voice was low and steady, more controlled than Harry knew he would have been capable of at that moment.

"You need to stop running and start *doing*. You haven't told anyone about your fits because you're afraid of how they would respond. I can't blame you, after what I heard the Weaselette say." Harry opened his mouth to complain about the insult to Ginny, but Malfoy's voice rolled over him, as smooth as an ocean wave. "But not everyone is her. You're letting her response control you long past the point when it should. And meanwhile, the fits and the nightmares are conspiring to corrupt your life.

"You could have so much more if you would just move out of this tormented standing still. If you would confront your friends and force them to realize that you don't want to be a hero anymore. If you would research your fits and try to figure out whether they're linked to decay in your magical core. If you would accept the compatible magic and work to find out how it can improve your life. If you would trust me until you *know* that I'm going to do something stupid and betray you." Malfoy's face was so dark that Harry couldn't read his expression anymore. "Arguably, the only thing I've done like that since we came into the Auror program is to support the instructors' idea that we become partners, but you still treat me like a criminal."

Harry found his voice for that one. "You were the one who decided to blackmail me into giving you private lessons."

Malfoy flicked his fingers to dismiss that accusation like the little blast of hot air he probably saw it as. "And things changed as soon as we figured out the compatible magic. When we were attacked together. When the instructors started seeing us as partners, whether or not you wanted them to. I've tried to adapt and change. *You* haven't. You're still clinging to the past and claiming that you want to be free when you're doing more than anyone else to imprison yourself."

Harry shut his eyes. He told himself that Malfoy's words weren't reality—why should he want to do anything but say what he thought would hurt Harry most?—but it didn't matter. They ate into

him like acidic dust. He *hadn't* done anything for the last few months but run harder and harder to keep standing still.

But…

"Those were the same kinds of things that Ginny said to me," he whispered. "Blaming me and telling me that I had to do something, no matter how hard it was or how impossible it was for me to accomplish alone."

"She didn't offer help," Malfoy said, his voice sounding nearly as tired as Harry's had. "I do. I *will*. I've tried to offer myself as partner and friend and helper. But you won't accept it, and I'm tired of tossing my gifts into a gulf and receiving nothing back."

Harry heard shuffling steps, and when he opened his eyes, Malfoy was leaving the room. Harry swallowed, or tried. There was a knot of panic in his throat.

"Malfoy, wait," he managed to croak.

"Why should I?" Malfoy kept walking. "Every time I think that you've finally made your mind up to accept me as a partner, you go back on your word and it turns out that you're doing it because of Weasley. I don't see why this time is going to be any different." He paused for a moment, but didn't turn back around, shaking his head. Then he reached out and laid a hand on the door.

Harry shivered. It felt as if he was hollow. If he tried to use his strength now, he doubted that he would have any left afterwards. The conversation with Ginny had drained him. The conversation with Malfoy had drained him.

Everyone asked things of him, things he couldn't give. He wondered why they should think that they had the right to claim those things.

But only one person had said that they would help Harry after that, if he made the effort.

Harry managed to swallow this time. He might still try and be left with nothing. That was what had happened when he confessed the truth to Ginny and watched her eyes cloud over in pity and the inability to deal with his need.

But on the other hand, if he tried and Malfoy could work with him, then things would *change.* If he tried and Malfoy couldn't, then he wouldn't really be in a worse position than he had been.

And Harry was sick and tired of hesitating because things might get worse.

He stepped forwards and laid his hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "Wait," he whispered again.

Draco closed his eyes. He hated how much he had been waiting for that touch.

He had become more sincere than he meant to be. He had revealed his frustration and anger with Potter, that he would cast away the chance at compatible magic and friendship and fame with Draco just because they weren't offered by his precious, precious Weasleys. He had showed his contempt for those Weasleys. He had showed his scorn for the way that Potter stood still and looked anxiously from side to side.

And now, success, more dearly bought than he had wanted it to be.

He turned around and met Potter's anxious eyes. "I won't fuck around," he said harshly. "I don't want you to make a promise and then retreat again. I don't want you to pretend that we're comrades while we're fighting together and then pretend that nothing has changed when the fight's done."

Potter stood up straight, and Draco saw how much strength it took. Where he got the iron to put into his next words, Draco didn't know, and he wondered if he was a fool to trust to them.

"I won't," Potter said.

And, in a risk more profound than he had taken or thought to take when he knocked on Potter's door, because now he was in a leaning position like Potter instead of the one in absolute control, Draco reached out and clasped Potter's hand. Potter clutched him back like a drowning man. Draco wondered if this was wise, if he would be dragged down.

He dropped the question when he realized the fire had come back to life—a low spark, fluttering as if it would go out any minute, but there—in Potter's eyes.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—A New Way Forwards

"So," Ron said, too casually, his eyes fastened on the diagram in front of him that showed the proper way to heal the wound from a Stinging Hex—at least if he'd taken the correct notes from Portillo Lopez's lecture, Harry thought half-maliciously. "Did you talk to anyone today?"

Harry leaned his head back on the chair and squinted absently at the problems Hestia had set them in Auror Conduct. For each specific situation on the chart, they were supposed to give both their own likely response and the response the Auror Code called for. Harry was curbing his

natural honesty, because he doubted that he wanted Hestia to die of a heart attack when she read what he would *really* do. A watered-down version of it would work. "Of course," he said. "You. Hermione. Darien West. He knows more about Combat than I thought he did, and he managed to show me that one strike that I can never perform when Gregory demonstrates it. I think I'll surprise her the next time she pits me against Malfoy."

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron stiffen, probably at the mention of Malfoy. Harry hid a hard smile as he began to write his response to the question, *What would you do if you saw your partner bleeding on the ground at the same moment as the Dark wizard you were fighting began to flee?*

Ron hadn't made this easy for him. Harry didn't see why he should make it easy for *him*, in return.

"But no one else?" Ron was fidgeting. His notes from Portillo Lopez's lecture fell onto the floor, and he bent and picked them up with a low curse.

"Why, no." Harry looked up with a perplexed expression that he'd practiced in the mirror for several minutes after Malfoy left. Ron frowned at him in return. Harry snorted and fixed his eyes on the list again, "Were you expecting a firecall or something? Hermione spent most of the day with you, so I would have thought she could give you a message then if she wanted to do it."

"Come off it, Harry," Ron said. "I know this was the day Ginny was supposed to firecall you, and I reckon that you're just trying to get out of talking about it."

The anger that struck Harry was as sharp and stinging as a bite at his fingernail that made the quick bleed. He slammed down his sheaf of paper on the arm of the chair, and Ron jumped, dropping his notes again. Harry might have thought it was funny, but for the moment, the expression on Ron's face and Ginny's and Malfoy's remembered words were the world for him.

"You set your sister on me," Harry said lowly. "You know we don't talk anymore since the breakup. You ought to be enough of an adult to handle your problems by yourself. Especially," he added, with slow, ripe contempt while Ron's face darkened to tomato, "a problem that comes from your petty little *jealousy* of Malfoy."

"I'm not jealous of the bastard!" Ron yelled, springing to his feet. "Or at least," he added, when Harry just glared at him and didn't say anything, "I wouldn't have to be if you didn't treat him like a *friend*."

"He was unconscious for two days, almost, because I pulled on his compatible magic," Harry said. "I drained him without his asking. He wasn't angry about that, and that's worth being angry about a lot more than a decision the instructors made and you can't change. I told you we could change it in the future, if Malfoy and I can't get along as partners, but you're throwing a fit about not being able to change it *now*. I thought you were better than that by this point in your life, Ron. I thought you were an adult."

Ron leaned towards him. "What would you say if they partnered Hermione and me? Are you trying to tell me that you wouldn't be upset?"

Harry pictured all the time they would spend together and winced. This was why he wasn't any good at staying angry with his friends, most of the time. He could see their side—

And part of him was still the scared little boy Dudley kept from having friends in primary, he acknowledged grimly to himself. That little boy thought that if he irritated his friends too much, they would walk away and abandon him.

But if he wanted Ron to act like an adult, then he had to dismiss the boy and act like one, too. Harry made himself sit up straight and speak quietly. "I'd be upset, but I'd try to understand. You would have something special that made you work together well. You'd *have* to, if they paired you up this early. And I'd expect you to tell me I was being a prat if I kept on acting like it was your fault."

Ron's hands made the wood of the chair creak as he grasped it. "What you and Malfoy have isn't *special*," he said.

"I reckon compatible magic is around every corner, then?" Harry demanded. "And that's how come none of the other trainees have it?"

"I don't like you using the word special," Ron said, in that stubborn tone that meant he was simply going to ignore everything anybody said until he got his way.

"Too bad, I used it," Harry said. "And I'm going to go on being partners with Malfoy, and I want you to stop acting like a prick. You saw the way we can fight in Dearborn's class. You can't stand there and tell me that that isn't special."

"This is exactly why I wanted Ginny to deal with it!" Ron shouted at him, snatching up his notes and marching towards the door. "Because I knew that she would know the right words and I wouldn't!" He spun around in the doorway and pointed one finger at Harry. "But just because I don't know the right words doesn't make me wrong!"

He slammed the door. Harry heard a few muffled protests from trainees up and down the corridor, but he didn't bother getting up and going to reassure them. He just sat there, shaking his head and thinking how right Malfoy had been.

Ron was acting like an idiot. He could barely admit that he was jealous. He saw nothing wrong with setting Ginny on Harry, and then he got offended that Harry was offended. He would probably run to Hermione and tell her his side of the story, and that would cause trouble between Harry and Hermione. Or, at best, it would catch Hermione in the middle, the way she had been during their fourth year at Hogwarts.

Harry sat and waited for regret to bubble through him. Fighting with his two best friends was not the way he had intended to start his December.

But instead, he found a smile playing on his lips, and he sat down and worked right through the Auror Conduct problems with a clear conscience.

"Malfoy. Potter."

Gregory called them up to the front of the room to face each other, of course. Draco had to admit that he went somewhat warily. Potter had made a promise, a promise Draco *wanted* to trust, but so far Potter giving his word to a Malfoy had meant nothing in particular. He might have changed his mind over the weekend and decided that Monday should begin with a re-commitment to ignoring Draco.

Draco thought that until he got up to the front of the class and turned to face Potter, unconsciously drawing in a deep breath as he did so.

And then he caught sight of Potter's face, and his eyes widened in spite of himself. Potter was *grinning* at him. The grin had a friendly edge to it. A desperate edge, Draco thought, as he studied Potter's face some more, but even that kind of friendliness was more than he had ever been accustomed to receive from Potter.

"I've been studying," Potter whispered. "Prepare yourself."

Gregory snapped the command to go before Draco could answer. And anyway, he thought, as he lunged and aimed a kick at Potter's midriff, it wouldn't do to waste breath on a taunt.

Potter spun out of the way of the kick and then leaped forwards and jabbed out with one hand. Draco answered the move before he thought about it. Potter was staring too intently at Draco's left side for him not to mean it.

Or so Draco thought until Potter stepped back neatly and he realized it had been a feint after all. Potter had learned to lie with his face some time in the last few days.

Or maybe he changed his mind and decided to put in enough effort, Draco thought dimly as Potter spun on one heel and kicked him in the back of the leg, dropping him neatly to the floor.

There was silence for long enough that Draco began to worry he'd hit something vital in his ear and was now deaf. Then he lifted his head and realized Gregory was staring at Potter, and the rest of the class was holding its breath, not wanting to irritate Gregory by applauding.

Idiots, Draco thought as he shook his head and worked his way back to his feet, gingerly testing his knee. It would support his weight for the rest of class, he thought, but he would heal the injury as soon as they left Gregory's room and were allowed to do so. *They should encourage good work, whether or not they know the instructor hates the student who did it. Where's their*

bravery and their pride?

"Mister Potter has been studying," Gregory said at last. Her voice was harsh as a crow's, and she couldn't manage a smile the way she did for most people when they won a contest—or beat Potter. She turned away with a grudging nod and focused on the other students. "Cadwallader, Snowpoint, up here."

Draco had to conceal a smile as he turned to limp back to his place. Gregory's partiality for anyone but Potter had caught her by surprise this time. She had decided, the way Snape had, that Potter would never be good at her subject, but she shouldn't have had that confidence. Potter was naturally better at physical things like Quidditch, Draco thought. It was only his wariness of Gregory that had kept him from doing better in Combat before now.

Someone grabbed his arm and slung it around his shoulders. Draco turned to stare the person into stammering embarrassment.

It was Potter, who caught his eye and snorted, rolling his own. "You'll have to do worse than that to make me back down, after what we talked about the other day," he whispered, and assisted Draco back to his spot. Draco had to admit, if only to himself, that it was easier to walk with companionship. Potter had hit his knee harder than he knew until it started to send a pounding ache up his leg.

He wondered what would happen when Potter dropped his arm. Would he sit down near Draco, proclaiming his change of allegiance to anyone who cared to watch, or would he sit down by his friends again, trying to reconcile them to his growing friendship with Draco? Draco could think of good reasons for both actions.

Potter did neither. Instead, he took up a new position in the group, next to Catherine Arrowshot, a high-strung, brown-haired girl he'd been cultivating for the past few days. Arrowshot looked at him shyly. Potter made a joke of some kind, from the way his eyes shone, and Arrowshot laughed.

Only when Draco crossed cold stares with Weasley did he realize that the spot of floor Potter had picked was halfway between his friends and Draco.

Draco was the one who had the problem with not sneaking sideways stares at Potter for the rest of class. A Potter who had proven himself capable of deception *and* diplomacy was unexpectedly attractive.

"I received very interesting responses," Hestia said, rifling through the sheets of paper that they had handed her containing their answers to her problems. "Very interesting indeed. I think we need to have a discussion of some of them." She looked up, and for an instant Harry thought he caught a gleam of mischief in her eyes, but it was gone so quickly he couldn't be sure. Besides, she had looked mischievous when she assigned them the problems, too, and they had turned out to be hard work.

Half the class groaned. Hestia laughed. "Oh, I'm not going to have you simply *talk* to one another. I'll split you up into pairs and ask you to act out one of the situations on the list." She smiled sweetly. "And because you can't always anticipate what you'll meet when you go into the field, I'm going to give one of you the situation, and withhold it from the other one. The other partner will simply have to react."

Now it was a murmur of excitement instead of resentment that stirred the class. Hestia nodded. "I also have a reason behind my choices, random as they might seem to be at first."

Harry glanced at Catherine, wondering if he would be paired up with her, but his name was the first Hestia's called. "Potter and Granger, please."

Harry hesitated before he stood. He had been sure that Hestia would either pair him up with someone completely new or with Malfoy. He couldn't help glancing at Malfoy, and found him watching with narrowed eyes.

Malfoy raised a brow when he saw Harry watching and extended his hands palm-up, as if to say that he had no idea why Hestia hadn't put them together. Then he cocked his head and nodded beyond Harry, and Harry turned hastily back to face Hermione. She already looked sad and angry, as she had most of the morning. Ron had explained his side of the story to her first, of course. Harry hoped, as he moved slowly forwards to stand opposite her, that he wouldn't have to hurt her or do something else that would deepen the argument.

Hestia handed a scrap of paper to Hermione. Harry could make out the strokes of thick letters through the paper, but not what they said. Hermione read it, and took a single deep breath before she faced Harry.

"Harry," she said softly.

Is this part of the discussion she wants to have with me? But Harry remained on his guard, because he didn't really expect Hermione to ignore the rules in public, or try to sabotage her own performance in class. "Yeah?" he asked, letting his hand fall onto his wand.

"I wish I knew how to get you to respond." Hermione stared at Harry with large, heartsick eyes. "You're drifting further and further away from us, and I don't know how to bring you back."

Harry stiffened, but then he saw Hestia out of the corner of his eye. She looked pleased instead of frowning, so he didn't think Hermione was violating the rules for whatever the situation was supposed to be. She was probably just adapting it, taking the chance to say some of the words she wanted to say without revealing to everyone what had happened between them.

That's something, at least. She and Ron want to keep this private.

And like a flash, the memory of one particular situation on the sheet came back to him. It was

that of an Auror trying to coax a partner who had been incapacitated by the Imperius Curse or one of the mind-control artifacts that Dark wizards sometimes favored. Hermione could be playing either role, but Harry was sure that that was what she was doing.

He let his wand fall into his fingers as he watched Hermione, sparing a fleeting thought for the fact that he didn't remember the last time his mind had worked this quickly, this clearly, this consistently. He didn't know what had caused it, but he wanted to hang onto the clarity.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Hermione asked. Her voice broke with frustration. She took one step forwards, so quick and smooth that Harry hardly saw it. "Why are you leaving us behind?"

I think she's the one who's under the curse, Harry decided. *And even if she wasn't, my reaction should still be the same, because either I'm trying to rescue her and I have to ignore what she says, or I'm the one under the curse and I won't be paying attention to her anyway.*

He swiftly cast a Body-Bind, and Hermione wavered and started to fall. Harry cast a Cushioning Charm on the ground in response, and though Hermione toppled over like a statue, she didn't get hurt.

"Very good, Mr. Potter," Hestia said, looking pleased. "What made you decide to react the way you did?"

"I thought she was either under an Imperius Curse or convinced I was under one," Harry said, glancing sideways at Hermione. Her face was frozen in an expression of hurt dismay. He nearly sighed aloud, because he knew that would mean an argument later, but sighing would rather give the game away. "She wasn't actively hostile, so I didn't want to fight her, and it's not her fault if she's under an Imperius Curse."

Hestia nodded. "What made you decide that was the more likely option?"

"Her vagueness," Harry said. "She could have attacked at once if she thought I wouldn't listen to her, and she wasn't trying to tell me something specific, like that the people who had enchanted her were friends. Whoever cursed her probably knew that I wouldn't fall for something like that."

Hermione shut her eyes.

"A good piece of logic," said Hestia. "Let her up now, Mr. Potter."

Harry released the Body-Bind on Hermione and turned away instead of watching her climb to her feet. He didn't want to see the betrayal he knew would be in her eyes. There would be another argument—there would always be another argument, Harry was beginning to think now—but for the moment, he simply wasn't interested in continuing it.

Instead, he found himself seeking Malfoy's eyes.

Malfoy looked stunned. Harry scrutinized his expression carefully for some hint of pleasure, using all the skills that Pushkin had taught them in Observation, but couldn't find it. In the end, he shrugged, slightly annoyed at himself, and sat down again in his seat.

Maybe Malfoy's trying to be an adult as well.

Potter was getting more interesting by the minute, which was the only reason Draco didn't roll his eyes when, once again, Ketchum partnered them in Battle Tactics.

They didn't work together in this class the way they did in Dearborn's. They had to act as a team not in dueling enemies—or not in dueling enemies only—but in scrambling up staircases, dodging falling obstacles, watching for spells from Ketchum's second- and third-years, and protecting each other from ambush. He and Potter pulled in opposite directions when the instructors tried to yoke them like that. Of course they wouldn't do well without the bond of the compatible magic between them.

But now Draco was wondering what this changed, interesting Potter might try.

"Listen up." Ketchum didn't need to extend his hands over his head and clap to get the class paying attention to him—they already were—but he did it anyway. Draco had noticed that the Mudblood was fond of dramatics. "This time, I want you to get to the platform up there." He pointed towards a floating, slender block in the upper left-hand corner of the enormous room, already crowded by five of his trainees. There were no staircases that led to it. "Both you and your partner have to reach it at the same time, or it doesn't count. Meanwhile…" He flourished his wand, and boulders zipped out from chutes in the walls, hanging suspended in midair as if from invisible wires. Flying torches danced among them, changing direction at unpredictable intervals, while ropes wove lazy patterns around *them*. Spikes popped in and out of the walls. "These obstacles will be trying to stop you," Ketchum said casually. "And my trainees will fling spells, of course."

He turned to Draco and Potter. "Malfoy, you're the leader this time."

Draco's breath caught. Usually, Ketchum decreed that Potter would be the one making the decisions, or he gave both of them equal rights. But now Potter had to do as he said.

The next moment, Draco's curiosity to know how Potter would take this became more interesting to him than the fact of his command. He turned his head and stared at Potter.

For a moment, Potter seemed to swallow and struggle with a sour mouthful of envy. Then he grinned and bowed to Draco. "Lead on, captain."

Ketchum fell back. Draco enchanted the flagstones beneath him and Potter with a muttered spell that, to his pleasure, Potter listened closely to. The stones rose beneath them, flattening and curving, and formed a passable imitation—but only an imitation, and therefore legal—of a flying

carpet. It was a spell Draco had studied the night before, and he trembled in gladness that it had worked. The stones circled them up through the air towards the platform.

Potter pressed his shoulder and leg against Draco's, half-shielding him, half-shielded, and awaited orders. Draco, his confidence making him feel lighter than flying did, said, "Summon one of the torches, please, Potter."

He got a sideways glance for the *please*, but Draco wanted to show that he could make small sacrifices, too.

Potter nodded, and the next moment a torch was flying towards his hand—

Pulling a boulder right behind it.

"Concentrate on what you're doing!" Draco snapped when he saw Potter's wand rising. He ducked around him and used a Blasting Curse that sent the boulder flying apart in smithereens. Potter lifted a hand and caught the torch in an easy grip, then sent an impressed look towards Draco over his shoulder.

Draco's mouth dried out at that look.

He would have to think about that later, he decided. They had circled too near the wall, and one of the popping spikes had carved a bit of stone off the side of their "carpet." Draco adjusted its course with a word, and they dipped around two ropes and straightened out in a flat run for the platform.

Making perfect targets for the trainees' spells, of course.

"Defense, Potter!" Draco said, because he knew Potter was stronger on that. Potter nodded and raised a shield around them that deflected the first hexes. Draco knelt beside him and aimed his wand along the line of Potter's hip, through a small gap in the shields, waiting for the recoil of the compatible magic to hit him.

It did, but carrying a new sensation with it this time. Draco felt as if he were wearing Potter like a skin cloak, a second awareness around his own. He could feel the stone carpet under a second pair of feet, another pair of lungs drawing breath, glasses around his own eyes.

He didn't let it distract him. Instead, he muttered, "*Creo fluctus!*"

The spell charged out of him, not stronger than usual but faster, silkier, smoother. The wave of mingled water and air it made caught up the torch and swept all the trainees off the platform at once, and then doubled back and swept Potter and Draco off the stone.

Draco felt his crow of triumph stick in his throat as they whirled along for a moment, nothing but sparkling foam and thick air and mingled fire between them and a fall all the way to the floor,

and then they landed on the platform, at the same time, and clutched each other to keep from tumbling.

From below came dazed silence and then clapping, both thin with distance. Potter steadied himself with a hand on Draco's shoulder and leaned across to murmur to him in the moment before Ketchum called to them.

"Thank you. There's no one else I could do that with. I know that now."

Draco whipped his head around to look at him. Potter's smile was warm, if a trifle aloof. He was trying.

Draco had no words for his feelings and could only give a single, convulsive squeeze of his hand.

His *thoughts* had no words, either. But his determination to keep Potter close burst into bud like a flower, and hardened like stone.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen—An Afternoon of Arguments

Harry paused outside his rooms and listened a minute. Yes, he could hear Ron and Hermione arguing in there, or at least agreeing loudly with each other. He sighed and wished or a moment that he didn't have to face them both at once.

On the other hand, he thought Hermione was being so hostile to him because she only knew Ron's side of the story. If he confronted her alone, then she would go away and talk to Ron, who would deny everything Harry said. It was probably for the best if they all spoke at once and Hermione got to compare their stories.

Harry lifted his hand to knock on the door.

Someone caught his arm and pulled it backwards. Harry turned around, already tense and reaching for his wand with his other hand. He no longer felt safe when people came up behind him and grabbed him.

He tried to relax when he realized it was Malfoy, but the tension had to go somewhere, and he

dissipated it in a loud huffing sigh. "What do you *want*?" he asked, folding his arms and keeping his voice low. He wanted to choose the moment when he confronted Ron and Hermione, instead of having it forced on him.

Malfoy's the one who taught me so much about the importance of choice, he thought, as he watched a bright flush break out on Malfoy's cheeks. *Strange to think of.*

"You're going to talk to your friends?" Malfoy asked.

Harry glanced at the door again. Ron and Hermione's voices had risen, which was probably the only reason they hadn't heard what Malfoy had said. Harry tried to set him the example by whispering. "I was until you interrupted."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "I came in time, you mean. I should be with you when you talk to them."

Harry *knew* his jaw dropped; he didn't need the sidelong sneer on Malfoy's face to tell him that. He coughed and said, "No, you shouldn't! They'll be more hostile in front of you than they would be otherwise."

"They'll be more truthful," Malfoy said, as if that made sense. "And Granger will see how irrational the Weasel is about me. That's what you're hoping to do, aren't you? Get Granger on your side and use her to tame the Weasel's madness."

Harry scowled. "Don't call him that."

"You're failing to address the larger point." Malfoy's voice was bored, but his eyes had a sudden pale fire in them. "We need to be together."

"No," Harry said. "You have a place in my life. I understand that now. I won't fight against it. But that place isn't everywhere." He leaned forwards, hoping that that, combined with the serious look on his face, would intimidate Malfoy.

He might as well have hoped to intimidate a thunderstorm, said Malfoy's look of contempt. "It's by your side in an argument I'm the cause of."

"Not just you," Harry said. "You helped me realize that. Ron and Ginny hope to have a place in my life that's—I don't know, controlling or something, for some reason." Malfoy smirked at him, and Harry flushed. He knew he wasn't a great speaker; did Malfoy have to rub it in? "That's what I need to talk to them about. It's the more important topic."

Malfoy clenched one fist and then looked as if he wished that he hadn't done it. Still, his voice was sharp enough to cut. "More important than I am. *I* see."

"Shit." Harry wondered briefly if pulling on his own hair would relieve some of his frustration,

and then he thought of the way Malfoy would make fun of him for messing it up even more and managed to refrain. "I didn't mean it that way, Malfoy. I'm trying to have both you *and* Ron and Hermione as friends, all right? For them, the petty little things they're doing are the more important topic. For you, it's different."

Malfoy stared at him like an angry cat that had just been offered a plate of its favorite food. Then he said, "What are the important topics that you would want to discuss with me?"

Harry blinked, caught off-guard. Then he shrugged and said, "How to handle our compatible magic so that it doesn't drain one of us. What you think the Death Eaters, if that's what they were, were doing. How we're going to keep our investigations into the Dark magic low-key enough that the instructors don't notice."

Malfoy half-lowered his head and gave him a secret smile. "You intend to take me along on more of those investigations, then?"

"Of course. They attacked you, too. And I think the red and black magic was aimed at you, not me. How could the caster have known that I would open your door just then?" Harry shook his head, growing more confident as the quiet pleased look made its way over more and more of Malfoy's face. "You have a right to participate. You have a right to participate in a *lot* of what I do," Harry added, driven to honesty by Malfoy's expectant silence as much as anything else. "Just not everything."

Malfoy glanced at the door behind Harry and hesitated. Then he gave a clipped nod and said, "If this turns out to be something that I should have been involved in, then I'll blame you, Potter." He turned on his heel.

Harry, in gratitude and because he really did want to offer Malfoy reassurance, reached out and touched his shoulder. Malfoy glanced back at him. Harry wondered if he knew about or understood the vulnerability in his own eyes.

"They're not going to persuade me to abandon you," Harry said. "I promise."

"You think that now," Malfoy muttered.

"You're the one who taught me to be sure of that," Harry said. "You're the one who gave me the strength to choose you." He produced a smile that he tried to put all his emotions into. He wasn't sure he succeeded, because Malfoy stared as if Harry had punched him or vomited on him.

Malfoy turned in the next moment and walked away as though he couldn't wait to reach the end of the corridor. Harry shook his head. He didn't know if he would ever understand Malfoy, but at least he had managed to get him to leave.

That way, he could confront Ron and Hermione alone.

Harry *knew* it was the right thing to do. As he turned and opened the door, he could feel that determination bracing him up like a commandment.

But he couldn't help wishing Malfoy could have been with him, all the same.

Draco went straight back to his room. He didn't trust himself to appear calm and collected in the face of anyone he met right now, and there were still too few people he trusted to see him when he *wasn't* calm and collected.

He flung the door open and let it crash shut behind him. A chattering chorus of voices in his head told him what his Malfoy ancestors would think of his dramatic little display.

For once, Draco told the Malfoy ancestors to go fuck themselves, and the chattering chorus shut up in surprise. Draco dropped into a chair and shut his eyes, putting his hands over them in the vain hope that it would calm his racing heart.

Potter's smile had done this to him.

His bloody *smile.*

It wasn't that Draco was incapable of controlling himself around the people he was attracted to. He had got over that particular bit of nonsense long ago, when he'd had his first crushes at thirteen and fourteen. But he had anticipated those crushes. His father had explained that Malfoys were like other people in a few things, and being at the mercy of the urge to propagate the species was one of them.

Likewise, he had come into the Auror program prepared for the idea that people would hate him. He hoped to find mentors, such as Dearborn, and those people who would recognize his talent and admire and promote him, however grudgingly they did it. Draco would have liked approval, but he did not need it with the same ardor that he needed the Malfoy name restored. Dearborn had been enough of a conquest for a few months.

He had not anticipated the compatible magic, but he had anticipated Potter's reaction to it. He had assumed that would drag on for months and resolve itself into little more than sullen acceptance in the end. It was one reason his intense conversation with Potter had so shaken him. It did not fit into the possibilities for his future his mind had created the moment he felt the compatible magic coiling between them.

Instead, Potter had kept his promise. He had managed to send Draco off just now with words that he didn't resent, words that made him feel as if he were part of a community larger than the Malfoy family for the first time in his life.

Draco leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. His mind stretched and strained, trying to encompass the idea of what his life might be like now that Potter—Potter who had compatible magic with him, Potter who had fame and power enough to get anything he wanted done, Potter

who was brave and beautiful—stood at his side.

Draco had thought through everything, planned everything, anticipated everything.

Except friendship.

Harry shut the door behind him in absolute silence. Ron and Hermione had both frozen the moment they saw him walk in and now blinked at him as though they expected that to make him go away.

Harry folded his arms and leaned on the door. He would wait for them to make the first move, since he couldn't think of a comfortable way to approach the subject he wanted to talk about.

Hermione was the first to react. She licked her lips and leaned forwards. Her voice wavered at first, but quickly grew strong as she went on. "Ron told me that you had an argument over Malfoy, Harry, and that you were going to start being best friends with him instead of us. I tried to appeal to you in class today, and you used a spell on me that looked like a rejection. Would you care to explain *exactly* what you're doing?"

Harry had to control the impulse to sigh. He hadn't said that, of course, but he also knew it would sound like he had to Ron. And Hermione's perception of what had happened in Auror Conduct was an odd mixture of reality and the fact that Harry had been playing a role and had to do what he thought would be appropriate to the imaginary situation.

This was the point in arguments with his best friends when he wanted to walk away. He used to despair of getting through the thick walls around Ron's mind, and he knew that he couldn't oppose Hermione's relentless rationality.

But right now, he was remembering the way that Ron had set Ginny on him. Ron might allege a bunch of motives for that. He couldn't deny that it had happened, though. So Harry would tell Hermione about it, because she didn't seem to know.

"I told Ron that I didn't appreciate his interference in my life," he said. "Why can't *he* argue with me about Malfoy, if he wants to? Why does he have to get you and his sister to do it?"

Hermione snapped her mouth shut and blinked. "What's Ginny got to do with this?"

"Nothing," Harry said, stalking over to his chair and flinging himself into it. He wanted to show that he wasn't afraid of them and about to retreat out the door any moment, the way he might look if he was standing on the other side of the room. "In a sane world. But Ron set her on me, and she gave me a big lecture about how I have to stand up for myself and fight the instructors no matter how suicidal that would be and no matter how tired I am of fighting. Because I can *do anything*, according to her."

Hermione twisted around to look at Ron, her mouth slowly opening like someone drinking in

new knowledge. Ron crossed his arms and concentrated all his energy into a scowl at Harry. Harry waited for him to defend himself, but he didn't say anything, so Harry cleared his throat and went on.

"I broke up with Ginny for a reason. I don't think we're good for each other anymore." He had considered the idea of telling Ron and Hermione about his fits and rejected it again. He should do it, he knew, and maybe someday he would, but right now it felt too much like doing what Ginny had ordered him to.

And betraying Malfoy.

Harry frowned and shifted his shoulders. Malfoy shouldn't be the only one who knew secrets about him, and Harry couldn't understand his own desire to have it be that way. But he left those thoughts aside for the moment so he could concentrate on what he was talking about.

"To have her come in here like that and tell me that I was too weak and too strong at the same time—to have her think that I always want to be a hero—to have her accuse me of wanting power—" Harry's voice was rising, and he didn't care. The conversation with Malfoy had told him at least one thing. Didn't he have the *right* to be angry with Ginny? Shouldn't he be able to argue against what she claimed if he wanted to?

"Don't talk about my sister that way."

Harry surged to his feet, to stand opposite Ron. Ron was taller than Harry was, but Harry wouldn't allow Ron to loom over him anymore.

"That's what she said," Harry said. "And worse. This is only the parts of her speech that I feel I can *repeat* without spitting in rage." He saw the way Ron cocked his head and laughed bitterly. "What's the matter, Ron? Afraid to deal with the consequences of what you did by telling your little sister about our arguments?"

"She didn't mean to hurt you," Ron said. "She wanted to help."

"But she had no *right*," Harry said. "How would you feel if I'd asked Seamus or Neville to talk to you because I was sick of your jealousy about Malfoy?"

Ron looked as though Harry had slapped him. "But they're just friends," he said. "They didn't date you."

"And now Ginny is just a friend," Harry said. "I don't give a fuck about what she used to be to me." He saw Hermione holding her hand to her mouth and Ron's eyes darkening, but at the moment, he just couldn't *care.* "You didn't have the right to ask her to do that. She gave me one of the most humiliating lectures and one of the most patronizing scoldings of my life. The *Dursleys* weren't that bad, because I didn't care that much what they thought of me after a while. But I care about Ginny. I cared about her," he corrected himself, because right now he wasn't

sure what he felt for her anymore. "You shouldn't have asked her to fight the battle for you. That's the part I'm really angry about, Ron, not that you told her. You can complain to people, but you don't tell them that they should go and have the argument *for* you."

"What was I supposed to do when no one else could reach you?" Ron stamped his foot. Hermione's eyebrows drew together, Harry was glad to see. Ron didn't seem to notice, and leaned forwards as if he assumed that he could intimidate Harry that way. "You weren't listening to me. I explained my concerns, and you just dismissed them by saying that you had something *special* with Malfoy, something that you wouldn't give me the right to complain about—"

"That's enough, Ron."

Hermione's voice had a steely ring of command that surprised Harry. He turned to look at Hermione along with Ron as she rose to her feet. Her eyes were sad when she glanced back and forth between them.

"Both of you are in the wrong," she said. "You more than Harry, Ron. I didn't know that you'd contacted Ginny." She took a deep breath and ran her hand down the outside of her hair, as though running it through the middle was too much effort right now. "That was stupid. Of course Ginny would push Harry away from us. He doesn't feel connected to her anymore."

Harry set his jaw and said nothing. Hermione had questioned him thoroughly when he broke up with Ginny, determined to know why he hadn't stayed with her. Harry hadn't admitted the truth then, and he wasn't about to do it now, either.

"What Harry has with Malfoy isn't going away," Hermione continued. "We have to learn to accept it, and not scold him about it."

"But *Hermione*," Ron said, and his voice whinged.

"Get out of here for right now," Hermione said, turning back to face Harry. "You didn't tell me about Ginny. We'll have to have a private talk later about how you lied."

For a long minute, Harry didn't think Ron would obey. He clenched his jaw, and the veins in his neck stood out, while his face flushed. The grinding of his teeth was audible.

But in the end he turned and marched out of the room, tugging open the door so far it hit the wall, and then slamming it behind him.

Harry blinked and turned back to Hermione.

Only to find that she had collapsed into her chair and put her hands over her face. She was making soft sounds—not crying, Harry thought, but taking the sort of breaths that people took when they wanted to keep from crying.

"Hermione?" he asked uneasily.

"I've tried so hard," she almost wailed into her hands. "The work here is harder than it was at Hogwarts. I can barely keep up. And sometimes I don't know what I'm doing with Ron anymore. We have *so many arguments.* And he's wrong, but I understand what he's going through because he thinks he might lose you to Malfoy. I *do*." She dropped her hands and stared up at Harry. "Because I feel the same way."

Harry wanted to turn and stalk off. Hermione seemed to be doing the same thing Ginny had: throwing Ron's problems at him and demanding that he solve them. Why couldn't *he* ever be the overwhelmed one, the one who got to act like he wanted without caring what other people thought?

Two answers came to him at once, so quickly that he was ashamed. First, he would hate himself if he did manage to behave like that, no matter how good it might feel at the time.

Second, there was someone who could help him if he felt overwhelmed. Malfoy.

Or Draco. Harry wasn't sure how long he could continue to call Malfoy by the chill distance of his last name.

For now, though, Hermione was watching him with tear-brightened eyes and obviously wanting an answer. Harry cleared his throat. "I didn't know that you were feeling that far behind in your classes," he said. "I'm sorry. I can try to show you some of the ways that I'm coping with it." He bit his lip to keep himself from laughing, because he knew that Hermione wouldn't understand. His offering to help her with study skills was ridiculous.

"That's not what I need," Hermione said, shaking her head. "I can handle the classwork when I get used to it. It's just trying to do that and be calm and understanding for Ron at the same time that's the problem." She looked up at Harry again. "Do you think you could…spend a few days with Ron? Just give him time with you so that he doesn't feel like he's losing his best friend?"

Harry straightened his spine. He hated to refuse Hermione when she sounded as if she was pleading, but if he gave in to her demands, then Ron would feel like he'd won. And Harry no longer intended to let him get away with what he was doing.

"No," he said.

Hermione drove her fingernails into her palms until it looked as though she was going to claw her skin open. "But *Harry*—"

Harry knelt down and took her hands in his, stroking and soothing them open. Hermione blinked at him in astonishment and seemed to forget about the tears that Harry knew she was about to shed.

"It's hard," Harry said calmly. "I know that. I know that you feel you might lose him. I went through that, too, in fourth year and during the Horcrux hunt and sometimes during this last year when he asked too many questions about Ginny. But, Hermione, you have to remember that you *can't* be calm and understanding for Ron all the time. You're putting an unnecessary burden on yourself, and on me. We'll have to refuse to give in to Ron's temper tantrums and instead do what we *know* is right. And I *know* that it's right to be friends with Malfoy and Ron at the same time."

Hermione was frowning, her lower lip sticking out in the closest thing to a pout that Harry had ever seen her make. "But how can we do that? Ron won't accept anything less than complete devotion to him."

"First of all," Harry said, "I don't think that's true. Because if it was, then neither of us would ever have become friends with him in the first place. He would have been impossible to live with. But we have to be careful that we don't turn him *into* someone like that by indulging him all the time."

Hermione blushed. Then she said, "I would never have said that if I was feeling normal. But coming into the Auror program is overwhelming, and with Ron being upset all the time—" She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"We'll get through it together," Harry said, and squeezed her hands one more time before he stood up. "We'll make Ron see reason. Slowly," he added, and Hermione let out a reluctant laugh. "But he's worth it, Hermione—both to make up with and not to pamper. It'll take him a long time and it'll be hard, but he'll get used to my friendship with Malfoy in the end."

Good God, I nearly said "Draco" just then. Harry twitched. Whatever he might privately feel, he didn't think that Hermione was ready to hear him speak about "Draco."

Hermione gave him a faint smile as she walked towards the door. "I would have thought of that myself," she said, "if I hadn't been struggling so much and didn't want simple solutions." She threw her shoulders back. "Well, no more simple solutions. We could never do that in Hogwarts. Why should we do it here?"

Harry gave her a smile of thanks. "Do you want to talk to Ron first?" he asked.

Hermione nodded briskly, once more the woman he remembered from the Horcrux hunt. "Yes, I think it's best. He'll take it better from me. Like you said, it'll take a while to make him see reason." She hesitated, then added, "What else did Ginny say to you, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "Things I'll find it hard to forgive her for, Hermione. But I don't want to talk about it right now."

"All right," Hermione said. "And—don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but are you *sure* that you want to be friends with Malfoy?"

Harry thought of the way that Malfoy had spoken to him after the conversation with Ginny—his unflinching, scathing honesty. He thought of the way the compatible magic coiled and eddied between them. He thought of the way Malfoy hadn't even blamed Harry for the dangerous draining of his magic that could have cost him his life.

Contentment spread through him, different from the contentment that he felt when he was with Ron and Hermione. But why did that matter? His friendship with Malfoy was going to be different. He already knew that.

"Completely sure," he murmured.

Something in his smile made Hermione smile back.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—Friendships Old and New

Harry leaned his chin on his hand and scowled at Ron across the tables in the dining hall where all the first-year trainees ate their meals together. Ron kept his back resolutely turned and his head bowed as if there was nothing more important than stuffing scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Harry had tried waiting up for Ron last night, but Ron hadn't come back to their rooms until Harry's eyes were crossing with weariness, and he had reluctantly decided that falling asleep in class wasn't a good idea. Then he tried to wake up early, and Ron had already left. When he came down to the dining hall, he found that Ron had chosen a seat at the most crowded table, so Harry had no chance of getting close to him.

How am I supposed to go back to being his best friend if I can't talk to him? Harry glared at Ron's back and rapped his fingers on the table.

"Explain to me why you don't have any food in front of you," someone said behind him. "I don't want my partner fainting at noon."

Harry cocked his head back and grinned at Malfoy's words in spite of himself as Malfoy sat down next to him. He had seen how Malfoy's voice made Ron stiffen, but that was a hopeful sign, Harry thought. If a good faith effort wouldn't lure Ron over to speak to him, maybe jealousy would. "I didn't feel hungry this morning," Harry said, and a yawn sneaked out of his mouth before he could suppress it. Malfoy narrowed his eyes, so Harry added sheepishly, "I

stayed up late last night. I'm never hungry when I'm missing sleep." He shrugged.

Malfoy glanced between him and Ron as if to say that he knew exactly what the problem was, but, in an amazing feat of diplomacy, he didn't speak aloud. Instead, he waved his wand, and two large blue sparks sprang from it. Harry blinked, wondering if he was calling a Malfoy house-elf. It seemed strange that he would summon one now, when he probably could have done so in the first weeks they were here.

Instead, the sparks apparently acted as a signal to another Auror trainee, a large young man with a blunt face and honey-colored hair who stood up and marched over to them like a martyr. Malfoy smiled at him, and received a scowl back that Harry recognized. No doubt Malfoy had blackmailed him into acting as a sort of servant, the same way he had blackmailed Harry into private lessons. "Aaron," he said. "My friend here needs some food." He gave Harry a critical glance, then nodded. "Toast, scrambled eggs, a large glass of orange juice, and scones with butter. Go get them." He turned a blandly smiling glance back on Aaron.

Harry opened his mouth to protest that he never ate so much and to ask if Malfoy wanted him to be *fat*, but Aaron interrupted him sullenly before he could say it. "Everyone knows that you're only working together because the instructors paired you up," he muttered, scratching his chin. "You're not *friends*."

Malfoy froze, his whole body shuddering into stillness as effectively as if someone had cast the Flesh-to-Stone Curse on him. Harry could see the stiffening of the lines in his face and knew he was struggling not to roll his eye sideways and see what Harry thought.

I'll show you exactly what I think, Harry thought, and drew his own wand. He had to lean back in his seat to aim it at Aaron, but it was effective for all that. Aaron stared at him, looking breathless, and Harry was grateful for the first time that he'd gained a reputation from killing Voldemort.

"We *are* friends," he said quietly, letting menace drip into his voice. It was a melodramatic performance, especially now that they had the attention of everyone else at the nearby tables, and Harry was sure that someone would laugh, but instead a deep silence enveloped him. "The instructors can quantify partnerships, but they can't order us to feel certain things." He put one hand on Malfoy's arm and bore down gently with two fingers, rubbing in circles that he hoped would soothe Malfoy's tension. "I'd let you know if I didn't feel friendship for Malfoy. When have I ever missed the chance to state my opinions loudly?"

Aaron stared at him with his mouth falling more and more open. Malfoy's arm shook once under his touch, then clenched tight, muscles locking. Harry didn't dare look at him yet, instead keeping his gaze aimed along the wand at Aaron.

"All right, all right!" Aaron said suddenly, maybe because Harry had narrowed his eyes. He turned and lumbered away in the direction of the trays.

Harry shook his head and lowered his wand. "Bastard," he muttered. "It was kind of you, Draco, but you didn't need to order him around for me. How did you get control of him, anyway?" He turned to Malfoy, hoping that the change of subject would help them move past the inevitable awkward moment that would follow this.

Malfoy was gazing at him, frozen again. Then he spoke in a slightly dazed voice which made Harry worry that Aaron had slipped in a Confundus Charm when he wasn't looking. "You called me Draco."

Harry took a deep breath. He'd intended to wait on that, because he knew it would change more than it really should. "I wanted to," he said. "And it's one of your names, isn't it?"

After that, he could only wait, while Malfoy struggled viciously with himself. Harry watched his flickering grey eyes and wondered what demon he was fighting. He still knew too little about Malf—no, call him *Draco*, he wanted to—about Draco to know which one it would be.

Then Draco looked away and said, in a voice almost but not quite too low for Harry to hear, "I never wanted to be so grateful for someone else's friendship."

"I know all about that," Harry said. "Hermione and Ron were the first friends I ever had." That earned him a violent twitch sideways of Draco's head, but Harry knew he would ask no questions; he was too busy drinking Harry's words. "The gratitude is always there, and sometimes I hate it, but being friends with them is too wonderful for me to wish it was different." He took a deep breath, and a risk. "Let me have the chance to be a friend to you who's good enough that you can forgive the gratitude."

Draco turned fully to look at him then. Harry folded his arms, bracing himself against a gaze that cut like a desert wind.

Then Draco closed his eyes and nodded.

Knowing that a barrier had been passed, but nothing else other than that, Harry determinedly changed the subject and started talking about what challenges Ketchum was likely to set them that day as Aaron came back with a tray full of food. He didn't mind the way Aaron dropped the tray on the table and scuttled off, because it made a curve of a smile show at the corner of Draco's mouth and his eyes glint like flecks of mica.

He *told* himself he didn't mind the way Ron's shoulders looked hunched now, as though a great weight was bearing down on him from above.

He's the one who has to come to me and talk about it if he's worried, Harry thought stubbornly. *And even then, I'm not going to abandon my friendship with Draco for him, any more than I would abandon him for Draco. That's not an option. I'm going to be friends with anybody I want, and they'll get used to it or walk away.*

His own resolve made him blink. He wondered if he had ever felt this secure about anything. Not since the war, anyway, and the conviction that he had to sacrifice his life to destroy Voldemort.

That was another reason not to give up his friendships, he decided as he turned back to Draco. Because they made him feel so bloody *good.*

And I deserve to feel good just as much as anyone else does.

Mine.

The deep possessiveness that Draco could feel moving through him was nothing new. He had felt the same way about his position on the Slytherin Quidditch team, when he knew that he was the one meant to fill that spot and no one else would fit. He had felt the same way about his wand when he first picked it up in Ollivander's shop. He had leaned back in fourth year—the first year that he had felt his leadership of his Slytherin yearmates was truly uncontested—and looked around with that feeling bubbling in him like lava.

Right.

Draco shook his head. He had tried to diminish the intensity of his feeling by lying to himself, but it wouldn't work.

This urge to hold Potter fiercely close every time he looked at him—not physically, of course, because Potter wasn't ready for that—was different from anything he had ever experienced before. Before, an element of constraint had invaded everything. The Slytherin prefects had felt obligated to give that spot as Seeker to him, or else it was possible that Lucius would be upset. His schoolmates had battled against him for years before they acknowledged, sullenly, that his money and his stubborn will made him more capable than they were. His wand had never had a choice about where it belonged; Draco had picked it up and felt the deep pull that emerged from the core, and accepted that this was his possession.

Potter's wanting to be with him was chosen, willed, by another person.

I wanted to.

Potter's answer for why he had called him by his first name echoed over and over in Draco's head that day as they moved through their classes. Potter spoke to Granger and the Weasel frequently—well, to Granger, since the Weasel seemed to have decided that the best way to repay Potter for all that he'd done in the name of friendship was a turned shoulder. But he spent a fair amount of time with Draco as well, coming over and standing next to him in Tactics and Offensive and Defensive without being asked. He rolled his eyes at Draco as if they shared a long-standing joke when Jones explained earnestly that partners sometimes found themselves at odds. And when Gregory assigned them to fight each other, he struggled hard, and accepted the blow that Draco managed to sneak into his solar plexus with good grace.

Well, all right, so he tripped Draco on their way out of the classroom, but that was so much less than he would have done before. Besides, he held his hand out right away and helped Draco back to his feet.

Draco was conscious of how much that handclasp meant, or should mean, between them. If Potter had the same kind of awareness at all, he wore it casually, and Draco could never *catch* him meditating on it. He gave Draco his glances, his smiles, and his words, as well as those occasional touches, and it was all what he might have done for any of his friends.

To Draco, this friendship meant something more, because it had to.

It was unique in his experience, and, now, unique in his life. Vincent was dead. Greg had said that he'd prefer swimming through sharks to following Draco into Auror training. Draco's friends had gone their various ways after the war, some into Azkaban, some into exile, some into house arrest in their family homes. Not *everyone* was held away from him, but most of them were, and the ones who might choose to freely associate with him would be suspicious that he had decided to become part of a force whose primary task was investigating Dark wizards.

Draco had actually courted that loneliness. He had believed it would help him make his mark on the world.

Now, he thought that it would be easiest and most graceful to make his mark on the world if he had someone standing at his side.

Mine, he thought, as he watched Potter stand opposite from him with his muscles tense, waiting for Gregory's instruction to begin, or next to him wreathed in a Shield Charm and the flow of compatible magic. *Mine because he said so.*

But Draco could not possess him entirely. Try to keep him away from his friends, and Potter was likely to turn fractious. At the very best, he would treat Draco with the same amused exasperation that he was currently treating the Weasel with, and Draco couldn't stand that. He wanted Potter's respect and admiration.

So he would have to do the hard thing and keep his urges under control. He would have to allow Potter space, freedom, an existence and friendships apart from him. In return, he would get what *he* wanted: those glances, those touches, that consideration that he had once believed Potter would be the last person in the world to ever exhibit for him.

That smile.

It was hard, but Draco believed he could do it. And it was no more than three days into the future before he saw how well that strategy paid off.

Harry rolled his eyes at Hermione as he sat down next to her in Auror Conduct. As usual, Ron had been quietly arguing with Hermione when Harry came in, but the moment he saw Harry he

shut his mouth and moved towards the front of the room. "No luck yet?" Harry asked.

Hermione twitched her head, her mouth set and her eyes bright with frustration. "*No*. And I don't understand it, Harry. Why won't he at least try to talk to you? If he's afraid that Malfoy's going to steal you from him, he should want to prevent that from happening at any cost."

"I think," Harry said slowly, watching Ron's back and the way he jutted his chin out as if he could feel their eyes, "that he wants to see what sort of effort we'll make for him. He needs some assurance that he's still respected, valued. He's not wrong about the fact that we do value him. He's wrong if he thinks that I'm giving up Draco for him, though."

"Draco?" Hermione flung the word at him like an arrow.

Harry regarded her evenly. "Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

Hermione chewed a curl of her hair for a minute, then whispered, "No. But—oh, Harry, be careful."

"Draco's no more threat to me than anyone else," Harry said, and stood up to walk towards Ron.

Ron turned his back loftily when he saw Harry approaching. Harry didn't worry about that. He had known he would have to make an effort. In a way, he'd almost enjoyed the break from Ron's company over the last few days, because it gave him the chance to calm down and talk to Hermione and Draco. Hermione had driven herself mad trying to be *perfect*, to complete the classes—including Tactics and Combat, which she found hard—with no effort and still have all the notes ready to instruct Ron. Harry had told her gently, multiple times, that she didn't have to be perfect, and that she was allowed to be better at some things than others and ask the instructors for help. He thought she was almost ready to believe him.

Ron should have noticed that first, because he's her boyfriend.

But then Harry shook his head. He was trying his best to keep from blaming people for unfair things. He was Hermione's friend, and he hadn't noticed, either.

Besides, there are so many things that I can fairly blame them for, he thought, and grinned a bit before he said quietly, "Ron?"

Ron cupped a hand around his ear. "I think I can hear Malfoy calling for you," he said. "Better run back to his side like the good little dog you are."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Time away from Hermione has affected your insults," he said. "They used to be better."

Ron whirled and faced him. Harry gave a small, satisfied nod. *Finally.* The hardest thing about trying to deal with Ron in the past few days had been the fact that he simply wouldn't confront

Harry.

His best friend's face was red, red enough to swallow the freckles, and he kept gripping and then releasing his wand, as if he didn't know whether he would need it or not. Compassion broke through Harry like a wave of silver foam. Ron was confused and insecure and uncertain. Harry knew he would have felt the same way if not for Draco.

Fuck, if not for Draco, I would have been floundering around still, trying to come up with some way to deal with Ron and Ginny and not admit him to my life.

The thought of Draco made Harry glance around for him. He was standing near the desk he usually took in Conduct, gaze locked on both Harry and Ron. His eyes were narrowed, and it was that combined with the slight flare in his nostrils that let Harry know just how badly he wished to intervene.

Harry gave him a single even look and turned his back. He needed to give his full attention to Ron right now. And if he couldn't trust Draco to restrain himself, then they had deeper problems than Harry thought they did.

Ron had noticed the glance, of course. His voice had an artificially nasty tone in it. "What? Asking for Mummy Malfoy's permission to play with me?"

"This isn't you," Harry told him.

Ron gave him a frozen stare.

"This isn't the real you," Harry said. "The real Ron can tell his best friends what's wrong with him. He can fight his own battles. He doesn't blame Draco for everything that's going wrong in his life."

He had used Draco's first name on purpose, and Ron pounced on it, of course. He laughed, a jagged enough sound that it sounded as if he'd got food stuck in his throat. Harry was uneasily aware that everyone in the class was watching them, but he tried to dismiss the sensation. He would always be a public figure, and his friendships were public business. He had to accept that.

"You really *are* falling in love with him," Ron mocked. "Calling him by his first name. Tell me, Harry, does he call you by yours?"

"No," Harry said quietly. "He doesn't have to." He paused, then added, "This kind of insulting isn't you either, Ron."

"I can say whatever I bloody well please." Ron's voice was loud.

"Yes, of course," Harry said. "But I think you should consider whether you'll succeed in alienating me. You haven't so far, because I know that you're better than this and it's only your

pride that's making you act this way. But you might."

Ron paled. In the corner of his eye, Harry could see Hermione drop her head into her hands. She would think he had taken too great a risk, he knew, confronting Ron like this and threatening him with the loss of Harry's friendship, which he feared most.

It wasn't like that, Harry wished he could tell her. *I gave Draco a chance and a choice, and I can't give Ron less.*

But he couldn't say that. So he waited until Ron whispered, hoarsely, "Do we have to discuss this in public?"

"No," Harry said instantly. He saw Ron's eyes widen, and gave him as open and cheerful a smile as he could. "Not if you promise to meet me later in private so that we can go over this like mates."

Ron blinked for a minute and then stared at the floor. Harry hoped he was thinking about the trust in him that that statement displayed. Harry was counting on Ron to keep his word after three days of avoiding him.

"Yeah," Ron said. There was a faint gleam of his smile as he looked up. "All right." He hesitated, then put his hand out.

Harry shook it roughly and marched back to Draco's side just as Hestia swept in. He had thought about going to sit with Ron, but then Ron would probably think the problem had been resolved and he didn't have to do anything else.

Besides, Harry liked sitting with Draco. He usually managed to unobtrusively help Harry if the answers to the questions baffled him, and he was so easy to observe so that Harry could imitate him or respond to him in seconds.

Besides, Draco—well, when Harry sat down next to him he didn't smile, not exactly, but there was a relaxation that seemed to go down to his bones. Most of the time, he maintained a wary standoffishness that Harry knew was meant to protect himself. To be one of the people allowed inside that guard was an honor and a privilege.

"Thanks for not jumping in," he whispered, while Hestia began to speak about the essays that were due in their next class.

Draco turned his head to look at him full-on. Harry blinked, surprised. Usually, he tried to avoid that so as not to draw the instructors' attention.

"I wanted to," he breathed.

Harry squeezed his shoulder. "Then I'm more grateful that you didn't," he said, and faced the

front as Hestia glanced at them and cleared her throat pointedly.

He didn't know if he would say it yet, because Draco might get a swollen head, but he thought his life was better for having Draco's friendship.

Mine!

It had been *so tempting,* that idea of casting an unobtrusive hex on the Weasel, or stepping up to Potter's side and telling him that if he didn't want Potter as a friend, Draco would gladly accept him. That was still a vision Draco knew he would come back to many times: the Weasel abandoning Potter for good and all, and then looking on jealously while Draco and Potter became closer and closer and made their names part of a legend.

But he had held himself back, because he knew it was to his long-term advantage to do so.

And because he knew Potter was relying on him to stay back.

Draco was ridiculously vain about that trust. He wanted it, coveted it, was determined to possess it, and it would be stupid to allow the *Weasel* to make him forfeit it.

As he copied down the newest list of rules from Jones attentively, his eyes went sideways frequently to Potter. Potter was mostly bent over his list of rules, nibbling his lower lip or frowning or tapping his forehead with the quill or pulling at his hair as if his scalp itched, but Draco could see enough of his face to satisfy him.

Mine.

Draco's sense of possession was calmer now. The Weasel had challenged their friendship in public, and Potter had stood up for him. He had used Draco's first name even though he must have known his "mate" would hate it. He had showed trust in Draco equal to his trust in accepting the Weasel's promise.

As long as Potter had that loyalty to him, Draco could share him with other people and not *have* to keep him all to himself.

Something nudged his elbow. Draco looked over and saw Potter pushing a folded bit of parchment towards him while keeping his attention fixed ostentatiously on Jones. Draco wanted to snort. Passing *notes*. Was there anything more juvenile?

Needless to say, he scooped up the bit of paper adroitly and read it when Jones turned her back to wave her wand at one of her floating illusions.

Do you want to investigate how those Death Eaters got in again after classes today?

Draco looked up and let his eyes drift to Granger and the Weasel. Potter gave a small shake of

his head.

Just us, that meant. Or maybe, *I can talk to Weasley and not have it interfere.*

Draco nodded back and diligently copied down the next instruction Jones told them, while warm, deep contentment flooded his belly.

Mine, but his, too.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Staying the Course

"Good luck, Harry."

Harry squeezed Hermione's shoulder when she looked as if she wanted to stay at his side and even follow him into their rooms. "Thanks," he said. "But I don't think I'll need it. Ron sounded ready to listen to reason, didn't he?"

Hermione gave him a troubled glance. "He did, but…"

"I know," Harry said. "It's sometimes hard to get him to the point where he can absorb reason even if he listens." He paused, but Hermione didn't smile; she just continued watching him with an anxiety that Harry privately thought was unfounded. "I'm going to do my best," he said at last, because that was all he could promise in the face of her appeal. "And I won't abandon him because he's a bit stubborn."

Hermione smiled for the first time since they'd left class. "I know that," she said. "Well. I have an appointment with Portillo Lopez to ask about a few of the stitches in Battle Healing that I don't understand." She hitched the stack of papers she was carrying more firmly into her arms, inclined her head to Harry, and turned around, stalking up the corridor as though she was going to challenge a breeding dragon.

Harry knocked on the door, and waited until Ron called for him to come in before he opened it. He thought it best if Ron felt in control of this confrontation. It would give him some confidence and willingness to listen, and Harry didn't mind—unless Ron started trying to assert *actual* control, and if he did he would get a nasty surprise.

Ron was sitting in the middle of his bed, his arms folded and his wand lying on the blanket next to him. Harry dragged a chair up so that he could see Ron's face comfortably and dropped into it. Ron stared at him, and Harry stared back. He had decided that he would let Ron make the first move, too.

"You and Malfoy," Ron said finally, picking at his back teeth with what Harry knew he desperately wanted to be a casual gesture, and which came across as nothing of the kind. "Who would have thought you could ever like him?"

"He's been more agreeable to me than he ever was in the past." Harry leaned back and crossed his ankles, sprawling in the chair. "If he'd showed me that side of himself at Hogwarts, then we probably would have made friends when we were third years or something."

Ron turned his head sharply and glared at him. "Even if he was still insulting my family? Even if he was still calling Hermione a Mudblood?"

"Has he done that since he came here?" Harry asked. "I really want to know." He could remember a few times that Draco had snapped insults about "Weasel" and so on when they were in private, but he couldn't think of a full-blown argument in public. Draco seemed to be working under the assumption that he wouldn't get ahead in the Aurors if he let his prejudices show, and Harry agreed with him wholeheartedly.

Besides, that *did* make him more pleasant to be around. No matter how much he liked Draco, Harry doubted he would have tried so hard to become his friend if Draco was insulting his mother at every turn. There was a certain point where you had to stop making excuses for people and expect them to act like adults.

"He might not say it that often," Ron said grudgingly, and then leaned forwards and stared earnestly at Harry. "But he still thinks it. I know it from the way that he looks at me, and Hermione."

"And I know that you think he's a horrible pointy-faced little git with horrid parents," Harry said. "But you don't go around saying that. And you should get some credit for that, don't you think?"

Ron rubbed his mouth and scowled at the wall for so long that Harry began to wonder if he needed some more time to think about this. He shifted in his chair. Ron's eyes came back to him at once, and he said, "He's still trying to take my best friend away from me."

"No," Harry said, dead certain of this if nothing else. "I don't think Draco has thought much about you since we came into the Auror training program, Ron." Ron's face was screwed up every time Harry said Draco's name, but at least he wasn't protesting verbally yet, and Harry thought that was an important beginning. "He wants to affect *me*. He doesn't care as much about you and Hermione."

"He wants to change you by taking away your best friends!" Ron punched his fist into his palm.

"I don't know why you can't see that, mate. He would be so much happier if you never did anything but stand next to him and give everyone this vacant smile—" he imitated a smile that made Harry's eyebrows rise, because he knew he didn't like that "—and duel when he wanted you to. That's why I hate him so much, why I keep objecting to him. Because even if he just wants you as his partner right now, he's changing you and cutting you away from us. Why do you think he's got you to call him by his first name and argue with me? Those are the first steps! Eventually he'll control your life and we won't have any part in it." Ron's face was flushed as he reached out and grabbed Harry's arm, shaking it. "I was so angry because I can see that and I was trying to tell you, but you wouldn't listen to me."

Harry counted to ten in his head twice before he could trust himself to speak. Ron not only had the wrong idea about Draco, he was making insulting assumptions about Harry and attributing to Draco a bunch of the things that *he* had done, whether he realized it or not.

"Draco doesn't want that," Harry said finally. "I was the one who made a choice to start calling him by his first name. If you'd turned around in the dining hall the other day, you would have seen how surprised he was when I called him that—"

"You didn't make the choice," Ron interrupted him. "He did."

"How the—how can you say that?" Harry snapped, deciding that swearing at Ron now would only make him more stubborn and more prone to do anything other than actually listen to Harry. "I'm sitting here and telling you that I'm the one who made it. I know I did. I can throw off Imperius, so you can't possibly think that he cast a spell on me or something. And why does it matter so much anyway? Of course you start calling people by their first names when you spend more time with them."

"You never called Snape by his first name, even though you spent a lot of detentions with him." Ron looked at Harry triumphantly, as if he had proven his point.

"Snape was my *teacher*." Harry stood up, his muscles locked against the temptation to hit Ron. Then he realized he was getting ready to walk away, and sat down again. He had promised Hermione that he wouldn't leave. Besides, if he did, he thought it was unlikely that he would get Ron to talk to him again so openly.

Maybe I should just say what's on my mind and force him to accept it instead of dodging around the issues and letting him choose what to talk about.

"Look," Harry said. "You say that Draco wants to control me, but *you're* the one who wants to, from deciding what I can call Draco to trying to make me deal with your sister." Ron opened his mouth, looking outraged, but Harry bulled ahead. If he was going to say this, then he was going to say it all as one piece. "No, Ron, hear me out. You're the one who wants me to do certain things and stay at your side and never walk away from you. We can have a life outside each other. We can be friends, but that doesn't mean that we won't have other friends. Besides, you need to start paying more attention to Hermione. You would have seen how much she was

suffering if you paid attention."

There.

Ron's face was mostly white, with a small spot of red in each cheek, as though Harry had slapped him. "Hermione isn't suffering!"

"She is," Harry said. "Trying to keep up with all her classes and stay cheerful and perfect all the time so that she could help *you*." He watched as enormous flushes of red traveled across Ron's cheeks, and then added, as much because he wanted to as for any other reason, "I didn't notice, either. But then, I'm not her boyfriend."

"And you're not Ginny's!" Ron said, voice suddenly sounding so thick that Harry could have reached out and plucked his bitterness from the air. "The way you should be! You're more likely to end up as *Malfoy's* lover at this point."

"You brought up the other thing I wanted to talk to you about without any prompting," Harry said, swallowing his anger with difficulty. He knew that Ron had been disappointed when he and Ginny broke up, but he hadn't suspected *this* level of resentment. "How convenient. You don't have any right to call in Ginny to fight your battles, or for any other reason. We're not dating anymore."

"You should," Ron said. "You bloody well should."

"What, to protect me from Draco's uninterested clutches?" Harry rolled his eyes and snorted. "He might be my friend, but, Ron, *think* about it. Do you think someone like Draco would really want to date someone like me?" He spread his arms, inviting Ron in silence to look at him. Scruffy and scrawny and untidy and irritating—Harry had several times seen Draco look at him with something that he would have called romantic interest in another person, but that was silly, because he would never meet Draco's standards.

Besides, they were both blokes. Harry knew that that might not matter to some wizards, because Hermione had explained that along with so many other things to him in the past year as they got ready to enter the Auror program, but it would sure as fuck matter to Harry.

Ron paused and blinked as though Harry's words had been a punch to the gut. Then he tilted his head back and forth, surveying him from several different angles. Harry placed a small, confident grin on his face and waited.

Ron looked at him and said slowly, "No offense, mate, but you don't look like something Malfoy would snatch up."

"That makes your suspicions sillier than ever," Harry retorted. "Don't you think? I'm not going to be Draco's boyfriend. I'm his friend, and I can be a friend to as many people as I like. You don't need to compete over me."

Ron swallowed and lowered his head. "Yeah, mate, but you can only have one best friend. And I'm afraid that—he might be that." His voice sank, and he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth.

Harry stared at him, stunned. He couldn't remember the last time he had heard Ron admit fear.

But, more than that, he finally understood why Ron had been so against Draco from the beginning. He thought there was something special and exclusive about his friendship with Harry, and he thought the friendship Harry and Draco shared would surpass it or change it.

He's right about the first part, but not the second part, Harry thought, as he stepped up and put his hands on Ron's shoulders and stared into his eyes. Ron lifted his head and peered back at him, almost timidly. Harry wondered if he thought he would find condemnation in the steady stare Harry gave him.

Not that he hasn't done plenty to deserve it.

But the fact that Ron was *afraid*, which Harry never would have thought of—he had thought jealousy and anger were at the bottom of everything—made Harry look beyond condemnation. Ron had little in his life that was his alone, little that he could be proud of. He was like Harry at the Dursleys'. His clothes and his wand and his rat had been hand-me-downs. Harry could remember the wonder he felt when Hagrid took him shopping in Diagon Alley for the first time as if it was yesterday. He had *fresh, new* things that he didn't have to share.

Harry didn't know why Ron didn't resent sharing Harry's friendship with Hermione. Maybe he thought it was different because Hermione was a girl. Or maybe he didn't see Hermione as Harry's best friend in the way that he was.

But either way, Harry knew what Ron was feeling now. It was the same way he would have felt if Dudley came to the wizarding world when they were eleven and tried to drive off Ron and Hermione like he'd driven off all the kids in primary school that Harry wanted so badly to befriend.

"You aren't going to lose me," Harry said. "It doesn't matter how close I become to Draco, or how much like a prat you act. Though I like you much better when you *aren't* acting like a prat," he added, just so that Ron wouldn't think this was free permission to be annoying. "I can be everyone's friend."

"Even though we both dislike each other?" Ron muttered the words and stared at Harry as if he thought this would be too great a challenge for Harry to find a way past.

"Even though that's true," Harry said. "I'll just ask him not to insult you. And in the meantime, you don't get to insult Draco, either."

Ron made a face, as if Harry had handed him an earwax-flavored Bertie Bott's Bean to eat. "Do I have to call him Draco?"

"Not unless you want to." Harry tightened his grip on Ron's shoulders. "This is all about choice. That's what I'm trying to get across to you. I'm calling him Draco because I want to, not because he forced me to. And I'm his friend because I want to be. You saw how hard I struggled against being his friend before I made up my mind. And I broke up with Ginny because I wanted to," he added, more or less against his better judgment. Still, Ron *had* to understand that Harry wouldn't be getting back together with his sister any time soon.

"You were perfect for each other," Ron said mulishly.

"No. We weren't." Harry made his words stern enough that Ron nodded, even though he still frowned. "Leave it alone. All right? Or else we'll have to have another stupid argument, and I really don't want to. I hate having arguments with my first and best friend."

Ron's grin was slow to emerge. When it did, though, Harry felt as though his life was normal again for the first time since he discovered he had compatible magic with Draco. That magic was exciting and fulfilling, but it was very much not normal. "Right, mate," Ron said. "So long as I'm that."

"Always." Harry smiled back in relief, and then turned away to gather up his books.

"Where are you going?" Ron hovered next to him as though he thought Harry was about to write a letter to Ginny and he didn't want to miss it.

Harry gave him an even look. "To study with Draco." They weren't going to study, of course, but investigate. Still, if Ron knew that, he would insist on coming with them. Harry wasn't ready for that yet, and he doubted Draco was, either, whatever casual remarks he might make about not minding Weasley's presence.

Ron sighed and nodded. "Just come back early so that we can talk about Battle Healing," he said. "I'm having trouble in there."

"Sure thing, mate."

Harry thought it was all right to make that promise as he slipped out the door, even though he fully expected the investigation to occupy him and Draco for several hours. He felt so *light* at the moment, and as though the impossible balancing act that seemed to have become his life wasn't so difficult after all.

"I trust that you won't tell Mr. Potter about these sessions, Mr. Malfoy?" Dearborn's face was anxious as he tucked his wand back into his sleeve. "I fear that he would not understand."

Draco gave him a small smile. "You can count on me, sir."

He reckoned that promise might have sounded ominous to someone who didn't know why Dearborn had asked it, but Draco knew exactly why, and he agreed wholeheartedly. Dearborn had confessed to Draco—not that it had come as a large surprise after his class, where he had presented his outline of the history of how certain spells had become illegal—that he didn't agree with the Ministry's classification of Dark Arts. The Unforgivables should never be used, of course, and there were others, spells meant only for torture, that were unspeakable. But Dearborn did not see why spells that forced someone to tell the truth were forbidden. Why, they were the same thing as Veritaserum, which the Ministry used freely.

Dearborn was looking for people who agreed with him and would seek to relax the Ministry's more restrictive laws by unrelenting pressure and proof that they could use the less illegal Dark Arts for good. Draco was more than eager to help with that. He did not like the idea of giving up half the magic he had learned because of archaic prejudices that few modern wizards shared.

But Potter would go mad, and Draco knew why. Potter still had certain simplistic notions of good and evil that he had not modified.

Contact with me should modify them.

But that not happened yet, and Draco was not enough of an idiot to force Potter to go against his conscience. So when Dearborn had asked for private history sessions where he would explain to Draco more about what he intended to do and what spells should be chosen from the Ministry's vast repository of interdicted magic for testing, Draco had agreed.

This was something special *he* could do. Dearborn had chosen Draco for his background, not against it, and not simply as part of the irreducible double unit that included both him and Potter, because he had said that he would like to mentor Draco before the instructors had partnered them. Draco needed this individual evaluation and adulation in the same way that Potter needed his friends.

There was no question but that Draco would bring Potter into it someday, because he didn't think their friendship could survive many secrets. But for now, it was private. Special, the same way that Professor Snape had sometimes invited him to brewing sessions where he was handling delicate and experimental potions.

Draco licked his lips at the thought of Snape. He still hadn't found the courage to look into the Professor's Pensieve. He would, someday, but not until he had decided what memories Snape might have sent him and thus decided on the best mindset for facing them.

"Sir," he asked, to distract himself from such thoughts, and because Potter had not come to fetch him yet for their investigation, "what would you say if someone accused you of being like the Death Eaters because you use some Dark Arts?"

The smile vanished off Dearborn's face as though Draco had tried to choke him. Then he said in

a strangely altered voice, "What do you know of my brother?"

"Your brother?" Draco blinked. "Just that you had one." His mother had had him memorize enough of the pure-blood lineages that he knew that. After a moment of ransacking his memory, Draco remembered something else, and added, "And his name was Caradoc."

"Yes." Dearborn's voice was a soft hiss. He rubbed his fingers for a moment over his onyx ring, then lifted his head. Draco tensed his muscles to keep from recoiling. Naked pain was visible on Dearborn's face. Draco wanted to shift uneasily, and didn't only because he knew it would seem like weakness.

He didn't want to see pain like this. It was meant to be endured and suppressed in private. Only to Potter, perhaps, when their friendship had advanced more than it had right now, would Draco express his emotions openly.

He tried to imagine dealing with a revelation of similar agony from Potter, and experienced twin and unwelcome sensations. On the one hand, he wouldn't want to see a crack in his partner's defenses like the crack in Dearborn's.

On the other hand, he would be jealous if Potter took his pain to someone else.

Dearborn spoke then, and stole Draco's attention back to the present moment. "He worked with the Order of the Phoenix. He vanished during the war, and everyone assumed Death Eaters had killed him." Dearborn closed his eyes and breathed carefully. With faint horror, Draco recognized the pattern of breathing he had used himself to keep back tears. "Everyone also assumed that his fate would never be known for certain because no one had found his remains.

"I found them."

Dearborn glanced at Draco, and seemed to understand the dislike he felt. His pain vanished behind shields of smooth expression in the next instant, and he made a courtly bow from the waist. His voice was half-mocking. "Do I distress you? Do not let me. What I found was enough reason to keep me from wishing to use the *Darker* Arts forevermore. I hate the Death Eaters and wish to see them slaughtered."

Draco lifted his left arm between them. He wasn't brave enough to bare the Dark Mark, but that didn't matter. Dearborn would understand well enough what he meant. "Does that include me, sir?"

Dearborn caught his breath. His eyes widened, and Draco could see the lashes trembling as he stood still, apparently in contemplation. Then he shook his head. "No," he said at last. "Good God, no! I let my tongue run away with me sometimes." He glanced aside, at last using a delicacy that Draco appreciated. "Forgive me," he said, with a soft laugh. "I have had so few people to whom I can talk about my plans to change things, to reform the Ministry and make the Aurors more effective. The trainees who come in are usually so *stupid,* or intelligent but blind,

like your partner."

Draco watched him carefully. Dearborn was less effective than Draco had thought him: more impulsive, more passionate, and perhaps more likely to make a mistake.

On the other hand, he had got past Draco's misdeeds, despite excellent reason to hate him, and was willing to work with him. It was more than many would be willing to do, particularly among the instructors. Draco saw no reason not to use Dearborn to climb higher. Later, he could turn on him if he needed to.

"Forgiven, sir," he said. "Now, will you excuse me? I need to meet Potter to train."

He was always meeting Potter for something or other, and Dearborn let him go with a wave of his hand. Draco shut the door to Dearborn's office behind him and strode quickly and quietly along the corridors of the Ministry, something other than his mentor's inconsistencies occupying him as he walked.

When he was with Dearborn or talking to his mother or studying for classes by himself, he felt much as he had ever done since the war: determined, strong, powerful, committed grimly to the ideal of making something of himself.

When he was with Potter, he was more open, more confiding, more patient and pliant and *soft* in a way that he had never thought he could be.

Even now, just walking towards Potter instead of being in sight of him yet, he could feel his mind swelling with things he wanted to tell him, jokes he wanted to exchange, and eager possessiveness to have Potter's time and attention to himself.

I have to be careful. As I change him, he is changing me.

Under the influence of the emotions flooding his mind, Draco could not but think that a good thing.

Which is probably a sign that I am not in my right mind.

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Chapter: 17

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—Partners in Interrogation

Harry was grateful that Draco gave him a quick nod when he saw him and launched straight into a discussion of how they would need to conduct this investigation, rather than asking how his talk with Ron had gone. "Dearborn never made it clear, when you talked to him, whether they still had the false Death Eaters in custody or not?" Draco asked. He had met Harry at his rooms, and had his head ducked as he dropped his books and gathered a belt hung with potions flasks. Harry eyed it, hoped there was nothing illegal in it, and decided not to say anything as long as Draco didn't *force* him to notice the illegality.

"No. He told me it was privileged information and they couldn't share it, especially because they fear that I have a tracking spell on me."

Draco whipped around with a sneer. "A cage of mice could run itself better than this barracks," he muttered.

Harry gave him a temperate smile in return; he agreed but didn't want to let the conversation be deflected. "So how do we begin, then? I don't think that corridor where we encountered them can tell us anything more, and if they're in custody, we're unlikely to be able to talk to them."

"Oh, aren't we."

Harry felt the hairs on his neck and shoulders standing to attention at Draco's dark drawl. He licked his lips and said, "Do I want to know what you mean by that?"

Draco lifted his head, his eyes narrowing. He looked like a proud cat that someone had called a kitten. "We know that we deserve to know what's going on," he said, "because they attacked us."

"Right," Harry said, eyeing the belt of potions that Draco had picked up with more uneasiness than he had before.

"And we know that we'll have no chance of that as long as the false Death Eaters stay in Ministry custody." Draco muttered a Disillusionment Charm with a slight twist to the incantation that Harry hadn't heard before, and the potions belt dimmed.

"The instructors might tell us sooner or later—" Harry began, but broke off when he saw the slow, sardonic look that Draco was surveying him with.

"When you acted on your own in Hogwarts," Draco said quietly, "it was because you had to. Because the professors wouldn't help you, or you tried to tell them the truth and they didn't believe you, or because you knew that you deserved to be included in whatever was happening and they thought you didn't."

Harry swallowed, thinking of Sirius. There had been another nightmare last night where Bellatrix explained in a patient voice that Harry could have saved Sirius if he had just learned Occlumency. "The best results didn't always come from including me," he said.

Draco shook his head. His eyes glittered with piercing intensity. "But they depended on you to save the world," he said. "Treating you like any other student was a mistake on their part, because they also wanted to give you responsibility beyond anything any other student carried. This time, the Death Eaters—or whoever they really are—have attacked us, and the instructors *know* that they have. They're gaining nothing by holding the information away from us. Except their own pride and peace of mind."

Harry wanted to argue that the two situations weren't exactly the same, but every argument he could think of died before the force of Draco's stare and his own desire. Besides, they were older now, and the instructors should be able to trust them *more*, not less, than they would have trusted Hogwarts students.

And how long should it take them to decide whether he had a tracking spell on him anyway or not? Harry felt his resentment growing. Dearborn was making the whole process unnecessarily complicated.

"I can see from your scowl that you agree with me," Draco murmured, his voice gentle, his eyes anything but. "I know, in fact, that the Death Eaters are still being held, and where. I overheard Portillo Lopez and Ketchum talking about it. I'm going there and I'm *going* to find out the truth, whether or not they want me to. Are you with me?"

Harry felt his nostrils flare. He didn't want to let Draco go into danger alone, and the sheer thought of being left behind while the most adventurous thing that he'd been involved in since Hogwarts happened without him was irritating.

"I'm with you," he said.

Draco reached out a lightning-fast hand, fast enough to make Harry tense. But all Draco did was let it lie on his arm as he gazed deeply and earnestly into Harry's eyes. Harry blinked back at him and stood still. This seemed important to Draco, though why, he didn't know. He didn't *think* Draco was using Legilimency to read his mind, since he felt no sharp-edged shoving at his thoughts.

"Good," Draco said at last, in a voice hardly above a whisper, and his hand made a tiny caressing motion on Harry's arm as he took it away.

Harry shivered, and didn't know the "why" of that, either.

Potter's face was a study. Draco thought he should have made friends with him long before this, if only for the pleasure of shocking him.

"That's Veritaserum," Potter said suspiciously as he watched Draco remove a few careful drops from one of the larger flasks on his belt.

"Yes, it is," Draco said peacefully as he scattered the drops on a piece of cake he'd stolen from the dining hall that morning, and waited for the next inevitable question.

"Who are you going to use it on?"

Draco turned his head by slow degrees and gave Potter a toothy smile.

"Using Veritaserum without permission from the Ministry is *illegal*," Potter whispered, his face a brilliant red. Draco pictured Granger reading Potter and the Weasel a lecture about illegality and almost laughed. She would do it with that exact same expression, he knew she would. "Do you want to be kicked out of the Auror training program in your first term?'

"Lots of things are illegal," Draco said. He corked the flask of Veritaserum again and shook the cake a bit to make sure that it had completely absorbed the potion. It didn't squish in his hand, so it had. He dipped a finger in the thick chocolate that covered the top of the cake. "Legilimency, for example. Occlumency. Using Unforgivable Curses. I've done all three, and I'm still here and an Auror trainee." He extended the finger covered with chocolate to Potter. "Want some?"

Potter glared at him. Draco would have laughed, he was so priggish, but he couldn't help but think of what would happen if Potter *wasn't* so priggish. The way his tongue would dart out, curling around Draco's finger, the way his mouth would open and how his throat would feel as he swallowed around the chocolate…

Draco caught his breath and concentrated on Vanishing the chocolate from his finger without removing his skin along the way. Potter, meanwhile, proving that he had no idea what Draco had been thinking about and thus lacked basic observational skills as well as Legilimency, demanded, "How do you think you'll keep from being caught? Snape could use Legilimency at Hogwarts, where he was under Dumbledore's protection, but this will be in the Ministry itself."

"Chocolate absorbs and hides Veritaserum," Draco said patiently. "When they look for traces of it in the prisoner's system, they won't find anything. All he'll know is that he felt like chatting to us today."

Potter's eyes narrowed. "If that's such a simple trick, then surely they'll figure out that you must have used it."

Draco shook his head. "First, Veritaserum is usually given directly or in a liquid, not hidden in food, and the Ministry is hidebound. If they suspect—which I plan on giving them no reason to do—then they'll question the prisoner we feed the cake to about *that*, not about food. Second, I plan on using a small Confundus Charm to ensure the prisoner doesn't remember the cake. And finally, the effect of chocolate on Veritaserum might be simple, but it's *not* widely-known. It's something Professor Snape taught me, a reaction that he discovered himself through the kind of experimentation that the Ministry never lets its Potions masters do."

Potter bowed his head for a moment. Draco reckoned he was thinking about Professor Snape and

silently paying tribute to him in his mind or something. The fact that Draco sometimes felt tempted to do the same was not the point. He waited, one eyebrow rising higher and higher, until Potter looked up and nodded sharply, once.

"So where are the prisoners held?" he asked.

Draco smiled, conjured a box that would wrap the cake and preserve it from getting crushed, Disillusioned the box, and jerked his head down the corridor. "Follow me."

And Potter did. Draco wished he had an audience so that he could preen. The Great Harry Potter following a Malfoy was no common sight.

But an audience would defeat the purpose of secrecy, so Draco kept his eyes fastened straight ahead and his forming grin to himself.

The room holding the Death Eaters turned out to be in a corridor of holding cells not far from the main body of the Magical Law Enforcement Department. Harry frowned, perplexed, as he noted that there weren't many wards or guards around. Why would they treat Death Eaters so casually?

Maybe they're fakes, the way Draco suggested.

But then, it seemed as though the Ministry could have quickly finished interrogating them and decided to try or release them. And *that* meant the instructors could have told Harry and Draco the truth about them much sooner.

Harry scowled as he followed Draco along. Draco had taught him how to look as if they had business here—heads up, shoulders pulled back, expressions somewhere between boredom and resentment on their faces—and had reassured Harry that instructors and third-year trainees used first-years as errand-runners all the time. Harry had no problem playing the resentment part, at least.

Still, there were too many problems with this for him to think they would get away with it. He muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "Someone is going to remember seeing us here, and *then* what will we do?"

"Come up with a plausible lie," Draco said, slowing and checking the doors of the cells. Harry glanced at them, but even when he scanned them closely, he could make out no marks that separated them from one another. Draco grunted in satisfaction and halted in front of one, though. "Of which I already have several."

Harry folded his arms. "Tell me one."

Draco grinned over his shoulder. "Why ruin the surprise?" Then he faced the door and knocked firmly.

The door opened almost at once. The trainee behind it divided her gaze between Harry and Draco, frowning. Her eyes widened when she saw Harry, but her hand also tightened on her wand. She had grey eyes a shade or two less bright than Draco's and pale brown hair that hadn't known the touch of a comb in several years, Harry thought. "Yeah?" she demanded.

Harry stifled a grin. Hestia would be horrified by the trainee's lack of proper greetings to fellow trainees according to the Auror Code of Conduct.

Draco sighed and ran a hand through his hair. The expression he wore was one that Harry remembered seeing on his face several times in History of Magic. "Let me guess," he said. "They didn't tell you anything about the message Auror Dearborn wanted sent."

The trainee couldn't keep her eyes off Harry for very long, but she did look at Draco then. "What message?"

"Well, if they'd told you, then you would know, wouldn't you?" Draco held up a piece of parchment Harry was ninety percent certain was blank. "He wanted to request you for a training exercise. Unless your name isn't Ursula Kendrick," he added, suddenly sounding less certain, and starting to lower the parchment back to his side.

"No, no, it is," Kendrick said, and took a step forwards into Draco's personal space, reaching anxiously for the parchment. Harry bristled and stopped himself from moving up to Draco's side with an effort. Draco let the parchment go without effort, though, and Kendrick stepped back again and read it with greedy eyes. Harry frowned at the back of Draco's head in confusion.

"At *last*," Kendrick whispered. She looked up, cocking her head. "You're here to take over my guard duties?"

Draco folded his arms and glanced to the side with a sulky pout. Someone who knew him would have thought it was too dramatic, but Harry doubted Kendrick knew him. "Unfortunately," he muttered.

"Have fun, first-years," Kendrick said, with the same kind of mild sneer that Percy had sometimes used during Harry's first year at Hogwarts, and she sprinted down the corridor of identical doors. Draco watched her go with a much more vicious expression, then turned and waved Harry into the room.

Harry stepped in, looking around. The room was large and featureless, with plain stone walls and torch sconces shielded with wards. The only furniture was a chair between the two doors, and in front of it sprawled a book he thought Kendrick must have been reading. Harry picked it up and then snickered in spite of himself. *How to Impress and Influence Your Superiors.*

"God knows she needs that," Draco said with a certain relish as he shut the outer door behind him. "She's been trying to get someone to mentor her personally since she entered the program, and she's failed." He raised an eyebrow at Harry. "You can see why a message that seems to offer

a coveted connection with Dearborn would be…eagerly accepted."

"Until she gets there and finds out Dearborn never sent such a message," Harry had to point out.

"He did, actually." Draco wore an expression of thick smugness. "Last week. I daresay that trying to figure out why the original messenger didn't deliver it will occupy some of his time, and hers."

Harry laughed in spite of himself, but said, "And won't Dearborn think something is off because you were the one to deliver it?"

"Not when I can spin him the long story of how the message got traded between various people who dislike Kendrick and wanted to deprive her of the chance for a mentor," Draco said. He was already walking towards the door on the other side of the room, considering the wards that crawled over it. "Which is perfectly true. The use I decided to make of it is what will intrigue him, and that's where another of those plausible lies comes in."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think I ever came up with a plot that complicated in Hogwarts. Polyjuice Potion to try to find out if you were the Heir of Slytherin was as complex as it got."

Draco paused and glanced over his shoulder. "I *did* think Vincent and Greg were acting strange that day," he said slowly.

"Yes, well, that's why." Harry stepped up to Draco's side, trying to ignore the edge in his gaze. Perhaps he hadn't been wise to mention any Hogwarts memories at all; for all he knew, they were getting along well at the moment because neither of them had reminded each other of that time. "And you have a clever plan, by the way. Simply unnecessarily complex." He paused then, frowning, as he realized that the wards on the door all came down to a single glowing line. "I don't understand," he muttered. "Why would they put Death Eaters behind a Grimson's Ward?"

"A what?" Draco's voice pitched high.

Harry paused. Then he cast a look sideways at Draco. "Well, well, well," he muttered. "Have we found something that you don't know?"

"Tell me what a Grimson's Ward is." Draco stared at Harry as if he could convince him to ignore Draco's ignorance by the sheer force of his stare.

Harry wondered if he should tease him some more, but he doubted they had time before someone came to check on Kendrick. He still couldn't believe the Aurors were as careless as this setup made them appear. Perhaps it was a test for any trainees intrepid enough to seek out the Death Eaters and wonder how they had got into the barracks. "It's a very simple kind of ward," he said. "It's listed in the back of the Offensive and Defensive Magic textbook. It confines your enemies, but it does nothing else. It doesn't warn you if they get loose. It doesn't hold up to repeated blows." He grinned and drew his wand. "It doesn't give a warning if it's tampered with."

Draco frowned, and went on frowning while Harry touched the top of the door, then the bottom, with his wand and whispered the incantation that seemed to come effortlessly to his lips. He was still best at the things that most related to Defense Against the Dark Arts, he thought as he watched the ward disappear.

"Do you have your poisoned cake?" he asked, letting one hand rest on the doorknob.

"You and your dramatics, Potter." Draco adopted a bored expression at once, as if he hated the thought of being caught off-guard again. "It's hardly poisoned."

"They might think so, if they have enough loyalty not to want to betray their purpose here," Harry muttered, and opened the door.

What Potter had described of Grimson's Ward made Draco all the more convinced that the Death Eaters were fakes and that they had some other purpose in the trainee barracks besides a true attack.

Well, the first thing Potter's description convinced Draco of was that he needed to spend more time studying his textbooks.

But when he and Potter eased into the "prison" room and discovered that the Death Eaters were confined in simple cages of wards, without sleeping potions or complicated alarm spells or bonds on them, then Draco's suspicions came roaring back to life.

Too much conflicting information was present here. The Ministry apparently considered these people no threats—as they shouldn't, since the Dark Lord's dangerous followers had died in the war or been arrested already—but still held them. They *weren't* threats, if their skill in combat was any indication, but they had somehow possessed enough magic to pierce the heavy defenses on the trainee barracks.

Draco paused and scowled at them in general. They stared back at him and Potter, a few blinking. They were mostly young men and women; the oldest Draco saw couldn't have been more than thirty. He noted the dark eyes, arched brows, and sharp chins that were characteristic of various pure-blood lines. He recognized no one immediately, however.

"Well, well," one of them, a man with a large mouth and sardonic brown eyes who looked like a DeChancie, muttered, "what's this? A Malfoy and a Potter, come to interrogate us?"

"We're your new guardians," Potter said, his voice thick with anger and sullenness. Draco approved of his quick wits. He himself was caught off-guard; he had expected all the prisoners to be isolated from each other, as would have been usual procedure, so that they could feed the cake to one of them without interference. But Potter gave a good performance, folding his arms and ducking his head so that he could scowl at them from beneath his fringe like a barbarian. "Much good we'll do the Auror Corps *here*."

As though they had planned this, Draco found himself picking up on Potter's cues and translating them into a new response. "Now, Potter," he said, with a light scolding tone, laying a hand on Potter's shoulder and shaking it slightly. "You know the trainees' motto. *We can serve wherever we are.*"

DeChancie sneered before Potter could respond. "What are *you* going to do, Malfoy?" he asked. "Threaten them with the corpse of your family's reputation?"

Potter moved in front of Draco as if by accident, and blew a sigh through pursed lips. "We're supposed to learn *interrogation techniques*," he said, stressing the words and pouting so hard that Draco had to work hard to refrain from laughing. "And I might as well pick you, since you're showing an inclination to talk at the moment." He undid the wards around DeChancie and prodded him out of the room with his wand, glancing at Draco in disgust in the meantime. "Do you have that stupid list of questions with you?"

Draco nodded and followed Potter and DeChancie back out of the prisoners' room into the area where Kendrick had waited. That had gone as smoothly as if they'd plotted beside each other for years.

And DeChancie had swallowed every word, if the way he took Draco's offered piece of cake was any indication. "Oh?" he said, holding the cake in front of him and smirking at it. "This would be the part where you assure me there isn't any Veritaserum buried in that cake, no, really?" He glanced sideways at Potter. "Not that Potty the Perfect would ever consider breaking the Ministry's rules like that."

Draco whispered the Confundus Charm under his breath just as DeChancie's teeth closed in the cake. He blinked and looked terribly bewildered a moment later, staring around even as he chewed and swallowed.

"What's your name?" Potter asked briskly.

"Geoffrey DeChancie." He rubbed his throat and stared at his hand, which seemed to come as a revelation to him. Draco thought he would have started numbering his fingers, but Draco interrupted.

"Why did you dress up as Death Eaters to attack the trainees' barracks?" he asked, making sure to keep a tone of scorn in his voice. If he was right, the Charm combined with the Veritaserum should make DeChancie interpret that as a slight to his honor that he had to defend himself against.

Sure enough, he jerked his head up and squinted at Draco. *Oh, yes, the terrifying squint,* Draco thought, and worked very hard to contain his laughter. "We weren't *Death* Eaters," DeChancie said. "We would never have followed that Great Blunderer with his unpronounceable name. We were adopting a convenient disguise for striking terror into the hearts of those about us, so that in

the end we can make the name of *our* master known."

"And what name is that?" Potter demanded, before Draco could ask it.

DeChancie gave them a vacant smirk. "Nihil."

Potter exchanged a silently triumphant look with Draco. Then Draco asked, "What does Nihil want? To raise the pure-bloods to a position of power again and destroy the Mu—Muggleborns, the way that the Dark Lord did?"

DeChancie sighed and rolled his eyes as though confronted by a pair of children. "I told you, he's nothing like that. He doesn't share the same goals. He wants to complete the work the war began, the work of tearing us apart, and beyond that—beyond *that*—" DeChancie's voice dropped, and Draco thought that he was trying desperately to sound impressive "—his great and real project begins."

"That is?" Potter breathed.

DeChancie opened his mouth.

And went on opening it. As Draco watched, his skin split open down the sides of his head, along the line of his mouth, like a collapsing bag, and his body sagged and slithered to the ground.

Out of its disguise reared the red and black magic, an expanding, poisonous, blooming flower, which turned and draped all its tendrils over Potter as Draco watched, drawing him into its gaping maw.

Draco stared, paralyzed, for a moment.

Then Potter screamed, an inhuman sound of terror and pain.

And Draco decided that he should probably save his partner.

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eighteen—Between Two Fears

The memories were eating Harry alive.

This time, the sensation was much more intense than it was when he relived his memories thanks to his fits. This time, he could feel the sensations as if they were happening again: the hunger gnawing at his belly when the Dursleys shut him in the cupboard under the stairs, the urge to be sick as he stared down at Cedric's motionless body, the chill wind blowing on him as Sirius fell through the veil.

But mingled with it was the knowledge that all these things had already happened and so he couldn't prevent them. He was helpless.

He tried anyway, of course. He darted through the veil after Sirius, and grabbed Cedric's body to drag it out of the way, and turned to open the door of the cupboard so that his younger self could escape.

It was all useless. His hands passed through the images as they would have passed through Pensieve memories. He yelled for help, but his voice died in a heap of muffled echoes. He pounded on the door, and it stood up to him, dully solid. He found himself back on the other side of the veil as soon as he had gone through, with the streamers flapping mockingly at him and the stream of cold and restless voices whispering.

The present mingled with the past, bleeding into one another, and Harry didn't know whether the more intense grief came from looking backwards or living it again. He didn't think he *could* tell.

Already his thoughts were running like paint that someone had thrown water on. The moment when he stood before the veil and glanced over his shoulder, he saw Remus standing there and didn't think it strange. It took him time to remember that Remus had died in the Battle of Hogwarts. And when he walked through the Great Hall, filled with motionless bodies, and found Remus and Tonks there, he had to struggle to remember poor orphaned Teddy.

Teddy?

The name pivoted through his head, attached itself briefly to Ted Tonks, and flowed on.

His childhood was mud when Harry turned to look back at it. There was a child in a cupboard, and he thought briefly that that wasn't normal, but he really didn't know. Maybe, where he came from, it was perfectly normal for people to shut children up in cupboards and not give them food and pretend they didn't exist.

Where did he come from?

Somewhere strange, where beams of green light cut the sky and stabbed into the darkness through flapping curtains. Curtains that could kill people. Harry thought he had seen at least one person die that way. But someone else had held him back when he tried to follow. Someone who was large with a sad purple face, named Uncle Vernon, Harry thought. Or maybe Uncle Curtain.

He came from somewhere that used sticks as weapons. But he had left that place now, and he didn't think he would need the stick he had taken from it anymore. Harry began to fumble absentmindedly for the stick, thinking it would be a good idea to break the pieces apart so that no one could use them as a weapon again.

Grief struck him as he watched a flash of green light stab past him and strike a woman with red hair and green eyes. She fell over, but she didn't look real, Harry thought. Her scream was the real thing, stabbing through the darkness like the green light had and making him catch his breath and choke as the tears started to his eyes.

He was hollow, empty, except for that single flowing emotion, the sorrow that drowned him and made his mind flicker with odd-colored lights. He closed his eyes and saw a river behind his eyelids, strong and silver, dancing with red and green. The stream started to slow to a trickle, and Harry was relieved. That had to be the river of his grief. If it stopped flowing, then he had nothing to worry about.

Then someone called his name.

Draco had stepped forwards with the vague idea that he should drag Potter away from the red and black magic. He had drawn his wand, and he meant to cast a spell that would dissipate it at once.

Never mind that he hadn't the slightest idea how to get rid of mingled despair and killing spells.

But then a streamer of red and black magic lashed at him and dragged him behind the flower that had consumed Potter, into what seemed to be the same space. Draco tensed, but nothing touched his mind. The streamer, once it had dragged him in, fell away from him as if the murderous magic had suddenly lost interest.

No, not lost interest, Draco realized when he looked up and saw Potter crouched on the floor, his eyes shut, his fingers crooked in front of him into strange and awkward shapes, his mouth open and held there as sharp screams emerged from it. It simply had another victim right now. It would probably turn on Draco when it had disposed of Potter.

Draco edged closer, wand at the ready, wondering what was happening to Potter. He had no blood trickling down his body, but he screamed as loudly as if someone had mortally wounded him. And something *was* strange, Draco thought. Something didn't feel right as he approached Potter.

He had no idea what it was until he realized he had braced himself unconsciously against the welcoming pull of the compatible magic, and that it hadn't touched him.

Draco swore and chanted a swift incantation that would allow him to see the ambient magic in the area. Most of the time, this was a useless spell as long as one was still in the wizarding world, but Draco was counting on the red and black magic to block out most of the spells that could

influence his result so that he could see if what he suspected was true.

Sure enough, the red and black flower flared with dazzling silver light, but nothing intruded from beyond that. Draco used one hand to block the glow and studied Potter grimly.

He looked dull and empty. His magic was flowing out of him, coiling in the air next to him like a stream of visible wind. As Draco watched, it turned and proceeded towards the edge of the red and black flower. Merlin knew what would happen when Potter's magic touched the entwined spells.

And Draco had no idea what he could do to stop it. According to everything he knew, one wizard couldn't affect another wizard's magic.

On the other hand, according to everything he knew, Potter shouldn't have been able to pull on the compatible magic between them and drain Draco like he had when the "Death Eaters" were attacking. And there was supposed to be no spell that could work someone's magic loose of their body like this anyway.

Draco shouted, "*Potter!*" at the same time as he aimed his wand at the floating magic and cast a barrier spell. The flowing stream hit the barrier, a variation of the Shield Charm, and writhed around it in confusion. Draco doubted it would take long to find a way over or through.

He really needed Potter's help for this.

"*Potter!*" he shouted again, and this time he thought he saw Potter stir. Hoping it would be enough to awaken him from his trance, he constructed another barrier behind the floating magic and moved around to attack it from the side.

Harry tried to answer the call. He really did. But it felt as though someone had tangled ropes made of memory around his feet, and when he tried to decide who might be calling him and why he recognized the voice, he pitched headlong into another bout of grief. This was of the way Fred had fallen over, the grin frozen forever on his face, the rocks of the castle bounding about him.

My fault, Harry thought, his teeth chattering in the wake of the wind of regret that swept through him. *If I had been a little stronger, a little faster, a little more alert, I could have knocked him out of the way and made sure he survived, or at least made sure that I died in his place.*

The image wavered, and instead of seeing Ginny looking at Fred with tears in her eyes in the Great Hall, he was seeing her watch him with a sad, soft smile as she explained that she couldn't deal with his nightmares.

"I need a hero, Harry," she whispered in a voice that still twined through his dreams. "I need someone who came through the war more or less unscathed, because, you see, I have scars of my own. I need someone I can talk to about Fred, who will understand instead of mourning with me." She paused, watching him with vague regret, and then added, "You're just not strong

enough. I wonder if you ever were."

Harry shuddered and turned away in revulsion from her, hearing the voice call his name again.

That was when he realized that some of his memories were in the proper order once more, and he could attach names to faces. He lifted his head, his hand snapping down to his wand—

Which felt rough and useless against his palm, without that tingling spark he'd always got from it.

Harry cursed and dragged it frantically out of his pocket. Was it broken again? But no, it was strong and firm. He swished it, shouting, "*Lumos!*", but no light shone from the end.

He felt different, come to that. He was weaker and heavier on his feet. He stretched his arms above his head and tried to feel the magic humming through him, but he couldn't.

The wand didn't lose its power. It's me.

"*Potter!*" the voice cried again, and Harry knew this time that it was Draco, and that he sounded desperate.

Sheer determination sent Harry surging out of his mind. He had been useless to Ginny, not strong enough to support or save her, but it would be different with Draco, because it had to be, because he willed it so.

He opened his eyes and staggered to his feet. For a moment, he was disoriented—it seemed that everything he had been through, including the spell he had tried to cast with his wand, had taken place entirely in his head—but then he managed to focus on the situation in front of him, which was the important thing right now.

Drooping strands of red and black surrounded a small area of stone floor. Beyond the shifting tendrils, Harry could see nothing. They seemed to hang down from some central point, like the tentacles of an octopus. In front of him, Draco was raising Shield Charm after Shield Charm in front of a stream of floating blue particles, which kept trying to dart past him to reach the red and black strands.

Harry found his eyes fixed on the blue particles as if someone had nailed them there. Each grain shone with an individual gleam of light, and he was certain that this was his magic, translated somehow into a physical form.

He had to get it back inside him.

Somehow. Harry had to admit that nothing he had learned in either Hogwarts or Auror training had prepared him for his magic escaping.

He sprang up next to Draco and laid his hand on his shoulder. Draco leaned back without a sign of surprise and snapped, "We have to corral your magic back in your limbs. Do you have any idea about how to do that?"

"Let me think," Harry said, staring at the blue magic and fighting the sinking sensation that Hermione, who had read so many books, would know what to do better than he did. A doubting voice whispered in his head that he had no idea what to do about *anything*, and that he had always let Hermione handle too much for his own good. The voice sounded like Ginny's.

"We need to do something *now*, Potter." Draco's voice was a hiss as he stepped back towards Harry, his wand weaving frantically. His Shield Charms fractured almost the moment he raised them now, Harry saw. The magic seemed to learn what to do and become more bloody-minded the longer it was out of Harry's body.

Harry licked his lips. He had no idea how he could help, since his wand was useless now. It was Draco who would have to—

Yes, exactly. It's Draco who has to.

Harry experienced a fleeting moment of being grateful that it was him the red and black magic had attacked. He trusted Draco more than Draco trusted him, as could be clearly seen by the fact that Draco couldn't call him by his first name yet. They had a chance of surviving.

Harry leaned forwards until his lips were next to Draco's ear. "You need to direct the magic back into my body," he whispered. "I don't have a connection to it now. It's beyond my reach. But I think you can pull on it the same way that I pulled on your magic the last time we faced the Death Eaters."

Draco quivered as though Harry had touched a lightning bolt to him. He took a deep breath, but his voice was still uncertain when it emerged. "How can I? I mean, I'd need your permission, and you can't give it if your magic is free."

"I took from you without permission last time," Harry murmured. His eyes were locked on his magic, trapped temporarily by the glass box Draco had conjured but already managing to work a tiny crack in the side as it searched for freedom. "I think you can take from me and send the magic where it belongs without permission."

Draco shuddered once. "I don't—I don't know how—"

"I just *wanted* badly," Harry snapped. His magic was out of the glass box now and heading towards the red and black magic as fast as a snake. "The only thing you have to do differently is focus on the magic in front of you instead of focusing on me. For God's sake, Malfoy, *hurry!*" He clamped down with his hand, hoping that would inspire Draco.

Draco wanted to snap that he didn't know what to do, that he thought this was stupid, and that

Potter's plan didn't have a chance of working—

And then he realized he would sound exactly as Potter did when he said he had to think. There wasn't time, and Draco didn't have any ideas. He had to adopt Potter's stupid plan and hope for the best.

He reached back to clasp Potter's hand where it rested on his shoulder, having the vague idea that it might be easier if they were touching, or at any rate if he was returning the touch. Then he made himself look at those floating particles, no matter how strange it was to think of them as the magic he had felt pulsing and entwining with his, and silently commanded them: *Return to me. Return to us. Return to him.*

The particles wavered towards him as if someone had pushed them from the side, but then continued on their straight path. Draco gritted his teeth. *Want it badly, Potter said. As much as I hate to take his advice…*

"Come here," he hissed.

The magic bent this time, and flowed around him, and pierced his body. Draco cried out. Briefly his skin felt stretched around the amount of power it was trying to contain. It seemed that he might burst like DeChancie.

Then Potter leaned towards him and grabbed both his hands at once, roughly spinning Draco until they faced each other.

Their hands turned blue and golden before Draco could say anything, and he choked as magic—rather like a mixture of sand and honey—filled his throat. It came bubbling up his throat, and Draco opened his mouth, hoping that Potter was close enough to catch it. He didn't fancy it dripping on the floor. God knew what he would have to do next—drink it, lap it up, roll it into a ball…

Potter leaned close and placed his mouth over Draco's, making a noise like a house-elf confronted with a mountain of dust.

Draco froze, dreading to feel the touch of Potter's tongue, dreading this business altogether, but Potter simply made the elf noise again, and this time Draco realized that he was sucking in air. The magic went with the air, flowing into Potter's mouth and making his body stiffen as though someone had punched him in the solar plexus.

The next instant, he had released Draco's hands and was doubled over, uttering muffled cries, and Draco was left to lick his lips and wonder why they were still tingling so hard, when Potter hadn't touched them.

Much.

Harry hadn't realized before how much magic affected him. He had never been without it, even as a child when he had lived with the Dursleys and believed there was nothing special about him at all.

It was like the ability to move—something he never noticed until he was in a Body-Bind. There was warmth filling the empty places in his chest, now, and making his heart beat more strongly than it would have done otherwise, and making his lips tingle and smart as though he'd split them.

Or maybe they smarted for a different reason, Harry thought as he straightened back up and saw Draco watching him with dazed eyes, touching his mouth lightly.

There was no time to think about that. The faint light around them vanished and the space seemed to grow smaller, and Harry knew the black and red flower had contracted, shutting them in. Angry bubbling noises worked their way out from the tendrils. It was going to work to drain the magic from him again, and maybe Draco, as well.

Already the memories flickered along the edges of his mind. Harry could feel grief pushing at his eyes, forcing tears from them.

"We have to act against the magic," he said, his teeth gritted so that he wouldn't surrender. Draco didn't sound as if he were surrendering. Harry should be strong enough to overcome what the magic was trying to do to him, too. "Black is despair. Red—is anger. You told me that." He had to swallow back more tears as they streaked down his face. "How can we fight them?"

"We can try to do what we did before," Draco offered.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think that will work. I'm already—overwhelmed—by this." He blinked furiously and leaned against Draco, trying to use the solid weight of the other man's body to detach himself from the floating world that the magic was trying to escort him into. "I can't—I don't think I can keep on my feet long enough to concentrate and give you the compatible magic that you need."

"What exactly happens to you when the magic touches you?" If Draco was irritated or angry, Harry couldn't tell. He was speaking briskly, yes, and probably keeping a wary eye on the magic, but he also sounded as if he was trying to solve an interesting problem that Dearborn had set them.

"It makes me relive my worst memories as if they were happening around me again, but also the knowledge that they're in the past and I can't do anything to change them," Harry said. *Sirius.* The name lay on his tongue, and he had to gag hard before he could be sure that it wouldn't be the word he spoke next. "All the grief comes rushing out on me, and—"

"*Grief* magic." Draco's voice hissed, and Harry turned his head blindly towards the sound, focusing on the fact that almost none of his worst memories included Draco to anchor him in the

present. The memory of Dumbledore's death on the Tower promptly tried to ambush him, but Harry gritted his teeth and held it off and away. "Of course. A magic that combines despair and anger would be likely to result in grief. And since you have so much grief, it affects you more powerfully." Draco's voice grew muffled on the last words, as if he didn't like saying them, but in the end he took a deep breath and held his wand up, from the movement next to Harry. "Lean against me, Potter. Pass control of your magic back to me."

Harry bowed his head and muttered, "I give you permission." It was all that he seemed capable of, when his mind was full of Dumbledore's white face and the hatred that had twisted Snape's expression when he cast the Killing Curse.

Draco shook his head. He should have seen this before. The magic didn't pull up memories of anger from Potter, which indicated that its nature was more complex than a simple mixture of spells. Grief involved both despair and anger at different stages.

He reached out and focused on blasting the magic to nothingness. His desire grew as he felt Potter leaning more weakly against him, and he waited until he thought Potter was about to slide to the floor and his own longing couldn't grow any more. Then he bellowed, "*Reducto!*"

The Blasting Curse left him powered by both his magic and Potter's, and Draco felt as though someone had turned him inside out and flayed the skin from his body. He wanted to collapse, but now Potter was holding him up as much as Draco held him. Draco leaned his head down, and panted, and watched as the bright block of energy flew towards the red and black magic.

The tendrils frayed where the Blasting Curse touched them, and then began to unravel and rip apart. Draco blinked when he saw the Blasting Curse double back and attack again. He had wanted that to happen, but since it wasn't in the original nature of the spell, he hadn't been sure if it actually would.

The magic fought harder than it had when he and Potter confronted it in Draco's rooms, but in the end it didn't succeed any better. The air outlined by the light, the only visible effect of the Blasting Curse, charged back and forth, chasing and then rending apart the last remnants of that terrible flower that had swallowed Potter. Soon enough, Draco could step forwards, dragging Potter with him, and find himself out in the light of the interrogation room again, next to DeChancie's forsaken skin.

Potter shuddered and tried to stand upright. Draco held him in place without turning his attention from the battle. "You won't be able to stand, if the way I felt after you drained me is any indication," he murmured.

"You don't need to take care of me." Potter sounded so like a child trying to convince his mother that he should stay up past his bedtime that Draco smiled.

And then he remembered that Potter didn't have a mother, and the way Potter had trusted him to use his magic.

And the way Potter had taken his magic back when Draco drew it into himself.

He stopped smiling and whispered, "It's my privilege to take care of you."

The last of the red and black magic finally disappeared. Draco turned around, checking out of habit to be sure that both he and Potter had their wands, and considered the skin on the floor. Then he shook his head.

There was no hiding this. The Aurors could count, and they would notice that a prisoner was missing. And that no one had come to help them meant that the grief magic hadn't triggered the Dark Arts wards on the Ministry. This was something entirely new, something they would have to confess to the instructors and ask for their help on.

Draco smiled grimly. He had a few questions of his own to ask, too, starting with the scantiness of the protections on the "Death Eaters."

He turned to the door out of the room, and paused. Scored on the wall in enormous black and scarlet letters was the word *NIHIL.*

And beside it, another. *FIN.*

Draco raised an eyebrow. *He calls himself after nothingness and he proposes an ending. At least we know that much about him.*

He kept the Latin firmly in mind as he opened the door, and began arranging the battle in his mind as he dragged Potter down the corridor, making up a report of it that the instructors could listen to.

It was easier to think about that than about the way Potter had trusted him, or the way his lips ached.

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—Explaining the Absences

"A little help, here?" Draco was grateful for his own coolness when he heard how sharply and crisply his voice emerged. It made the two figures he'd seen in front of him and recognized turn

around, surprised, instead of already being prepared to meet him. That gave him a better chance at being in control of the situation.

Portillo Lopez turned first, but Dearborn was hardly behind her. Portillo Lopez hissed when she saw the way Potter was dangling off Draco's shoulder and came forwards, her eyes traveling back and forth between his face and Potter. "What happened?" she demanded as she drew her wand and conjured a stretcher.

"An unfortunate encounter with one of the imprisoned Death Eaters," Draco said blandly, making sure that he was speaking to Portillo Lopez but watching Dearborn. His face was anxious, however, and had been anxious since Draco first saw it. He gave an inwards shrug and gave up on the hope that he would win some reaction from Dearborn. "We received a mysterious letter telling us that they were still in the Ministry and would target us. We went to interrogate them, and one of them exploded into red and black magic of the kind that threatened us before. Potter was injured. His magic was drawn from his body, and I had to draw on compatible magic to put it back."

That was not the whole story, but mingled with enough truth that it would hold instead of pulling apart immediately the way a fabric of lies would. And Draco did not think he wanted to tell them the true way he had returned Potter's magic to his body, any more than he wanted to reveal that they'd decided to interrogate the Death Eaters on their own.

"Where is the letter now?" Dearborn asked quietly while Portillo Lopez bent over Potter. Draco took a step back so that he could keep an eye on both of them at once—and catch a glimpse of the spells that Portillo Lopez was using. It was his partner she was muttering over and brandishing a wand at, after all.

"It destroyed itself the moment I finished reading it," Draco said flatly. He shuddered and bowed his head. "A burst of strange-colored fire. Much like the red and black magic, it had to a new kind of spell, because I didn't hear the wards clang that would have reacted to Dark Arts."

He was looking up enough to catch the faint, quick frown on Dearborn's face and the puckering of his forehead. He obviously had no clue what the "strange-colored fire" might have been, or maybe he didn't like Draco's guessing that the grief magic wasn't entirely Dark Arts.

Draco didn't care. He had come to several conclusions when he was dragging Potter towards a more inhabited part of the Ministry, and the most prominent of them was that he didn't trust any of the instructors. At a minimum, they had kept information secret from him and Potter that they should have shared, since he and Potter had consistently been the targets of this magic.

At a maximum, one of them had helped the Death Eaters into the trainee barracks. Yes, any of the full-fledged Aurors could be a good candidate for that, but the instructors were the ones who spent the most time around the barracks and could be counted on to understand its defenses.

"Mr. Potter will need extensive recovery time," Portillo Lopez said, looking up. There was a

tightness around her mouth that made Draco think she was none too pleased with them, but at least she spoke calmly, and Draco thought they would probably avoid a scene. "You pulled on him the way he pulled on you last time, didn't you?"

Draco inclined his head. "I would apologize, but it was the only way to survive," he said.

Portillo Lopez sighed and straightened. She exchanged a look with Dearborn that seemed full of meaning, though Draco didn't know what that meaning was and had to hold himself patiently still. Then she said, "I think you should tell them. Someone clearly wants them to know," and began floating Potter away in the direction of her infirmary.

Draco planted his feet and swung to face Dearborn. He *did* want to accompany his partner, but he knew that whatever Dearborn had to say might be of importance, and he and Potter had been left in the dark long enough.

"Understand," Dearborn said, his voice tight, "this is confidential information." He glanced to the side. Following his gaze, Draco saw the remnants of letters on the wall that had almost faded. Probably he had been working with Portillo Lopez to remove them. "Most of the trainees will not know the details of what happened here," Dearborn continued, drawing Draco's eye again, "though some guessing is inevitable, certainly. After all, we have to have a new Combat instructor."

Draco tried to make himself as still and as attentive as possible. "Something has happened to Auror Gregory, sir?"

Dearborn made a helpless, disgusted noise and let his head fall forwards into his hands. Draco thought some of the performance was genuine, but not all of it. "Yes, one could say that," Dearborn said, his voice muffled by his fingers. "If by 'something happened' one means our discovery that she has thoroughly betrayed the Ministry."

Draco caught his breath. He had wondered at first if Gregory was connected with the Death Eaters and the grief magic, since she hated Potter so much, but he had dismissed that as too obvious. Besides, some of the attacks had been aimed at him. On the other hand, Gregory might have taken a dislike to him once she realized that she could do nothing to disrupt his partnership with Potter. "How, sir?"

Dearborn cast a privacy ward around them with a quick flick of his wand. Draco told himself to remember that Dearborn was powerful enough to cast a spell like that nonverbally, something he had not been sure of before. "We discovered materials in her room that show she is responsible to someone outside the Ministry," he said. "Letters, documents, and magical binding contracts going back several years. It seems that she has corrupted several of the trainees and even some of the full-fledged Aurors—though since they were cautious enough to use false names, we cannot yet be sure of how many." He grimaced and shook his head. "Many of the trainees idolized Astraea because her skills in Combat were rarer than certain kinds of powerful magic, and not as many of them did well in her class as in classes like mine or Hestia's. It would have been easy for

her to lure them close if she wanted. But we never saw her associating with many of them. In fact, she rarely offered to mentor any, seeming to disdain people who were younger than she was." He chuckled, but Draco could hear the rusty, bitter sound to it. "I expect we should be more cautious in the future than to judge by appearances."

Draco frowned. No, he had never seen Auror Gregory catch anyone's eye in a way that would have given him suspicions of her, or smirk knowingly in the way that he knew many Slytherins with "secret" plans often did, or display the openly mad desires for revenge and pain that many of the Dark Lord's followers had.

On the other hand, he already knew that Nihil was considerably more clever than most of the Dark Lord's followers.

"How did you discover that she was the guilty one, sir?" he asked.

"I'd noticed, during the last few days, that some of the wards that should have alerted us when Dark Arts were used were disabled." Dearborn sighed and began to pace back and forth, running his fingers through his hair. "I wasn't suspicious of it at first. After all, I often do the same thing myself when I want to show curses to third-year trainees and don't want to bring the entire Ministry piling into my classroom. But every time it happened, it was in a room that Astraea had recently entered. I began to watch her more closely. Still, though, I couldn't see anything that would give ground to my suspicions. As I told you, we didn't have a clue about what she was doing to corrupt trainees.

"Then Maryam came to me with disturbing news: she had found a young woman, one of the trainees who had left the program in order to win a job elsewhere, stumbling about outside her office. It seemed that she had been subjected to the Imperius Curse or some other mind-altering magic, and had come instinctively to a place where she thought she might find help. She could only repeat Astraea's name. The rope burns on her ankles and wrists and the way she acted made Maryam think she had been held captive for a long while.

"We went to question Astraea—without letting her know that we were doing so, of course. We smelled smoke from inside her room, and Maryam was concerned enough to blast her door open without knocking." Dearborn shook his head again. "I wouldn't have done so, but in this case I can only be grateful for her impetuosity. Astraea was burning several documents in her hearth. We are simply lucky that we intruded before she had managed to destroy a majority of the evidence. When she saw us, she drew her wand and attacked."

Draco nibbled his lip. It didn't sound as if Gregory was Nihil, because why would Nihil do something as clumsy and as easy to detect as that? Still, it was entirely possible that she worked for Nihil and had been spooked by the escape of one of her prisoners.

"Did you find anything about the nature of the red and black magic in the documents, sir?" he asked. "Or why she might have wanted to target Potter and me?"

"Not yet," Dearborn said. "On the other hand, they haven't been thoroughly examined. We had quite a time holding off Astraea long enough to secure them. She knows Combat as well as wanded attacks, after all." He rubbed his shoulder in a way that Draco thought indicated Gregory had hit him there. "But we will let you know." He hesitated, then added, "I think now that we were overly cautious in keeping the information about the Death Eaters from you, when you were the main actors concerned. Especially since we had already indicated that we had an unusual amount of trust in you by making you partners two years before your time."

Draco's throat *boiled* with the need to make a sarcastic remark, but he managed to hold it back.

"On the other hand," Dearborn went on with a sharper accent, "we need the real cause of Astraea's treachery to be held secret for the moment—especially since she managed to flee, and we do not know where she is or what she is doing yet." He came closer, staring intently into Draco's eyes. His onyx ring didn't flash, which meant he wasn't flailing his hands about to make it do so—a sign of how serious he felt at the moment, Draco decided. "Can I count on you for that?"

Draco nodded. "Of course, sir. Since it intimately concerns our health, and I agree that Auror Gregory might have contacts still here among the trainees who would be interested in hunting down people who angered her."

Dearborn's face relaxed into a smile. "You will make a good political actor yet, Malfoy, and a fine Auror."

Though Draco listened closely for some trace of animosity when Dearborn spoke his last name, he heard nothing.

"And now." Dearborn raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you could explain a bit more about your interrogation of the Death Eaters? We had left low-security measures on them in the first place, since we were trying to lure their leader or the traitor in the Ministry into rescuing them, but since Astraea has fled and you have managed to pierce the wards, we will need to replace those in any case."

Draco began to speak, making a mental note to catch up with Potter and acquaint him with the story before Dearborn could question him alone.

Harry rolled over restlessly. His arms dragged when he did, and it felt as though they weighed fifteen stone. He scowled. He hated being this weak and this ill when there was no physical wound on his body. At least he was willing to lie quiet when he had a broken arm or something, because he remembered what had happened every time he looked at the injury.

But not this time. And thinking too much about what had happened to weaken him only reminded him of how Draco had returned his magic to him.

Harry coughed, his face turning red, and once again carefully excised that thought from his brain

rather than allowing it to remain. Then he rolled over again and stared moodily at the far wall.

"Mr. Potter. You will be still."

Harry reckoned he should have been intimidated by Battle Healer Portillo Lopez. She was much less kind than Madam Pomfrey, and half the time she would cast diagnostic spells on him and then shake her head instead of explaining the results. Besides, he had the feeling that she cared more about Healing as a discipline than she did about teaching it to students.

But spending enforced hours with her had taught him that she was good at two things: speed and efficiency. When he asked how long it would take him to get out of the infirmary and she would deign to answer, she could give him a precise estimate, down to the hour. When he asked how long it would take him to improve with the Strengthening Potions she was forcing down his throat, then she could tell him to the *minute*. She was very good at what she did, and Harry had to appreciate that.

"All right," he said. "But it's boring. I wish there was some way that I could continue to work or fight or train or cast spells or—do something."

Hermione was walking in the door at that moment, so Portillo Lopez simply tilted her head towards her and didn't reply. Hermione's face, of course, flooded with rapture. "Do you want something to read, Harry?" she demanded. "I can give you *all sorts of things!* I've been reading the most fascinating history of Battle Healing, for example, and that way you can keep up with at least one of your classes while you're lying down!"

Harry stifled a laugh, wondering how much Hermione's choice of the book she mentioned was because of the instructor with him. "Thanks, Hermione, but I don't think I could concentrate on reading right now." Hermione and Portillo Lopez gave him disapproving glances together. "I should be out of the infirmary tonight. I want you to tell me how Ron is. Is he really angry? He visited once, yesterday, but he hasn't come since."

"Not angry," Hermione said, sitting down in the chair by the bed, which in Harry's opinion was ridiculously big and overstuffed. Draco had seemed to like it, of course. "*Busy*. He somehow managed to forget that we have an exam in Auror Conduct next week, and naturally he hasn't studied for it so far. So he's wearing himself out working on that." She sat up a little and gave Harry a significant glance that was not lost on him. "But," she went on, lowering her voice, "I'm sure it doesn't help that he doesn't have my notes to copy anymore."

Harry regarded her with admiration. "You took those away? Why?"

"Because that was the reason he was doing so much better in the classes than I was." Hermione folded her hands on her knees and spoke grimly. Only the deep line between her eyebrows told Harry how distressing she found this, and how much she would probably have liked a different solution. "I was struggling to do all the work and then struggling to make the notes perfect for him, and so he got the benefits of all my thoughts clarified without ever having to think himself."

She paused and stared at the wall. Harry had no idea what she was seeing there, and was content to wait in silence until she said something. She shook her head after a moment and focused on him. "I still love him," she said with conviction, and a faint blush. She hadn't forgotten Portillo Lopez was in the room, then. Harry had thought she had. "But he needs to change some of the things he's doing and stop relying on me so much."

"What if he can't?" Harry asked quietly, thinking of how stubborn Ron could be when he decided he was right, and the way he would probably try to rely more on Hermione now that Harry was "best friends" with Draco.

"We'll deal with that when we get there." Hermione said the words firmly, but suddenly clasped her hands together and gave him an anguished glance. "Do you think I'm being unreasonable, Harry?"

Harry smiled at her. "No. The way he was behaving *is* unacceptable. But—well, trying to change someone usually doesn't work."

"I know that." Hermione ran her fingers through her hair hard enough to make the curls ruffle. "But I have to try something, because just going along with whatever he wants also isn't working."

Draco cleared his throat from the doorway. Harry knew it was him before he looked around, and then paused for a moment and wondered *how.* Hermione promptly rose to her feet, blushing all over, and left with a muttered greeting to Draco that could qualify as friendly if you stretched the term. Portillo Lopez had moved over to the other side of the room and was studying what looked like a large chart. Harry sneaked a glance at her and started to sit up to welcome Draco.

"Lie still, Trainee Potter," Portillo Lopez said, voice precise as the chime of a clock. "Unless you want to extend the time when you'll have to stay here by an hour."

Harry rolled his eyes and let his head drop back. Draco, looking amused, damn him, sat down on the chair Hermione had left and sighed a little as he leaned against the cushions. "This is how every chair should be," he murmured. "In our rooms and all of our classrooms."

"Then half the class would be asleep every time we had class," Harry snapped, uncomfortably aware that Draco loomed over him when he was lying flat like this. He tried to ignore it by clearing his throat and looking Draco in the eye. "Did you find out anything more about the red and black magic?" They wouldn't call it the grief magic in public, since Draco had told him he'd concealed that discovery from the instructors.

Harry wasn't sure what he thought of that decision, but he was going along with it for now. After all, as Draco had argued, if Gregory had been corrupted by Nihil, they couldn't trust that other Aurors wouldn't be.

"Auror Dearborn let me look through the documents." Draco was always scrupulously careful to

use titles before the instructors' names in front of another Auror; he'd already said sharper things in private conversations with Harry. Harry was just glad that Draco had managed a quick private meeting with him so that he could whisper what he'd "confessed" and what story Harry should agree with. If they were going to decide the instructors, at least they should do it with some skill. "The problem is, half of them use false names and a lot of them are in code. They *have* to be, because they refer to nonsensical things like 'milking the blue cow.'" Draco rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "The one common part to the code is that they use colors in everything, so I've looked for references to red and black. But even those aren't consistent, and I can't tell what they mean."

"Hermione might," Harry said.

Portillo Lopez turned, her face so set that Harry winced when he saw it. "Only you two are being allowed to see these documents," she said. "Not that I would have allowed you that much, after what you did when you broke into the interrogation rooms."

Harry put his hand across his mouth to stifle a groan.

"Battle Healer Portillo Lopez is right, you know," Draco said solemnly. "We should be grateful that we escaped worse trouble."

Someone would have to be as close to him as Harry was physically to make out that his eyes were brilliant with subdued laughter. Harry rolled his eyes at him. He didn't know how Draco had managed to pull it off—he suspected a lot of it was protection because Auror Dearborn was Draco's mentor—but they hadn't been punished, much, for breaking into the interrogation rooms. They would have to account for their movements for a week solid, and on absolutely no circumstances venture outside the barracks unless they were going to classes or the dining hall. And they would have to have an extra exam in Auror Conduct to prove that they knew all the rules they'd broken.

That was it.

"So, nothing concrete yet?" Harry asked, doing his best to put those thoughts out of his head. It was hard to be properly grateful for what Draco had done when he was confined to bed and Draco got to go around investigating.

"Nothing yet." Draco sighed and sat still for a moment, staring at Harry. Harry raised his eyebrows back. There were limited conversations they could have with Portillo Lopez there. If Draco wanted to say something else, he should contrive a way of doing so. Harry had thought he knew that.

Draco scratched the back of his neck and said, with the air of someone walking forwards off a cliff, "We should discuss our compatible magic and the way we used it."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm not comfortable with the idea that we can drain each other. We might go

too far someday."

Draco leaned in, his eyes bright and intense again, but not with laughter this time. "We should also discuss," he said, voice pitched low, "the way I put your magic back in your body."

Harry shut his eyes as a slow flush crawled across his face. He hadn't thought Draco would bring that up. After all, while he thought Draco had some kind of weird half-romantic interest in him, that didn't mean it would ever amount to anything. The way he had "kissed" Draco was the best way to get his magic back. Any problem he had with it was his problem. Draco wasn't going to bring it up.

Apparently Draco hadn't got that silent message.

"Yeah, we will," he said, opening his eyes and finding Draco still far too close. "But for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Draco clamped his jaw shut. "Are you?" he said at last, with a sound in the back of his voice that told Harry he wished they could hurt each other with magic. "Why, I wonder?"

Portillo Lopez was watching them curiously. Harry was limited in what he could say. So he tried to compromise and muttered, "Because I think it—got you upset, and I didn't mean to do that. It was just the best way I could think of."

Draco kept staring at him, saying nothing, for long minutes. Harry saw the anger fade from his face, but he couldn't tell what replaced it.

Then Draco jumped to his feet and strode out of the room.

Harry sighed. He hadn't meant to do that, but then, he'd never meant to be involved in a situation like this in the first place.

He rolled on his side.

"Lie still, Trainee Potter."

Harry groaned.

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty—Settling Into Distrust

"More than one thing bothers me about Gregory's guilt."

Draco nodded to encourage Potter to go on, while his left hand closed into a sharp grip on the seat of his chair, down by his side where Potter couldn't see. Potter might not see it even if Draco was using his right hand, since he had his head bowed at the moment and hair falling into his eyes while he pulled at it.

Draco didn't care. Potter would ask why he was upset if he *showed* that he was upset, and Draco didn't have all the words to explain how much it annoyed him that Potter apparently intended to let their near-kiss go.

Sometimes Draco hated his own ability to qualify things. It *had* been a kiss, as much as any meeting of lips was. But he had to remember that Potter hadn't initiated it for that reason, and that he seemed embarrassed about it, and…

And a hundred other factors, all of which contributed to the situation being handled in a way that he hated.

"If she was taken by surprise and facing two Aurors at once," Potter continued in a meditative way, his fingers still playing with his fringe, "how did she manage to escape? It seems like she *must* have had a warning, or someone helped her. That's the kind of thing that makes me tempted to say that she wasn't guilty and the real Nihil is using her as a pawn. Someone could have planted those documents in her rooms." He leaned back in his chair abruptly enough that his hair flipped behind his head again and turned those unnerving green eyes on Draco, frowning. "On the other hand, why would she burn those documents instead of reporting them the moment she found them? And why attack Dearborn and Portillo Lopez instead of explaining the situation? If someone *is* framing her, then she has an awfully strange way of responding to the manipulation."

Grateful to have something to think about that would put the non-kiss out of his head, Draco nodded. "It suggests she had something to hide. Or perhaps that one of the two confronting her was her enemy."

"Then why not speak to the other one?" Potter grimaced and dug his fingers into his hair, rubbing in a way that made Draco have to bite his tongue. He had almost said that Potter would make himself look like a demented hedgehog, but he would look like that without the rubbing, too. "I can't imagine that Portillo Lopez or Dearborn would *refuse* to listen, given how strange the situation was. They might as well suspect one person as another."

"You forget the young woman who apparently escaped Gregory's custody and came moaning to Portillo Lopez's door," Draco said smoothly. "She practically ensured that anything Gregory said would be taken as an attempt to throw suspicion off herself, where it belonged."

Potter narrowed his eyes. "That's convenient, isn't it?"

"Very."

Potter bit his thumbnail. Draco dug his hand into the chair again. After several moments of scraping, snapping sounds that made Draco ill to listen to, never mind watch, Potter shook his head and said, "No matter how I think about this, it doesn't make sense. There's always some puzzle piece missing—unless everyone is a pawn in some kind of huge chess game." He looked hopefully at Draco. "Do you think that could be it?"

"No," Draco said. "Dumbledore was clever, and the Dark Lord was cunning, but they still didn't control hundreds of people in the immediate vicinity. There had to be people in Hogwarts who weren't allied with Dumbledore—"

"Like most of Slytherin House, for a start."

"Can you blame us?" Draco leaned forwards. "He never offered us any special terms or protection that would have made us take notice of him. He left us at the mercy of our families and the Dark Lord."

Potter's smile was gentle and bitter both at once. "And would you have listened to him, if he did? Or would you have thought that he was trying to manipulate you into serving him as loyal puppets, the way you thought the Gryffindors were?"

Draco tilted his head, reluctantly conceding the point. "I still could have used some sort of help during our sixth year," he muttered.

Potter surprised him completely by reaching out and tapping the back of his knuckles with one finger, not quite a squeeze of the hand but a more intimate gesture than Draco had expected, given what they were discussing. "Yeah, I know," he said. "I wish I could have helped." And on he went again, before Draco could recover from that surprise. "So let's not get ourselves into the same kind of situation. If we start distrusting *everyone* and deciding that no evidence would be enough to convince us, then we'll probably alienate people who actually want to help us."

Draco was silent for some time. On the one hand, what Potter said made sense. And even if Nihil had corrupted dozens of young trainees and was so clever as to put grief magic inside a human body, that didn't mean he, or she, could do everything.

But on the other, Draco could not shake off the clutch of instincts he'd learned through real-life experience as well as the study of history and politics.

"We can trust ourselves," Draco said at last. "And probably your friends. And maybe a few of the people who are too stupid to cause trouble or think for themselves, like Aaron."

"How do you control him, anyway?"

Draco smiled sweetly at Potter. "Consider that a trade secret that you'll learn along the way, if you're lucky," he said, and delighted in the way that Potter rolled his eyes. "But I don't trust anyone else. Not even the instructors." *My circle of trust would be wide enough if it included simply you and myself.* But he knew Potter would scoff at that as too paranoid, so he didn't say it.

"We can't just set ourselves up as—as private investigators, taking on a conspiracy all by ourselves," Potter argued.

"Why not?"

Potter paused. From the way his eyelashes flickered, Draco knew he was considering the possibility. He liked it more than he wanted to admit, too. Draco knew that not from the way he behaved, but simply from his past at Hogwarts.

He leaned nearer and lowered his voice persuasively. "Why not?" he repeated. "We haven't done so badly so far."

"Except for the fact that we each spent a few days exhausted," Potter said flatly. "Oh, and there was the small matter of a false Death Eater attack and the limp human skin on the floor."

Draco flicked a hand. "Unimportant," he said. "Minor consequences that we should have been better-prepared for. We are going to *plan* next time."

Potter studied him with a jaundiced eye. "You planned when we went to the interrogation rooms, and look what happened."

"This time, it will be more thorough." Draco scowled at Potter. Partner or not, trustworthy or not, he had retained his irritating habit of looking harder at Draco's faults than his virtues. "Anyone could have fallen into the mistakes we've fallen into. This time, we'll do the things no one else can."

Potter stared doubtfully at him through a few strands of tumbled hair. Draco buried his hand in the chair seat so that he wouldn't be tempted to smooth it back and let a sneer cross his face.

"Don't tell me," he said, "that you're falling into the trap of thinking you're the same as everyone else. Not *better*, maybe, but the same? Don't make me laugh."

Potter rose to the challenge with a sharp chuckle. "After everything that's happened to me? Hardly."

"Good. And I'm the same way." Draco tilted his head. "We'll continue investigating, and not confide everything we're doing to the instructors. Since they would probably notice if we asked too many questions, I think we should ask questions of their trainees. Too many of them take attention and admiration from first-years as a matter of course for them to suspect us."

Potter gave him a surprised look, as if he had never expected ideas that good from Draco. Then he nodded. "That sounds like it might work," he muttered. "And I reckon that we can do research on grief magic, and whether it's possible to hide something like that in a human body."

Draco snorted. "We know it's possible because we saw it happen, Potter."

Unexpectedly, Potter smiled. "Then would you care to describe the process?" he asked. "Because something like that would be dead useful to know, assuming that we ever wanted to become world-dominating maniacs." He stood up and turned in a circle, his arms spread wide. "You can cast the spells on me with my permission, so the compatible magic won't stop you from doing it." He twisted his head and grinned at Draco over his shoulder.

Draco felt his shoulders tighten. It wasn't so much because Potter's grin roused painful memories—though it reminded him of the way that Blaise would sometimes grin when he had played a particularly good prank—as because he suddenly realized how much he had wanted to see that look on Potter's face, directed at him.

And he knew, because he was feeling the emotions, how easily that longing could transform into a fancy for other looks.

He clenched his hands again. Meanwhile, Potter seemed to have decided that something was wrong, because he had turned around fully again and was regarding Draco with a perplexed expression.

"I meant it, you know," he said quietly. "I do trust you. I would give you permission to try the spell on me if you really wanted."

Fuck it. The worst thing he can do is refuse me. Draco rose abruptly to his feet. Potter started, but didn't back up and automatically reach for his wand the way he would if his words about trust were just a pretty act. "What I *want*," Draco said, "is for us to discuss what happened when I gave your magic back to you."

Potter just blinked. "All right," he said slowly. "I do think that we need to figure out why and how we can drain each other like that, and why it isn't a common thing with compatible magic." He rolled his eyes. "What you said about not being normal applies to my magic, too, it seems."

Draco took a step closer, almost at the end of his patience. How could Potter trust him and be so protective of him, and then turn around and exasperate him so much? "Not that," he said. "You know very well what I'm talking about."

By the sudden widening of Potter's eyes, apparently he had managed to put the near-kiss out of his mind very effectively up until this point. He coughed and looked away as he had when he was with Portillo Lopez. Draco waited. This time, he wasn't about to run away, but he wouldn't let himself be goaded into saying something, either. He had done enough by opening the

conversation.

"Look," Potter said. He sounded as if he was stepping off a cliff into a high wind, with the ridiculous expectation that the wind would somehow carry him and bear him up. "I know that you're offended I forced myself on you. It doesn't—it doesn't *matter* if sometimes I think I see you look at me with attraction of some kind." Potter's face was so red by this point that it looked as if it hurt. He was mumbling, but Draco strained his ears so that he didn't miss one fascinating word of this. "I had no right to kiss you without your permission. I just, it was the only way I could think of to get my magic back."

Draco stared at him. He didn't know what surprised him more: that Potter had picked up on the reason behind some of his lingering looks, or the interpretation he had put on it.

Then Potter looked up at him miserably, and Draco decided that the interpretation was definitely it.

"I'm not *offended*," he said. "I want to *discuss* it."

"Er," said Potter. He was now staring at Draco as if the high cliff had turned out to be a single stair. "But what else is there to say? If you're not offended, why bring it up?" Potter scratched his head and looked honestly puzzled.

"Because—we *should*." Draco hated to flounder on such a simple matter, but he had assumed Potter would understand the necessity of this as well as he would, and so he didn't have an explanation ready.

"But neither of us is dating anyone," Potter said, his frown deepening, "so there's nothing to explain to anyone." He paused suddenly, his eyes widening. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have assumed that. You're *not* dating anyone, are you?"

Draco gave him a withering look in lieu of the words that he couldn't summon at the moment.

"Right," Potter said, with a small nod. "And we're never going to date each other. So why do we need to talk about it?"

Draco took a step back from him, as struck silent by the words as he had been by the words Potter uttered in hospital. Potter's simple assumption of the truth was a more effective block than an angry denial would have been. It was clear that the vague longings Draco had entertained simply had no place in his conception of the universe.

And they should have none in mine, either! Whoever heard of Harry Bloody Potter being self-possessed when Draco Malfoy was at a loss? I have my pride.

Draco shook his head and said sharply, "I have no idea. You're right, we should research grief magic and see if there are books about it. Nihil must have learned it from somewhere."

Potter nodded and said, "Do you want to work on the compatible magic at the same time, or do this research by itself first?"

"By itself first," Draco said. "We'll work on the compatible magic as we have time. Between the investigations and the fact that we have exams coming up in a few weeks, we'll be quite busy enough as it is."

Potter groaned and rolled his eyes. "Why the *fuck* does the Auror program have to take after Hogwarts in scheduling exams near Christmas?"

Draco mentally rolled his eyes in return and let Potter lapse into such commonplaces, while in his mind he rejoiced in his near escape. It was obvious that Potter had no interest in the kind of "discussion" that Draco wanted and would gape at him witlessly if he tried to have it. Draco would have looked like a fool if he pursued the matter.

The same part of his mind that taunted him about being a coward for refusing to look in Professor Snape's Pensieve laughed and told him that he was being a coward now, too.

But it was beneath the dignity of a Malfoy to listen to small voices in his head, and therefore Draco did not have to.

"Mate, can I talk to you?"

Ron was standing over him with a determined expression. Harry had expected it, because Ron was *really* bad at being subtle. Throughout the evening, he'd been sneaking sideways looks at Harry and taking deep breaths and then releasing them with a little huff as his brow wrinkled. Harry had deliberately chosen the homework for his least challenging class, Auror Conduct, because it would matter less if Ron interrupted his concentration while he was doing it.

"Of course," Harry said, and moved his homework away across the table. He hoped the expression on his face was neutral, the way he meant it to be. This was going to be hard.

But then he thought of the way Hermione was making Ron fend for himself, and he thought of Draco's support. And he thought of the way Ron had dragged Ginny into this private argument.

He could do this.

"Look," Ron said, forcing Harry to pay attention to something other than what was going on inside his own head. He had his hands clasped in front of him, and Harry thought he was trying to look serious and stern. He looked like Dudley begging his mother to be allowed to stay up instead of going to bed. Harry firmly bit the inside of his cheek so that he wouldn't laugh. Ron frowned at him and shuffled from foot to foot. "I know I did a few stupid things. But I want you to be happy, I swear."

"Involving Ginny wasn't the way to do it," Harry couldn't keep from muttering.

"Why *not*?" Ron leaned forwards. "Look, I know that you and me and Hermione couldn't just stay together forever and not change anything, because sooner or later Hermione and I are…well, we're already dating, and." He cleared his throat. Harry had to bite his cheek again. At least the way Hermione had treated Ron meant he was reconsidering whether their wedding was that certain. "Things change," Ron went on in a slightly louder voice. "So you should be near us, but you couldn't marry *her*. I was looking for someone you *could* marry. Ginny's my sister and Hermione's friend. It would be perfect."

Harry shook his head.

"But you were happy for a little while," Ron said. "What changed?"

"Things I don't want to tell you about yet," Harry said, because that was easier than trying to lie. "I don't want to date her anymore. If you still have that in your head, you should get rid of it now, because I have no intention of talking to her except for a few polite phrases ever again." He wanted to look away from Ron as he remembered some of the words Ginny had spoken, but then he reminded himself he had a right to be angry about that. He held Ron's gaze instead.

Ron's jaw dropped. Then he shook his head. "Maybe you feel that way now, Harry," he said, voice so condescending that it set Harry's teeth on edge, "but in a few months, you won't—"

"Fuck you," Harry hissed, with venom that he'd had no idea was going to bubble out of him. He stood up and moved one step towards Ron before he forced himself to stop. He would punch or hex Ron in this mood, and that might be the end of their friendship. He'd fought too hard to be himself and yet keep his friends. He wouldn't be the one to ruin this, even if Ron was.

Ron, meanwhile, just stared at him with round eyes and mouth, too stunned to speak, and let Harry have the minute he needed to think things through and choose his words.

"You can't be sure about my feelings like that," Harry said at last. He tried to make every word heavy and forceful, the way he would talk to Draco if he called Hermione a Mudblood. Ron couldn't be under any mistaken impression about this, or at least it couldn't be Harry's fault if he was. "You can't say that I'll change in a few months and become what you want me to be. *Never*. I hate it when you say that, and I hate that you think I'm just acting to spite you when I do what I want. All right?"

"But you could be happy," Ron said, and now he looked injured. "I'm just doing what I think will make you happy."

"Well, you're wrong about that." Harry controlled himself as carefully as he could, envisioning the way Draco could look cold and disdainful. That was better than shouting. "I don't want that again. I don't want you to think you're the only one who knows what will make me happy. I know that better than you. Do you understand?"

Ron looked mutinous, which Harry knew meant he didn't agree, but he gave a single angry shrug and turned away. "Between you and Hermione," he muttered, "I don't know who's worse. I was *trying* to help."

"I appreciate the intention," Harry said, "not the action. Do you understand the difference?"

"And now you sound like bloody McGonagall." But Ron's voice was a bit more relaxed, and he gave Harry a tense smile before he nodded. "Yeah, I do." He hesitated, then asked, "How much time are you going to spend with Malfoy this evening?"

"This evening?" Harry blinked. "None. Why? It's not like Draco and I are joined at the hip," he added.

Or the lips.

But he had started playing a new edition of the game he used to play with thoughts of Ginny, called, "Let's Not Think About My Mouth Touching Draco's," and he could put that image out of his mind with relative ease.

"Want to study for the Conduct exam together?" Ron's voice was low, and he glanced down as if he expected rejection in a way that was really irritating, but Harry recognized it for the peace offering it was.

He nodded and moved his homework so that Ron had a place to put his papers on the same table. Ron beamed.

Harry smiled at him. Sometimes, it was good to remember he *did* have a friend under that annoying exterior.

Who is Nihil's pawn? I'm sure that he didn't have only one. And if he really is Gregory, or if Gregory is close to him, then surely another instructor must have agreed to act as the conspiracy's eyes and ears now that Gregory is gone.

Draco watched Ketchum from under his eyelids. He had already finished the written exam for Battlefield Tactics, but he had to wait for Potter to finish before he could navigate the practical part, which included a maze. Ketchum was moving from desk to desk, cheerfully offering help and checking for cheating at one and the same time.

It could be him. No one can be that unnaturally cheerful all the time, and his observation skills, though he's using them right now on students, could be useful to Nihil in other ways.

The only thing that kept Draco from being certain Ketchum was a cats-paw was the fact that he spent so much time with his trainees and in preparation for his classes, including constructing the obstacle courses he had his students run. Little as he liked the Mudblood, Draco had to admit he

was a dedicated teacher. Someone would notice if he was spending large amounts of time doing other things, the kind of duties Nihil would demand of his followers, because of the quality of his work falling off.

Unless he has built his duties to Nihil into his other work for years.

Still, Draco thought they could do worse than to approach one of Ketchum's trainees. So far, their efforts to speak to Portillo Lopez's had been a failure, because all of them were madly busy—and it seemed that the Battle Healer had the irritating habit of choosing modest people who could not easily be flattered and wooed. Gregory's trainees were slinking around at the moment, doing their best to show that they had not been compromised. Dearborn, of course, had no other trainees that he mentored except Draco.

Ketchum's, then.

Draco turned his head so that he could regard Potter. He was just pushing back from his desk and handing the completed exam to Ketchum, his face pale and haggard. Draco narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Potter had looked like that for two days now. Draco had put it down to the stress of the examinations at first, and then he had remembered that Potter had started looking downcast one evening shortly after an owl had come into the dining hall.

They had a moment to speak together while Ketchum declared himself satisfied with Potter's paper and walked away to signal to his trainees to activate the spells on the maze. Draco turned to Potter. "What's the matter?" he whispered.

"Nothing."

Draco stared. A single brusque word, and it shut him out of Potter's life far more effectively than all the stammering denials of their kiss had done. He felt as though he had bumped his head on a stone wall he had expected to be soft and yielding.

He opened his mouth, and Potter shook his head.

"Sometimes, friends keep secrets from each other," he said, eyes bleak. "This is one of them."

Ketchum signaled them to enter the maze before Draco could tell him that *his* secrets were usually dangerous and best shared. Potter set his mouth and proceeded to give Draco nothing to complain about by performing brilliantly. There was no doubt that they would earn an O for the practical portion of the exam.

Then he slipped away before Draco could corner him.

Draco stared after him. *He doesn't owe me every detail of his life, but he owes me many of them. And this is something I want to know.*

He will *tell me.*

But he may need to be coaxed…

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Chapter: 21

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-One—Problems Aplenty

Harry shut his eyes and sat still, waiting for the Calming Draught to work. He was almost glad that the exams were happening now, even though it gave him a hundred other things to worry about. Hermione didn't suspect the real reason at all when he asked for Calming Draughts or for charms that would force him to slow down and breathe for a few minutes.

He had to do that because there was no way that he could go to anyone for help on this, which meant he had to devise a plan on his own. And if he fucked up the plan, then he would fuck up Hagrid's life.

The words of the letter flamed in his mind. Luckily, with the Calming Draught in his system, there was no way that Harry could panic. He had to think about the words instead and all their implications.

Harry,

Chester's escaped! And now there are evil wizards sniffin around after him, and McGonagall is askin questions, and I've heard about new laws for anyone breakin the magical breeding ban. Yer have to help me find him and get him out of the country. Yer the only one I trust.

Hagrid.

It had only taken a few idle questions to Hermione—who was so delighted to see him interested in anything that she would chatter about certain subjects by the hour—to confirm that Hagrid was right. Apparently some of Voldemort's plans had included breeding Dark magical creatures to fill out the ranks of his army. No matter that those plans had never got off the ground; they'd still panicked the Ministry, which tightened the Experimental Breeding Ban to the point that simply being found with *books* about crossbreeding magical creatures was likely to get you arrested. Hermione had filled Harry's ears with indignation about it, but Harry had barely heard her, paying more attention to the furious thundering of his heart.

He had to save Hagrid. For his friend to be sent to Azkaban *again* would probably break him. And now Harry had to wonder if Nemo, the mysteriously-named "nobody" who had given Chester to Hagrid, was connected to Nihil. He didn't want anyone who could use grief magic anywhere near his half-giant friend. Hagrid wasn't a fully-trained wizard like Ron or Hermione or Draco. He would fuck up.

At the same time, Harry knew that he couldn't just rely on someone else to solve the problem for him, the way he'd been doing so much of the time. Hermione would insist on appealing to authority because she still had that deep-seated faith in authority Always Being Right. Harry couldn't do that when it might get Hagrid in legal trouble.

Ron would be eager to help, but Harry simply didn't trust him enough right now to ask him to go along.

And Draco…

Harry chuckled bitterly and shook his head. Why should Draco care? He'd made it clear that Hagrid was nothing more than a half-breed and a big, clumsy oaf to him. Harry hadn't thought about it in much detail, but that was something that would always be a problem and a limitation for his friendship with Draco in a way that it wouldn't for his friendships with Ron and Hermione. Draco didn't *care* about people in the way that Harry thought was normal. They had to do something for him first.

So Harry had to do this alone.

Luckily, by swiping some of Hermione's own Pepperup Potion supply that she used when she wanted to stay up at night studying, Harry had managed to gain enough time to study for his exams *and* look up things that might help Hagrid. He thought he knew some spells that would help him find Chester and get him safely into custody. Then they could see about the evil wizards.

Harry started gathering up the things he needed to take with him. He'd already written back to Hagrid, so his friend would know to expect him tonight.

He really wished he could tell *someone* about this. It no longer felt right to be slipping off on his own. All of Hestia's lecturing about Auror teamwork had drummed its way into his head, he reckoned.

But there was no choice, just like he'd had no choice about facing Voldemort alone, so Harry made the best of things.

"I don't understand, sir." Draco frowned at the shimmering shield that hung in the air. It was slightly bigger than the one created by *Protego* and darker around the edges, but otherwise, Draco couldn't see any difference. "What does this spell do that the Shield Charm can't?"

Dearborn smiled and walked to the opposite end of his office. A spell that Draco had already admitted the usefulness of had shoved his desk, his tables, and his bookshelves back and up the walls, so they had plenty of space to practice in. "Stand behind the shield and I'll show you. Resist the temptation to strengthen it, however much you might feel that temptation."

Draco narrowed his eyes. He didn't think that he trusted Dearborn not to hurt him.

On the other hand, what was a bit of pain compared to learning a spell that Dearborn had praised to the skies? Draco stepped behind the shield.

Dearborn waved his wand and whispered a word. Draco strained his ears, but didn't manage to catch the word, and then his attention was rather taken by the grey smoke gushing out of the end of Dearborn's wand.

The smoke eddied and thickened, and reared up and up and up—and up. Draco had to tilt his head back to properly view the dragon that the smoke solidified into. It seemed to be made of metal, its scales tiny overlapping steel plates.

The dragon lowered its head and opened its mouth. Draco tightened his muscles to keep from running. He knew that the dragon had to be at least partially illusion, which would limit the damage it could do. No one could simply conjure a real dragon from his wand, or most of the wizarding wars Draco was aware of would have been considerably bloodier.

He thought so, anyway.

A noise like the creaking and roaring of a bellows made its way out of the dragon's mouth, accompanied by a blast of foul, reeking air. Draco pinched his nose shut and caught a glimpse of something bright and burning white in the back of the dragon's throat. The next moment, a lance of fire was traveling straight at him.

Over the top of the shield.

Draco dropped to one knee so that he could get under it.

Then the shimmering shield extended itself, or grew outwards, or perhaps simply made a part of itself visible that had been invisible before. Whatever the right name for the procedure was, it caused an arc of shady silver light to form above the upper rim of the shield, and the next moment the dragon's lance of fire was bouncing back at it. The dragon writhed in silence as the flame hit it and melted two of its scales off before Dearborn flicked his wand and the illusion dissolved.

"You see?" Dearborn murmured. "The Fortress Shield will stand up to anything, including the charge of a dragon, and modify itself based on happenings in the immediate battle. A trick worth learning, do you not think?"

Draco nodded. He knew the incantation for the Fortress Shield, having heard Dearborn use it, but at the moment, he was more interested in something else. "What about the spell that brings the dragon into existence, sir?"

"That?" Dearborn laughed modestly and shook his head. "An illusion, as you must have surmised. The fire would have scalded but not seriously burnt you."

"It could still be useful to distract someone," Draco said, and made his eyes worshipful when Dearborn's glance turned searching. Draco spent a lot of time flattering Dearborn, trying to make him think that Draco was more in awe of him than he really stood. "And you must have invented it yourself, sir."

"Well." Dearborn shrugged so that the cloth around his shoulders rippled. "I did."

"Then might I know it?' Draco ducked his head and made sure that his eyes were wide when he looked up again. He couldn't play the appealing innocent too strongly, or Dearborn would begin to suspect, but he thought he could use a little of it. Add in the respect that he didn't have to feign—someone who could invent a spell like this and figure out how best to use it was worthy of admiration—and he would surely persuade Dearborn.

Dearborn stood still for some time, gazing thoughtfully at Draco. Then he smiled. "I have never taken a mentee before this because I did not trust them to use the secret as it should be used," he murmured. "But I am interested to see what you will do, as I was when I helped pair you with Potter. Yes, I will teach you the incantation."

Draco nodded his thanks, and then jumped and turned his head. It felt as though someone had pricked him with a pin. There was no one there, of course, and he didn't think Dearborn was the kind of person who would hide another trainee under a Disillusionment Charm and have him frighten people who were getting above themselves, which was said to be one of Ketchum's tricks.

"What is it?"

Dearborn's voice had that high-pitched strain that it got when he thought someone was making fun of him. Draco turned back to him, shaking his head in apology. "I felt as though someone were stinging me," he said. "I apologize, sir."

The sensation came again as he spoke. Draco shifted in annoyance. The pain faded quickly, but now he was anticipating it, and that made the minor sting far worse.

"I have heard of things like this," said Dearborn, his eyes shrewd. "It feels as though a single pin is being pushed into the skin just under your right shoulder?"

"Yes, sir." Draco hoped that it really was Dearborn's reading that had told him what Draco was feeling, and that the way he moved hadn't revealed the secret. That would be humiliating.

"The person who shares compatible magic with you is in trouble."

Draco blinked, deliberately keeping his movements slow as he reached up to rub at the itching place on his arm. His heart had kicked into a gallop when he heard Dearborn's casual words, but it would have been the height of folly to *show* that. Draco had not survived the war by carrying his emotions around in public for anyone to see. "Are you sure, sir? I know compatible magic is capable of accomplishing much, but surely not that."

"It always has an element of defense," Dearborn said, falling into the natural tones of a lecturer. The needle poked Draco. He clenched his right back teeth and kept his face unruffled. He would have to hope that Dearborn's lesson did not take long. "It is rarely so neatly split as yours is, with you having an affinity to the Dark Arts and Potter a talent for Defense magic, but that element is present or it cannot be classified as compatible magic. And therefore it will tell you when your partner is in trouble, so that you may defend him."

"I understand, sir." Draco glanced towards the door with an expression of distaste. "I reckon that I should go and see what's happened to him *this* time." *Make Dearborn think that I care more about missing the end of his lesson than I do about Potter.*

"Yes, I suppose you should." Dearborn leaned back on the wall and gave his head an amused shake. "This time, try to arrange something that does not involve breaking into interrogation rooms."

Draco gave a bow and noted the subtle reminder that his misdeed had not been forgotten before he walked out of the room. Once in the corridor, he began to run.

The warning gave him no clue where Potter was, that was the problem. But not for nothing had he watched the Death Eaters use sophisticated tracking spells during the year of the war. He only had to get outside the Ministry to use them.

Harry put his back to a tree and shut his eyes to listen. Then he opened them again with a soft curse. Listening didn't do much good when the terrified pounding of his heart overrode anything else.

If he concentrated, he thought he could still hear Hagrid crying, "*Chester!*" at a distance and ringing the bell that he claimed he had trained the little beast to respond to. But Harry was more concerned with something else.

Like the tread of soft paws and the snuffling of large, wet nostrils.

Harry had arrived at Hogwarts two hours ago, reassured Hagrid, and promised to help him search the Forbidden Forest for Chester. He hadn't thought it would be that difficult. His reading had told him that dragons and hippogriffs had been crossed before, and they tended to like things that smelled strong and scorched—a result of coming from two beasts that stank, the book suggested.

Harry had brought garlic and the glands from a polecat's tail, which Hermione had in her room for a Battle Brewing assignment, with him, and then he'd cast *Incendio* on them. He'd been sure the smell would bring Chester running.

Except it hadn't. Except it had attracted something else.

Harry shifted his weight and glanced around thoughtfully by the light of his subdued *Lumos*, trying to imagine what Pushkin would tell him to observe about this scene, and the way that Ketchum would recommend that he use it to evade his enemies in the Battlefield Tactics class. He stood between two thick roots the height of his waist, in a tiny cove carpeted with fallen leaves and pine needles. He couldn't move quietly, but if the things hunting him tracked by scent, the way Harry thought he did, that wouldn't matter. He was more interested in the possibilities of how he would make this a defensible position.

At least they could only attack him from the front.

Unless they can climb.

Harry shuddered and began to Transfigure some of the leaves and pine needles into additional wood. The roots rose higher and higher around him, and finally Harry was content they couldn't come at him from the sides. He thought about adding a roof in case they scrambled over the tree, but ended up shaking his head. No, that would restrict his movement, and Ketchum would have a fit if he did that.

The thought brought a brief smile to Harry's face before he heard the deep sniff he'd been waiting for. He worked his way slowly to the tiny gap he'd left in the eastern wooden wall and pressed his eye to it.

One of the creatures who had attacked him shortly after he lit the garlic on fire stood five feet from the root, its head tilting back and forth. Harry had only seen before that it had a body like an enormous wolf and a pair of twisted horns on its head and fangs that stuck out of the sides of its mouth; that was quite enough. Now he made out the human shape of the face and shuddered.

Werewolf? No, I know *they don't have horns, and it's not a full moon tonight.*

The head turned. Now Harry was staring at a second face that apparently occupied the back of the first one. His heart twisted and so much adrenaline flooded his body that he nearly leaped out of his safe little hiding place.

Quirrell, and Voldemort, and the Stone—

But he forced his memories back into their proper places with a quick, vicious application of one of the calming techniques Portillo Lopez had taught them and made himself watch the face rationally. This one was human, too, but mutilated, the cheeks visible only as torn strips of flesh, the forehead smashed in, and the nose turned upside-down. Large patches of grey that looked

like burns clung to the lips and eyelids.

The upside-down nose sniffed, and then a perfectly pleasant, bell-like voice said, "This way, boys!"

Something long and supple shot past the face at the same moment as the head twisted to bring the "normal" face around again, and Harry recoiled. It took him a moment to understand that it was the thing's tail, rattling in a way that suggested it was a scorpion's.

And by the time he had understood that, the things were upon him.

Two of them at once came over the root walls, one on either side, scrambling and leaping up them, their claws hooking and cutting into the wood. The one Harry had been watching rustled and pounded the earth. Harry knew it was trying to circle around the front and ambush him there, so he would be caught between three at once.

I'm going to die.

Somehow, Harry managed to retain the wits to figure out what to do, maybe because that thought was hardly a new one. He lifted his wand and swept it around at shoulder height, chanting so fast that his own words blurred in his ears. "*Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

The two beasts climbing over the walls dropped when the red light hit them. Harry spun around in time to see that the third one had ducked, letting Harry's own protections defend it from the spell. Now it stood back up and prowled slowly forwards. It had pivoted its head around completely so that the mutilated face was looking at him.

Harry planted his feet and lifted his chin. He would have Apparated out of there if Hogwarts's anti-Apparition spells didn't extend all across the grounds. He missed Draco and wished he was there. He wasn't ashamed to admit those things.

The face licked its drooping lips with a pointed blue tongue and spat a sharp gout of liquid at him. Harry reacted with a Shield Charm before it got fully out of the creature's mouth. When he heard the way it splattered and hissed as it hit his shield, he was glad. It was either poison or acid, and he knew that he didn't want it to touch him.

"You have resisted me so far," said the bell-like voice. "I would expect nothing less of you. But you are young, and the many things your instructors have taught you cannot counter all my tactics at once."

That was the only warning Harry had before the beast sprang at him, its shoulders bending with an obscene fluidity around the edges of the wooden walls, its claws and its teeth and its whipping tail and its poison all coming towards him at once. Harry fell back, saw his shield shiver and dissolve, dodged the poison, tried to raise another *Protego* and felt the reaching claws tear his wand from his hand, and prepared himself to die.

But before the tail could reach him, a sharp, peculiar cracking sound reached his ears. The beast simply *stopped*, and the tail dangled over its back like a drooping branch. Then its eyes rolled back under the patterned eyelids and it collapsed.

Harry stared down at the limp form of the beast. A giant sword was stuck through its back. As he watched, the sword turned into silver mist and flew away, rather like his Shield Charm. He knew it must be magic, but it wasn't a spell that he had seen before, and no matter how many times he blinked, he couldn't seem to get used to it.

At least he had enough intelligence to stoop down and pick up his wand where it had rolled against one of the wooden walls. He breathed and blinked and stood there trying to clear his brain and figure out who had done this.

"Draco?" he called tentatively into the darkness, and then wondered why he had thought automatically of Draco when someone protected him, rather than Ron or Hermione.

More cracks answered him, and then screams so loud and piercing that Harry shuddered. He couldn't hear Hagrid's voice among them, but that hardly mattered.

People were being *hurt*, maybe including the person who had saved him, and he was an Auror trainee and learning to save people. He leaped out of his hiding place and ran as fast as he could towards the sounds.

He stumbled as he came up a little hill he hadn't seen in the darkness and caught a tree for balance. Then he froze again, because the battle taking place below him was frightening and awe-inspiring and not one that he could see himself joining right away.

A single figure in a heavy cloak whirled around and around in the center of a clearing made out of the Forest by slashing and burning spells. Around it, or him, circled at least seven wizards in the black cloaks and white masks the fake Death Eaters had worn. Harry saw two or three lying on the ground, in shriveled, crumpled heaps like the skin of the one the grief magic had come out of in the interrogation room.

It should have been an easy contest, seven against one, but the wizards encircling the central figure couldn't get through. Harry saw one of them lunge and wave a wand, but the one in the middle swayed backwards like a reed and then launched a kick that made the wizard scream and stumble away, his arm dangling useless from the elbow.

The effort made the central figure's hood fall back. Harry gasped. He recognized that face, and he probably should have recognized it before he saw it due to the level of skill. Obviously, there was a reason that Auror Gregory had been made Combat instructor.

Harry licked his lips and wondered who he should help, Gregory or the people fighting her.

But he glanced at the crumpled skins on the ground and made his decision. He *knew* the people fighting Gregory were Nihil's servants. He didn't know that for sure about Auror Gregory. And there was the fact that a sword spell was probably Combat magic and she had probably saved his life.

He was just getting ready to spring down the hill and try to insert himself in the fighting somehow when an arm curled around his waist. Harry tried to struggle, kick, and bite, furious with himself for being taken off-guard yet *again.*

Then he felt the tingling hum of compatible magic and heard Draco's voice whispering in his ear, "I'm here. It's me."

Harry relaxed with a harsh huff of breath and hissed back, "Don't *do* that next time."

Draco's arm around his waist tightened, and he hauled Harry close to his side again as if in defiance of that advice. "It was a way to get your attention," he said. "Now, Auror Gregory appears to be on the opposite side from Nihil after all. Am I right?"

Harry nodded. "I think so. How do you think we should help her?"

Draco opened his mouth to reply. Sometime later, Harry found himself curious about what the words would have been.

Gregory lifted her hands and brought them down in a savage slash, her voice wild as she screamed a single word. "*Segmentum!*"

The body of every wizard facing her divided into two neat pieces, as though someone had swept the sword that had killed the beast straight through them at the waist. Harry felt his head swim and heard Draco gasp beside him. He didn't need any more confirmation that Gregory's spell was Dark Arts.

The bodies fell without any blood that Harry could see, just a wash of dark, oily magic. He gagged anyway.

Gregory turned around and raised her head to stare at them. When she saw Harry, she gave him a grim, bitter smile and a tight nod. Harry thought she was pleased to see him alive, despite everything.

Then she caught sight of Draco.

In an instant, her wand was aimed at him, and she had begun to chant a spell. Harry didn't wait to hear her finish it.

He leaped down the hill, hurling himself through the air straight at her, and between Draco and her wand.

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Chapter: 22

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Two—A Thunder of a Scolding

Draco kept his head. He never knew how he did it, watching his partner leap into danger, but he did. He extended his wand and said, in a tone so clear that he was half-surprised his words didn't cut the air, "*Accio* Harry Potter."

The air rippled and bulged, and then Potter was flying back towards him. Draco braced to resist the collision, but only as much as necessary to prevent himself getting hurt. The moment Potter slammed into him, Draco wrapped his arms around him and tipped them both to the ground.

Which meant that Gregory's spell flew overhead, of course, as neatly as if Draco had planned that. He smiled into Potter's neck, giddy and dizzy and feeling *amazing.* Sometimes, he could manage feats in Defense that Potter couldn't, then. It was nice to know.

Potter immediately slammed an elbow into Draco's gut as he tried to scramble up. Draco grimaced in distaste and rolled away. Potter was scanning the area in front of them like a hawk watching for a mouse. "Where did she go?" he demanded.

Draco peered over his shoulder. Gregory was gone, and the severed bodies of her antagonists were the only sign she had been there. Draco sucked the inside of his cheek thoughtfully as he remembered the anti-Apparition wards enclosing the Forest. It was the reason he had had to run to Potter's side instead of leaping directly there.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "But I doubt that it matters." He reached out and clamped his hand down on Potter's shoulder, squeezing until Potter gave a tiny gasping noise of pain. Draco smiled viciously, but continued in a tone so sweet that he hoped Potter would have trouble connecting the touch and the voice. "Meanwhile, what matters a great deal is that you left me behind when you ran off."

Potter made a loud, wet snorting sound that had Draco biting his lip so he wouldn't tell his partner to wipe his nose. Then he braced his elbows in the leaves and whirled around. "I came here to help Hagrid," he said. "I knew you wouldn't understand." His face changed and he tried to leap to his feet. "*Hagrid*."

Draco pressed down again, twisting one of Potter's legs from under him when it appeared that he

was going to get away. Potter went down with an undignified yelp. Draco put his lips to Potter's ear, ignoring the way that the contact made his body shudder, and murmured, "Are you mad? This forest is full of Nihil's servants and God knows what else, and still you want to go charging off. Send some message to him. What about your Patronus?"

Potter twisted around to glare. By now, they were almost tangled together, and the light coming from their wands had dimmed. Draco could just make out the way Potter's lips had twisted to the side and his nostrils flared, and his eyes had an unsteady brilliance to them that increased Draco's anticipation of his words.

"And they're not going to notice an enormous glowing stag charging all over the forest?" At least Potter had lowered his voice. "Oh, yes, good show, Draco."

At least he's not irritated enough to go back to calling me by my last name. That gave Draco more confidence to continue the confrontation that by now it was only too obvious they needed to have. He pressed down on Potter's shoulder again. "At least it's silent, and if they were close enough to see you cast it, they would probably have attacked by now."

"Probably," Potter muttered, but he drew his wand and whispered the spell. When the stag appeared—also with a subdued glimmer, as if it understood they were in danger and was anxious to help—Potter told it, "Go to Hagrid and make sure that he's unwounded. Tell him that we're all right."

The stag dipped its antlers and vanished. Draco felt a moment's yearning. He *had* to learn how to do that spell.

Then his attention changed focus and direction as Potter whipped around to face him again and said, "Do you mind telling me why you tried to rip my arm off?"

Harry kept his voice low despite the temptation to shout. Gregory was gone, and it seemed that the human skins Nihil used to contain the grief magic were no threat, but the creatures that had challenged him might still be around.

He wanted to shout, though. He was *angry.* Wasn't it perfectly clear that he had left Draco behind because he felt he had to? It wasn't something he would have done otherwise. Draco should bloody well know that and stop glaring as if Harry had abandoned him. He *hadn't.*

So he told his conscience and his reason and the other things that would have tried to make him feel guilty, while glaring proudly back at Draco.

"Let's understand one thing right now," Draco said. His voice was low and deadly, and Harry couldn't help thinking that he would have been a much better Death Eater if he could have sounded this menacing *then*. But for some reason, it was always Harry who pulled that reaction from him. "You had no right to do what you did. I wouldn't have known you were in danger if the compatible magic hadn't punched me like someone poking me with a needle."

Harry stared at him. "I didn't know it could do that."

"Neither do I. Now I do." Draco leaned towards him. "You had no right." His voice was so intense that Harry flinched back. "Tell me why you left."

Harry glanced from side to side, estimating how open this little hilltop was. Moonlight shone down on it; it was entirely possible that the creatures would see them from a distance. "Shouldn't we move?" he asked. "We don't have any shelter if something comes up on us unexpectedly. You know what Ketchum would say about that."

"Who are you expecting to come up on us, if your friend is alive?" Draco's voice sounded petulant. He was clasping Harry's arm again in the hurtful way, the way that seemed to imply Harry was going to run off and leave him all alone. Harry shook his head. Draco was obviously not that good at paying attention to body language.

"This is still the *Forbidden Forest,* remember?" he asked pointedly. "Besides, I was attacked shortly before you appeared by creatures that I've never seen before. Wolves with horns and human faces on *both* sides of their heads." He shuddered. Maybe reacting so strongly to that one part of their appearances made him a coward, but he still couldn't quite get over it. "Maybe they were Nihil's servants, maybe not. But there's no telling where they are, not to mention what the centaurs might do when they find us in their territory."

Draco said, "You're trying to avoid this conversation." He pulled himself fluidly to his feet for all that and turned to pick his way down the hill. Harry followed, his wand aimed casually between Draco and the trees and his gaze darting in all directions.

"The reason I came here is very simple," Harry said. He saw a tangle of roots ahead, and peered at it, using his wand to scrape some of the dirt off. Yes, there was a nice hollow there, where the earth had rotted or fallen away, and they could have some shelter from the light rain that was starting to fall as well as something to put their backs against if the creatures attacked again. Harry relaxed. "This way," he said, tilting his head.

Draco followed him into the little hollow without complaint, but the moment they sat down and turned to face each other, Harry wondered if this had been such a good idea after all. They were close together, so that Draco could see every flash of emotion that passed across his face, and Harry suddenly found it hard to play the small game he had been playing for so many days.

He drew a hard breath. *Nonsense. Nothing to it,* he thought. *I only need to stop thinking about Draco's lips.*

"Now," Draco said, voice lower and stronger than it seemed like it should be legal for it to be, "we'll discuss why you left me behind."

"It's simple, like I told you." Harry craned his neck so that he could see over Draco's shoulder

just in case someone tried to approach from that direction, but so far, there was only darkness and the falling rain. He bit his lip. *My Patronus should have reached Hagrid by now.* "I got a letter from Hagrid that one of his magical creatures had gone missing and that there were Dark wizards about. I couldn't let Hagrid be hurt." He arched his brows as he brought his eyes back to Draco's face, frowning when he saw that Draco's expression had simply darkened.

"You could have brought me for *that*." Draco dug his fingers into the dirt, picking up a handful and crushing it as if it weren't powder already.

"No, I couldn't," Harry said patiently. He didn't want to reveal that Chester was an illegal hybrid right now. That would only make Draco angrier. "You don't care about Hagrid. You wouldn't have wanted to help him."

Draco's breath made a whistling sound. He leaned forwards as if he thought that Voldemort had possessed Harry. Harry braced his hands to keep from falling back and blinked at him. *What's got into him?*

"But I would have wanted to help *you*."

Harry let his eyes fall. He could feel his cheeks burning, and he was sure that Draco could see them, as unnecessarily close as he was holding the lighted wand.

"I didn't think of that," he muttered.

Draco felt his rage hissing up in him like steam up the spout of a teakettle. It was probably the smartest idea to keep silent—especially since they were in the middle of a dangerous area—and let Potter figure out for himself what was wrong, why Draco hated what he had done.

But he physically couldn't.

"You *never* think," he said, leaning forwards and crowding Potter into place against the dirt wall under the twisting roots above their heads. Potter swallowed nervously. Draco crowded even nearer. Potter was nervous around him when they were this close. Fine. Draco would use that to his advantage, even if he thought the reasons behind the nervousness were stupid. "You claim that you trust me now, that you've adapted to my being your partner, but that's not true. The minute you're ready to get into real danger, you leave me behind."

Potter's forehead took on the fixed lines that Draco was used to when he was being haughty. "I left Ron and Hermione behind, too, didn't I?" he replied, as if that proved something.

"They're your friends," Draco said. "You can choose to bring them or not, as far as I'm concerned. I don't care. I'm your *partner*. You're supposed to *trust me* and share your dangers with me. And trust me to hold my own, instead of flinging yourself stupidly between me and an enemy's spell. Gregory's curse could have done anything, Potter. Do you realize that?"

The words seemed to make an impression at last. Potter flinched. Then he wound his fingers together and said, "I didn't want you to be hurt."

"And I don't want you to be hurt, either." Draco made his response as simple and brutal and prompt as possible, because he knew no other way to get Potter to listen instead of nod at his words and then think about something else.

Potter gaped at him. Then he shook his head and said, "But I can take care of myself."

"Do you really think I can't?" Draco felt a thin, sharp lance of pain run from his throat down his chest. If Potter did think that, then he wanted to know so he could get used to the idea. But it hurt nonetheless.

"I—that's not what I meant." Potter swished his hand through his hair. Draco thought he knew where it got at least part of its reputation for uncontrollable shagginess. "I just meant that I can take care of people better than others can, and so you should leave me to get on with it."

"Come to that, I can fling my body between you and curses as well as you can yours." Draco folded his arms. "So why don't *you* leave *me* to get on with it?"

Potter glared at him. Draco stared right back. Potter had skated out of their last discussion because Draco had been too embarrassed to make him face the fact that they'd kissed. He wasn't getting out of this one. Draco would rub his face in his own illogic until he woke up and smelled the stink of it.

Harry felt trapped—more mentally than he did physically, even with the short space between his back and the wall of the hollow they were in, and the shorter one between his chest and Draco looming in front of him.

I said I wasn't going to think about that.

Harry shoveled ignorance on top of the thought and tried to figure this out more carefully. The things he was trying to explain to Draco were things he understood so instinctively that he was having trouble expressing himself. He could have done that to save Ron's life and Ron would have understood. Hermione would have, too, though she would probably have scolded him about it and told him he was being a martyr.

From the hostility on Draco's face, he didn't get it. At all.

And yet, Harry *knew* it wasn't the same thing, him trying to save Draco and Draco trying to save him. He just didn't know how to explain it.

"I do trust you," he said, because that was true and he thought Draco deserved to know it. "I do want to take you along with me. I would have taken you along with me if it was anyone except Hagrid."

"What about the Weasleys?" Draco's voice was soft and precise this time, and he drove it home like a blade that he was trying to plant in Harry's brain.

Harry hesitated.

"Ah." Draco rocked back on his heels, giving Harry some breathing space, though the coldness that hovered between them squashed his relief. "So you trust me to battle dummies or imaginary enemies on Ketchum's training fields, but not to save anyone who actually matters to you. Pleasant to know."

He stood up as if he was about to duck out of the hollow, and Harry reached out and grabbed his arm. Draco whipped his head around to glare again. The glare couldn't hide the pain at the corners of his eyes.

"Why shouldn't we go back to the Ministry and tell the instructors that we don't want to be partners anymore?" he whispered. "Give me one good reason."

"Um," Harry said, and then went back to truth. "Because I need you."

Draco gave him the most perfect skeptical expression he had ever seen, and Harry babbled more truth before he thought about it.

"I just—I really don't want you to get hurt, like I don't want Ron and Hermione to get hurt, and I sacrificed myself to protect people before, and I thought about the same thing now. I reckon I'm just used to it, so it's the first thing I think of. I didn't know it would bother you so much, or I wouldn't have done it. I want to do more things alone because my friends have helped me so much and I feel like I shouldn't depend on them anymore. I don't want you to get hurt. I didn't know what else to do." Harry swallowed, though it felt like he was swallowing razor blades, and extended his hand. "I wanted to bring you along, my mind told me to, but it was my pride that made me leave you behind. I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Please, forgive me?"

Draco took a slow, careful breath. He was tempted to fling off Potter's hand and stalk away in glory, leaving Potter to follow in humiliation like a kicked dog.

But he knew that would only cause problems in the end. Potter would use that pride he was talking about and build walls that would exclude Draco. It was pathetic, maybe, but Draco couldn't give up his friendship with Potter. It meant more to him than anything ever had.

And Potter had talked about pride being the cause of his stupidity. Draco knew about that. Oh, did he ever know about that. It was pride that had convinced him he could save his parents all by himself in sixth year, and somehow "prove" himself to the Dark Lord, though he had known in his more rational moods that the Dark Lord simply wanted to punish his family and wouldn't be satisfied by proof of any kind.

If Draco rejected Potter for being too proud, then it would be akin to Potter rejecting his younger self.

Draco liked to think that he had learned from his mistakes. He took a second deep breath, to calm his irritation, and held out his hand.

Potter's smile when Draco clasped his wrist was powerful enough to make a throb travel through Draco's body, originating in his chest and ending in his cock. Draco murmured, "If you break that promise, then I'll curse you. I know several spells that would leave you convinced your balls were tied around your ears."

Potter paled and leaned back from him, but Draco's stubborn hold on him wouldn't let him get very far. *Maybe that's a metaphor for our relationship in general,* Draco thought, watching those green eyes and the way they fluttered with hunger.

"Yeah, all right," Potter said. "I promise."

"You'll break that promise, but I'll remind you," Draco said, and smoothed down Potter's arm with his thumb to watch him shiver, and then let him go. Potter stood up and worked his way out of the hollow.

"*Point Me* Hagrid," he whispered, and his wand turned and pointed to what Draco thought was the north. Potter began to move through the leaves, more silently than Draco thought he would have been able to but still with a fuck of a lot of noise, and then whispered over his shoulder, "What do you make of Gregory?"

Draco thought about pushing the conversation they badly needed to have, but in the end shook his head and gave in. He'd done enough for one evening. At the very least, Potter was aware of how much they mattered to each other, and he might *hesitate* in the future to break his promise. Draco would be content with that for now, and quick with the reminders when Potter needed them.

"That she's trying to play both sides," he said. "She probably knew that she could convince you she's been framed, but then she saw me and realized she couldn't convince me. So she tried to get rid of me."

Potter snorted and stepped carefully past a prickling bush, holding it out of the way so that Draco could avoid being slapped by it. Draco bit his lip, hard, so he wouldn't embarrass himself by his reaction. "Why would someone who could know that about us react so clumsily as to try and kill you? At the very least, she had to know that I would suspect her after *that*. Not to mention that she knows about my sensitivity to Dark magic, so she couldn't think that I would fail to recognize her spell as Dark."

Draco nodded, but he wasn't about to let Potter see how disconcerted he was by the git's use of proper logic. "Then what do you suggest? Not that she's completely innocent, I hope, or her

attempt to kill me becomes hard to justify."

Potter snorted again. "No. Mostly, I don't know what to make of her. She did save my life by conjuring a sword that killed one of the creatures hunting me, but then she tried to kill you. I don't know." He shook his head and lapsed into silence.

"Describe these creatures more closely."

Potter did, but Draco didn't recognize any of their traits no matter how long he listened. The only thing he could be sure of was that they violated the Experimental Breeding Ban, and that sounded like something Nihil would do, in the pursuit of better servants. But it also sounded like something that oaf of a gamekeeper would do. When they met up with him at last, cradling something small and orange against his chest, Draco half-expected him to scold them for "manhandling the poor beasties."

But Hagrid was simply ecstatic that he had his "Chester" back, and kept repeating, blubbering, the tale of how he had run up to Hagrid "as if he knew his mummy!" The orange menace that had dragged Potter out here, meanwhile, closed its eyes and snored in all innocence. Draco rolled his eyes and ignored the way that Hagrid stared at him. It was none of the oaf's business if he chose to accompany his partner.

"You'll let me know about the Dark wizards that you think are around?" Potter asked Hagrid. He was half-smiling at the man, his head tilted to the side as if he would begin to shake it in exasperation any minute. Draco sighed. *How can he put up with someone who constantly gets into trouble and demands so much of him?*

Maybe it's a special Potter trait. He put up with Weasley for this long, after all.

"Yeah, Harry," Hagrid said, and chucked Chester under the chin. This resulted in a small flare of fire that told Draco the horrid thing had at least partial dragon heritage. "Bless him!" Hagrid said with what sounded like reverence.

Though Potter asked several questions about other wizards in the woods, and the creatures that had stalked him, Hagrid gave him only blank stares. Possibly he was too distracted by his obvious concern for "Chester" to pay proper attention to the questions, but Draco didn't think he was lying. He knew from experience how terrible the half-breed was at concealing the truth.

Potter thanked him at last with a voice that had defeat in it and moved away. Draco stepped close to him, refusing to glance back when he heard a yelp of pain and then a croon that ended in the word "Precious!"

"What do you think we should do?" he asked.

"Keep an eye on the creatures and the Dark wizards around here," Potter said. "I don't know if they're really interested in Chester or not, the way Hagrid thought they were. It seems they would

have stalked him instead of trying to capture Gregory if they were. He should have been easier to take than she was." He gnawed his cheek for a moment, and Draco struggled against the temptation to tell him it was an unattractive habit. "And keep an eye on things around Hogwarts in general," Potter finished in a low, frustrated voice. "I can't get over the idea that there's something specific around here that they want, though I don't know what it is."

Draco nodded. At least their investigation had turned in a new direction, and they had people to suspect outside the Auror barracks. Besides, Gregory's involvement in the battle would make something interesting to report to Dearborn.

"Thank you."

Draco raised an eyebrow. Potter had mumbled the words, and he wasn't sure there weren't others he had missed. "What?"

Potter turned around to look at him, face set in determined lines. He clasped Draco's hands as if he meant to squeeze the bones in them to dust.

"Thank you," Potter repeated firmly. "I don't—there's no way that I could have done this without you."

Draco didn't want to make a fool of himself. On the other hand, he didn't want to hurt Potter by cold dismissal. In the end, he settled for squeezing Potter's hands back and offering a smile that he hoped was distant.

Then Potter gave him a slow, burning smile of his own, and there was a flicker of that interest in his eyes that Draco had missed seeing lately.

Perhaps I do not want my smiles to be distant, after all, Draco thought.

The developments around Hogwarts and in the Forbidden Forest were not the only things that he would have to keep an eye on.

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Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Three—The Real Thing

"I'm going to ask you again to wake up, Trainee Potter."

Harry hastily forced his drooping eyes open and sat back in the chair. Auror Pushkin stood in front of him, shaking his head slowly and tragically back and forth. He tapped the crystalline sculpture that sat on Harry's desk with one fingernail. The sculpture rang as though it was a cymbal.

"You have had more than enough time to do your observation," Pushkin said crisply. "How many spikes does this object have?"

Harry cursed under his breath. He was getting better and better at noticing individual small details, like the singed side to Ron's sleeve that he'd seen when his friend came storming into Observation and meant to ask him about, but he couldn't count a huge number of things at a single glance. It was one time that Harry would have been glad to be Hermione.

"Um, thirty?" he said.

Pushkin simply stood there considering him. Harry looked down at his desk and pushed his quill back and forth. Dearborn's silent looks of condescension set his teeth on edge, and the other instructors tended to scold. Pushkin was the only one whose silence made Harry feel the way he used to when yet another birthday passed without presents.

"A hundred and sixteen, Trainee Potter," Pushkin said, his voice chill and gentle. He removed the sculpture from Harry's desk and stepped out of the way, waving his wand at a blank wall. A picture appeared there, a confusing tangle of colors and shapes to Harry's tired eyes. "This is an image of the Forbidden Forest at the height of summer, a place that you might find yourself fighting in someday if you are lucky enough to survive the training program."

Harry swallowed down the urge to tell Pushkin that he'd been fighting there last night and that was why he was so tired. He was almost sure the Observation professor wouldn't care that Harry was trying to keep a madman from taking over the world. Pushkin probably would have insisted on counting the number of threads in Voldemort's robe before he killed him.

"What should I be looking for, sir?" he asked instead. He heard Draco snicker from the side, or was sure that he did. Harry tightened his left hand down into a fist at the side of the desk and made a mental note to curse every pair of Draco's socks to tie themselves together later.

"This image has been altered," Pushkin said crisply. "Find the animals and the geometric shapes that have been added to the trees and branches."

Harry wanted to laugh. *Are you bloody kidding me? This is the kind of game that Muggle children play.*

But apparently Aurors had to play it, too. Harry leaned forwards, straining his eyes, and made out a square in the trunk of the nearest tree. He announced it. Pushkin nodded and gestured with his wand again. A faint pink number 1 appeared on the wall next to the picture.

"How many are there, sir?" Harry asked, feeling a bit better.

"Eighty-nine," Pushkin said at once.

Harry glanced at the rest of the class out of the corner of his eye, wondering what they would have to say about this, and felt his face burn when he realized that the room was empty. Pushkin had let him sleep through most of the exam, then, and awakened him only when the last student had left.

Clearing his throat, Harry applied himself to disentangling the shapes of leopards and griffins and circles from the surprisingly dense picture of a forest in midsummer.

"Malfoy. I wanted to talk to you."

Draco raised his head, and his eyebrows. The voice had been polite, and that was a feat in itself, when no one but Potter and the instructors spoke to him except through gritted teeth. He pushed his tray aside and nodded to the speaker. "I have time." The dining hall was open at all hours during exams, giving harried trainees time to snatch meals in between frantic bouts of study. Draco wouldn't admit to himself that he was sitting here, long after he had finished his meal, and waiting for Potter.

The woman sat down across from him and looked at him seriously. Draco looked back at her, noting the tight lines around her mouth that meant she hadn't approached him voluntarily, and said, "Catherine Arrowshot?"

"Yes." Arrowshot clasped her hands on the table in front of her. She looked weary, her eyes rimmed with red, but Draco reckoned they were pretty eyes enough, deep blue. Her hair, though, was brown and stringy and hung over her shoulders as though she'd forgotten to comb it. Draco kept from curling his lip with an effort. He preferred hair darker than that, and with a will of its own.

Stop thinking of Potter. Among other things, he didn't need to flush from the force of his own thoughts or the blood they sent to his cock and have Arrowshot think the blush was for her.

He tilted his head and adopted a quiet, supercilious expression. "What could be important enough to make you approach me?"

"Damn few things," Arrowshot said, without smiling. "But I wanted to ask you about the red and black magic that you've confronted."

Draco nodded without surprise. The instructors had tried their best to keep the content of Harry and Draco's battles quiet, but of course that was impossible in a building of any size, and the trainee barracks had about a third the number of students that Hogwarts did. "Ask."

"You can't guarantee that you'll answer, though." Arrowshot peered at him through the outermost pieces of her hair.

Draco shook his head and darted another look at the door of the dining hall. He'd thought it amusing when he realized that Potter was asleep and Pushkin was letting him rest, but he wouldn't have felt that way if he'd known how long he would have to wait. *Come on, Potter.*

"Did the red and black magic leave…remains behind?" Arrowshot spoke so carefully that Draco was sure she'd spent a long time picking out that word.

Draco gave her what she probably wanted: a sharp look and his attention. "What do you mean by that? You know about the letters on the wall and the Death Eaters, of course." If she didn't know that the Death Eaters had been fake, simply containers for the red and black magic—the instructors had presumably dispatched them, but they'd been moved out of the Ministry and Draco didn't know their fate—then Draco wasn't about to tell her. Nihil had corrupted trainees, hadn't he? Arrowshot could be one of them.

Arrowshot sat still for a minute, agitatedly plaiting her fingers through her hair in a manner that told Draco how it had ended up looking the way it did. Then she snorted, said, "Ah, *fuck*," and reached into her robe pocket for something that she slapped into the middle of the table.

Draco drew his wand and cast a *Lumos* spell so that he could see the object better than the dim lights of the dining hall allowed. He wasn't about to touch it until he knew what it was.

It, or rather they, looked like plaster, at first. Jagged white pieces. Draco glanced at Arrowshot, and she nodded. "They're safe to touch. I've done multiple spells on them, and they only exude residual magic, as if someone powerful touched them and then went away."

If she was one of Nihil's followers, that was just the sort of thing she *would* say. Draco cast a protective charm on his hands before he reached out.

They were silky in the middle despite their sharp edges, and it took Draco a long moment to decide what they reminded him of. "Eggshell," he breathed. "They look like pieces of eggshell." He looked up. "Where did you find them?"

"Inside the interrogation rooms where they were keeping the Death Eaters." Draco knew he had blinked from the way that Arrowshot looked at him scornfully. "Do you think you're the only one who has the courage to investigate inside the Ministry? Yes, I've been there, too, and so do other people you don't need to know about."

Draco looked thoughtfully back at the bits of shell, wondering if he should worry about this. Then he shook his head. He didn't think so. After all, he and Potter had more knowledge about Nihil than Arrowshot could have. He was sure of that. They could allow Arrowshot and any little friends that wanted to run beside her investigate for them, make noise, and attract attention. Then he and Potter could come in behind and pick up the pieces.

"And are you sure that they aren't ordinary debris?" He let his voice waver as he turned the bits over with his fingertips, memorizing the slippery feel of them in the middle. Arrowshot smiled proudly, as he saw from the corner of his eye. *Good.* If he pretended to be more interested than he really was, the advantage would lie with him. "Maybe a Potions master dropped them while he was carrying ingredients."

"I've done the standard tests that Auror Jones told us about," Arrowshot said, her voice as solemn and proud as though she was declaring that she'd mastered a rare and secret art. "They don't match standard Potions ingredients. And I'm taking Battle Brewing," she added, as if that had only just now occurred to her. "I think I would recognize them if they fell within normal parameters."

Draco gave her an absent smile that he hoped would look impressed. He had finally accessed the odd sense memory that the bits of shell brushing against his fingers had reminded him of.

These are pieces from a roc egg.

But that still left the question of how they had come there. Roc eggs were not simply lying about anywhere for anyone to snatch up. Their use was carefully restricted. And Draco thought that these had been used in some unusual way, if residual magic lingered about them still.

"I don't know what they could have to do with Nihil," he said, not quite truthfully, as he pulled his hand back and pushed the bits of shell towards Arrowshot again. "But they could be an important clue. Maybe."

Arrowshot dipped her head. "That's all I wanted to know." She scooped up the pieces of eggshell and made them vanish inside her sleeve with a complicated motion that told Draco she could be a dangerous duelist. "This way, at least I can help Sarah."

Draco blinked. "Who's Sarah?"

Arrowshot froze in the act of rising from the table and gave him a sharp glance. "You don't know who Sarah Manders is?" she asked, as if the girl was the reincarnation of Merlin.

Draco gave her a steady gaze back. As always when someone tried to put him at a disadvantage, the temptation to throw them off-balance instead was irresistible. "How many people do you think talk to me and exchange friendly information?" he asked with a drawl, tilting his head from side to side so that Arrowshot would have to take in the empty tables around him, and the turned backs beyond that.

"I'm sorry," Arrowshot said, so quietly that Draco would have missed the words if he hadn't been listening intently for her every breath. He blinked again, but Arrowshot had gone on before he could respond, and he thought she found the apology distasteful and was glad to get it over with. "Sarah Manders is a second-year trainee who was one of Auror Gregory's mentees. Everyone

thinks that she must know *something*, and they keep questioning her and refusing to let her participate in some of the higher-level training that she needs if she's going to become a third-year trainee on time." Arrowshot's jaw tightened. "You haven't been treated fairly, Malfoy. I acknowledge that. But she hasn't been treated fairly, either."

Just someone else whom I don't care about. But Draco had learned how highly pretenses of compassion could be valued. Potter seemed to approve of the way that Draco "tolerated" his friends simply by keeping most of his thoughts to himself.

Besides, he was beginning to think that Nihil's web was laid stronger and deeper than he and Potter had believed it was. It would not hurt to have allies, if they could make them and if they held them outside that inner circle of trust he still believed should exist between himself and Potter only.

"Tell her that I hope her name is cleared," he said politely.

Arrowshot gave him a smile that was out of all proportion to the gesture and nodded. "Thank you," she said again, and turned and strode from the dining hall. In her face was a familiar kind of passion. Draco usually saw it in Potter's expression when he contemplated defeating evil.

"Why were you talking to her?"

Draco smiled and took a moment to revel in Potter's tone. There was a compressed spark there, something pounded flat that might take Potter months to acknowledge, but which Draco knew was jealousy. That made up for the fact that he had not heard Potter approach.

"Because she showed me bits of eggshell that she had found in the interrogation rooms and wanted to know if they had something to do with Nihil," he said, turning around. Potter flopped into the seat beside him, and Draco shuddered a little. It was a miracle that his attraction to Potter could survive individual movements so graceless. "What kept you?"

"Pushkin made me do the Observation exam," Potter muttered. He glanced at the tray in front of him and dug a finger into a bowl of something limp and yellow that Draco hadn't been able to identify and therefore hadn't chosen. It *looked* like custard, but it also looked like fresh vomit. Potter gave a grimace of resignation and picked up his spoon.

"I'm amazed that you fell asleep," Draco said quietly. He leaned closer so that no one else would overhear, though given the way everyone continued to pointedly ignore him, it wasn't likely. "We were out late last night, but I didn't think you were that tired when we got back."

"I wasn't," Potter said. He pulled up a long, sloppy strand of custard and swallowed it with a noise that made Draco shudder. "That was the problem," Potter said, and Draco reached over and pressed his jaw shut so that he wouldn't take with his mouth full. Potter rolled his eyes at him.

"Manners," Draco said, as gently as he could when he both wanted to laugh and to concentrate

on the warm, smooth skin under his fingers. "Tell me that you know what they are."

Potter looked away and gave his shoulders a shake that told Draco how irritated he was. Draco dropped his hand at once. When he touched Potter, his mind was going to be fully on what was happening to him, or Draco wouldn't give him the gift.

Potter finished licking his lips and defiantly ate two more spoonfuls before he said, "I couldn't fall asleep. And now I think something is wrong because Ron came into Observation with a singed sleeve, and I have to talk to him. And the thought makes me tired." He bowed his head as though someone had pressed the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"If he makes you that tired," Draco said, "why do you keep his friendship? I wouldn't be friends with someone who caused me only pain."

Potter glared at him. "He's done a lot for me," he said. "He's always been my best friend. Just because he's being a bit of an arse now doesn't mean I want to turn my back on him."

Back off, Draco. Draco stifled a sigh. Potter would be so much easier to deal with minus his tagalongs, but Draco didn't think he was going to get that wish granted any time soon. It would need far more outrageous behavior from the Weasel before Potter consented to abandon him completely.

"All right," he said, "I don't want to talk about Weasley, anyway. I want to talk about Nihil and what we're going to do."

Potter ran his fingers through his hair, which didn't improve its appearance, and sighed into his dinner. He had put down the custard spoon, Draco saw. He stored the information that Potter apparently didn't eat well when he was stressed in the back of his mind. It was the kind of thing that it would be useful to know about his partner in the future.

Or my lover.

The thought swirled around his mind like delicate morning mist and was gone as quickly. It was a thought that Draco dared not entertain until he had far more concrete proof than he possessed right now of what Potter might someday mean to him.

"Finish your ludicrous meal," he said, "and we'll talk."

Potter shook his head, refusing to reach for his cutlery out of sheer bloody-mindedness, Draco was sure. "I'm tired of that, too," he said. "We have to start somewhere, but I think we're running around in the dark. We keep picking up threads, and then the threads are attached to something else, and the whole thing unravels, and we're left with a bunch of dirty cloth and no idea what to do next."

"Poetic, Potter," Draco muttered, but Potter kept on in such a way that Draco was sure he

couldn't have heard. Draco's words deserved more attention than that.

"What do the beasts have to do with Nihil? What were they looking for on Hogwarts grounds? Why would they give Chester to Hagrid—if Nemo was Nihil—and then try to take him away again? What is the red and black magic exactly? What is Gregory's connection to this whole mess? What do the instructors know? Why would Nihil want to reveal his name like that? Why the attacks on *us*, before we'd done anything but destroy one of his illusions? So many *questions.*" Potter dropped his head against the back of his chair with a thunk that made Draco wince and stared at the ceiling. "No answers at all. I think we're running in circles." He glanced sideways at Draco, his eyes hopeless. "And now eggshells. Where do they fit? Probably nowhere."

Draco drummed his fingers on the table. He reckoned he could understand why Potter was feeling overwhelmed; it was simply inconvenient of him to give way to those feelings *now*, of all times. Draco was used to stepping lightly through the dark, gathering the threads together, and then looking for the place where they would make sense in the larger tapestry, and they had more threads than ever before.

But Potter needed some goal.

Draco took a deep breath. "The eggshell means living things," he said. "I could tell that it was the shell of a roc egg, though altered somewhere. And we at least suspect that Nihil has been breeding himself servants like the beasts that you met in the Forest."

Potter rolled his head towards Draco, his eyes brightening. "Yes."

"So let's start with them," Draco said. "If someone breaks the Experimental Breeding Ban, they're going to leave traces. And I know people—or my mother knows people—who could try to find those traces for us. Meanwhile, we can try to figure out what was done to that eggshell and what kinds of spells you would need to give something two faces, and why you would want to."

Potter frowned. "What would the price be for the people your mother knows?"

Draco grinned. "You do have your moments of common sense." Potter raised an eyebrow, and he gave in. "Probably no more than an exchange of favors at some time in the future. Imagine what they could do if they had the Boy-Who-Lived in their debt."

"Don't *you* start." Potter regarded Draco with distaste, as if he imagined that Draco would grow the long, flowing hair and starry eyes of one of his female fans.

"You're not like everyone else," Draco said, flinging his words like stones. "We discussed that already. It's time that you started acknowledging the power of your position and using it, instead of letting other people use you."

Potter frowned, opened his mouth, shut it again, and bit his lip.

Draco was content to move on from the subject. Just like his point about Potter's friends, it was best to leave this seed to grow in Potter's mind instead of continually poking at it. "Come with me to the library tomorrow. We can start looking up information about the Experimental Breeding Ban. And then I hope that you won't be opposed to sneaking out again tomorrow night, since you seem to make quite a habit of it."

Potter flushed, but only asked, "Where are we going?"

Draco grinned at him. "If you're going to work with my mother, shouldn't you meet her?"

"Mate?" Harry called softly as he stepped into their room. He knew from the tingle of magic—something he had just realized he was able to sense a few days ago—that Ron was here. But he didn't respond to Harry's words, and Harry had walked into the middle of the room before he saw him.

Ron lay face-down on his bed. Harry found himself clutching his wand and staring hard. Then he realized that Ron's back still rose and fell gently with his breaths, and there was no sign of blood. He lowered his hand and cleared his throat in embarrassment.

Ron rolled over and stared at him. Harry took a step backwards. Ron's face had red patches on the skin that looked like burns, or else caked makeup, and his nose was large and protruding more than it had that morning. His fringe had turned white.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked in some awe. "Did you get in a duel with one of the second-years?" The only exams that might have caused something like that to happen to him, Dearborn's and Ketchum's, were already over.

Ron shook his head miserably and tried to croak something. His voice sounded like a toad's. Harry hastily waved his wand and muttered a *Finite* that made most of the damage recede from Ron's face, although the enlarged nose stayed. That must have been a Transfiguration, Harry thought absently as he sat down in the chair nearest Ron.

"Hermione," Ron said, putting a hand across his eyes as if he thought that would keep Harry from looking at him. "We got in an argument over—it doesn't matter, really." Harry opened his mouth to protest that Ron thought *Harry's* love life was his business, then thought about it and kept quiet. If he didn't want Ron telling him who he should date and how to make up after fights with his girlfriend, then he couldn't do the same thing to Ron. "But she cast spells at me just like she did during sixth year at Hogwarts and then stormed off, telling me she didn't want to date me if I wasn't going to do my own bloody work." Ron sounded injured.

"Ah," Harry said. At least that told him the fight had probably been over Hermione's newfound effort to keep Ron from using her notes. "Is there anything I can do, mate?"

Ron started complaining about Hermione, which made the answer clear enough. Harry listened and offered sympathy when he could, mostly by shaking his head and making noises in the right places.

For some reason, his thoughts were on Draco and other things unrelated to how happy Ron and Hermione were in their relationship. He wondered if he and Draco would curse each other if—

And then he stopped, horrified, because he knew exactly where the thoughts were leading.

If we dated? That's what you were thinking, Harry, wasn't it? And it's wrong. You know that nothing like that will ever happen. You shouldn't want *it to, not when it would make everyone around you unhappy and Draco doesn't want to date you.*

Harry swallowed and shook his head. He didn't understand his own imagination sometimes, or want to.

"That's what *I* said!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry tried to pay attention to the conversation that was happening in front of him, the real thing, and not the imaginary things that his brain was trying to conjure up for him to look at. He and Draco were good partners and getting to be good friends. They argued, sure, but no one was perfect as far as that went.

To think of more than that was—

Dangerous. Stupid. Nonsensical.

Harry didn't even understand *why* he was thinking it, because, as far as he knew, he wasn't gay.

And if he wasn't gay, he couldn't really be attracted to Draco.

He sat back in relief and let Ron's familiar problems wash over him. At least they were real.

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Chapter: 24

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Four—On the Move

When Harry walked into Dearborn's class the next day—most of the instructors didn't require

them to attend after the exams were finished, but of course Dearborn had to be the exception and insist on a final "review" class—he saw Draco talking to Catherine Arrowshot. Their heads were bent together, and from the looks on their faces, what Harry could see of them, they were either arguing or agreeing intensely.

There was no reason for the stinging bile that flooded Harry's mouth, or his sudden inability to breathe, or the way he wanted to hit someone. There was no *excuse* for it. Draco could talk with whoever he liked.

In fact, Harry thought, as he slowly took a seat towards the front of the classroom and turned around so that he couldn't see Draco and Arrowshot anymore, *he needs more friends than just me. He still doesn't have someone who will stay in the same rooms with him. I would, but that would mean abandoning Ron. He still doesn't have people lining up to talk to him after class, no matter how brilliant he is at the subject. He doesn't have a study partner or someone who will sit with him at meals, other than me.*

I should be happy that he has someone who doesn't mind spending time around him, even if it's only because they're discussing Nihil.

Harry glanced at the door. No, Dearborn wasn't coming in yet, which meant he could dig his fingers into the desktop with no one to scold him. He hated showing that much emotion in front of the Offensive and Defensive instructor. Dearborn would always find some way to mock him for it, or to look at him and make him feel as if it was a weakness.

I have no idea why Draco likes him so much. Harry had to smile a bit, though, as he remembered how Draco would have done the same kinds of things to him in Hogwarts if he could muster the coolness of expression. *Similar personalities, maybe.*

Draco's laughter sounded from behind him. Harry heard more laughter, too, laughter he assumed was Arrowshot's. He hunched his shoulders and moved them defensively, then stopped. He could hear Dearborn's footsteps in the corridor, but more than that, he was revolted by his own behavior.

He deserves to talk to anyone he wants. He needs *friends, I know that. It's disgusting of me to make any kind of a fuss about it.*

Harry almost relaxed when his irritation and jealousy turned into self-loathing. At least he knew how to deal with that kind of thing since Draco had confronted him about his conversation with Ginny.

I had thoughts that were stupid, but as long as I don't actually do *anything stupid, then it's all right. Besides, I have Ron and Hermione as friends, and Draco doesn't object to them nearly as much anymore. I shouldn't object to Arrowshot.*

Dearborn walked in. Harry heard a rustle of robes as the students standing up and talking to each

other scuttled to their seats. He rearranged the quill and parchment on his desk and told himself that he didn't mind where Draco sat, that he wasn't waiting—

Draco dropped into the chair beside him and raised an eyebrow at him, as if asking why he had a half-sulky expression on his face. Harry relaxed and smiled back.

"You should know," Dearborn's voice began, "that the next term of Defensive and Offensive Magic will be different from this one. You have learned the differences between them and used them in duels against each other. Next term, you will have to combine spells and use them in large-scale battles with three or four partners working together. This is done to prevent two people's magic from becoming so deeply entwined that they can only function in pairs." Harry frowned as he saw Dearborn looking at him. "I will give you the names of several books that may help you if you wish to begin preliminary study over the Christmas holidays…"

Harry heard the soft scratching of a quill from his left, and knew that Hermione was already taking notes. Beside him, Draco folded his hands and raised his eyebrows, as if he wanted to know what the book titles were before he would bother writing them down.

Everything's normal, Harry reassured himself. *See? It's not going to change anything if Draco has other friends.*

He picked up his own quill and parchment when Dearborn began to reel off the titles, sounding as if he were naming old companions. There was probably no chance of getting hold of them, since the trainees' library never had enough copies of the required books for everyone, but on the other hand, he was staying at the barracks over the Christmas holidays the way he used to stay at Hogwarts. He might have a chance when most of the other trainees had gone home.

He had to stay focused. He was here to become an Auror. There had to be other things in his life besides Draco and who Draco was spending time with.

And if he felt jealousy for any reason, it was up to him to conquer it and not let it make him stupid.

"You'll be coming to the Burrow for a few days, right, Harry?" Weasel's voice was loud, anxious, and unmistakable, even from a corridor away. Draco leaned his shoulder on the wall and shook his head. Weasel was right to be anxious about Potter refusing, since they'd been arguing most of the term.

"I reckon," said Potter. Draco heard a few muffled thumps that were probably him throwing clothes into a bag to travel—wherever his Muggle relatives lived. Or maybe he was going to spend the holiday with Potter relatives, if he had any left. "Christmas Eve and Christmas Day? And maybe Boxing Day, if no one minds."

"Who would *mind*?" A solid sound, as though the Weasel had clapped Harry on the shoulder. Draco curled his lip. He always clapped too hard; Draco had seen the bruises before.

"Ginny," Potter said quietly.

An awkward pause. Draco smiled sharply, bowing his head. *You don't have an answer to that one, do you, Weasel?*

"You have as much right to be there as she does," the Weasel said suddenly, fiercely. "Come along if you want, Harry. And I'll tell Mum to make sure that she doesn't seat you together."

Potter laughed. Draco strained his ears, but he couldn't tell how much genuine merriment was in his voice and how much was probably a contrivance for Weasel's sake. "All right, Ron. I'll see you then, and probably sooner." This time the solid sound was, Draco thought, a clap on Weasel's shoulder in return.

He waited until he heard the Weasel's footsteps leave before he rounded the corner. When he peered through the door of the room, he blinked and wondered how he could so have misinterpreted the noises. Potter wasn't packed yet. Instead, he stood frowning at a thick book, shaking his head as though he had found a theory he disagreed with. Draco eyed the back of his neck. He hadn't realized how long Potter's hair had grown. It lost some of its messiness as it sprawled towards his shoulders, though it would never look as elegant as Draco's did.

He cleared his throat, since Potter was taking an unconscionably long time to notice him. Potter started and looked up, but relaxed when he saw it was Draco.

I do that to him, Draco thought smugly as he walked further into the room. *Me.* "Are you ready to visit my mother?" he asked, running a critical eye up and down Potter's trainee robes. "No, of course you aren't. Use a Cleaning Charm first."

"I thought we were going tonight." Potter put the heavy book down on his bed as if it had hurt his hands. Draco rolled his eyes. Honestly, sometimes Potter seemed to forget he was a wizard. Why not just use a Lightening Charm?

"There's no reason to when we're being allowed to leave the barracks anyway," Draco said, with a shrug. "When I told you that, I had heard rumors from the instructors that they would extend our days here with extra meetings like the one that Auror Dearborn wanted to have. Now I know they're not going to."

Potter glanced at him with eyes that were brilliant and a mouth twitching with laughter. "Why not just admit that you made a mistake, Draco?"

"Because," Draco explained carefully, "I didn't." He could feel a smile lifting the corners of his lips. Why that was happening, he couldn't understand and perhaps should not try to.

There's no one else in the world I could see myself joking with like this. Draco had never considered before whether a lover should be able to make him laugh, because other traits had

always come first in his mind. But now, as his gaze lingered on Potter's rolling eyes and flushed face, he decided that the trait might be worth considering.

"All right," Potter said. He turned towards the door of his rooms, leading Draco along behind him, and then asked, in such a pointed tone there was no way he could make it sound casual, the way he seemed to wish, "Oh—what were you talking about with Arrowshot this morning?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. He deserved to get part of his own back since Potter had seen fit to laugh at him. "Jealous, Harry?" He deepened his voice, and watched in great satisfaction as if Potter's shoulderblades twitched as if he was about to grow wings.

"I—no!" There was no way that Potter could make that convincing, either. He seemed to realize it a moment later, since he turned around. "I wanted to know if she'd found out anything else about Nihil."

Draco shook his head. "She has more extensive ties to the Ministry than we do, however, since she has family members working there. She intends to ask them to listen for rumors and to spread the rumor herself that the Auror program might lose some of its trainees if people get nervous enough."

"That's true, I reckon." Potter ran his hand through his hair, making Draco wince, and then turned around again. "Well, let's go face the Wild Beast of the Manor."

"We don't keep wild beasts running about to devour the guests," Draco said, as he cast a nonverbal Styling Charm at Potter's hair, "not since the war ended." He did not want to think about Nagini, but at least the thought in teasing words sounded less fearsome than the memories it would stir if he tried to be serious.

"I was talking about your mother, actually," Potter said, and then had the good sense to dodge to the side to avoid the hex that followed. Draco only felt more irritated when he remembered that their compatible magic wouldn't actually have let him touch Potter.

Well, I can still trip him up, or punch him, or hold him against a wall and breathe on his lips until he thinks we're going to snog.

Draco could not decide which of those would be more fun.

"Mr. Potter. How lovely to see you again."

Harry was sure Narcissa Malfoy's words weren't sincere. Why would they be? He was the reason that Voldemort was dead, and even though he knew she had helped him escape Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest, he'd still cost her family a lot of prestige and money, and helped to put her husband in prison.

But because she *sounded* so absolutely sincere and was smiling while she extended her hands to

him, Harry thought that the least he could do was return the courtesy. He clasped her hands and bowed his head to give the back of the right one a kiss. "The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Malfoy," he murmured as he stood back up. He hoped that was right. He was mostly running on old memories of shows that he'd sometimes glimpsed on the Dursleys' telly that were set in historical times.

Draco drew in a sharp breath that made Harry wince, sure he'd got it wrong, but Mrs. Malfoy looked more charmed still. "Call me Narcissa, Harry," she said, and hooked his hand in her arm and drew him into the Manor. "Let me show you the portraits of our ancestors. This is the very first Lady Malfoy, who was born Harmonia Torrent…"

Harry was glad for the tour; it let him look around without seeming like a gawker, and it gave him some time to recover from his first impressions of the Manor. He'd been thinking of it as the place where Hermione was tortured, and getting more and more tense as they came up the long gravel drive. He needed to stare at each wall and each portrait and each piece of furniture for a while until he could get the screams out of his head.

Draco followed them like a shadow, and when Harry glanced back at him, he found him scowling. Harry wondered what in the world he'd done wrong, but the only thing he could do was to try and give Draco a reassuring smile. Draco hunched his shoulders and turned away with a sniff. Harry shook his head. He had no idea what *that* was about.

"And this is the glass case with the relics of the Persecution…"

Harry found himself calming down as they wound further and further into the Manor; they were avoiding any of the rooms he remembered. He wondered if Mrs. Malfoy knew that he wouldn't want to go into them, and then shook his head and told himself not to be so vain and stupid. Why would that matter to her? She probably had bad memories herself, and so those rooms were shut up or something.

"And this is the beak of the griffin that Octavius Malfoy killed all by himself, in the days when the Malfoys still demanded some sort of trial of manhood…"

Mrs. Malfoy's pointless chatter was actually soothing. By the time the tour finished and they were sitting down in a room so posh that Aunt Petunia would have drooled at the sight of the cushions, Harry was more relaxed. He tried to ignore the fact that the glass in his hand probably cost more than four sets of his robes would have as he said, "Did Draco tell you why we're here, Mrs. Malfoy?"

"Narcissa, Harry." She sat on the couch across from him, her pale robes a contrast to the deep red of the cushions. Her hair was done up in some kind of complicated arrangement with silver combs that Harry knew his hair would never agree to. She gave him a smile with a bit of a bite to it. "That's what friends of the family always call me."

Harry was glad he hadn't been taking a sip of wine just then, because he would have choked on

it. *Friend of the family?* He was Draco's friend and he owed a life-debt to Mrs. Malfoy, but he wouldn't say that he was a friend of the entire family. Draco, too, was shifting on his chair as if he disagreed with those words.

"And yes, he did," Mrs. Malfoy went on, turning to her son. "You want to make the kind of political contacts that would let you find out who this 'Nihil' is." She framed the name carefully with her lips as if she disliked pronouncing it.

"Yes." Draco gave his mother a smile and finally seemed to relax. "I know that we Malfoys don't have as much political capital as we used to, but what do you think of the name of Potter? It ought to get us what we want."

Harry shifted in turn. "I don't want to do that unless we have to," he said.

"We have to, Potter," Draco snapped, glaring at him. "End of discussion."

"There's no proof of that yet," Harry said, and turned to Mrs. Malfoy. "What do you think, ma'am? Do you think that we'll really have to trade favors to get people to investigate Nihil? After all, he threatens the safety of the world *they're* living in, too, and not just Draco's safety or mine."

"I would like you to call me by my first name, as I have several times told you to." Mrs. Malfoy's voice was low and sharp. Her smile had vanished entirely as she put down her wineglass on a table beside the couch and took up her wand.

Harry stared at her, then glanced sideways at Draco, who was quietly chuckling. He sighed. "What do you think, Narcissa?" The name tasted foreign on his tongue, worse than when he had had to start calling Draco by his first name. At least there was friendship there to help him over the initial barrier.

As though there had never been an argument between them, Narcissa settled back into her seat and picked up the wineglass. "I think I would rather not try weapons that didn't work and see them fail," she said equitably. "We will begin with your name, Harry, instead of waiting on it. That will secure us the results that we want, and faster."

Harry hissed between his teeth, but nodded. "All right," he said. "If we must."

Narcissa tilted her head to the side in curiosity. "Forgive me for asking, in case the answer is obvious," she said quietly, "but why are you so reluctant to use your power? The Ministry has not been. They have bragged consistently that you are in the Auror program since you joined, hoping to draw more recruits."

Harry tightened his hand on his glass and stared blankly into the fire. That shouldn't surprise or hurt him as much as it did. Of course it had happened, and he probably would have known that if he'd been able to pay attention to anything outside exams, his friends, trying to find Nihil, and

Draco in the last few months.

"I don't—I don't want to ask for anything unfair," Harry said at last, when he glanced to the side and realized that Draco was waiting for the answer, too. "I've received so much already from the wizarding world, and not all of it is stuff I deserve." He ran his hand through his hair, which made Draco give a full-body twitch for some reason, and shrugged. "And I also don't want to do unjust things for people I'm obliged to."

"Asking for help to find Nihil is not an unfair use of your power," Draco said, his voice so thick with conviction that it took Harry a moment to sort out the words from the tone. "And I'll make sure that you're not bound to anything too bad."

Harry looked at him. "You will?"

"Trust me." Draco's lips were parted and his eyes shone.

Harry smiled in spite of himself. "*That's* no problem," he said. "But even you can't stop people asking for things that I might not want to grant."

"Then we will simply negotiate the price down," Narcissa said briskly. "I know a few people I can ask—those who might have had some sympathy with either side but remained neutral during the war. They would know more than the Ministry would at the moment about undercurrents shifting among their social circles. They are also the ones who might be approached and asked to support Nihil."

"Thank you, Narcissa." Harry sipped at his wine again while Narcissa and Draco steered the conversation in different directions, mostly talking about people he'd never met. He was happy to remain silent. He felt hopelessly out of his depth, and had since he'd entered the Manor. This was a rich place, and he wasn't rich. This was a pure-blood place, and he wasn't a pure-blood.

This was a family place, and he didn't have a family.

Harry scowled into his glass. *Yes, you do. You have the Weasleys. Just because you don't feel like spending every spare minute around them these days doesn't mean that they abandoned you.*

Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

It was hard to do, but watching Draco's face as it lit up with wicked humor at some joke of his mother's more than helped.

"You need not be so hard on him, Draco," his mother murmured the moment Potter had followed one of the house-elves out of the dining room in search of the bathroom.

Draco grimaced and pushed his fingers through the side of his hair, where the ruffling wouldn't show. "I know that," he said. "But he's so *exasperating* sometimes, Mother. And he could at least

return the level of attention that I've shown him so far." He knew his voice was petulant. He could feel Narcissa's disapproving stare. He scowled at the table.

The last few days, since their encounter in the Forbidden Forest with Gregory, Draco had found himself more and more dissatisfied with the way that Potter didn't *understand* things. He wasn't as attuned to Draco as Draco was to him. He didn't volunteer information about himself; he still hadn't told Draco where he was staying for the Christmas holidays. He wouldn't admit the most obvious things, such as that he was clearly jealous of Draco's conversation with Arrowshot, or arrive at the most obvious conclusions from them, such as that he might want Draco to be more than a friend.

Pushing Potter, snapping at him, insulting him at times where he wouldn't have before, was all Draco could think of to express his displeasure, because telling Potter the truth seemed only to inspire him to more creative ways to deny it.

"Try not to destroy him in your quest to bring him to that level of attention," Narcissa said mildly, and leaned back in her chair as she finished a bit of the delicate Dragonsmilk Cheese. "I'm pleased for you, Draco. He seems like someone who can help you in numerous ways, and who is worth your wanting."

Draco gave her a quick, grateful glance. He had thought often enough of Potter as a lover in the past few weeks, but if his mother had opposed Draco because she did not think Potter worthy of a Malfoy, any attempt to make him so would have been much harder.

"Merlin knows why that longing is there," he said, sitting up and trying to speak more cheerfully. "There's no one more unsuitable for me in many ways. But the compatible magic began it, and—"

A crack cut across his words, and Draco turned about in annoyance. Most of the Malfoy house-elves knew better than to Apparate into a room when a member of the family was speaking.

But this was Margy, the elf who had escorted Potter to the bathroom. Draco found himself on his feet, wand drawn, before he consciously thought about doing it. From a distance, his mind considered that all those Auror instincts the program was attempting to instill in his head were useful after all.

"Margy is sorry, sorry!" the elf squeaked, yanking on her ears as she spoke. "But Master Harry Potter, he has collapsed in the bathroom, and his face it is blue, and he is having troubles breathing, and—"

Draco had already started running. He heard the rustle of robes behind him as his mother rose to her feet to accompany him, as well as her mild command that would make Margy stop punishing herself. They would probably need the elves' help, if Potter had been taken by poison.

Maybe she wanted to make sure that no one could blame them, either, as they would try to if they found out Harry Potter had suddenly become sick while dining in Malfoy Manor.

But those thoughts were ones that Draco barely felt behind the overwhelming, shrieking pressure of the ones that said, *My partner. Mine. And he's dying.*

He kicked down the bathroom door when he came to it, and fell to his knees beside Potter's twitching, panting body, taking him in his arms.

As he did that, Potter gave a great gasp and stopped breathing.

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Chapter: 25

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Five—A Better Understanding

Draco stared at Potter's motionless body, and then shook it. Potter's head flopped. His limbs dangled. He made no attempt to resist or fight back, and that, more than anything else, was what convinced Draco he had begun to die.

No.

He couldn't feel anxiety or fear at the moment. Pain was a distant hum in the back of his mind. What overwhelmed him was the sensation of falling, as if someone had cast him into a starless void he was doomed to tumble through forever.

No.

He reached out and splayed his hand over Potter's chest. His fingers shook so much he couldn't hold them flat. "Come on, Potter," he said, and then paused and listened for the echoes of his words. There *had* to be some way of getting around this. Potter *had* to get better. Draco rapped on his chest. "Come on, Potter," he repeated.

"Out of the way, Draco."

Draco found Potter's body ripped from his arms. He slumped back against the wall of the bathroom, in shock, and sat there blinking as Narcissa knelt over Potter and held her wand towards his mouth. "*Ago suspirium*," she whispered.

Draco shook his head in irritation. He should have remembered the Re-breathing Spell himself, he thought when he saw Potter's chest heave. If Potter was his partner, his and no one else's, then that meant Potter was his to protect and heal. Draco could have recalled that, and it would have done Potter more good than sitting around with an open mouth and staring eyes did.

His mother cast the spell again. Potter's intake of air this time lifted his back and heels from the floor. But then he slumped down again, and Draco could see all too clearly that his chest wasn't moving.

He tried to crawl forwards and get near Potter, but his mother sat back on her heels and blocked him. Another spell, this one Draco didn't catch because he was staring too hard at Potter's blue lips and motionless face, and a bright purple glow burst from Potter's body.

"The problem is his magic," Narcissa said, her voice soft with dread. "I do not know what is wrong, but he must have taken some kind of poison or had a curse cast on him that would interfere with his magic, and the drain is too much now for him to sustain normal bodily processes."

Draco could have laughed with relief. "Is *that* it?" he asked, in a tone that made his mother stare at him. "But I can fix that!" He stretched out and laid his hand over Potter's heart. He had no idea why, since magic was spread throughout the body, except that it seemed natural.

"Come on, Potter," he said, and this time he envisioned his magic, the magic that was compatible with Potter's, driving into his still body. There had to be something that would set him up on his feet and make him move again. "I know you can. I *order* you to."

The magic trembled, and then seemed to break through a barrier that had been holding them apart. Draco found himself floating down what seemed like a watery tunnel, the gleam of light at the end growing closer and closer.

And then the light broke over him, and it was black and red.

Harry had felt a hand grasping and crushing his throat. He'd shuddered and fallen, wondering for a moment if this was one of his fits.

But the memory that he was used to overcoming him when the fits happened didn't come. Instead, there was only blackness around him, and he could feel his magic *changing*.

It was strange, and unnerving, and the only thing Harry could think of was that it must be like what happened to a werewolf when the full moon rose. His magic wriggled and shuddered and twisted sideways, and Harry knew he didn't have control of it anymore, that he couldn't have used it to cast so much as a *Lumos*. His limbs fell slack, he could feel that, but he didn't have time to worry about it with his magic occupying him. He fought in the only way he could think of, by grasping his power the way he had when Draco had poured it back into his body and tugging.

That didn't seem to help. The magic was still changing, and now Harry could see intense flickers of black and red crossing his vision.

He had no reason to come to the conclusion that he did, but he was sure of it anyway. Nihil was changing his magic into grief magic.

I'm not going to let that happen, Harry thought, lunging forwards with a snarl. *I'll kill myself first.* He set about grimly trying to stop his breath or his heart or something else that his body needed to function. He thought it was working, because his magic was no longer changing as rapidly as it had at first.

Then some fool started shoving magic back into him. Harry growled and tried to fight its entrance. That would only give Nihil more power! Was it Ron? He was the only one Harry could think of off the top of his head who would do exactly the opposite of what Harry wanted.

On the other hand, Harry didn't think Ron could influence his magic. That left Draco, and Harry tried to yell his name, though he had no idea if Draco could hear him. *Draco! Stop it! I have to get rid of this magic, not let Nihil take it over!*

For long moments, the struggle was so even that Harry had the bizarre image of two snakes swaying back and forth, their bodies entwined, battering at each other with fangs and blunt heads. Then a particularly hard shove made him fall over, and Draco's magic poured over him in triumph.

And over Nihil.

Harry heard a combination of a snarl and a scream, and then the alien force was gone from his body. He was floating alone on a sea of power, which Draco kept shoving into him, because he couldn't pay attention to reality and realize that it was no longer needed.

Harry pushed the power back towards him instead, ignoring the way that Draco tried to ignore him. *Prat. I don't need it right now. Doesn't he see that? He should. Maybe he thinks I'm too weak. I need to give him some sign of strength.*

He choked. He had wanted to make a haughty announcement about how Draco was doing the wrong thing because he didn't listen to Harry, but it seemed that all he could do was choke.

"Oh thank God," he thought he heard Draco whisper. He opened his eyes, but the dazzle of light in front of them wouldn't let him make out faces. Harry choked again and shut his eyes. He felt a cool hand lying on his cheek.

A voice that wasn't Draco's whispered, "*Dormito*."

Harry had the chance to be only briefly outraged before the sleep spell took him down into a

more wholesome darkness. At least he knew that his magic was whole and lying in his body the way it was supposed to again before he went.

Draco leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms. Potter lay in the bed in front of him, his black hair and pale skin startling against the deep green sheets. They'd put him in a guest bedroom close by Draco's own chambers, so that the house-elves who'd watched him overnight wouldn't have to travel far to fetch Draco in case something went wrong.

But nothing had, either last night or in the three hours Draco had been sitting here. He could almost hear Potter's snort. *Three hours? What are you doing? Go to some posh shop or read some book that would be impossible for me to understand. I'm fine.*

Except that he wasn't fine, and Draco didn't intend to leave his side until Potter woke up and gave Draco his impression of what had happened last night. All Draco knew was that some kind of malady had infected Potter's magic, and it had stopped when he pulled on the compatible magic and lent his power to Potter. The power had come back to him almost immediately. He didn't feel weak and shaky the way he had after Potter drained it, so he could only suppose that it hadn't required much of his magic to fix the problem.

If Nihil could strike from a distance like that…

Draco shivered and shook his head. Nihil could strike from a distance, yes, but why hadn't he targeted Draco as well? The longer this persecution went on, the more uncertain Draco became about who was really the bastard's main target.

Potter groaned. Draco glanced up sharply and saw the sweat breaking along his brow. One hand reached out and groped at the bedside table. Draco let out a deep breath, wiped palms that had gone damp with relief on his robes, and picked up Potter's glasses.

"Looking for these?" he asked.

Potter jolted. But then he held still, which made Draco think he was waiting to see if the threat would go away. Draco curled his lip and dangled the glasses temptingly above Potter's face. Would he snatch at them? Draco was interested in finding out.

Potter slit his right eye open and gave Draco a glare from a single intense slit of green. "Give them back," he said.

"Ask nicely," Draco said. "And then tell me what the fuck happened to you last night." He was speaking more loudly than he meant to, and he took a breath that he hoped would force him to calm down. He wouldn't give much for his chances if his mother heard him using language like that.

"I don't know," Potter said. "I felt as though someone was trying to take control of my magic and change it into something else, probably grief magic. When you came in, then that defeated Nihil.

But then you went on pushing power into my body, and I had to fight you back before you drowned me." He lashed out with his arm and managed to take the glasses away before Draco could react.

"I notice that you refuse to ask nicely," Draco muttered, leaning back in his chair and watching the way Potter's eyes seemed at once clearer and less attractive as the lenses settled into place on the bridge of his nose. "I probably saved your life, you know."

"Yeah," Potter said. "Thanks."

His smile was slow and dazzling and made Draco's heart contract in a way that was highly unpleasant. He coughed and looked aside, saying, "I'm afraid we didn't know who you were staying with over the holidays, or we would have sent word to them about what happened. It'll still be another day or so before you can travel."

"A *day*?" Potter sounded aghast. He tugged himself up in the bed and then nodded briskly as he looked down at his body. "See? There's none of that weakness that we felt after I drained you and you drained me. I can leave." He reached for the sheet.

Draco shoved him ungently back into the pillows, his anger finding that sudden outlet. "You nearly died," he said. "You stopped breathing."

Potter frowned thoughtfully. Draco decided grudgingly that it probably *would* take a lot to impress him, after so many near brushes with death. "Oh," he said. "I wondered if that would happen. I was thinking that I should die rather than allow Nihil to get control of me, and I reckon it manifested that way."

Draco's hands closed into fists. "You *what*," he said.

"I didn't mean it that way!" Potter sounded guilty now, darting Draco a sideways look. "It's not like I want to die. It's just that I thought it would be better than having Nihil turn me into a sack of human skin filled with grief magic the way he did those other people."

"You think he was doing that," Draco said. He wondered if he should keep talking about the way that Potter had *tried* to die, but he didn't think he could get very far without speaking the kind of cruel words that would make too deep a cut on their friendship for it to recover. He would have to think about it and speak to Potter later, when he was more rational. He spent some moments staring at the headboard, as if he were gathering his ideas, and asked, "You think he transformed the fake Death Eaters?"

Potter nodded eagerly. He looked as happy to leave the subject of his death behind as Draco was. "Yes. Maybe he altered their features after that, too. Once he had control of their bodies, he could probably do anything with them. But that was what I felt like—like someone was taking my magic and changing the very nature of it, warping it into something else." He shuddered and stuck his tongue out. "It wasn't pleasant."

"No, I imagine not," Draco murmured, leaning back. "I hope now that you understand why we're not willing to let you go yet."

"Yeah, I reckon I know why," Potter said, picking at the threads of his blankets in a way that made Draco itch to reach out and close a hand over his fingers. "Thanks, Draco. I hope that I'm not imposing on you and your mother." He looked up, so anxious that Draco had to blink before he could respond.

"You're welcome," he said at last. "Now, where did you say you were staying? We need to send a message to let your relatives know. They must be frantic by now."

Harry felt a tightness in his throat that couldn't be expelled no matter how many times he swallowed. He wanted to tell Draco to go away and not ask any more questions.

Draco had always had a family. True, his parents didn't always make the best decisions, and Harry personally wouldn't have wanted Lucius Malfoy for a father, but he had parents who loved him. He'd always known a lot about his family, too—his ancestors and the good and bad things they'd done. He was attached to his surname in a way that Harry couldn't imagine being attached to Potter.

How was Harry supposed to tell him that he didn't really have a blood family? He had the Weasleys, but he knew how Draco felt about them. Besides, he would probably think that a chosen family was inferior to blood relatives.

"Potter?"

Draco sounded impatient. Harry glanced up at him and saw his eyes fastened sharply to Harry's face.

You're making a bigger deal of this than it has to be, Harry told himself firmly. *Draco might make fun of you a little, but he's going to be all right with this. You can get past it.*

"I'm not staying with anyone, actually," he said, forcing his voice to be as calm and normal as possible. "Until Christmas Eve, when I'm going to go and stay with the Weasleys until Boxing Day. So there's no message to send." He smiled slightly, hoping that the joke he was about to make would distract Draco from the subject. "Really, you're worrying about me more than anyone else is at the moment."

Draco just stared at him, blinking now and then. Otherwise, his face was frozen. Harry cringed at first, but as minute after minute ticked past and Draco still said nothing, he stiffened his spine and glared at his partner. *If this is such a shock to his delicate sensibilities, maybe I should shock him more often. He'll probably faint the first time we meet some really ugly abomination of a Dark creature otherwise.*

When Draco finally spoke, it was a single, croaking word. "Why?"

"Because I like the Weasleys and want to stay with them, of course," Harry said. He decided that this was an excellent opportunity to try and get Draco off the main track of the conversation. "You would like them if you paid more attention to them. Maybe not Ron and Ginny, but I think Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley could be persuaded to make peace with your mum. And you've probably never met Charlie for any length of time, he's really good with dragons—"

"Why aren't you staying with your relatives?" Draco said. His voice was so flat that it smashed Harry's pretense like a plate of iron, and he could no longer pretend not to know what Draco was talking about.

Harry smoothed a hand along his hair and stared at the blanket. He'd never been in a bed with sheets this soft and smooth. Even *they* were too good for him, he thought, and wondered again if this friendship between him and Draco was going to work out.

Now you're the one being ridiculous, just like with the jealousy. All Draco's asking is a question. You don't know that he's going to make fun of you yet. Grow a bloody backbone.

Harry glanced up at Draco and saw him leaning forwards with his chin in his palm, waiting. It wasn't a common posture with him; it made him look a little silly. Harry relaxed and said simply, "My relatives don't like magic. It makes them nervous. And I never knew my Potter relatives. I think Dumbledore said once that my grandparents were old when they had my dad, and they probably died before I was born." He shrugged. "Maybe there are cousins and aunts and stuff out there, but I've never met them."

Draco exhaled slowly. "You know that I'm staying with my mother over the holidays," he said.

Harry waited, but Draco didn't go on. "Yeah," he said at last. "So?"

Draco shook his head, eyes never moving from Harry's face. "You could have asked to stay with me. We have plenty of room here. You're my partner. Why didn't you?"

Harry stared at him, but no matter how long he waited, Draco didn't seem to see what was wrong with this, so Harry had to tell him.

"I don't know your mother," Harry said, feeling enormously frustrated. "How could I intrude? And you were going to be with her because you wanted to, and I assumed you needed a break from me. Everyone needs a break from other people some of the time. Why would I want to interrupt that?" He wished he could leap to his feet and pace back and forth, the way he usually did when he was upset, but the trembling weakness in his legs told him not to get out of bed. He would hardly convince Draco of his point if he sprawled inelegantly on the floor. So Harry had to sit still and clench his fists and try to think of how in the world he could explain himself.

At least he had the words this time—words that he'd been wanting to say for months, but which

circumstance or anger always choked back.

"I think I'm depending on you too much as it is. I've depended on you to save my life and tell me when I'm doing something stupid and persuade me that we need to be partners and I shouldn't ignore the compatible magic because it's important. *You've* been the one making sacrifices for me, pulling and pushing and tugging on me to get moving. Sure, I've done a few things for you, but they haven't been as important.

"I don't want this to turn into one of those one-sided friendships where one person takes and takes and takes, and the other person gives and gives and gives and receives nothing in return. I want to do things for you. I want to save your life sometimes, sure, but that's just something partners should do anyway. I want to go beyond that. But I don't know *how*. I'm trying to figure it out. I feel like I should decide on my own because asking you what you want is—is cheating. I didn't say it made much sense," he added defensively, when he saw Draco's mouth open. "But it's necessary for me to try to give you things you want that are *gifts,* not things selected from a list. And giving you privacy and time with your family is something I can do. So is encouraging you to form other friendships, and maybe standing up for you when someone tries to make fun of you. But other than that, there's so little. And now I'm here and taking up your time during the holidays, too." Harry finally lost his composure and glanced away from Draco, his hands twining nervously together. He tried to make them stop, but they didn't cooperate. "I just—*fuck*, of all the stupid things to happen! I didn't want it to, and I'm glad you saved my life, of course, but don't you see why I have to get out of here? Being here is depending on you and taking from you again."

Draco sat still. Potter's outburst had left him dazed. He had several answers that rose to the surface of his mind, bobbed up and down, and sank again, but he didn't think any of them was an adequate response to what he had just heard.

What Potter had said was right in many ways. Draco did think he was more committed to their friendship than Potter was, who had other friends, and some of the things Potter did were so exasperating that Draco felt worn-out trying to correct his mistakes.

Their conversation about the not-kiss came to mind.

But to suggest that he should leave Potter to spend the holidays by himself because of that…

It wasn't right. Draco just didn't have a splendid argument about why it was wrong, something that Potter would nod and accept.

So he said quietly, "I want you here. You'll need to stay at least a day so we can make sure that you don't have another attack."

Potter eyed him skeptically. He had drawn his knees up before his chest, as if to defend himself. Draco wondered if he was even aware of it. "But Christmas hols are a fortnight," he said. "There's a difference between me staying for a day and me staying for two weeks."

Draco ground his teeth. "Yes, I *know* that," he said with forced patience. "I want you to stay anyway."

Potter tilted his head to the side, so that his fringe covered one eye, and peered at him with the other. Draco couldn't describe the expression on his face. Trusting, maybe, or lonely, or astonished.

"Why?" he asked.

Draco shook his head. He would never have thought a question like that could come from someone like Potter, who seemed to be surrounded by people who would be delighted to have him stay the Christmas holidays.

But now Draco knew that wasn't true. He had witnessed arguments between Potter and his best friends. And he had other information.

My relatives don't like magic. It makes them nervous.

Draco had no idea what was hiding under the surface of those words, but he felt rather as he had one time when he was a child, playing in one of the attics of the Manor, and had moved an old tapestry. A cluster of insects was nesting in the threads of the tapestry, and had exploded out at him, silent and white. It had taken Draco an hour's scrubbing to feel clean again.

And then Draco had a touch of the fiery genius that his mother said lived in the Black line.

"Because I want you to come with me and Mother when we start asking if anyone knows about Nihil," he said promptly. "It would do people good to see we actually have the Boy-Who-Lived on our side."

Potter lifted his head and blinked. Those brilliant eyes that could never hide anything from Draco now reflected distaste. But the distaste vanished a moment later, and his smile was dazzling again.

"Yeah, I can do that," he said.

That was why it was a stroke of genius. Draco knew Potter wanted to do something for him that was radically unpleasant for himself; he seemed to think that everything Draco did for *him* had been a personal sacrifice, so he wanted to repay it in the same way.

It was still not right, not in the way that Draco wanted it to be. But there were so many things that he had to let go for right now, and discuss later, when he had his thoughts in order and they would make more sense.

Watching the way Potter sprawled across the pillows and began to ask questions about what

Draco had felt during the struggle with the grief magic, and if he didn't think Nihil was scarily powerful, Draco thought he knew how his eventual speech would begin.

You are a source of pleasure to me, a source of delight.

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Chapter: 26

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Six—Night of Falling Stars

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"It's a brilliant idea." Draco stepped back behind Harry and cocked his head critically. Harry could see the motion in the mirror he was facing. He tried to catch Draco's eye and let him see how uncomfortable he was with this—not that Harry didn't want to help the investigation, because he did, but maybe it would be better to wait a little while and build up his confidence—but Draco was frowning down at Harry's robes and didn't notice. Harry had no idea what was wrong with his robes. Draco reached out and gave a quick dusting motion across his back, then nodded. "There. Perfect."

Harry looked at himself worriedly in the mirror. He wore dark robes, almost black but not quite; they shimmered deep brown in the light when he moved. Narcissa had said something about them being the color of his hair. Harry had bitten his lip to avoid replying that, to look like his hair, the robes should really be dusty and covered with tangles.

A single large brooch held the robes closed at his throat, although there was also a line of tiny gold buttons. (Harry had no idea how he would get them undone if he needed to go to the loo). The brooch was large, dark gold and ornamented with a dozen twining snakes, all of them with fanged mouths fastened around the ruby in the center. Harry was sure the ruby was worth a dozen fortunes, which meant he would probably break it or get it stolen before the evening was over.

To make it worse, Draco had fastened a dark green cloak over the robes. Tiny golden pins shaped like rearing unicorns held the tips of the cloak to the brooch. Draco said the whole ensemble was dashing.

It might make people dash themselves to the ground with laughter, Harry thought, and wriggled uncomfortably.

"Stop fidgeting," Draco said, with an authority in his voice that Harry had only heard him exercise about clothes so far. "You look wonderful, and everyone's going to want to dance with you."

"*Dance*?" Harry asked in horror. He spun around to face Draco. "You never said anything about dancing. We were just going to go to this Abrane Hall and see what we could learn about Nihil from them, you said, because he was sure to have approached them."

Draco gave him a reassuring smile that Harry was much less disposed to find reassuring since Draco had mentioned dancing. "You don't have to do it. You can look cold and dignified as you refuse them, and that will attract more attention to you and bring other people up to ask questions."

Harry blinked. "But wouldn't I look rude?"

"No, of course not." Draco was speaking patiently now, apparently because any pure-blood child five-year-old would have understood what he meant, and yet Harry kept missing it. "The more proud you are, the more they'll be intrigued and wonder what you have to offer them—at least if you have some reason to be proud, which you most certainly do. It wouldn't work for someone like Weasley." He sneered. Harry opened his mouth to defend Ron, but Draco was continuing, his eyes sparking coldly as he looked past Harry's head and apparently at something in the distance. "They'll offer something of themselves, bits of information, in hope that you'll give them gifts of gossip in return, or some in with you."

Harry swallowed bile. "And all pure-bloods like this kind of gossip and chattering?" he asked, revolted.

Draco laughed. "This doesn't have anything to do with pure-bloods in particular, though most of the people we'll see at the Abranes' party will be pure-bloods," he said. "This is *politics,* Potter." Harry winced. He had started disliking the fact that Draco still called him by his last name, but Harry didn't want to force him into intimacy he didn't feel ready for, either. "This is the way politics are played. You talk and make connections and strengthen relationships that are already in place. You make exchanges. No one has to know what kind of exchange we're looking for until we're ready to reveal it, mind." He gave Harry a warning look.

"I know that," Harry said irritably. "I'm hardly about to walk to the front of the room and proclaim that we're looking for connections to Nihil."

"I know, but there are other things you could give away with just as much ease to the people who are looking for them." Draco shook his head.

"This is why this isn't a good idea," Harry said. "I'm not trained to do this kind of thing. I don't know how to behave." He reached up to unfasten the brooch at his throat.

Draco grabbed his wrist and stepped close. Harry swallowed. Since he had admitted to Draco

that he wanted to give and not just take—an admission so powerful and damaging he could hardly believe he'd made it, sometimes—he had noticed that he got dizzy around Draco a *lot* more easily. It was like he'd given himself permission to notice that Draco was an attractive man or something.

"You'll do fine," Draco murmured. "Mother and I both trust you to smile and shake your head if you don't know what to say. Looking mysterious is always a good idea. Don't drink much wine. Refuse all the invitations to dance. Sigh and look pensive if you have no idea what else to do. That will convince people you're hiding something important."

Harry sighed. "All right, fine."

"I'm so pleased that you're being gracious about this," Draco said in an overly bright voice, and shooed him out of the room before Harry could make any response. He still had to get dressed, and apparently that was a procedure that would take some time. Harry went, shaking his head.

I think he's wrong. I can try *to look mysterious or shady or as though I have secrets to hide, but I'm not good at controlling my expression or lying. I couldn't even tell Draco lies about what happened when Nihil started to turn my magic into grief magic, though I think he was upset about the fact that I tried to die.*

If he was, though, he hadn't given any sign of it. Harry shrugged the thought off and sat down to make small talk with Narcissa in the little anteroom where the house-elves had placed him while they waited for Draco.

Draco blinked and shook his head to clear his mind from the lingering aftereffects of Apparition. He looked towards Abrane Hall with a sense of anticipation that he wouldn't reveal even to his mother. It was true that he hadn't been here often, and he might be exaggerating his memories in his eagerness, but every year the Abranes gave a spectacular Solstice party with a different theme. Draco wanted to know what the theme would be this year.

He caught his breath when he realized it. The house had been transformed into what looked like an earth-bound constellation of stars by the clever use of lamps, fairy lights, fires, and, no doubt, glamours; Draco didn't think there was any natural light that would shed that specific kind of gentle white illumination from some of the "stars." The bulk of stone and wood that made up Abrane Hall had vanished into airiness that looked as though the visitors could have walked through it.

In the sky overhead, unnaturally bright stars turned, forming the most familiar constellations. Draco looked up at them with some admiration. It was one thing to fasten a spell like that on the roof of a building, where it would give you solid grounding to work with, and another thing altogether to attempt it with an expanse of open air. Draco wondered for a moment what bindings they had used, and then chuckled and attempted to relax and enjoy it. He didn't think not knowing the source of the Abranes' complicated spell would be dangerous.

Probably.

When he looked down again, he found Potter eying him sideways, with a hungry expression that he probably didn't realize he was revealing. Draco controlled his own preening reaction and nodded towards the house. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Yes," said his mother, rustling decisively past him. She was clad in pale robes that made her look like a queen of snow and went well with the starlight. "I simply cannot wait to greet Cynthia Abrane again. There are so many things I wish to say to her!" She walked ahead down the path, her eyes moving from side to side. Draco was comfortable having here there. He knew she would do her best to spot social traps, as well as people Potter definitely should *not* talk to, and warn them in time.

He and Potter followed her down the path of crushed white stone that curved and dipped over the small hills towards Abrane Hall with a glimmer like moonlight, though Potter watched Draco more often than he did the curves of the path. Draco had to work hard to hide a smile.

The robes he had chosen were simpler than the ones he had given Potter; it was in the quality of the cloth that their beauty showed, not in the sheer richness of color. His were the shimmering blue-green of the eyes in a peacock's tail, though without the tawdry glitter of the natural bird, subdued rather than glaring when they caught the light. The blue would give some color to his pale skin—paler than Draco wished it to be right now, mostly the effect of long study and worry about Potter in the past few days—and make his hair appear blond instead of white. Draco thought his hair was shifting slowly in the direction of white, and he would endeavor to look distinguished and exotic when it finally hit. But for the present, there was nothing wrong about seeming to be crowned with gold.

The large ornamental brooch that secured his robes and cloak was not ostentatious like the one that clasped Potter's, either. Small and made of silver rather than gold, it depicted long-winged birds wheeling around a sapphire. Draco wondered how many people tonight would realize that the birds, from the shape of their crests and talons, had to be phoenixes, and that the brooch was a statement of its own.

"You remember what we talked about," he said to Potter, to get his mind off his clothes. Potter was so struck by them that Draco was in danger of forgetting about their real purpose if he lingered on them too long.

Potter nodded and snapped his eyes forwards again. Perhaps he had realized he was staring, too. "I pause when we step through the door, so that everyone can get a good look at me. Then I go immediately to some corner and wait there for people to come up and talk." He grimaced and raised a hand to swipe through his hair. Draco rolled his eyes. They hadn't been able to do anything with Potter's hair anyway, so forbidding him the gesture was useless.

Still… "Doing that makes dandruff fall on your shoulders, you know," Draco told him. "And it *really* shows up against the dark color of those robes."

Potter shot him an outraged look, and Draco felt as though the path had become more solid under his feet. This was the truth of their relationship, not the dreamy half-romantic glances Potter had given him. "I do *not* have dandruff, Malfoy," he hissed.

Draco gave him a pitying stare and shrugged. "Whatever lie enables you to live with yourself, Potter."

Potter would probably have answered, but just then the stars overhead swirled and began to fall.

Draco jerked to a stop, his breath catching, and stared. The stars descended like a snowfall, breaking out of their constellations to form new and glittering ones that puffed apart a moment later like the dust from broken glass. Where they touched the grass, or appeared to touch the grass, fountains of light arose, shuddering and tossing themselves like the manes of beautiful pale horses. Draco had to swallow, his eyes stinging against the sheer beauty of the sight.

As new stars opened above their heads, blossoming like flowers made of silver, Draco heard Potter mutter something that sounded like, "I didn't know that you could use magic like that."

Draco managed to recover from his trance and give Potter a superior look. "I'd wager that you didn't think wizards like the Abranes would use it for *anything* beyond torturing people and getting themselves more money."

A frown settled itself into place on Potter's lips, and he didn't reply as they walked up the stairs to the Hall. Draco didn't mind. It was no bad idea for Potter to appear in the party first with a disapproving look; it might mean the other people there would put themselves through their paces trying to please him.

Harry shifted in his robes and gave the most polite smile he could muster to the bloke in front of him, who had introduced himself as some sort of Abrane relative and was chattering on about broomsticks. He'd probably heard that Harry played Quidditch at Hogwarts and assumed that was all he would want to talk about. Harry let his eyes wander away from the man's face and around the interior of Abrane Hall.

The party was being held in a single enormous room that might have taken up the entire house for all Harry knew. It was larger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts. The walls were black, dotted with enough ripples of light and shadow to give the impression that they were standing outside beneath a full moon.

Or so Draco had said, and Harry had no reason to doubt him. The fact that he hadn't been able to figure that out for himself just showed how out-of-place he was at a function like this. He wasn't *meant* for it. Draco was.

Harry felt his head pulled around in a circle. He knew exactly where Draco was standing at any given moment, as if they were tied together. And maybe they were, by the compatible magic, but

Harry didn't think it could account for this.

Draco was holding court in the middle of a circle of admirers. Maybe a pure-blood would have been able to read something from their body language, maybe they weren't as accepting as they seemed, but from what Harry could see, they wanted nothing more than to get under Draco's robes—and maybe inside his pants.

Harry firmed his grasp on his wineglass and took a deep breath. He had no right to think like that. So what if that was what they wanted? Draco had a perfect right to choose one of them. The fact that he could, just like he could describe the effects of magic the Abranes were going for with a glance, only showed Harry how thoroughly he didn't belong in this world.

Or with Draco.

"I think you're bored with me."

Harry started and brought his eyes back to the face of the bloke in front of him. After a minute of struggle, he managed to remember his name—Jarvis. "No, Jarvis, not at all," Harry said hastily, and Jarvis beamed. *Probably because I remembered his name,* Harry thought in disgust and despair. *Having Harry Potter notice you is somehow worth more than having other people do it.*

"But something's wrong." Jarvis gave him a little nod and snapped his fingers. A smooth, slim glass carafe of wine appeared beside him, and he poured a stream of it into Harry's glass. "Tell me about it."

Harry lifted his glass to his mouth and made it look like he was taking a large swallow. That was one of the few things Draco had drilled Harry on before he let him go to this party. He said that Harry had to convince people he was more drunk than he really was. Harry had learned his lesson well. Probably, at least, if the small, satisfied smile that Jarvis gave him was any clue.

"Well." Harry decided that he would use a tiny sliver of the truth. He just wasn't good enough at lying, and a direct invitation to talk meant that he couldn't stand around looking silent and mysterious. "I'm not that interested in Quidditch anymore. Not interested in the kinds of things that should interest me anymore." He shook his head helplessly. "Ever since the end of the war, and almost dying…it changes my perspective on things."

That was part of the truth. The rest of the truth was more complicated, tried up with Auror training, and Draco, and Ginny, and the way that Harry sometimes felt as though the world was pulling him into rags to make a dozen different cloaks, but Jarvis didn't need to know about that.

"I know *exactly* what you mean."

Harry looked up and blinked. Jarvis was leaning towards him with his teeth and eyes shining, and he was nodding furiously, too, as though he wanted his head to fall off his neck before the end of the evening. Harry hadn't expected such an enthusiastic response, and had no idea what to

do. "Were you in the war, too?" he asked, a little lamely, because it was all he could think of to say.

Jarvis chuckled. "No. My family stayed neutral. But you could say that I've learned a little about life and death since then." He gave Harry a deep, significant glance. Harry managed to keep from grinding his teeth together, but it was hard. *This is why you should have stayed with me, Draco, you bastard. This is probably important, but I have no idea what to do to make him trust me.*

"Really," he said, and sipped from his wine, and tried to look thoughtful and mysterious, the way Draco had advised. Whether he was successful or not, Jarvis took the bait.

"Yes." Jarvis leaned further towards him. Harry had assumed his breath would smell of wine, but it smelled of dust instead. "The Dark Lord was afraid of death. He was a fool. The problem is that, if you go through death, either most of you doesn't survive, or it survives in a form like a ghost, where you can't really influence and you don't care about the world." He waved a hand, and Harry saw the passion glowing in his eyes and prepared for a long lecture. "You follow me so far?"

Harry nodded.

"But if you can ensure that part of you goes through death and survives, so that death is just another kind of transformation, like falling in love or being born or growing up, then it's not terrifying. And if you can *control* that transformation, and where the changed part of you ends up…" Jarvis shrugged and lowered his eyes in what Harry thought was supposed to be a sort of display of modesty. He hadn't seen anything so false since Dudley pretended that he didn't want his parents to praise him. "You understand?"

"It sounds fantastic," Harry said. His heart was beating hard. He was thinking of the way that Nihil seemed to specialize in transforming people and twisting animals, and the way that his magic had begun to alter when he'd felt Nihil trying to change it into grief magic. He had been certain, somehow, that he would survive what Nihil was doing to him, but he wouldn't survive it as himself; he would become Nihil's minion, the way the "Death Eaters" they faced in the interrogation rooms had.

Yes, what Jarvis was talking about had to have something to do with Nihil.

"I know." Jarvis waved a hand again, but this time he touched Harry's wrist and slipped something into his fingers. From the thickness and the way it crackled, Harry thought it was a piece of parchment. "Think about it, all right? I'm sure that there are certain people who would be interested in meeting you. Nusquam, for one." He gave a little bow and then walked away.

Harry licked his lips. Nusquam was Latin, and he thought it meant "nowhere." He slid the parchment into his robe pocket. He didn't want to open it here, where all kinds of people might see and maybe use charms to read the paper the Chosen One was staring at so intently.

He was too excited to stand still and drink wine anymore, though. He started towards the buffet table.

Then he veered towards Draco.

Draco was an expert at appearing attentive when he was bored silly. It was a necessary task to learn in Hogwarts when one was taking Arithmancy and ahead of the rest of the class. So he had no trouble nodding and smiling and exchanging honey-sweet barbs with the people who stood in a circle around him while in reality keeping an eye on the woman in the nearest corner of the room.

She was a tall witch he didn't recognize, with thick black hair that rivaled his Aunt Bellatrix's, bound carefully on the top of her head with a golden comb. Her eyes were wide and a deep, dark blue, several shades deeper than Draco's robe. She wore a dark blue robe to match them, fringed with golden lace that flipped over her hands whenever she ate or drank something. And she had finished several cups of wine and several small plates of cheese and fruit since Draco had begun to watch her.

She wasn't trying to be subtle about her staring. Draco would have caught her even if she was, but for her to be so open made him wonder.

Gradually, he began to work his way out of the circle of people, mostly by granting them compliments they needed to think about for a while, or hinting gracefully at important business elsewhere. Most people had seen him come in with Potter and were willing to let him go. Draco stepped free at last and turned to face the witch.

She gave him an open, amused smile, her lips redder than nature could have made them. Then she flipped her sleeve again so that the lace fell back from her hand and spread her fingers. A golden ball of light came into being above her palm, spinning rapidly. Draco recognized it. It was a variant of the spells that the Abranes had used for their glamours of the stars, a powerful spell, but harmless.

One thing only was unusual. He had watched her sleeve carefully, and there was no sign of a wand anywhere.

Then she began to drift towards one of the corridors that led further back into the house, the golden ball drifting and waltzing around her head now, her gaze inviting Draco to follow.

Draco narrowed his eyes. He took a step towards the woman, who smiled again.

"Draco!"

And of course Potter came up to him then, and when Draco turned back, the woman had vanished. Only the golden ball of light was left, which bobbed in what seemed like a mocking bow before it burst into sparks that flew to join every torch in the room. Draco cursed under his

breath. There was no chance of getting a magical signature by analyzing the spell she had left behind now.

"I definitely learned something about Nihil," Potter whispered in a tone still not low enough for Draco's taste as he came up beside him. "And look!" He thrust a square of parchment into Draco's hand.

Draco opened it irritably. He was certain following the woman would have proven more profitable than reading what was probably no more than a love letter to Potter from one of the people who wanted to fuck the Chosen One.

There were nine Latin words on the parchment—three on the first line, five on the second, one on the last.

Nihil. Nemo. Nusquam.

Et sic transit gloria mundi.

Mors.

Draco licked his lips. Potter, crowding in beside him, made a frustrated sound.

"I thought it was a clue," he muttered. "What use are three names? And what do those other words mean?" He reached out to trace them. Draco thought about stopping him, then realized that any charm on the parchment would have taken effect before now, since Potter had carried it across the room.

"And so passes the glory of the world," Draco translated the second line. "A very common motto. The Death Eaters used it sometimes. The last word means 'death.'"

"That's still not a clue," Potter protested. Then he brightened. Draco knew he had from the tone, though he wasn't looking at him. "But what I heard from Jarvis is!"

Draco glanced up sharply. "Jarvis?"

"Jarvis Abrane," Potter said. "At least, I think it was Abrane. He introduced himself that way."

Draco shook his head slowly. "Potter, I know all the Abranes. I made sure to study their genealogy before we came here. There's no relative called Jarvis."

Potter shut his mouth hard. His eyes were dark as he looked down at the parchment. "That still doesn't tell us what that means," he muttered, as if in rebellion.

Draco shivered. "No, it doesn't," he said.

But it gave him an image in his mind: a wide dark sea, large enough to swallow up all the Abranes' falling stars without a trace.

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Chapter: 27

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Seven—Christmas

Harry scowled at the ceiling in the bedroom that Draco and Narcissa had given him. His neck hurt from trying to find some comfortable position on the pillow. He reckoned that most people would consider it just fluffy enough, but when you'd been used to sleeping on hard ground and inside a cupboard in the past, it was difficult to feel like you were sinking into feathers.

He was thinking about the party, and the way that Draco had avoided his eyes after it, and the way he called him "Potter" with almost a sneer in his voice, as if he was still remembering the times he had said it at Hogwarts.

He probably is, Harry thought, his fingers digging into the pillow until he thought he'd rip the cloth. *A few months of friendship can't overcome seven years of hating each other.*

He didn't want Draco to call him that.

But if he told him that, then Draco would probably ask why and want some detailed and complex argument, crystalline with logic, the kind that he was fond of using when he thought Harry was being stupid. And Harry didn't have one of those. He just knew that he didn't like the way Draco said his last name.

Harry sighed and turned his head to the right, closing his eyes. He began counting his breaths, which sometimes helped him fall asleep. But his mind touched on a treacherous thought first: that it was probably a good day he was going to the Burrow for Christmas Eve through Boxing Day. It would give him and Draco some much-needed time away from each other.

I wish I could trust that if I told him I don't like the way he says my name, that would be enough to make him stop.

"Draco, darling, you are positively *petulant.* What's wrong?"

Draco blinked and sat up straight in his chair. He'd had a book spread on his lap for the last half-hour, but he hadn't read any of it. Surely, though, his mother couldn't know that. He had

been in the library, and she had been in the drawing room writing a letter to his father in Azkaban.

"Nothing's wrong," he said, and then tried to fix a look of cool and yet sympathetic interest on his face. It was the only sort of expression that would make his mother talk about what Draco knew must be a trial for her. "Have you owled Father? I hope that they're taking proper care of him there, and not trying to feed him that filthy gruel a house-elf couldn't survive on."

"I have some hope of better treatment for him, now that I've given them the latest bribe." Narcissa seated herself on the chair nearest the door. Today she wore deep blue robes that made her eyes look like sapphires. Draco wondered wistfully why he hadn't inherited her genius for looking like that in dark colors, instead of looking washed-out. "But you can't distract me, Draco. Even if I thought you *had* been studying, I've heard the sighs at mealtimes and the way you exploded at Daffy yesterday for laying his finger on your plate as he put it down. The poor thing was still ironing his ears this morning. What's wrong?"

Draco glared at his book. It was humiliating to have his mother make him confess his feelings as if he was still a child, but it would be more humiliating still to lie when she would know perfectly well that he was lying. "Potter," he muttered.

"Did he say something to you before he left?" Narcissa frowned and leaned back in her chair. The diamond earrings that hung to her shoulders swayed back and forth with slight tinkling noises. Draco had known many pure-blood women who would have looked ridiculous wearing them. Once again, his mother defied the laws of nature. "I must say, I had thought you were getting on better in the last few days. He had more semblance of manners."

Draco smiled in spite of himself. That *would* matter to his mother. "It's not that," he said. "It's—strained and tense between us, and every time I try to figure out some way that I can breathe the air more easily, he shuts me down. I've *tried* to ask the questions I need to ask, but he won't let me ask them. He denies so effectively that it's as if he's anticipated all my questions beforehand."

Narcissa raised her eyebrows, but she was perfectly sensitive to Draco's tone, and she would know from it that he would have specified those questions and the source of strain if he wanted her to know what they were. She nodded. "Can you not simply press the inquiry in spite of his denials? Have you tried Veritaserum?"

Draco snorted, then had to work to hold back his laughter. Meanwhile, his mother more and more resembled a statue with a slight glazing of ice, so Draco hastened to clear his throat and explain. "He'd think that was a betrayal, Mother. I'd break his trust by doing something like that."

"There are variants that are milder, of late," Narcissa said thoughtfully. "I heard the names of some mentioned at the Abranes' party. I didn't make many notes of suppliers, as we were after rather different prey, but I remember them. We could attempt to acquire them, and then he need never know that he had been under the potion. The new variants compel only some partial truths

and don't produce that wretched mental state that's such a telltale."

Draco took a deep breath. "I appreciate the offer, Mother," he said. "But I don't think that he would forgive me if he found out about that, either. And I can't promise that I would be able to keep it from him forever."

Narcissa opened her mouth slowly. She turned the motion into a yawn, but Draco knew what the expression meant, and stored the memory of it away as consolation against what she had just realized. She'd been startled. He had taken her aback. He did that so rarely, especially now that he was grown-up and couldn't startle her by getting into childish messes, that he would note the date.

"This is far more serious than I realized," Narcissa breathed. "If you're adopting his moral standards, Draco, you aren't just thinking about friendship."

"Could we put this aside for now?" Draco shut his book and stood up, keeping his eyes carefully averted from his mother's face.

"Ah, Draco." Narcissa had a smile in her voice, which Draco would have objected to, except that he thought he had embarrassed himself quite enough for one day. "I've been through the same thing myself, though I was younger than you were. Of course."

Draco strode out of the library and up to his room. The house was quiet, of course. It always had been, even when his father was living here. Lucius wasn't the sort to conduct noisy Potions experiments or crash his broom through a plate glass window, and his Dark Arts experiments that might go wrong were always conducted in the most secure of laboratories.

There was no reason for the silence to feel *wrong*, as though someone was missing who should have belonged there.

"Come on, Harry!"

Harry ran gratefully out into the cold, carrying his broom, behind Ron. His new Weasley jumper embraced him warmly, and he smiled as he watched his breath form in front of his face. A little practice Quidditch was just what he'd needed. It seemed as though no one really knew what to do with themselves on Christmas Day once they'd exchanged their presents and eaten. The empty chair at the table didn't help.

Besides, Ginny had given him several meaningful glances and made a point of announcing loudly that she was going up to her room after the meal. Harry didn't want any part of *that* right now.

It's not that I hate her, he thought, as he kicked off from the ground and felt the spiraling wind envelop him. Ron was already hovering near the edge of the Quidditch pitch that George had built last year with the money that was beginning to come in through Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

George had admitted that he didn't know what to do with all the Galleons, since he couldn't keep every single one for re-investment in the shop, and so he might as well make his family comfortable.

I don't hate her, Harry thought again, as Ron tossed a Quaffle at him and Harry caught it, then lobbed it back at him. *It's just that she thinks one way about things and I think another way, and we're not ever going to come to an agreement.*

He and Ron flew for a long time, taking opposite sides and trying to toss the Quaffle through each other's goals, and then competing in dives. Hermione came out to watch before the end, clapping her hands when Ron managed to jerk out of a plunge just in time—though he went so low his boots plowed trails in the snow—and looking more relaxed than Harry had seen her since the start of Auror training.

I think this has been good for them, at least. Harry twisted to get out of the way of Ron's broom, watching Hermione smile and cheer from the corner of his eye. Her cheeks were red from the cold, and he thought that she'd forgotten to cast her Warming Charm, which might be a good sign. It wasn't usual for Hermione to get so caught up in a game that she called foolish and silly. *They have some time to relate to each other and not think about homework.*

On the other hand, he'd heard them arguing the other night. Harry hadn't tried to listen in—why would he want to?—but he'd been sure the argument hadn't lasted long. There was that.

When they landed, Hermione ran up and kissed Ron on the lips. Harry watched for a moment before he looked away, jealousy twisting his stomach. *I wish I had someone who would care for me that way, who would keep going with me against all the odds.*

But then he thought about Ginny again, and snorted, shaking his head. Yeah, like *that* would work. He was probably better off waiting until he was through the Auror program and knew both himself and anyone else who would want to date him a little better.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Hermione had come up beside him and was studying him with an anxious expression.

Harry told himself that neither of his best friends had any reason to think he was less than deliriously blissful to be with them. He hadn't told them he'd come from Malfoy Manor because—well, because. He dredged up a smile and said, "Of course. Although I still don't understand how to work the gift you got me."

There was a time last year when Hermione would have taken offense if he said something like that. Now, she looked absolutely *thrilled* at being asked to explain. Harry had asked partially to give her something to say, and he listened contentedly enough as she dragged him inside the house and showed him the book.

It was a plain, small book, with a leather cover. Harry had thought at first it was another

homework organizer like the ones she'd got them for Christmas at Hogwarts one year. But when he opened it, the pages were blank and remained stubbornly blank no matter what spell he cast. When he tried to write on them, the ink drained into the parchment. That reminded him of Tom Riddle's diary, which made him queasy, and Harry had decided not to write any more in it until Hermione could show him what to do.

"Look," Hermione said importantly. She tapped the front of the book twice with her wand, and added, "I used the same principle that's behind the Marauder's Map. You have to tap it, twice, and speak a specific phrase, or it's not going to work. I thought I included that phrase on the paper with the gift, but I wouldn't be surprised if *someone* tore it off in his haste to get to the gift." She gave Harry a pointed look.

Harry flushed, but compensated for it by rolling his eyes. "Forgive me for wanting to see what it was," he muttered. He didn't say, even though it was true, that he had caused such a fuss with the wrapping and the noise as he ripped into it because he wanted everyone's eyes focused on him. That way, Ginny wouldn't get a chance to start a private conversation with him under cover of everyone else's chattering and excitement.

"I will," Hermione said magnificently, "if you just attend to what I'm showing you, so I don't have to show you more than once." Ron leaned over Harry's shoulder to watch, since he'd got the same kind of thing, though Harry thought Hermione had already showed him how to work his. "The two wand taps, like I said. And then, *I am going to make it through the Auror program."* She looked at Harry out of the corner of her eye.

Harry refused to give her a reaction the way she wanted, but just looked interested. A moment later, he didn't have to pretend to be interested, as the letters *My Notes* appeared on the front of the book. Hermione flipped it open and touched her wand to the first page. "Think about one of the subjects we've studied," she said.

"Er," Harry said. "All right. Defensive and Offensive."

Words began to race across the first page. Harry took a step back, thinking about Tom Riddle again, and then realized that he knew that writing. It was *his*. He leaned in, uneasily fascinated, and studied the lines.

Duel in pairs—the Ministry makes D. Arts illegal because—he's talking too fast…

"As you can see," Hermione said, "it comes up with the notes for that subject you've studied. All of them, no matter where the notes are now. It interacts with your thoughts and your memories. You remember a lot more than you realize. It's just that the memories get stored in parts of the brain where they're not recalled easily." She gave a modest little shrug as Harry stared at her. "It seemed simple enough. I was studying Memory Charms in my free time—"

"What time?" Harry asked, cupping his hand around his ear, but he knew that Hermione would always make free time to study something if she was really interested in it.

"And it just seemed like it would work. After all, this is parchment and words, and so are the notes you take. All parchment and all words are in some sense connected." Hermione looked at the book with a little frown. "I don't think it would work for notes that you'd scribbled on Muggle paper, though. That isn't the same as parchment."

"Hermione, you're *brilliant*," Harry said, because he wasn't sure what else to say, and because it *was* a wonderful gift, and because he liked seeing her turn Weasley-red.

Ron said the same thing, but in a reverent whisper that made Harry get out of the way before he could be caught between them. Then they were kissing again, with plenty of loud smacking sounds, and Harry stepped back and told himself to stop feeling jealousy. He used to almost never feel it, except over Ginny when she was dating Dean, and suddenly it seemed that it was braiding up his insides every time he turned around.

You have no right to feel it. And you don't *want to feel it over Ron and Hermione. You're not interested in either of them. Or Ginny either, for that matter.*

A slippery, treacherous thought whispered and hissed to him that it knew who he was interested in.

Shut up, Harry told himself, and went to admire his Christmas presents again.

Draco glanced up at the golden and pearl clock that hung over the fireplace. Potter wasn't late, not yet, and Draco didn't want to remember that he'd looked at the clock thirty times in the last ten minutes.

He got up to take some healthy exercise instead, which was *not* pacing in front of the fireplace. Not at all. Only people jealous of his grace and beauty would say that.

The green flames flared up in the hearth, and Draco could see a spinning figure appear in them. He relaxed, then stepped out of the way. He had seen Potter travel by Floo before, and he knew what was likely to happen when he did.

Sure enough, Potter staggered out in a rain of soot and sagged to his knees on the carpet, coughing. When he stood up again, Draco tried to conceal a wince, and suspected he didn't succeed from the wry way Potter looked at him. He was dripping more soot all over the floor. Of course, the house-elves would soon take care of that, but it was the principle of the thing.

"Oh, yeah," Potter said, and pushed something into Draco's hands. "I was even more off-balance than usual, carrying *that* thing." He nodded to the box and then started stamping more ashes off his boots as if they were snow.

Draco looked down, opening his mouth to make a scathing retort about how Potter was blaming innocent inanimate objects for his own clumsiness. But he shut his mouth and swallowed when

he realized that the box was (badly) wrapped in green paper with small silver snakes on it. He looked up into Potter's face.

"Where did you get this?" he whispered.

Potter laughed at him. "That would be telling, wouldn't it, when you haven't even opened it yet?" He folded his arms and grinned. His face was radiant with delight, and Draco found it as hard to look away from as it had been to look away from the box a moment before. "Just open it already. It's your Christmas present. And if you mean, where did I get the paper, I just saw it and bought it. I thought it'd be something you'd like."

Draco shook his head. His hands were shaking and his heart felt too large against his ribs as he tore the paper off.

Inside was a plain wooden box without markings that didn't tell Draco anything. He tried to lift the top, and then realized it was tied down. With an impatient motion, he drew his wand and cast a quick *Diffindo* that sliced the string off.

"I see that *you* don't forget that you're a wizard, not for one bloody second," Potter muttered.

Draco had no time for the git's irrational resentment right now. He tipped the lid of the box back and peered inside, wondering for a moment why he was holding his breath. It was a Christmas present, for Merlin's sake, not something really important and fascinating, like the key to the Nihil mystery.

Inside, a tiny, perfect dog turned its head to regard him, then stood up on its paws and yawned to let him know that it was awaiting his attention.

It was smaller than Draco had known a dog could be, even the miniature Crups that Draco had sometimes seen in the handbags of wealthy witches as they paraded through Diagon Alley. It had pointed ears and a dangerous-looking pointed muzzle, and it looked as if it was made of pure silver. Logically, Draco knew that its coat must be grey, because dogs didn't come in silver, but it looked that way. It even shimmered wetly like water when Draco turned the box back and forth.

It had fangs so sharp and white that Draco knew they would pierce someone's skin and not cause any pain immediately, although they would certainly slice skin from bone. (Aunt Bellatrix had had a set of knives like that. He was trying not to think about them). And no ordinary dog had a tail like a scorpion's. Maybe it could have a silver coat after all.

He looked up at Potter, and his expression must have been more hostile than he meant it to be, because Potter hastily began a fumbling explanation.

"I know that it looks odd, but you've been the target of some of Nihil's magic, and I can't be there all the time, and the other trainees might or might not try to protect you, and you're alone in your rooms, and you could use another friend. I wouldn't even have bought one, but the breeder saw

me in Quality Quidditch Supplies and insisted that I take one because, he said, it would be good publicity for his business to have the Chosen One carrying it around, and they're bred for personal defense—"

Draco held up a hand to stop him. He would have difficulty speaking if he tried. The quiet welling up in his throat would spill out of his mouth and envelop Potter. And maybe it would tell him too much.

You could use another friend.

That statement of Potter's intent in buying the gift was nearly more precious than the gift itself.

"Thank you," he said at last, and held out his hand to the dog. It sniffed him, and then consented to be scooped up and placed on Draco's shoulder. Draco had already seen that its paws and nails were more like a cat's, made for clinging and climbing. It stepped so delicately that it didn't cut the skin, however, and sat as quietly next to his ear as the ornament made of silver and diamonds it looked like. There were some who would take it for that, and that would be an advantage. Draco took a deep breath and turned to face Potter again.

"How can I thank you?" he asked. "I didn't get you a gift."

Potter shrugged. He looked embarrassed now, his eyes darting away from Draco's. Draco hated to see it. He wanted to shake the prat and tell him that he had as much reason to stand up and be proud as anyone else. "You don't have to thank me," he muttered. "It's just—it's just something I wanted to do." He looked up half-defiantly. "You need more gifts in your life."

Draco shook his head. His mouth was dry now, although he had the words to speak. The dog cuddled next to his cheek, cool and unmoving. Elegant. The kind of gift he had never thought Potter would choose. "But it's Christmas, and I've got nothing for you. At least tell me what you want, even though it's not going to be a surprise."

He couldn't explain the urgency that beat like sunstroke in his head. *I have to give him something. I want to give him something. I want to give him something so badly that I have to.*

Harry looked at Draco, and was content. The dog fit as well with him as Harry had thought it would when he'd first seen the little silver thing. And if Draco had ever had a pet, Harry didn't think it had left any mark on him. He deserved to have one. Harry would have given the world for an animal, when he was living at the Dursleys', and he thought Draco's life right now was probably as hard as that.

Draco.

And then something broke in Harry, and he decided there was a gift that he would ask for after all. He flung up his head. Draco blinked at him and took a step back, but remained attentive, his chin turned slightly to the side.

"I want you to call me by my first name," Harry said harshly. "You shove me away with my last name long after I started calling you by your first. Why is that? It makes me feel like—like we're not really friends, like you just want me to be Potter the way you did when we were in Hogwarts. Call me by my first name."

Draco's eyes were very wide when he finished, and the silver dog bared its teeth at Harry. Harry was sorry a moment later. He'd spoken honestly, but what if Draco didn't want to? Then Harry was like everyone else who kept shoving at Draco, trying to make him into someone he didn't want to be.

He was just opening his mouth to apologize when Draco's lips firmed and he nodded. He reached out and clasped Harry's wrist. His fingers pressed cold and smooth against Harry's warm skin, and that was like he silver dog, too.

"Harry," he whispered.

Harry shivered. The words seemed to open a trap beneath him, so that he fell down and down and landed at the bottom of a pit with reality written on the walls.

At the sound of his name from Draco's lips, he could no longer hide from what—and who—he wanted.

Even though he had not the slightest idea of what to do about it.

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Chapter: 28

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Eight—Training

He asked me to call him Harry.

Two days had passed since that had happened, days that he and Harry had mostly spent buried in the Manor's library, searching for ways to train their compatible magic and ensure they didn't drain one another again. And still Draco felt as if he was reeling from the shock every time he glanced up and saw Harry's bright green eyes narrowed on a book, his lips moving, or watched him spinning his wand in his hand and glancing dubiously from it to the words on the page.

He wanted me to call him Harry.

Draco wondered now why he had held off for so long. It had seemed natural at the time; he could have named his reasons without hesitation three days ago. But those reasons had melted, and now he couldn't.

It was strange. Enthralling. Terrifying. Draco wondered what it meant for him and for them.

You shouldn't be thinking about this right now. You should be thinking about some way to master your compatible magic permanently.

On the other hand, they weren't in battle right now, and they had the rest of the Christmas holidays to consider what they should do about their magic. And Harry wasn't privy to his thoughts, either. He wasn't even looking up when Draco looked at him, the way he often did when he felt eyes on him. Draco thought he could stare and muse as much as he liked.

He propped his chin up on his hand and stared some more. At the moment, Harry was bent so far over his book that it looked as if his hair had grown from the pages. His forehead was wrinkled, as Draco could see from the side, but most of his face was hidden. He shook his head, and then ran his fingers through his hair.

Draco had raised his wand before he knew what he was doing, to hopefully soothe that tangled mess back into shape. Harry glanced up at him, blinking.

"What are you doing?" he demanded in irritation. "Put that down. I don't want to do any experiments until I've tried to understand this damned thing one more time. I'm certain it's the book we need, but the language is so bloody *confusing*." He turned back to the book, his lips forming the words once more.

Draco lowered his wand and scowled. He hated that Harry could put him off so easily, but he would rather not do things that would irritate Harry any more, no matter how small.

And that's why it doesn't bother me to call him by his first name and not his last name, even though it should.

Draco blinked. He *had* adapted to dropping "Potter" remarkably well, hadn't he? He hadn't slipped up once since Harry asked, and not just because the need to return a gift for the gift of Politesse had been so strong. That feeling might have faded, but his desire to do as Harry had asked hadn't.

I like to do what makes him happy. I would have called him Harry earlier if I knew how much it mattered to him.

And that suggested the case of his infatuation for Harry was just as bad as his mother had told him it was.

Draco scowled and glared down unseeing at the parchment in front of him. He wasn't sure how he felt about this. Yes, it was one thing to think of Harry as a partner and a friend, and it was one thing to keep him happy—

That's two things, his internal grammar monitor pointed out, in the voice of his mother.

But it was another thing altogether to move based on the fragile conclusions that he might draw from such speculations. Harry hadn't seemed to react well to Draco's attempts to increase their intimacy. He had shut down the discussion of their not-kiss. He didn't realize how rare it was for Draco to tell someone else details of his life the way Draco had done with Harry. He had tried to kill himself, which wasn't an indication that he thought his life mattered to Draco, or that Draco wanted him alive.

Draco gnawed his lip. He didn't understand, and he *wanted* to. Eventually, he would need to try to impress or court or date someone he liked so much, but not without assurance that he wasn't risking his pride.

I can't risk myself too much. I can't bare my soul without some hope of a return. I need that from Harry. I need to know that he'll give himself to me before I can say that I would give myself. *Otherwise, we're being as unequal as we always are, the way that Harry said we were, with my giving and his taking.*

Harry glanced up at him, eyes brilliant and finger resting possessively on one line in the book. "I think I have it," he said breathlessly.

Draco froze. It wasn't fear or anger that froze him in place, as it was so often with Harry. No, it was awe at the way excitement could change Harry's face. This was one of the few times Draco had seen innocent excitement there, not haunted by fear or the resentment he'd felt when the instructors first made them partners and forced them to duel together.

Draco's heart gave a single slow beat, and it seemed forever before he could make himself lean forwards and say with assumed indifference, "Let's see it, then."

Let him give himself to me soon, or at least make some move to show me that he respects my pride.

Otherwise, I may not be able to wait.

"You're sure that we'll be safe in here?" Harry looked around uncertainly. Draco had led him to a plain stone room in the lower levels of the Manor. It didn't look as though it had any protections of the kind that dueling rooms at the Ministry did, not even basic wards.

For an answer, Draco flicked his wand. The walls around them twitched, and Harry had to cover his eyes; it was too much like having his glasses knocked off for comfort. When he could lower his hand again, brilliant blue light covered them, sparking and glittering. Harry turned to look at

the door again and found blue light splayed across that, too.

"Those are stronger wards than any that I saw Dearborn use," Harry said in surprise. Pushkin had taught them about wards in Observation, too, and Harry knew that their brightness indicated their power.

"Of course they are." Draco was pacing to the far edge of the room and had his back turned to Harry, but his voice still thrummed with irritation. "My family has conducted dangerous experiments here for generations. They've spelled the wards, spilled the blood to strengthen them, and ensured that they would grow more complex as their descendants added to them." He paused and shot Harry a look over his shoulder. He was distant enough that Harry couldn't read his face perfectly. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No." Harry shook his head and drew his wand. "I just wondered why you were taking Dearborn's class at all if you were powerful enough to set these wards yourself."

"There's more to Auror Dearborn's class than wards and magical strength." Draco's voice was softer now, and Harry hoped that meant his answer had calmed him down. "You know that yourself. You haven't managed to master offensive magic the way you've managed to master defensive yet."

"I know." Harry set himself carefully opposite Draco, imitating his stance as much as he could: shoulders back, head held up straight, muscles ready but not tense. It was important to the information he'd found that he do so. "But I'll have a much easier time of it if we manage to get this to work."

Draco's eyebrows rose. "*If*."

"Concentrate as hard as you can," Harry said, ignoring him. *This is still our best chance. And I was the one who found it, not him. If he wants me to try something different so badly, let him find something.* "I think you should do this first because you got better Observation marks than I did and you can probably sense it better."

He saw Draco's mouth fall open, a strangely soft look curling his lips. It faded in a moment, but not before Harry was certain that he'd seen it. He blinked.

I gave something to him. A compliment. A small one, but I reckon that he appreciates it anyway.

Harry licked his lips. He hadn't thought of that method of dealing with his realization that he—liked Draco. But that was probably because he was inherently selfish and a taker. Why not try to give him more gifts? That might ease the tension between them, the cramped tension that Harry sometimes thought he understood and sometimes didn't.

But right now, he really needed to be thinking about something else. He pointed his wand at the wall beyond Draco and shouted, "*Creo speculum!*"

Draco shook off his astonishment at the kind words and focused every sense he had on the air between them as Harry cast the spell. He saw the light pulse at the end of Harry's wand and closed his eyes. He didn't want to be distracted by the *physical* signs of the spell.

The book had said people with compatible magic should be able to feel the effects of each other's casting. Of course Draco felt that effect when he got the extra strength in the wake of Harry's spells, but the book insisted it should go beyond that.

He imagined his ears growing longer, his eyes growing wider—although they were shut now—and his skin becoming more sensitive. Anything, everything that would allow him to pick up on the disturbance in the ambient magic that Harry's spell could be causing, he imagined using it.

He felt silly—

Until he felt a faint ripple slide alongside his head.

He immediately threw his hand out, in the way the book had commanded, and focused all his attention on his wand core. Unicorn hair, different from Harry's phoenix feather but not that much, both from creatures of purity and goodness, conducting his magic, linked to Harry's power by their compatibility, throbbing with his spells, resounding to his will—

He heard a sharp gasp. Draco spent a moment breathing calmly before he opened his eyes. If he reacted too much to Harry's surprise, then he might lose the effect they had worked so hard to create.

He tried to subdue his inner triumph, because it could interfere in the same way, but he could not help feeling smug that they had done something on the first try that the book had said would take twenty attempts or more.

Harry's spell, which, if it had been successful, would have created a mirror on the wall behind Draco, hovered instead as a glowing ball of white-silver light on the tip of Draco's wand. Draco bounced his wand up and down, careful not to let it lose contact with his skin, and the light came with him.

He glanced up at Harry. Harry, his eyes wide with wonder, nodded. Draco spun and hurled the ball of light at the wall, jerking his wand up sharply to make sure it went.

The silver light leaped and arced down, colliding with the wall rather close to the floor. That didn't matter. What mattered was that it burst, flooding outwards. Draco's eyes watered, but he managed to concentrate through the tears and see the exact moment when the mirror formed, as perfectly as if Harry's original spell had gone through.

The book was right. Exultation flooded Draco as he stood there. *We can use each other's spells*

and hold them back if we sense them in time. We can draw on each other's strength without harm. The main problem is that we must become good enough to feel it when one of us is dangerously near exhaustion.

My magic, his magic—it's really our *magic. We can change the direction of each other's spells in battle, or save them for later. We can change them if need be, once we get better. We are more powerful than any sixteen wizards put together.*

Draco had to wait a moment before he turned around, since he didn't want to show the line of his hard cock tenting his trousers to Harry.

Harry glanced at Draco out of the corner of his eye. "You're sure that you want me to do this?"

"Yes. Mother already said we could." Draco was pacing back and forth, his muscles rippling in a way that Harry found it hard to pull his eyes away from. He managed when he recalled Draco's words. He sounded as if Narcissa's disapproval was the worst thing they had to worry about.

On the other hand, it was just as well they didn't have to face it, combined with Nihil and the feelings Harry was struggling with and the unanswered questions about what in the world he was going to tell his friends when they find out he was attracted to Draco. Harry nodded and forced himself to look only at the vision in front of them for a count of ten.

It appeared the Malfoys owned small parcels of land throughout Britain that came with safehouses where their ancestors used to flee in old wizarding wars, or when the Muggles started hunting wizards intensely and they needed to vanish. (Harry had already teased Draco about his family apparently not being popular for centuries. Draco had given him a frozen look and said nothing). This particular one contained a tangled, woody grove of old pines that had wound themselves together and then died. Narcissa had suggested that they use it for practice.

Did Draco tell her the details of the practice, though? Harry wondered. The trees were old, and he thought Narcissa was the kind of person who would resent the destruction of anything old, no matter how useless it was.

But they badly needed to practice, and now that they were both better at sensing and halting spells than they had been, this was the logical next step. Harry did wish Draco had wanted to go first, though. It felt like he had given Harry the chance to do that instead of taking it for himself, and Harry was bloody tired of being the one to get all the gifts.

I even demanded that he call me by my first name after I gave him Politesse.

Harry sighed, reminded himself that Draco had been the one to insist on returning a gift for a gift and anyway they didn't have time for him to brood about this, and lifted his wand. Draco mirrored him, just like Harry had had to mirror his position when he was going to cast the spell for Draco to catch. Harry hoped there was a way to get around that requirement eventually. They wouldn't have time to seek each other out in every battle and do little posing dances.

He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on Draco the way he had learned to concentrate on flung spells over the last few days. It took time to sort Draco's presence out from the brush of grass against his ankles and the sweep of cloth against his skin, but at last Harry thought he had it: something like a second heartbeat of his own, but outside his body. He nodded.

"Go on, then." Draco's voice had a slight tremor to it, which made Harry feel better about his own nerves.

Harry reached out to him.

The magic was there, trembling and floating towards him. The effect was extremely delicate, like beads of water clinging to a rope that Harry held which was linked to Draco, and Harry knew that he only needed to twitch the rope to hurl the beads off. He clenched his teeth and kept on drawing it towards him.

Draco gasped a few times, but Harry paused each time, and could still feel the heartbeat of magic from him, strong and steady. It was probably just that he was conscious now and expecting the drain, so it felt stranger than it had when Harry reached out and pulled a bunch of power all at once without permission.

As the magic flooded into him, Harry felt as though his skin had become too tight, straining with the pressure of liquid. He gulped several times. He opened his mouth permanently at last, because it felt as if he were drowning. He *had* to reach the air, but the magic was getting in the way.

Finally, he decided that the end had come—not because he could feel Draco getting tired, no matter how he concentrated, but because he couldn't take any more power. He opened his eyes, the world around him shiny with floating haze-rings, and pointed his wand at the grove of old trees.

"Aboleo cum flamma!"

The magic rose and coursed through him, a flood, outwards. It was the most dangerous and powerful and rewarding thing Harry had ever felt. He found himself howling, and didn't think it was words. It was a simple, primal cry, a necessary cleansing of his soul given what had poured into him.

The trees rose from the ground, carried on a plume of fire. Harry blinked in shock, seeing no connection happen between his wand and the spell, the way he would have ordinarily; the trees simply spiraled up, and up, and then exploded into ashes at the height of their rise, raining down bits of charred wood and sparks. Harry remembered that they would set the grass on fire, and maybe the safehouse, if he let them.

And maybe Draco.

That thought was the most disturbing. Harry spun his wand and cast a Shield Charm.

At least, he *thought* it was a Shield Charm. The Shield Charm shouldn't form a slick silvery film that covered the grass, the house, Draco, himself, and most of the other things in sight that weren't on fire.

Harry stood there blinking as the ashes landed. They immediately went out, and he felt nothing where they'd landed on his skin. He lifted his hands to brush them off, and received an odd, smooth, sliding feeling when his hand passed along his robes and arms, as though he were made of ice.

"What was *that*?" Draco said, with an immense dignity that made Harry wince.

He turned to face him. Draco was watching the film that covered him; Harry could somehow tell that from the way his eyes were focused, even though he was turned in the right direction to be watching Harry, instead. He reached up and picked at the film that covered his nose, which immediately oozed back into place. Then he flinched as a branch landed not far behind him, but the ground didn't even shudder.

Then he looked angry because he'd been made to flinch when he hadn't needed to.

Harry took a deep breath. He wondered for a minute what would happen when the film flowed into his lungs, but the answer seemed to be "nothing," maybe because the magical protection was there already.

"Um," he said. "A sign that we need to practice more?"

Draco stared at him, then shook his head in disgust and tugged on the magic "rope" that still extended between them, once Harry could pay attention to it. Using some of Harry's power as well as his own, he cleared off the film and put out the fires. Harry licked his lips and told himself they didn't feel odd from having had the film on them.

"This time," Draco said dangerously, as he flipped his wand and conjured a stack of wooden shields where the trees had stood, "*I* do the honors."

Harry stepped meekly to the side and prepared to let Draco drain his magic from him, knowing that it would feel odd. "I do think it's interesting," he said. "I tried to cast the Shield Charm, and that's what I got instead. Something even more effective. Maybe being full of shared magic increases our power in specific spells as well as generally, and that means—"

"It made," Draco said, his teeth cutting off almost every word so it stood alone. "A. Great. *Mess.*"

Harry wisely fell silent.

Harry had fallen asleep again.

Draco turned around from telling the house-elf, Mariganny, who'd come to serve them after dinner, what kind of drinks they wanted and found Harry leaning against the back of the couch, his head tilted back and his mouth slightly open. He'd fallen asleep after other training sessions, too, but never as fast as this.

Draco reckoned that completely destroying a grove of trees with fire and then spreading a disgusting slime over everything in the same day—not to mention having his magic pulled on when it was Draco's turn to practice—would take it out of him.

He meant to stay where he was, so he could drink the wine he wanted and taunt Harry for falling asleep when he woke. Yet he found himself dismissing Mariganny with a murmured word and rising to his feet to approach the couch.

Harry's snoring was loud enough to sound in Draco's ears like a cat's purr when he stood close to him. Draco grimaced. If they ever shared a pillow, then that was something that would have to change. Draco would teach Harry specialized Silencing Charms before he would ever let him exhale like *that* close to his ear.

If it ever came to that. Which it would not.

Draco sat down on the couch next to Harry. Harry went on snoring, though his head rolled to the side as if he wanted to keep track of Draco in his sleep. His mouth opened further. Draco reached out and touched Harry's skin, his fingers lingering on the warmth.

I want him. But I can't take him as he is, selfish and suicidal and distant from me. If he wants me at all, then he'll have to make the first move.

Draco thought of the way that Harry had resisted telling anyone the truth about his fits and the truth about why he had ended his relationship with the Weaselette, and snorted.

And that will never happen, either, because he will never lessen his denial.

Draco rose to his feet. Now that Harry was sleeping, perhaps he could get some research done on whether Harry's fits were caused by a problem with his magical core. He had wanted to tackle the subject earlier, but Harry had insisted that their problems with compatible magic and getting it under control were more important.

That is another thing that must cease. The way he does not regard himself as important, to the point of trying to turn me away from doing something that could help him simply because it would help him.

Politesse was waiting for him outside the room; he had taken a decided dislike to Harry and usually refused to be with Draco when he was with Harry. (As Draco had expected, the small,

elegant beast and his mother had taken to each other at once). Draco held out an arm, and the little dog-creature crawled delicately up it and to his shoulder, where he promptly sat down.

Draco smiled as he walked. His careful testing of Politesse had revealed loyalty spells woven into his very being. Draco was not afraid of Politesse ever betraying him, or taking another master, or hurting him unintentionally the way Harry was prone to do.

Harry bought him to be a friend to me in situations where he can't be with me. I fear that Politesse will have to do, in the end, even in those situations where Harry could be with me, because he won't want to.

Politesse's ears flicked back and forth and he turned his head, sharpness and delicacy in every line. Draco watched him from the corner of his eye. Politesse was everything that Harry was not.

I need him to change before I can be with him.

And how can that happen, when he won't admit he needs to?

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Chapter: 29

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Nine—Outbreaks

"Harry! How was the rest of your holiday?"

Harry smiled and held out his arms to welcome Hermione, who dashed straight into them. No need to ask how *her* holidays had been since the last time he had seen her; her face was glowing, more relaxed than it had been. She and Ron must not have had another argument.

"Fine, thanks," Harry said, and smiled down at her. He'd taken care to arrive back at the barracks early, since he hadn't told his friends he was staying at Malfoy Manor. He didn't want another row with them so soon, but besides, it wasn't their business. He didn't need to know every single secret glance and snog they gave each other, either.

And are you saying that staying in Malfoy Manor is at all the same as them snogging?

Harry rolled his eyes at his inner voice. No, it wasn't, and not likely to become so, either, because Draco had been acting strangely these last few days—

"Are you ready for the next round of classes?" Hermione was already squirming out of his hug so that she could reach her books. "I've studied Observation ever so hard, and I *still* don't see how we're supposed to spot all these tiny details that I know Pushkin is going to want us to see—"

"Let the man have some time to breathe before you start trying to pile homework on him, Hermione." Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, as if to say *See what I have to put up with?* Harry only grinned back, because Ron looked just as relaxed and happy as Hermione did. Harry wasn't about to believe he'd suffered a whole lot of stress.

Like I have, these last few days.

But that way lay self-pity and thoughts that he shouldn't think anyway when Ron and Hermione were around, until he'd had time to get them used to a few essential truths. He shook his head and said, "Yeah, I've been studying the Battle Healing techniques that Portillo Lopez wants us to learn."

"*Those* bloody things," Ron said, his smile turning into a scowl. He aimed his books at the middle of his bed and managed to hit it. "Yeah, I don't know what in the world she wants us to learn those things for. I'm not going to have to time to bandage up a wound when the Dark wizards are shooting curses at me."

"That's why you learn how to do them fast," Hermione said promptly, "so that you can heal your partner faster than they can use the curses."

Ron rolled his eyes. "And you think I can charm bandages to wind up in a—" he gave one of the closed books a dubious glance and then obviously took a wild stab at the name "—Bee's Eye pattern when I still can't wrap them that way by hand?"

"The spells are different, and you know it," Hermione said briskly. "Here, let me show you." She waved her wand and intoned a low incantation that Harry almost recognized, and the blankets rose from the bed to wrap themselves in an intricate knot around Ron.

Ron yelped and stumbled, then nearly fell to the floor. Hermione caught him in time and floated him gently to a chair, while Harry wrapped his arms around himself and laughed until he felt like his ribs would break.

"That's how you do it," Hermione said serenely. "And it's Bee's Nest, not Bee's Eye. And when you learn how to do it well enough, then I'll promise to let you do it to me, and I won't even fight."

Harry stood back up, shaking his head and grinning slightly. Ron was smiling in spite of himself at what Hermione had said, even though he was also still thrashing to try and get out of the blankets. Harry was glad that his best friends seemed to have solved their problems for now. It was as though a bleeding wound in the back of his mind had quietly and painlessly sewn itself

up.

Which was good, because another one had opened.

Harry gritted his teeth and forced the thought away yet again before Hermione turned to him.

"Ginny sends her love," she said, eyes intense.

Harry stared at her. Why would she look like that? Hermione had seen the way he avoided Ginny at Christmas, and he'd had the feeling she approved. "Yeah, I know that," he said at last.

"She said," Hermione said, and then stopped, nibbling her lip. "Well, it's better if I just give the bloody thing to you," she muttered, and took something out of her pocket to hand to him while Harry was still gaping at her.

It turned out to be a letter. From the thickness of the envelope, Harry thought there were several sheets of paper in it. He closed his hand around it and heard it crumple.

Hermione gave him a pitying look, told Ron, "Let's go to my rooms, and I'll teach you how to undo those blankets," and floated Ron out of the room behind her, though he kept insisting that he could hop.

Harry pressed the envelope close down to the paper and stared to see if he could make out any of the words. Nothing. The spiky black letters could have been anything. Harry saw just enough to recognize it as Ginny's handwriting. Then again, Hermione didn't have any reason to lie about that.

Harry stood there, still, for a long time, but he knew the stillness was only another way of trying to control his rage.

Then he conjured a fire in the hearth, threw the letter in, and watched until the whole thing was completely burned.

Had he had a letter from Draco at the moment, he might have done the same thing with it.

"A bit more slowly," Draco murmured as he watched Harry's table manners from the corner of his eye.

Harry's hand tightened on his fork, and then he banged it down on the table and turned to face Draco. Draco blinked. He was glad that he had left Politesse in his rooms, because otherwise the little dog would have leaned forwards with his teeth bared. Draco was slowly learning that Politesse responded to Harry with hostility at those moments when *Draco* was feeling hostility; the other evening, when they had discussed how they should hunt Nihil and had mostly agreed, Politesse had napped on Draco's lap without waking up once to snarl or bark at Harry.

"What's the matter?" Draco asked.

"You keep giving me advice on my table manners," Harry said, not raising his voice, but with his eyes blazing so hard that Draco leaned warily away from him, "and my hair, and the way I should stand and sit. *Why*?"

Draco blinked again. He had expected the question even less than he had expected the conversation about it. "Because you're doing things the wrong way," he said. "Or at least, you're doing them in ways that make you look sloppy and ridiculous. And your back is going to hurt when you're older if you don't have good posture now."

Harry shook his head and swiped his hand through his hair. Draco winced, but didn't say anything, since Harry seemed to be feeling a bit sensitive right now.

Unfortunately, Harry saw the wince, and leaned towards Draco, his voice sharp. Draco could feel a few people at other tables glancing at them. He hoped that Harry wouldn't raise his voice while they were outside the privacy of Draco's rooms.

"There you *go* again," Harry said, and his fingers were clenched around the edge of the table, as if he wanted to show Draco beyond doubt how seriously he was taking this. "Why *the fuck* should it matter to you what my hair looks like, or what my table manners are? We're not required to watch out for things like that."

Again, Draco had no idea how to answer. "I assumed it'd be obvious," he said at last. "Because those are the wrong things, and I'd like to see you do the right ones."

"Why?" Harry was half out of his chair now, and his voice shook with such strain that Draco was sure he would give in and yell any second. He winced again. He didn't want to make a disturbance, but Harry was set on making one. *Of course.*

"Because the wrong things bother me," Draco snapped. If Harry wanted nastiness, then Draco would give him that. He had no idea why he was being accused. True, he'd been giving Harry little corrections for a week since they returned to their classes, but Harry had only rolled his eyes or even smiled. Why choose to get upset about it now? "I'd prefer it if I had a partner who was polite and well-groomed."

Harry slumped back down in his chair, which made Draco imagine the pain that would travel through his kinked spine, and laughed bitterly. "I knew it was that," he told his empty tray; he always ate too fast, as if someone was going to take the food away from him. "But I tried to pretend it wasn't."

"What are you talking about?" Draco kept his voice cool and his face stiff. No need to alert the other people who might be glancing at them of their fight, or the ways in which it seemed worse than the other rows they'd had, if Harry's face was any indication.

"You want to *change* me," Harry said, as if that was some heinous crime. "I'm not good enough for you. Not pretty enough. I don't act the right way. I'm a *freak* in your little pure-blood world of customs and social cues." He said "freak" with a particular hard emphasis that Draco didn't understand, but would prefer not to hear again. "I should have known that what I was feeling wasn't reciprocated."

Draco swallowed. It would have worked better if he'd had moisture in his throat to accomplish that. "I still have no idea what you mean. We're friends. I thought that I'd showed you your friendship meant—much to me."

"Apparently not, if all you care about is outward appearances." Harry's voice was heavy with stupid sarcasm. Draco would at least have liked to hear cutting wit if he was going to be despised. Harry climbed to his feet with his face turned away, flicked his wand so that his tray left the table without his touching it, and then started towards the racks on the far side of the dining hall.

"Wait," Draco said, unable to believe that Harry was walking away. Draco was the one who did that, instead of getting walked away from. He picked up his own tray and hastened after Harry, catching at his elbow as he turned towards the exit. "We agreed that you needed to change," Draco murmured, his lips scant inches from Harry's ear. "That little speech you gave me after you nearly *died* in my home because you thought it was better to kill yourself than let Nihil's magic take you is a case in point." Just thinking about the stupid way that Harry had risked his life made Draco tighten his hold.

Harry ripped free and spun around to face him. By now, Weasel and Mudblood, who were eating at a different table entirely, had risen to their feet and were staring at them in concern. Draco felt his face go red with embarrassment, but he had to pay as much attention to Harry as possible instead of the spectators, to see the moment when Harry realized how unreasonable was being.

"It's one thing to change the big things," Harry said savagely, and still in a whisper that made Draco wonder why he wasn't screaming. "I don't really want to die, and I'll have to learn better ways of dealing with Nihil's threat than killing myself. It's one thing to keep promises and try to work with you and to stop denying that we're effective partners. It's *another* to change all these little things about myself just because you're like me to, while you look at me down your nose because you're too good for me and you think you don't have to change *at all*." Harry sneered. "I thought we were equals, that you saw me the same way I saw you. I reckon that I was wrong." And off he stormed.

Draco became aware that his mouth was open, and that that might make him look less than perfectly composed. He closed it and placed his tray next to Harry's. Then he stood there coldly considering his partner's retreating back.

There were so many misconceptions in what Harry had just said that Draco didn't feel up to dealing with them right now. He went back to his own rooms and worked on the essay that Ketchum had assigned them, because he said that far too many of them were "thinking lazily"

about tactics, and maybe having to put their feelings and actions into words would make their minds run better. He petted Politesse throughout the evening, who rattled his tail in an erratic motion that reminded Draco of the way that some cats purred.

He didn't think about Harry. It would have suggested that he regretted his actions, and he couldn't, because he was right.

Harry was glad that the trainees who had made it through the first term were allowed to exercise in one of the training rooms that Ketchum sometimes used to set up obstacle courses. He couldn't go flying, but he needed *something* physical to work off the rage.

There were few people around the large room, with its mixed walls of stone and wood and its wooden floor, when Harry entered, and those there mostly clustered around a dummy enchanted with shields that they could practice their curses against. Harry made a bee-line for an open area of the room, Transfigured his robes to something more suitable for running without much concentration, and then took off in a wide circle.

His feet pounded the floor, and his breath jarred in his lungs for a long moment before he got used to the rhythm. Then all he allowed himself to think about for the next few minutes was how raw and sore his body already felt and how he would have to increase his physical exercise if he wanted to become an Auror and how he hoped that they would find someone else to teach the Combat course.

But his rage burned too bright to be snuffed out too easily, and soon it was back with him, and soon Draco's smug, taunting face was floating in front of him again.

Harry had been confused when Draco seemed to grow more distant from him over the last few days of Christmas holidays, but he had thought maybe he was worried about Nihil, or his inability to find an answer in the books for why Harry had fits, or already missing his mother. Then Draco had started correcting his manners and aiming minor grooming spells at his hair. Harry had tried to smile and accept it as partially a joke and partially just the way Draco was. He had habits and traits that he couldn't change.

But it went on and on and *on*, until sometimes it seemed as if Draco never looked at him normally anymore. Harry would look up and find Draco's eyes critically fixed on him, looking for something that he could disapprove of.

Harry bit down until blood from his tongue filled his mouth and intensified his run until the walls blurred past him and his head spun from how fast he made the turns at the edges of the circle.

I was right, when I thought that I didn't fit into the perfect little pure-blood world that Malfoy Manor and the party were in. He wants me to be someone different, and it bothers him that I'll never be that way.

Harry snarled and ran even faster. He couldn't hear the sound of his own feet anymore over the

heartbeat that thrummed in his ears.

I still want him. I still like him. But why should I tell him that when he would only look me up and down and tell me that I'm not good enough for him until I comb my hair fifteen times a day and wear designer robes?

I need to change. I know that. I'm not perfect. I know that. *But I refuse to change while he's standing there and not making any* effort.

Maybe he assumes that he's doing his part by telling me what I *need to change, but he's really, really not.*

By the time that Harry had exhausted himself and slumped to the floor of the training room, where he panted and sweated like a cow who'd run away from the slaughterhouse, he'd made his decision. He'd be Draco's friend. He was still that, no matter what happened. He would be his partner.

But he was *fucked* if he told Draco that he wanted him, at least while Draco was like this. Draco would assume that meant he had more power over Harry and could force him into doing other stupid, petty, annoying things, changing himself like a good little dog—like a pet like Politesse—just because Harry wanting him somehow meant more than friendship.

It doesn't, Harry thought, standing up and flinging his wet hair out of his face before he went to the showers. *They're equally as important as each other. But one of them he's never getting from me unless he apologizes and stops acting like a* prick.

Draco had assumed that Harry was so honest and open and emotional that he would never be able to do cold distance well.

In the next few days, when it felt as though someone had put a wall of glass between him and Harry, he learned he'd been wrong.

His mother sent news that there had been no rash of disappearances among the families she was aware of, or among the families outside her immediate social circles that the Abranes might know. Draco discussed that with Harry, as well as his suspicion that Nihil had created faces that weren't real on bodies like the fake Death Eaters they had spoken to in the interrogation rooms. Harry nodded, expression calm and eyes looking everywhere but at Draco.

"Then where did the bodies come from?" he asked. "That's what we need to find out."

All the reading Draco could do about magical cores yielded no story of symptoms that matched Harry's. Frustrated, he asked Harry again what happened to him during his fits. Harry described going back into an intense memory, this time the memory of Snape's death, which had been the one that knocked him down that day in Gregory's class. Draco stepped closer to Harry, daring to put an arm around his shoulders.

Harry moved away without appearing to notice.

Because most of the leads seemed to be closing in on them, Draco suggested that they try to interview the young woman, the former trainee, who'd escaped from Gregory's clutches. Battle Healer Portillo Lopez had treated her and sent her home, but she had come back, maybe because her wounds were paining her. The people Draco had questioned had heard only rumors about why she was in the Ministry again. The important thing was that she was.

Harry agreed with any sign of enthusiasm, and they set out for Portillo Lopez's office.

Draco stared at him from the corner of his eye all the way there. Harry was more quiet and subdued than Draco had ever seen him. He seemed to walk cloaked in his own thoughts much of the time. He would emerge from them to answer Draco if Draco asked him a question, but then he went straight back into them again.

He would never be as elegant on the outside, but otherwise, he was rather like Politesse, calm and cold and restrained. Draco had assumed he would enjoy that, if it ever happened.

He hated it.

But he couldn't see any way to apologize for the things that Harry seemed to want him to apologize for. That would be like yielding, giving up his pride *yet again* and letting Harry get away with behavior that even *he* had acknowledged was selfish behavior. Draco needed to see Harry give something of his own free will. Then he could soften and give the apology in return and not feel as though he was the weaker one in their contest.

But it seemed that Harry would prefer the contest simply continue on.

Draco gritted his teeth. *Fine.*

When he knocked on the door of Portillo Lopez's office, no one answered, but the door glowed and swung inwards, which was a sign that the Battle Healer wanted to invite her students to wait inside. Draco stepped in, resisting the childish temptation to shut the door in Harry's face.

Then he stood very, very still.

Harry walked into his back and peered over his shoulder, saying in annoyance, "Draco, what—"

Then he was still, too.

Someone was pinned against the wall of Portillo Lopez's office opposite the door. There were knives through her elbows, and through her shoulders, and through her eyes. They glittered like fallen stars, bright as justice through all the blood that had flowed over them. Draco could see the way the body hung, and he knew that the knives must have been driven straight through the

woman's body into the wall itself.

She was not Portillo Lopez, he could make himself see a moment later, and the knife-wounds were not the only ones she had. He didn't know how he had missed it before, but the entire front of her body had been torn open, her chest and belly peeled down but left attached so that they drooped on the floor like a bolt of cloth. Her organs had apparently been scraped out of her chest. The blood had been left, though, and the muscle, and dark glistening pieces of flesh and globs of liquid that made Draco think of thick jellies. He bit his lip and his stomach heaved as he gasped.

"Do you think she's the one who escaped Auror Gregory?" Harry whispered, what seemed an endless heartbeat of time later. His hand had come to rest on Draco's shoulder, and Draco leaned back into him, grateful for the support.

"Yes," he said. "We have to tell someone."

In the silence that followed his words, the sound of the door closing and locking behind them was very loud.

Draco turned his head, slowly, feeling as if he had all the time in the world.

The tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed woman he had last seen at the Abranes' party was walking towards them from the door that led to Portillo Lopez's private library. She had a pleasant smile on her face and a whirling ball of golden light cupped between her hands.

Beside her, on either side, stalked glittering messes of flesh that had been sculpted by clumsy magic into the form of four-legged beasts. Cats, maybe. Draco swallowed again; now he knew where the victim's organs had gone.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the woman said. "I thought it time we should formally meet. My name is Nusquam." She inclined her head, her smile so perfectly polite that Draco suffered the delusion that his mother would approve of her manners. "And it is time for another test, I believe. Though I hope this one works better than the last one," she added, with a slight roll of her eyes. "Nemo and his creatures test my patience."

She lifted the sphere of light to her mouth and blew sharply into it.

Draco fell to the floor as his magic revolted against him. Through blurring eyes, he saw the compacted masses of flesh heave themselves at Harry.

And then, darkness, and pounding heartbeats, and oceanic silence as he tried to stop his magic from becoming grief magic.

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Chapter: 30

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty—Breakthrough

Draco was drowning, struggling. Every time he found his feet and thought that he might prevent Nihil from taking control of his magic, another surge knocked him down and then more of his magic transformed. He could feel it draining away from him, a steady trickle like blood from a wound.

I will not allow this.

Draco fastened his mind on the cold disdain that his father had used when he heard of the Wizengamot's sentencing him to Azkaban. Lucius had cared, of course, but he had pushed the emotions down under a façade of indifference and clung to his pride.

It was not the indifference Draco wanted but the stubbornness that meant their enemies couldn't crush them. He gritted his teeth and thought of that. No Malfoy would die like this, because it would be too undignified.

He was *not* going to die.

He brought up his will and wielded it like a hammer against the magic that was encasing him, solidifying into place, no longer water but stone. He felt the tide pressing against him falter. Draco hissed in triumph.

He had much to live for. How was he ever going to persuade Harry to give him what he wanted unless he stayed alive? How was he going to be an Auror unless he retained control of his magic?

The evil force that seemed to be coming from both inside and outside his body at the same time hesitated for a moment. Draco forced his eyes open and saw Harry stumbling away from Nusquam. Good. At least he was alive—

Then the magic that was pulling at and devouring Draco came roaring back, and Draco realized that its cessation had never been more than a temporary pause. He fell again, and this time, when the waves closed over his head, even the *memory* of light and air and pride seemed to have been pressed out of him, and he could not stand.

Harry avoided the strike of the first organ-cat more by luck than skill. He'd forgotten how much better it felt to have someone to fight with. He'd taken for granted the way Draco stood at his back and the compatible magic that made both of them stronger.

Then remember how to fight on your own, damn it!

Harry whirled to the side and cast a mild wind charm, remembering Dearborn's lessons: *Use the advantages of your enemies against them when you can.*

The cats were heavy and faster than he was, but they still weren't perfect fighters. Harry's wind slammed the first one into the second one and they went down in a messy heap, coiled intestines spilling around them.

Nusquam clucked her tongue. "I did tell Nemo that they needed more testing, but he always wants to use spells before they're ready," she murmured. "And resources, like you." She glanced at Harry, her deep blue eyes amused. "No sooner does he know about the well of your power than he wants to drain it."

Harry tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but he saw Draco's eyelashes flutter just then and his partner heave himself to his feet. Harry turned towards him with relief. One thing he had learned in the last few minutes was that he hated fighting alone. If they could—

Then Draco fell over again, and his face went pale, and he gasped the way Harry could remember gasping when the grief magic was pouring into him and trying to change him.

There was no hesitation. It was what had to be done, so Harry did it. He flung a "rope" of his own magic to Draco, the way they'd been practicing when they wanted to drain each other without exhaustion. He felt it catch on whatever it was in Draco's power or spirit that made them compatible in the first place, but there was no pull. Draco was too far out of it to draw from him, Harry decided.

He was dying.

Harry felt as though his heart was going to explode. He *drove* his magic into Draco, plunging it into his body like a spear, and then faced Nusquam and the intestine-cats and spoke one of the spells they'd found when they were researching magical beasts with as much force as he could. "*Dilabor*."

The cats trembled and quivered; Harry still had to repel one of them, which was charging at his legs, with a Shield Charm before the spell he had used could take effect. But then it did, and their fleshy legs and thrust-forward heads simply fell apart. Harry smiled, though he could feel how much effort it took him to do so. Most of his power was flowing into Draco.

But the spell had worked as the book said it should. Experimental magical creatures were less stable than long-established breeds. The spell was meant to find the weak points in their composition and separate them.

"Interesting," Nusquam said, her face alight with a deep smile. Harry realized suddenly that,

except for blowing into the globe of light when Draco first collapsed, she hadn't done anything yet, and his confidence diminished again. "And now, I'll test you in my own way, rather than doing what Nemo and Nihil wanted." She raised one of her hands away from the globe of light, spread her fingers, and then bent them inwards towards her palm.

Harry screamed. He could hear his joints popping and his arms bending in unnatural directions; he could *feel* his knees trying to ram themselves through the back of his legs. He crumpled, while his body began to tear itself apart and the pain increased to the point that he knew not even the Cruciatus Curse could have matched it.

But he kept pushing magic into Draco, because if he died, at least his partner might be able to survive.

And then suddenly the magic was flowing back towards him instead, pushed, hurled into his body, and Draco was rising to his feet, his eyes ablaze.

When he needed it, there was power there.

Draco didn't realize where it must be coming from at first. He simply reached out, grasped the power greedily, and rammed it down the throat of the person he was struggling with. As moments passed, he had come to feel more and more as if *someone* was holding him down, pressing his wrists to his side and pressing the air out of his chest. But he could fight now, and he did, forcing his enemy up and away.

The power flowing over him ebbed, and Draco surged up, still gathering the magic, whipping it around him like a shield. The grief magic shredded as if it were paper, and Draco heard a distant shriek.

The magic was coming from Harry, he realized then. Of course it was. When one of them needed saving, the other was always there.

And on that note, Draco felt like laughing, because he thought he understood why Harry's magic made their enemy flee. Harry had already survived one assault like this. Of course Nihil wouldn't be able to convert his magic, when Harry had gained full control of it again.

Draco wound Harry's power over and around and through his, and the alien magic slid away with a snarl. Draco continued chopping, because he wanted to be sure that their invisible enemy wouldn't get any more bright ideas, and then he was opening his eyes in the room they'd entered and where he'd last seen Harry under attack by Nusquam.

Portillo Lopez's office, he remembered, and then turned and saw Harry screaming on the floor.

He didn't take time to think. It really didn't matter *what* Harry was suffering from, just that he was. Draco threw the magic that Harry had handed him back at him, tossing it like rope, smooth coils of strength, filling up the empty place that Harry had left when he reached out to Draco.

The air between them began to hum and vibrate. Draco had thought of them as connected by ropes of magic before, but this was the first time he had thought that might be literally true. He could see the white-golden cords if he squinted, binding him and Harry.

A bolt of red light cut towards them, and nearly split them apart.

If I can see them, so can other people, Draco realized, with a shock that was like being slapped, and whirled to face Nusquam. She raised one eyebrow at him and lifted her hand. The golden ball of light had dissipated, but a new one of red was coming into view, growing and expanding as Draco watched. He was sure that it would grow big enough to swallow both of them if he didn't do something about it.

Harry was recovering, the Dark magic that Nusquam had inflicted on him falling to pieces, but he still wasn't back on his feet, which left their defense up to Draco. He snatched his wand and barked, "*Tua mors!*"

Nusquam had only one moment to look astonished before the air around her turned golden-bronze, like the inside of a desert sun. Draco threw his hand across his eyes to hold off the afterimages and turned back to Harry. He heard one thin, shrill gasp and then no more. He wasn't worried.

Nusquam wouldn't scream while she was the victim of that spell, because it was a spell that inflicted pain so intense one *couldn't* scream.

He knelt down next to Harry and realized that Harry was shaking all over despite the dismissal of the curse. Draco frowned and traced his wand in a line from Harry's shoulders to his ankles. "Are you all right?" he asked, wincing as bright red streaks appeared in the wand's wake. The streaks showed how much pain Harry was in; the closer to scarlet they were, the higher the agony. These looked like spilled blood.

"Not really," Harry admitted. He laughed breathlessly and leaned against Draco's shoulder, staring up into his face. Draco blinked when he realized that Harry's eyes shone with joy. "But *you're* all right, so that doesn't matter."

Draco put a hand over Harry's shoulder and squeezed down hard for a moment. Then he said, "I think she used a twisted healing spell on you. We should get you to Portillo Lopez as soon as possible." He lifted Harry carefully to his feet, restricting the flow of magic into him but not cutting it. He thought the addition of extra magic was probably the only reason that Harry wasn't curled up in pain right now.

"What did you do to her?" Harry whispered, staring ahead of him in awe.

Draco looked over his shoulder and saw that the bronze glow had dimmed to a single outline of the right height to enclose a human figure. "I used a spell that isn't Dark Arts," he said smugly.

"I don't know what that means," Harry admitted, leaning on him. Draco lowered his head and sighed into Harry's hair. *This* was nearly enough, even though Harry hadn't made any open apology yet. He trusted Draco to take care of him, trusted to his superior strength at the moment, even though he had saved Draco in this battle as much as Draco had saved him.

"It's one of the spells the Ministry *would* declare Dark Arts if they knew it existed," Draco admitted. "It sets fire to the magic in your body and replaces it with pure mortality. You can think of it as really fast aging, if you like. Without our magic, a wizard isn't any different from a Muggle."

"I never thought I would hear you say that," Harry muttered, hopping a bit and then flinching. Draco moved closer so that Harry could put more of his weight on him.

"I'm talking about a matter of magical theory here, not of blood," he explained. Harry snorted. Draco chose to ignore that and continue. "So it's as though the victim is suddenly stripped of the magic that allows us to live longer than Muggles, and then all the years are piled on at once. Like I said, it would definitely be illegal if they knew about it, but since they don't, I can't get into trouble for using Dark Arts."

Harry started to respond, but suddenly stared over Draco's shoulder. "Should it be doing that?"

Draco twisted around. The human-shaped outline was gone, but the pile of ashes that should have been left behind had failed to appear. Instead, there was a single slender piece of what looked like metal, spinning in place and flashing with the remnants of the spell's light.

Then it fell to the ground with a bright tinkling noise. Draco waited for some moments before he drew his wand and spelled it into the air where he could get a better look at it. He didn't walk up to touch it, however, and not simply because Harry needed his support.

Yes, it was a long, slim piece of metal, an oversized needle. It was brilliant and pale, as if it was made of platinum.

It looked innocent, or at least more innocent than a pile of ashes would have—and far more innocent than the organ-creatures that Nusquam had appeared with.

Nevertheless, Draco shuddered.

This time, the instructors had little option but to believe them, because they had the piece of metal and the remnants of the organ-cats—not to mention the body of the young woman pinned to the wall—to show them. But they hadn't said anything original about it, not that Harry could hear. They simply talked on and on, coming back to the unknown facts of how Nihil and his followers were getting inside and why the Ministry's wards never picked up on Dark Arts when they were about.

So Harry didn't pay attention to them, because he didn't see why he had to.

He kept his gaze locked on Draco instead, who was sitting with his knees propped up in front of him and his elbows resting on them. His head drooped, and he took slow, careful breaths. But when he looked up and found Harry watching him, he offered him a fake smile and tried to sit up the rest of the way.

Harry shook his head. Draco hadn't taken any permanent damage from the attempt to transform his magic into grief magic, it seemed. And Portillo Lopez had managed to heal Harry's wounds without much problem. As Draco had said, it was twisted healing magic that Nusquam had used, and regular healing magic could counteract it.

But Harry wasn't worried about Draco's body as much as his mental state.

Three years ago, Draco had been unable to kill Dumbledore when he thought the safety of his family depended on it. But he had used a spell that he knew would kill Nusquam tonight—even though they hadn't found a body and so they didn't know if it had really worked. He hadn't hesitated. He had spoken coolly about the spell afterwards.

That didn't mean he wasn't suffering.

Harry wished Ketchum would stop arguing with Dearborn about how it was possible for their enemies to get in, decide whatever it was they were going to decide, and let them go so that he could comfort and confront Draco.

Finally Portillo Lopez brought her wand down in the middle of the table. The bang of it startled the others and brought Draco's head up. Harry had seen her getting ready to do it, which was the only reason he didn't jump. Aunt Petunia had banged a frying pan that way sometimes.

"Leave the theoretical magical considerations for the classroom, gentlemen," Portillo Lopez said. She was on her feet, and the scarf wound about her hair dangled half-loose as she surveyed them with hard eyes. "No matter how they accomplished it, our enemies *are* able to get inside the building. We need to deal with the consequences of that."

Harry found himself smiling. There was a reason that Portillo Lopez had become his favorite of the instructors, even though he didn't always do well in her classes. Hestia was nice, but she couldn't take charge in a situation the way Portillo Lopez could.

"You're right, Maryam." Dearborn rubbed his forehead. He looked haggard, and Harry wondered if that was because Draco, his mentee, had been the victim of yet another attack. "Forgive me. It's time to admit that we can't handle this on our own." He lifted a hand as if he anticipated objections, though from what Harry could see, none of the others had opened their mouths. "We should tell the Head Auror that we have two trainees who require bodyguards. If they did manage to kill this woman calling herself Nusquam, then Nihil and the rest will probably try to take revenge. If they didn't, then they are still likely to be involved in further attacks. These

madmen have proven that they will halt at nothing to get rid of them." He looked at Draco and Harry, his voice hopeful but his eyes hopeless. "Neither of you can remember anything that might explain these attacks?"

Draco shook his head. "Just that they must have infected us at some point because they tried to take control of my magic now and Harry's magic over Christmas holidays, sir. And we don't know how they did it, or when they did it. Who knows if they've done it to other people? They probably did it to the fake Death Eaters."

"I think I know how they did it," Portillo Lopez said quietly. "You said that the woman who faced you held a globe of light?"

Harry nodded and put an arm around Draco's shoulders. Draco was starting to look overwhelmed, and Harry wanted to show that he was there to support him.

Draco shot him a startled glance. Harry gave him a glare for being stupid back and turned to face Portillo Lopez again.

"I examined your magic when I examined you, Trainee Potter." Portillo Lopez's face was grim. "And from the testimony Trainee Malfoy gives, I believe you were infected through light."

Harry blinked. "Infected through light?" he asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Harry!" That was Hestia, her voice shrill. "You *will* show respect to Battle Healer Portillo Lopez."

Harry gaped at her. Hestia was normally the last one who cared about such things.

"It is all right, Hestia," Portillo Lopez shook her head slightly, never looking away from Harry. "I find the theory hard to accept myself. But I found traces of—I can only call them traces of *reflections* in your magic, Trainee Potter. Something you saw gave you the infection, which Nihil or Nusquam let lie dormant until they wanted to use it."

"But that means…" Ketchum sounded as if he were strangling. "That means they could strike anywhere, at any time. We can't stop *seeing* things."

"Yes," Portillo Lopez said. "And we must call on the Minister now. I believe that Trainees Malfoy and Potter should be moved out of the barracks and into a more secure place, to be determined by the Head Auror and us. They may still continue to attend classes, but they need rooms where they can relax in true peace, without fear of grief magic or experimental beings. And I wish them to have bodyguards that will accompany them to classes as well."

Harry stiffened. "Won't people say that's special treatment because I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, Battle Healer?" he asked.

"It's special treatment because you have so nearly been a murder victim multiple times." Portillo Lopez examined him coolly. "Send any complainers to me. I will deal with them."

She would, too, Harry thought, from the look in her eyes. He leaned back against the wall and went back to not listening, because now Ketchum and Dearborn were arguing about who should be appointed as bodyguards and all the names were names of people he didn't know. He shut his eyes, the better to focus on his thoughts.

If he was going to be sharing a room or rooms with Draco, then it became even more urgent to actually bring up what was on his mind tonight. He wouldn't *tolerate* living in the same small space with someone who was rude to him or someone he was accidentally hurting.

And he didn't want to ignore Draco's pain, either.

Draco looked around his rooms distrustfully. The instructors had pinned him and Harry in here for tonight, until the "secure place" and the bodyguards could be arranged tomorrow. Two third-year trainees were on guard at the door now.

It was all so foreign. Here he had assumed that he would be treated as a pariah by the Ministry for all his years in the program, until he forced them into respect, and now they were treating his life like it was a precious object.

Maybe that's only because I'm with Harry and they don't dare treat us differently.

He glanced over to Harry, who had been unusually quiet ever since the door shut behind them. He started when he realized that Harry's eyes were fixed on him and he was nodding slightly, as though he'd finished a private conversation with someone else. He took a long stride towards Draco.

Draco backed up a step and watched him cautiously.

"I want to ask you a question," Harry said. "And I want to tell you something."

Draco raised his eyebrows and waited. But it seemed that Harry wasn't actually going to say anything until Draco acknowledged him, so he nodded and said, "All right. What is it?"

"I want to ask if you're suffering because you tried to kill Nusquam." Harry stepped towards him again. "I know that you have problems killing."

Draco swallowed and ran his hand over his face. He didn't want to talk about this. He'd assumed that Harry wouldn't even think of it, as inconsiderate as he'd been lately, and he could deal with his feelings in peace.

But *no*.

Trying to put a lid on the resentment that bubbled up in him, Draco took a slow, deep breath and said, "I thought about this a lot, carefully, before I entered the Auror program, because I knew that I would probably have to kill Dark wizards at least once if I fought them. And I've come to terms with it. If someone is threatening me and—my partner, then I have no hesitations about striking. I'll think about it a lot for the next few days, but she was hurting us. That made her fair game." He hesitated, then added, "Besides, I don't think she's really dead." The instructors hadn't been able to agree on the significance of the platinum needle that Draco found, but that didn't matter. He couldn't have killed someone so powerful and dangerous so easily.

Harry nodded. "All right. Now for what I have to tell you." He was suddenly a lot closer to Draco, and Draco was still blinking and wondering when that had happened when Harry began, his voice low and powerful.

"I hate the way you're treating me right now. You're acting as though I can never be good enough for you. I *hate* that. My manners and my looks and my habits aren't the most important parts of my personality. My *personality* is. So either you admit that you're doing it and apologize and stop, or I curse you. And don't think I won't find a way around the compatible magic to do it, too."

Draco opened his mouth. Then he shut it. After what had happened that night, all his elaborate justifications for his behavior were floating somewhere far below the surface of his mind.

"You could walk away," he said instead.

Harry lunged suddenly, and then Draco's robes were in his fists and his face was open and raw and *determined* in a way that Draco couldn't look away from.

"Walking away is not an option," Harry hissed. "*Never.* It's just not. Not with the way that I feel about you."

"Which is what?" Draco asked. Harry kept silent, though his face turned red in frustration, and Draco smirked. He hurt mentally, but at least he might have the consolation of winning this victory over Harry. "You don't know, do you?" Draco asked, softly, tauntingly. "You can't say it. So that must mean that your feelings aren't nearly as strong as you think they are, after all—"

One of Harry's hands rose and traveled through Draco's hair. Draco yelped as Harry pulled on his head.

Pulled him straight forwards and into a kiss that made Draco's lips bleed and his tongue spasm and his mind stop running in astonishment.

Harry pushed Draco into him and himself into Draco, their mouths ramming together, teeth clicking. Then Harry stepped back and ripped his hand free of Draco's hair. Draco swayed without his support, and nearly fell. His mind was bursting with tiny stars, and he couldn't think of a thing to say.

Especially not when he saw the fire in Harry's eyes.

"What does that fucking tell you?" Harry asked flatly.

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Chapter: 31

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-One—In the Service of Sympathy

Harry stared at Draco, panting. It had taken almost all his courage to kiss him like that, and if he did something stupid now and pushed Harry further away, then Harry would—

Well, he didn't know what he would do. But it wouldn't be *nice*.

Draco raised his hand and touched his lips, moving his fingers carefully over them as if he wanted to know what spittle Harry had left there. Harry shivered. He thought the gesture meant rejection. Draco had been on him about his manners for the past few weeks. What if he thought Harry's kiss was sloppy and decided to teach him etiquette about that, too? Harry didn't know if he could accept that when he'd taken such a chance and bared such an intimate part of himself.

But Draco's hand fell back to his side and he tilted his head to the side, giving Harry a single, helpless smile.

The smile reassured Harry as nothing else could have done. Draco didn't know what to do about all this, either. He wasn't all-competent. He wasn't perfect. Harry stood up straight again and took a deep breath that filled his lungs completely for the first time since he'd been left alone in Draco's rooms with him.

"Harry, you…" Draco lowered his head, but if he meant to hide the smile, it didn't work. Harry could still feel it there, warming and strengthening him, even when he couldn't see it. Then Draco cleared his throat and said, "I want you to know that I didn't mean to hurt you by speaking about your manners that way. I'm sorry."

That's a good start. Harry exhaled slowly and shifted one step back towards Draco. "You haven't answered my question," he said. "What did the kiss tell you?"

"That you—feel strongly for me," Draco said, and now his expression was sharper and he looked as if he was trying to repress the smile. "I don't dare assume more than that, since my

assumptions in the past fortnight have been wrong."

"For longer than that," Harry muttered, but he wanted to collapse with relief. It was going to be all right. He would make it all right.

Draco lifted his head haughtily, his smile gone. "I meant what I said," he muttered stiffly. "And the only reason I believed it in the first place is because *you* said it. You said that you were selfish and took more than you gave and that you wanted to change. It's not wrong of me to act on that and try to make you change."

"Being selfish has nothing to do with the way my hair looks," Harry said flatly. Frustration and anger filled the back of his mouth like bile, but they were still easier to deal with than they'd been all those days when Draco was criticizing him. He kept that smile firmly in mind. He *could* make peace with him. He didn't have to walk away, as he'd half been fearing he must do at first. "It has to do with my risking my life when I don't have to, and not giving you the gifts that you've given me."

Draco sniffed at him. "And what if I respond that manners and better behavior are gifts that I want from you?"

"Then I'd say that you could *ask* me to do those things, instead of commanding them from me," Harry snapped. "You made me feel that I'd never be good enough to please you. There was always *something* else that would have to change before you'd accept me. And that's it, isn't it? You're afraid of how you respond and where this relationship between us might go, so you'd come up with more and more conditions to push me away, because the conditions would be impossible to fulfill if I honestly tried to fulfill all of them. You're just as frightened as I am."

Draco closed his hands into fists. He wanted to protest. But Harry's words made too much sense.

It was just—hard, that was all. Harry had taken the first step, and Draco knew that he needed to respond somehow, but wasn't he just giving in again? Why couldn't Harry be the one to do all the hard work for once? Draco was the one who had talked to him about things so far and said the right words and made promises that he intended to keep.

Maybe I should remind him about those promises he hasn't kept yet.

"Yes, I am," he said, and then went on quickly, so Harry only had time for one smile of triumph. "But I'm frightened of other things, too. Like how you keep trying to die and leave me here by myself."

Harry froze, only his wide nostrils and eyes saying how startled he was. But they said that *clearly*. Draco had always thought he was good at reading expressions, since his parents had taught him the trick, but that mostly worked among pure-bloods whose family history he knew. With Harry, their personal history should have kept him ignorant, if anything. Instead, reading Harry's face was the easiest thing he'd ever done.

"I'm not *trying* to die," Harry said, after some strained silence. "I want to live. It's just that I think me dying is not the worst thing that could happen."

"What would be?" Draco took another step closer. He was thinking about the way Harry had tried to kill himself when Nihil's magic had first come piling into his body, and wondering if he had tried it again when he was saving Draco with his magic during their last battle. Would he have cared if he had lived or died, as long as Draco lived?

"Nihil winning," Harry said flatly. "Someone else dying. Someone, like *you*, sacrificing their life for me."

"That's not always the worst thing that could happen," Draco said, determined to push this through to its conclusion. It was a conversation they should have had a long time ago. "Some people would say that it would be better for me to die, because I don't matter to most of the wizarding world, than it would be for you to die, because you're their savior and their symbol."

"Those people don't *know* you," Harry said, his voice so filled with outrage that Draco smiled again in spite of himself. He tried to erase it, because he thought Harry would notice and be offended, but Harry was pacing back and forth, his hand tearing at his hair. "They don't know that you can be a good person when you want to, courageous and giving, and that you're trying to be a good Auror. They value me for something I'm not." He spun towards Draco, and now his glare was hot enough that Draco pulled his robes away from his neck. "Don't ever try to tell me that I should lie back and let you die."

"Of course not," Draco said, as soothingly as he could. "I would never suggest that. It's just that—would you try to save your own life?"
"I did," Harry countered. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Draco shook his head. "But you care less about your life than the lives of other people. Why? And would you really only care about keeping me and maybe your friends alive, or would you sacrifice your life for any random innocent who happened along?"

From the way Harry flinched, Draco knew he had found a tender spot. He folded his arms and stared earnestly at Harry, waiting for an answer.

Harry wanted to point out that this discussion wasn't fair. Draco had never been in Gryffindor. He had different standards. Anything Harry said would be wrong, because he would never accept the principles that you had to accept *before* Harry's answer would make sense.

But Draco was looking at him with such clear eyes that Harry didn't think they would get far in that discussion. And he wanted to answer Draco's questions, instead of taking off in another direction that didn't.

He rubbed his mouth and said, as carefully as he could, "I mean—of course I would try to save

someone else."

"That's not the question," Draco said. His voice was heavy and somewhat sad, which was the only reason Harry didn't snap at him. "The question is if you would give up your life for *anyone* who was in danger, no matter who they were or what they'd done. Would you die for a Death Eater, if the choice was between his life and yours?" He raised an eyebrow and leaned forwards with an air of intense interest in the answer.

"I don't know," Harry said at last, because it was the only honest thing he could say.

"And that's why I want you to be a little less selfless," Draco said quickly. "Because—"

Harry glared at him. "Wait. First I was too selfish, then I'm too selfless?"

"I'm beginning to think that the situation is more complicated than you described it as," Draco said, magnificently avoiding the argument Harry was trying to have with him. "It's selfish that you keep putting yourself in danger, but it's far too selfless that you're trying to die because you might save someone else. Anyone. It's *mad* that you think your life is worth less than *any* other life on the face of the planet." Harry wanted to object that he hadn't said that, but he also knew it wasn't far from the truth, so he kept silent. Draco leaned in again. "Why did you start thinking that? When did you decide that the main way you could do good things was by dying?"

"*You* die and come back to life so that you can save the world and see what *you* think," Harry muttered rebelliously.

Only a slight flicker in Draco's eyes revealed his astonishment. "It's older than that, I think," he said. "Why?"

"You get treated like shite whenever the wizarding world needs a scapegoat and see how you behave," Harry retorted. He backed up a step from Draco. The room seemed too small, the air tight and hot on his skin. He pulled his robes away from his neck the way Draco had earlier and looked to the side. "Where's Politesse?" he asked, suddenly suspicious. "Why didn't he come and help you during the fight?"

"That's certainly a question," Draco agreed calmly. "Much like the one that you're avoiding right now. The wizarding world treated you like a scapegoat when they wanted to, and a hero when they wanted to. I don't think that, by itself, would be enough to make you start thinking your life wasn't worth anything. You seemed to bear up pretty well anyway and not be bothered by the rumors that you were Dark or insane most of the time. *Why*, Harry?"

Harry shut his eyes. "You would make a good torturer," he said.

"Because I want to know the truth about my best friend, my partner, my would-be lover, so that I can help him?" Draco said. His voice was like a knife, digging past layers of skin. "Oh, my, *yes*. That makes me so evil."

"Draco…" Harry put a hand to his forehead. He wanted to tell the truth so the torture would stop, and he didn't want to, because there would be more torture after that. And there was some other reason that he shouldn't tell anyone this, but at the moment he couldn't remember what it was. He felt so crowded and confused, so sure that he could rely on Draco's sympathy and yet not wanting to risk it, because he'd never told anyone this.

"Harry." Draco's hands clasped his, cool and firm.

And Harry gave in, as he never had before.

"You try living for ten years with people who thought you were worth nothing, not even food," he whispered, "and see what happens to you."

There it was, then.

Draco could imagine the silent shower of maggots the way he had the first time he heard something about Harry's relatives, and it still disgusted him and made him feel as though his skin was trying to crawl off his bones.

But it was also a relief. Now, at least, he *knew* what had happened, and he could learn the truth instead of watching his imagination conjure visions that would become successively worse.

Not that what had happened to Harry wasn't bad enough. He stepped up to him, gripped his arm with one hand, put his other arm around Harry's shoulders, and whispered into his ear, "You can tell me."

The words seemed to wake Harry from a trance. He started as if he hadn't felt Draco embrace him and then tried to shrug himself out from under the hold. Draco took a deep breath, pushed away the hurt he felt—he understood this was hard for Harry—and then moved closer again, tightening his grip. *Has he ever talked about this with anyone? Probably not. Or else his friends probably know already and they've made some kind of promise not to talk about it.*

Idiotic Gryffindors. I don't see many benefits from honesty, either, but sometimes it's the only potion that will heal the wound.

"Harry," he said. "You mentioned not having food. They starved you, then?"

Harry gave a slow nod. He was staring at the ground, his eyebrows twisted, his face so ferocious that the ground might have hurt him personally somehow. Draco debated raising his chin and then decided against it. Best to let Harry look wherever he wanted while Draco slowly took his confession from him.

"Did they beat you?" he whispered.

"Oh, God, *no!*" Harry exploded, and looked up on his own. His eyes were radiant with rage, but Draco tried not to take it personally. It wasn't really him that Harry was after, he could see that much. "Why does everyone always *think* that? They never touched me, and that's why I think it wasn't that bad."

"Tell me what they did," Draco said, lowering his voice to the purr that seemed to affect Harry most, "so that I can judge for myself."

Harry nodded, on fire now. Draco was pleased to see that. It meant he would be less cautious about secrets he had obviously wanted to hide. "Fine, I will. My bedroom was a cupboard. They told me I was a freak for performing magic—though I didn't know it was magic then, because they didn't tell me I was a wizard, even though my aunt and uncle knew. They lied about my parents and how they died, and there was what Hermione would probably call emotional abuse. But I survived it. And yeah," he added quickly, as though Draco had already started arguing, "it hurt, and I wanted them to like me for a long time even though they didn't, and I wish I'd had a better family, and it probably made me think less about my life than I should. But it's *over*. Now that you know more about it, you don't have to talk about it, do you?" He leaned back in the circle of Draco's arms and looked at him expectantly.

Draco shut his eyes and took another slow, deep breath. His embrace had tightened around Harry. He wanted to drag him close and hold him there while he explained, in exquisite detail, why Harry was wrong and this was something they needed to talk about a lot. Just because they had never beaten him didn't meant they hadn't damaged him. Harry needed to see that, and he needed to learn some care for his own life.

But Draco was beginning to understand Harry, and he knew now that trying to force him past his own barriers too quickly was a recipe for disaster. So he would wait, and keep the revelation locked safely in his own mind, and do what he needed to do over the weeks and months—and years, if he was honest with himself—that he hoped they would have together.

"All right," he said, and released Harry. "Now, let's go see what kept Politesse from the fight, and then discuss our strategy for fighting Nihil. For better or worse, he seems to have targeted us specifically."

Harry stared at the little dog from across the room. He didn't want to go near him until Draco had calmed him down, because he was fully aware that Politesse didn't like him. Politesse was barking and struggling against a beam of yellow light that seemed to be coming out of Draco's bed and curling around his neck. Draco knelt down next to him and stared at the beam for a long time without expression before drawing his wand and severing it.

"Well, that's it, then, right?" Harry asked, watching as Politesse scrambled up Draco's arm to his shoulder and then licked his cheek. "You tied him up and he couldn't get out of the spell. Or maybe those obedience spells are stronger than the loyalty spells."

"I don't know magic like that," Draco said quietly. "Someone else came in here and tied him up,

Harry, probably so he couldn't help us in the battle." He met Harry's eyes with a grimness that shook Harry. "Someone knew that we were going to be attacked. It looks more and more like this was planned."

Harry swallowed while Draco let Politesse sniff his hand and indulge in an orgy of scorpion-tail-wagging. "All right, then," he said. "They're watching us, and it's going to get easier to watch us, because with those bodyguards following us around, we'll be conspicuous all the time. So what do you think we should do about it?"

"I think," said Draco, "that we should try to make allies of our bodyguards, and use them as spies as much as possible. Also, reach out to other trainees that they aren't watching. Catherine Arrowshot. That rather dim blond one in our year—Samuel Margate, I think his name is. And Pollian Kepler."

Harry blinked. He could vaguely picture Kepler, a tall second-year who helped Ketchum with their Battlefield Tactics class and seemed to know everything there was to know about unarmed combat, though Gregory probably knew more. "Why her?"

"Because she's intelligent," Draco said. "And Margate, who I know you're going to ask about next, because he's dim-witted, but gets high marks in Observation. That says to me that he knows when things are happening around him; he just doesn't always know what they *mean*." He sneered suddenly, and his hand tightened around Politesse's neck, so Harry thought for sure the little dog would yelp and bite him. Instead, Politesse licked his cheek. "And they're not connected to us in any obvious way. Arrowshot is, but she's also committed to an investigation of her own, so I don't think we can help that. At least we'll have allies who aren't obvious. We're too isolated right now, with so few people helping us, and all of them known to Nihil."

"What about Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked quietly.

Draco arched an eyebrow at him. "You really think that Nihil doesn't know about them?"

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I think we should tell them what's going on, at least as much information as we're going to trust Arrowshot and the others with."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "You know that Weasley doesn't like me. I don't want to spend more time trying to persuade him to trust me than we spend actually investigating."

"I know," Harry said. "But Hermione would be valuable, and I think she can bring Ron along now and at least ask him to keep his grumbling to himself. They made up over the Christmas holidays."

Draco brooded on that for a moment, then nodded shortly. "All right. But I want you to make sure that you tell me if they start trying to argue you away from my side." He turned and went suddenly into the bathroom.

Harry couldn't help grinning, though he still had a bit of that flayed feeling that had started when Draco made him talk about the Dursleys. *By my side.*

Yes, Draco. There's no place I'd rather be.

"That's what we're planning to do," Draco said. He leaned back in his chair and carefully watched the trainee sitting across the table from him. "What do you think?"

Pollian Kepler gave him a bland glance back. She was a half-blood, as far as Draco knew; her mother had a pure-blood last name, but the surname *she* carried had come straight out of the Muggle world. She was more inscrutable than Draco would have liked, though, so she'd perhaps received some training. Older than most of the trainees, she had left Hogwarts several years ago. Draco had asked a few people discreetly what House she'd been in, but no one seemed to know, which indicated that she had kept her distance from them.

That was only part of the reason that Draco wanted her on their side if they could get her, and so he'd snatched this moment during the early morning when their bodyguards hadn't been assigned yet and few people were up to confront her in the dining hall.

"I think that you take a great risk telling me this," Kepler said. Her voice was soft and breathy, a little girl's voice. Her hair was a mass of shiny brown curls, and her eyes were a bright and startling blue. She glanced up at Draco now and lowered her gaze to the table again. "You have no way of finding out who works for Nihil. *I* could be working for him. I could be one of the trainees that Auror Gregory corrupted with certain oaths and vows. Why would you trust me?"

"I think you're too intelligent to work for him," Draco said. He wasn't sure of that at all, but it sounded good, and if he was going to win Kepler over, he thought it would be by flattery. Someone who didn't have many friends would also lack people to give her the praise that she felt she deserved.

Kepler paused, her eyes darting up to his face. Then she lowered her eyes to her hands again. "I will take it under advisement," she said, and stood up and strode away from the dining hall.

Draco gave a brief nod. He'd done what he could for right now. He had decided that Harry should be the one to make contact with Arrowshot and Margate, because they would be more likely to trust him.

"I can't *believe* this!"

Draco winced. A voice that ear-splitting had to be the voice of a Weasley. He turned to see Harry striding into the dining hall with a red face, two large trainees at his shoulders, and Weasel and Granger trailing him.

"You're staying in the same *room* with him?" Weasley continued, at a high pitch. "*Why*? If anything, that's going to make you less safe, not more!"

"Ron," Granger hissed.

Harry stopped and whirled around on one heel, making his friends and the trainees who must be their bodyguards scramble hastily to get out of the way. His face had gone from red to white. His words were low, but clear. Draco imagined that some of the trainees who were still in bed could probably hear them.

"It *is* for our safety, Ron. And I don't really care what you think. I'm sorry I had to move out of our rooms, but I want to *survive* this. And I want to go on being Draco's friend, and your friend, and Hermione's friend. And I want to survive all the stupid little things that can tear us apart, too. So you might as well whinge and get over it, because I'm going to make sure that we come through it intact in all the ways that matter. *All right*?"

Draco shivered appreciatively at the growl in Harry's voice on the last words, and gave him a sharp smile for it as Harry turned around to stride to his table. The bodyguards followed him. Granger and Weasley stood still, blinking.

"All right, then," Weasley finally said, in a weak voice.

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Chapter: 32

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Two—Building a Strategy

"If you think you can do this technique, then show me."

Harry shifted uneasily. One of the hardest things to get used to in this strange new world that was the second term of Auror training was the Combat teacher the Aurors had found to replace Gregory. She was also a woman, but there the similarity ended. Jennifer Morningstar seemed interested in absolutely everything, and would nod and consider the wildest claims seriously.

Then she would ask you to get up and prove them.

"I—I said I could," Harry admitted reluctantly, "but that was under my breath, and you weren't really supposed to hear."

Morningstar smiled. She had a young face, although her hair was grey. "Then sit down, Trainee Potter, and let me find someone who can do it." She paused and looked over the class while

Harry retreated into the half-circle that she required her students to sit in. "Trainee Malfoy?"

Harry relaxed. If Draco learned the technique Morningstar was talking about, then he could teach it to Harry.

Besides, it was always a pleasure to watch Draco in motion.

Draco might have been walking up an aisle covered in red carpet to receive an award, for all the concern he showed as he walked towards Morningstar. She nodded to him and planted herself in profile to him, her feet braced. "Try to knock me over," she said. "Shoulder-rush me or otherwise use your weight, but not your wand."

Draco gave her a brief outraged look that Harry doubted she noticed; of course, that look said, he would go unarmed because they weren't supposed to use their wands in here at any point. But Morningstar was good at ignoring things that she didn't want to see, and also near-sighted. She smiled at Draco and gave a slightly mocking invitation with one crooked hand.

He came in low and from the side, seeming at first as if he might run past her. Harry swallowed and realized he was leaning forwards as he watched Draco sweep out one arm. He wanted to catch Morningstar in the stomach and send her sprawling, Harry thought. Constant training with Draco had made him better at estimating the direction of Draco's movements.

Morningstar grabbed Draco's reaching arm and whirled to the side, then stepped forwards. Harry blinked. He could hardly process the movement, though he knew she'd interrupted Draco's momentum and ripped him off his feet, because it had happened so fast. Suddenly Draco was kneeling on the floor and hacking while Morningstar took her knee out of his stomach and smiled at the rest of them.

"He doesn't understand the technique," she explained needlessly.

Harry bit his lip and tried not to look at Draco. He would be humiliated, and the last thing he needed right now—or that their partnership needed—was for him to realize that Harry found that funny.

"You need to watch out for your balance as well as your enemy's balance," Morningstar said, stepping away from Draco. "He was relying too much on his weight to knock me down. And he would have, if I was fool enough to stand still for it. But I know the limitations of my own body." She held out her arms, which seemed slender next to Draco's, just as her small body seemed fragile next to his. It had taken Harry several classes to realize that those slender arms were lined with muscle. "You have to know the limitations of yours, and not only your strengths. Young wizards are too apt to trust to the strengths, and even think themselves invincible at times." She looked at with pity at Draco, who was rising to his feet with a slow groan and a stretching process that made Harry think Morningstar had put some kinks in his back. "No one's invincible. I'll meet the enemy who'll kill me someday, and the rest of you will, too."

Then she turned about and smiled at Darien West, who had often been the butt of Gregory's jokes. "On your feet, young man. I think that you should practice against me now and try to avoid what Malfoy did wrong."

One of the most disconcerting things about Morningstar, Harry thought as he gave Draco a look of sympathy, was the way she could sound so cheerful right after making a pronouncement about death and failure, which she did fairly often.

Overall, though, he preferred her to Gregory.

And as interested as he was in learning to fight without his wand, he paid more attention at the moment to the fact that Catherine Arrowshot was looking at him speculatively.

"Begin."

Draco bared his teeth. After failures in Combat several days in a row, he was all the readier to fight against his opponents in Dearborn's class.

If only Dearborn had not decided that they needed to learn how to fight in groups this term, and paired him and Harry with two useless young witches against four people, one of whom was Weasley.

Weasley had by no means accepted Draco as much as Harry thought he had. He still sneered at him in strategic moments when Harry wasn't looking, and sent stray hexes his way when Harry was out of the room or busy with homework for another class. He had used a Stinging Hex on Draco's arse that had left him unable to sit down for a day.

And the worst part was that Draco didn't want to complain to Harry about it, even though he knew Harry would ask Weasley to stop, because that would make it look as though *he* was the one who couldn't get along.

I never knew a Weasel could be sneaky, he thought grumpily as he lifted his wand and gave the duelist's bow to Weasley that Dearborn insisted they use in a combat like this. Weasley grinned back, his eyes full of fire. *I should have paid more attention to the fact that a weasel* is *a rodent.*

The groups surged forwards. The center of the classroom had been cleared of desks and chairs, and the rest of the class stood along the walls behind protective wards that Dearborn had erected himself. They watched with wide, excited eyes. Dearborn, probably because he wanted to test both Draco and Harry, had made sure that this was their first chance to put their training into practice.

Weasley aimed straight at Draco, then turned and feinted to the left. Draco was sure it was a feint, after the attention he had started paying in Morningstar's class, and tightened his muscles against the impulse to give in and pay too much attention to it. He saw Harry sending a jinx at one of Weasley's partners, and he wanted to shake his head. Why would you use a jinx when a

crippling spell would be more in order, to make sure that your foe didn't stand up again?

On the other hand, the rebound of the compatible magic rolled over from Harry's spell and sent the familiar rush of power through Draco's veins. As Weasley sent a crackling, spitting Acid Curse at him, Draco dodged to the side and whispered, "*Arceo conexionem*."

The spell struck Weasley looking like nothing more than a puff of white dust, but Weasley at once paused and stared down at his wand. Then he lifted it and said, "*Proteg*—" only to interrupt himself and scratch his head.

Draco smiled nastily, not caring who saw. They were supposed to be treating each other like enemies right now, after all. And the spell was subtle but reversible, so it wouldn't permanently damage Weasley. It simply sliced his thoughts apart from each other, keeping him from forming logical connections.

"Watch *out*, Draco!"

He nearly went down as someone shouldered him from the side, and then realized that Harry was standing between him and one of the wizards who had been fighting next to Weasley, shaking his head in disgust. One of them had aimed a spell at Draco, and he probably would have succumbed if not for Harry.

It was still an irritating thing to *know*, and so he leaned heavily on Harry as he stepped up to fight beside him. He could be a bit more tactful about the things that annoyed him, and especially about rescuing someone who was, in the end, just as skilled as he was—*exactly* as skilled, thanks to the compatible magic.

One of Weasley's partners was Catherine Arrowshot, and she fought on long after Weasley had wandered off to point his wand into a corner and the other two students were groaning on the ground with bloody wounds on their legs. Arrowshot dodged most of their spells, raised excellent shields, and responded a time or two with a nasty curse that Draco admired. He did wonder how useful she would be in a battle with someone else, since she seemed to fight best alone, but that was surely just a matter of training.

"Enough."

When Dearborn stepped forwards and interrupted them, less than a second after they had finally managed to bind Arrowshot with *Incarcerous,* it felt sudden. Draco blinked and glanced behind him. The two witches who had fought with them were sprawled on the floor, bound in ropes, too. He didn't know if Arrowshot or the wizards who fought with Weasley had got them, and he was a bit ashamed to realize that he couldn't remember.

"I see that you still have some things to learn about coordination," Dearborn said. He frowned at Draco. "While you are partners with Trainee Potter in many senses of the word, Trainee Malfoy, you should not allow his presence to make you forget the others in the room."

Draco inclined his head stiffly, his frustration and resentment visible in the blush on his cheeks. Dearborn seemed not to care about that, and turned away to remove the spell on Weasley and exhort the others to pay more attention, as well. Draco scowled at his back and felt Harry rubbing his shoulder.

"Why are you so angry?" Harry whispered, waiting to say it until Dearborn had begun his scolding. Dearborn had *views* about students talking in his class unless he gave them permission.

"Because he was the one who thought we should be partners, and now he's speaking as though it's our fault that this battle didn't go well." Draco hissed the words, partially because it helped to relieve his feelings and partially for the pleasure of leaning heavily against Harry. Harry shuddered when Draco's breath traveled over his ear. Draco promised himself that he would remember that for a time when they had more privacy.

"But why would you expect him to show us extra favoritism?" Harry asked in a perplexed tone. "And why would you expect to be perfect the first time, or upset if you weren't?"

Draco gave him an incredulous look. "I distinctly remember you getting upset when you failed to do something at Hogwarts," he said.

"Because half the time the professors never explained themselves clearly enough." Harry rolled his eyes. "But once I knew what I was doing wrong and could correct it, then I didn't mind. Only Hermione gets things right the first time."

Draco would have argued, but Dearborn had turned around again, his eyes sharp and solemn, and he thought it better to shut up and listen.

Inwardly, however, he decided that his view of Harry would need to undergo more readjustment. He had assumed without thinking about it that Harry expected easy victories and was frustrated when he didn't attain them. Harry had seemed to be angry at Hogwarts quite a lot.

Now I wonder if that came from having a Dark Lord after him.

And his childhood might have something to do with it, too. Draco was not going to forget about what Harry had told him, even though Harry might prefer that he do so.

"Eat as much as you can!" Ketchum called as he paced through the tables in the dining hall. "You'll need your strength for the class this afternoon."

Harry smiled as most of the people around him groaned. It was strange to him that they objected to the Battlefield Tactics class and not to the Combat class, which usually left them with just as many bumps and bruises. But then, people were strange to him a lot of the time, and he usually assumed he was never going to understand and that was all there was to it.

He took a final bite of his sandwich and leaned back in his chair, idly staring around. Ron was sitting at another table and glaring. Harry rolled his eyes. Of course he would, after what Draco had done to him in Offensive and Defensive that day. But sooner or later one of two things would happen: Ron would accept it, or he would complain to Harry about it and Harry would remind him that they were all trying to be friends now. It looked as if Hermione was already haranguing Ron about that, if the bleak look he gave her was any indication.

Someone walked straight through the tables towards them, acting as if other people would naturally move out of her way, which they did. Harry blinked. He recognized her as one of Ketchum's trainees, but didn't know who she was until she came to a stop in front of their table and stared at Draco. Then he remembered. Kepler, the one Draco had said he would try to speak to.

"We are agreed," she said simply, and gave him a little bow, and then turned away. Most of the people ignored her as she went past, Harry noticed. He wondered if they were afraid of her, or had merely learned that most of the things they did didn't matter to her. The only time Harry had ever seen Kepler get upset was when two of their fellow trainees had disarranged the Tactics classroom as a prank.

"One down," Draco said, with a faint smirk, and turned to look at Harry. Harry swallowed. He kept forgetting how beautiful Draco seemed to him now, and then little flashes like this would remind him. "How's it going with Arrowshot?" He kept his voice low enough that no one on either side of them could hear.

"I spoke with her after Dearborn's class." Harry shook his head and shoved a crumb off his plate. He watched from the corner of his eye as Draco tensed, but in the end he just rolled his eyes and blew his breath out without saying anything. Harry smiled. He hadn't been sure how good Draco's control was, but apparently he had got over his obsession with telling Harry how to eat and dress and walk and comb his hair. "She was angry because we tied her up, but she said that she'd come talk to us tonight."

"Good." Draco glanced over his shoulder. Harry turned to look with him. Their bodyguards, Julia Timmons and William Redworth, lounged on the seats of the table behind them, looking bored. Harry couldn't blame them. Nothing exciting had happened so far, and they'd had to listen to numerous arguments as Draco tried to get comfortable with Ron and Hermione. Draco lowered his voice even though there was no sign of Timmons and Redworth paying attention to them. "What about Margate?"

"He told me that he wasn't impressed by me being the Boy-Who-Lived and to stop wasting his time," Harry said briefly. He felt anger burn in his throat when he thought about Margate. The man hadn't even let Harry say what he'd come about. He'd laughed at him, and told him that he got away with a lot but that didn't matter, because Margate was never going to do what he said.

"I reckon that I'll have to talk to him after all." Draco had a faintly disgusted look on his face. Harry decided not to tell him that he looked like Aunt Petunia when she was thinking about

giving food to Harry.

"Why did you want me to talk with him in the first place?" Harry asked. "You did a good job with Kepler."

"Margate can't keep secrets very well," Draco answered. He leaned his elbow on the table and shoved his fingers through his fringe in frustration. Even like that, Harry thought he looked good. *What the fuck is wrong with me? It's one thing to be attracted to someone and another thing to think about every gesture like that.* "I thought he would respond best to honesty. But I'll have to bribe him instead."

"He seemed to think I was trying to bribe him," Harry pointed out. "I don't know what you can give him to make him respect you."

Draco smiled, and the smile was slow and sinister and made Harry shiver and burn at the same time. "I know."

"How are you, Margate?"

The blond trainee grunted without looking up from the essay he was writing. Seeing the way his eyebrows tugged together, Draco had to stifle a chuckle. It was probably taking so much of his brainpower to write the essay that he didn't even realize who had just sat down next to him and drawn out his books.

Sure enough, Margate wrote three more lines and leaned back with a little nod to consider his grand work. Then he suddenly looked up and narrowed his eyes at Draco. "Here, you. You can't sit here."

"Why not? It's a free library." Margate had chosen a table in the library that Harry and Draco had often used when they were looking up information on magical creatures. Draco liked it because it backed into a corner of the shelves and one could see the door from it, as well as any direction that people might reasonably approach. He could see Granger at one of the other tables, for example, furiously scribbling notes from a thick book that probably had to do with Dark Arts. One of the few advantages to come out of enlisting Harry's friends in the battle against Nihil was that Granger really *was* a good researcher, nearly as good as Harry had thought she was.

"I'm studying," said Margate. "And I don't like you."

"Yes, but I don't know why." Draco pretended to look through his Auror Conduct book while Margate struggled with that one, frowning as he saw the latest list of rules they had to memorize. He thought Conduct a badly-designed and badly-run class, and not only because someone so young was teaching it. What was the point of having trainees memorize useless rules and procedures, and then yelling at them when they broke the rules, as they inevitably did? It would be better to teach them in logical clumps and use the exams to reinforce knowledge of the rules. Then bring them into other classes, and ask what spells one would use if one's partner was down,

and how those would fit inside the regulations, and so on.

Not that anyone would listen to Draco if he tried to explain his brilliant changes to the curriculum. They thought of him as a child, still.

"Because you're a Death Eater," Margate finally said, with the triumph of someone who had discovered an unshakable argument. "You've still got that Dark Mark on your arm." He poked his quill towards Draco's left arm, and then examined the end of the feather, apparently for invisible contamination.

"What if I told you that someone was doing something worse than branding people with the Dark Mark?" Draco asked him. "Something worse than the Dark Lord wanted to do in a thousand years?"

Margate paused and stared at him.

"You heard about the former trainee who was killed?" The instructors hadn't been able to hush her death up, probably because someone had had to clean up Portillo Lopez's office and Draco couldn't imagine the instructors doing it all themselves. Of course, the instructors had chosen to blame it on Gregory. Draco could see the logic behind that, but it was the same "logic" that led them to leave Jones in charge of Auror Conduct, and so he couldn't approve of it. "That's the kind of thing they want to do to everybody."

Margate began to sneer at him. "Who's *they*?" But his sneer couldn't hide the restless way his hands played with his quill, or the way his eyes never left Draco.

Draco hid his own smile, thinking it best if he kept his face stern right now. This was the reason that Margate didn't like Harry, and the same reason that Draco had been so sure he could bribe him. Margate was looking for a chance to be a hero. He was too stupid to be of use to Nihil, except perhaps as a receptacle for grief magic, but Draco had decided that they must simply accept the risk that anyone could be infected and proceed from there. But he would be of use to someone who could promise him a large part in a war for the "light" against the "Dark."

He wanted to be Harry. Draco couldn't give him that, but he could give him another chance for heroic action.

"Someone with the name of Nihil," Draco said. "That was the name left behind with the Dark magic that Potter and I faced in the corridor months ago. And then we faced a woman who called herself Nusquam." This was taking more than a slight risk, but at the same time, Draco thought it was important to spread around the names. If he had realized the significance of the names on the note that the false Jarvis Abrane had given Harry, he would have reacted more strongly earlier.

People deserve the chance to know who their enemies are.

Margate was looking at him from the corner of just one eye now, but that eye was alight. "You

don't say," he muttered, with a bad attempt at casualness. He flipped his quill over between his fingers. "And why do you think I can help?"

"Because I think you're too honest and honorable for Nihil to try and ensnare you," Draco said truthfully. *And also too much of a fool.* "And I know that you're good in Observation. We want you to watch out for them, and tell us if you see something suspicious."

"You want me to *spy*?" Margate drew himself up and glared as if Draco had wanted him to eat poison.

"The bravest man I ever knew was a spy," Draco said, truthfully again. He leaned forwards. "Besides, we're doing the same thing ourselves. Our enemies are too powerful for us to face directly, and right now, they're hidden. We need to find them and drag them into the light, but at the same time, we can't let ourselves be killed before that happens. So we do something that Harry doesn't like, either, for the sake of doing something better. Do you understand?"

The clouds slowly cleared from Margate's face, and he nodded enthusiastically. "I got it," he said in a loud whisper. "You can count on me."

"Good." Draco stood up. He'd spent long enough with Margate for someone to be suspicious—and Harry couldn't keep Timmons and Redworth distracted forever by walking briskly around the Ministry. "We'll contact you."

Margate grinned at him. Draco gathered his books and parchment and walked out of the library, pausing to shut the door carefully behind him before he turned back to face the maze of corridors between their rooms and this point.

A shadow caught his attention. Someone was standing, out of sight but also not really trying to hide, in a side corridor.

Draco waited. The shadow didn't move. He drew his wand and approached cautiously. He didn't think much would happen here, with so many people near to be alerted by a scream, but one never knew.

He stuck his head around the corner, and caught a single glimpse of a figure before it dissolved into golden light.

The glimpse was enough. The figure had been Nusquam, as whole and healthy as ever, smiling at him.

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Chapter: 33

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Three—Unexpected News

"But there's no magic that can bring back the dead." Harry knew his voice sounded hollow and pitiful and ridiculous, but he had to speak anyway. What Draco was saying was *impossible.*

"Are you calling me a liar?"

Harry lifted his head in surprise. He'd been so preoccupied with his own thoughts—which included the image of Nusquam fading and dying in Draco's yellow light, and sometimes strayed in other directions, directions full of longing—that he hadn't paid attention to the way Draco reacted to his words. Now he saw Draco with his arms folded and his head lowered slightly in that way he always adopted when he was feeling aggressive.

"No!" Harry said quickly. "I know what you saw, and I believe that you saw her. It's just that—we know our enemies can take on other faces. Couldn't it have been someone who chose to look like Nusquam?"

Draco snorted and began to pace back and forth. Harry watched him in quiet curiosity. He didn't know why Draco was so determined to believe that someone had come back from the dead.

He doesn't have the reasons that I do to wish that could be true. Harry clenched his hand tight so he wouldn't have to remember that, somewhere under the Ministry, sat the veil that had swallowed Sirius.

"If that's the case, then who's to say we killed the original Nusquam?" Draco turned his head and spoke over his shoulder. "Maybe it was someone who wore her likeness, and the one I saw was the real one."

"Or maybe Nusquam and Nihil and Nemo aren't real people after all," Harry said. "Remember that the man who handed me the note about them wasn't real, either. Could they be just names and images our enemies have made up?"

Draco took a deep breath and trailed his hands down his face. "I didn't think of that," he said. "Maybe."

"I think it's also kind of strange that she would want us to know she had managed to survive," Harry went on, taking a step closer to Draco and studying his face in concern. He didn't know how he had managed to miss it earlier, except that Draco was always so pale that a touch more of pallor on his face didn't make a great difference. But now that Harry really *looked*, he could see the tiredness worked into Draco's skin like wrinkles. Harry put a hand on Draco's shoulder and watched him open his eyes and blink as though fighting sleep desperately.

Harry made up his mind.

"I'll think about it," he said, when he saw Draco opening his mouth to answer his latest protest. "Lie down for now."

Draco could still lift his lip in a magnificent sneer when he tried, though Harry hadn't personally seen one aimed at him in days. "So that you can have your wicked Gryffindor way with me?" he asked, and curled his tongue towards Harry's fingers.

Harry flushed and stared at him. They hadn't talked much about the kiss or the confessions that Harry had made and Draco had hinted at afterwards. There was so much else to do. And Harry had begun to think that Draco didn't really know how to respond to Harry's interest and was grateful to let it die. God knew Harry himself felt awkward and fumbling and didn't know what would be acceptable.

But his eyes went back to Draco's face, and he shook his head. Time for this later, when Draco was rested.

"You wish," he retorted, and gently urged Draco back towards the bed. "No, it's because you're about to fall over with weariness, and I want you to lie down and sleep the way you should."

"I am not—"

A yawn stole Draco's words. Harry chuckled and folded his hands gently over Draco's, lifting his wrists above his head. "I think you are," he whispered. "I think that you can't think of much except soft, fluffy sheets and soft, fluffy pillows and the way the bed is going to feel under your back when you finally let yourself go."

Draco moaned and tilted his head back. His hair fell around his cheeks, shimmering slightly. A faint flush rose into his cheeks, and Harry had to swallow and tell his inappropriate responses to go the fuck away for right now.

"It sounds wonderful," Draco whispered.

"Well, that's where you are." Harry pulled back and let Draco sink into the pillows. Draco sighed and moved his head and limbs lazily from side to side, gradually working himself into a more comfortable position. Harry pulled off his boots and set them beside the bed. "There's nothing else that you have to worry about right now." He kept his voice quiet, gentle, thinking of the way he had soothed Hermione to sleep a few times when they were hunting for Horcruxes after Ron had left. "Absolutely nothing…"

Draco's breathing evened out, and the hand he had flung above his head, as if he wanted to grasp something and stop himself from falling into slumber, relaxed, the fingers flexing wide. Harry smiled and sat there for a few minutes, looking at him. It was the kind of thing he wouldn't have

dared to do if someone else might intrude, but Timmons and Redworth had agreed, after long arguments, that they would stand outside Harry and Draco's rooms and guard the door instead of coming inside.

Draco looked unguarded. Harry wasn't sure he'd ever seen him look that way. Maybe he did when he was alone at home, talking with his mother, but Harry's presence in the Manor over the holidays had disrupted that. His lips could part and he didn't worry about tightening them; his hands could open and he didn't worry about clenching them into fists or wrapping them around his wand. His body lay there, prone, and Harry ached to run a hand lightly up his chest, for the sake of feeling muscles that he wouldn't get to see otherwise unless they were tense.

But Draco would probably wake up if he did that, so Harry sat back and contented himself with looking. It was a harmless pastime.

Especially since it would keep his thoughts from straying in those other directions that had occurred to him the moment Draco seriously argued for Nusquam coming back from the dead.

"I have news."

Draco stiffened, but managed to keep staring ahead as if he was intrigued by the boring lecture that Jones was giving them in Auror Conduct. Jones had realized a week or so ago that they didn't have enough time to cover all the rules before the end of the term if she didn't stop illustrating every single one individually with illusions and dramas. Now she mumbled her way through the lists and spent a large part of the class chasing around the parchments that she had scribbled on but apparently not numbered.

"What news?" he breathed back. Harry had the good sense to not move from his slumped posture, hand beneath his chin, other hand lazily tracing the quill over the parchment, even though he could surely hear Arrowshot's whisper to Draco.

"I overheard what I'm certain are some of the trainees who are sympathetic to Nihil's cause," Arrowshot said. "They were talking in a corridor that most people don't know about, but which I found a while ago, because my cousin who works in the Ministry told me about it. They were mentioning 'the power and the urge to live forever.'"

Draco exhaled. *At last, a clue.* His eyes darted sideways to Harry, and he noticed the stiffness of his shoulders. Yes, he had heard, and he was as excited about the importance of this information as Draco was.

"Will they hold another meeting soon?" he asked.

"I think so," Arrowshot said. "The moon quarters seem to be special times for them, and the moon is going to be new this week."

Draco took a deep breath and flexed his fingers against the desk. The new moon was in just two

days. Not much time to prepare, especially if Arrowshot was right and this was a gathering of several of Nihil's servants.

He tried to tell himself immediately that there was an excellent chance she *wasn't* right. What were the odds that trainees who followed Nihil would leave themselves unguarded like that, when they had access to the kind of Dark magic that Nusquam could use to defend herself? But even if they were only people speculating about the possible consequences of fighting someone who could break into the Ministry and murder people, they might have information Harry and Draco didn't have.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Arrowshot didn't move back into her desk the way he had thought she would. Partially that was because Jones still scrambled through her notes and so they'd been able to have a longer conversation than normal, but Draco understood the other half of it when he twisted around and saw the stubborn expression on Arrowshot's face.

"I want to go with you."

Harry twitched a bit, but said nothing. He faked a yawn instead and left Draco to handle this as he saw fit. Draco felt a tingle of warmth pass through him. Harry had been more considerate and caring in the last few days than Draco could ever remember him being.

"Absolutely not," Draco said.

"Why?" Arrowshot's hands clenched into fists. "I'm the one who found this out. I have a perfect right to go with you if I like."

"We have advantages that you don't," Draco said, and then wondered if he should have. His secret training with Harry over the holidays wasn't something they'd mentioned to anyone. On the other hand, from the way Arrowshot snorted and rolled her eyes, she thought he just meant their compatible magic.

"I'm a trainee, too, and I've received the same lessons that you have, and I'm just as determined to hunt them down as you are," she said flatly. "If you don't take me along, then I won't show you where to find the corridor."

Draco smiled in spite of himself; that was something he hadn't considered, and it was his own fault he hadn't got the information from Arrowshot first, before she demanded a price like this. He nodded. "All right. We'll meet in the morning."

"Why so early? The meeting I saw was in the evening." Arrowshot pushed her hair back behind her ears as she frowned at him.

"Yes, but there's no guarantee that the next one will be," Draco pointed out grimly. "We'll need to

set up alarms and wards on the corridor so that we can be alerted when someone enters it, and the best time to do that is in the morning before classes." Most of the trainees would apparently rather sleep than do anything else, and so they were unlikely to be observed if Harry, Draco, and Arrowshot had to sneak around then.

Arrowshot gave him a vicious smile and sat back just as Jones straightened up with a triumphant air and went on with her lecture. Draco returned to his pretense of taking notes, eying Harry's tense shoulders and wondering if he approved of the bargain.

Then Harry glanced over his shoulder and smiled, and Draco felt as if he was standing in sunlight.

Mine. That smile is mine. The strong possessiveness he hadn't felt since the early days of their friendship passed through him.

He has many friends, but he will have only one lover.

Harry hissed in exasperation under his breath as he stared at the letter in his hand. What was Ginny *about*? Harry thought he had made it clear that he had no intention of ever communicating with her again. But this was the third letter she had sent him since term began, and this was only the first week of February.

He tossed the letter up in the air and pointed his wand at it. "*Incendio!*" he snapped.

The flames surged towards the letter—and then bent back. Harry had to duck so they couldn't scorch his face. He stared at the letter with his eyes narrowed as it slid out of its envelope and Ginny's voice spoke through the room. It was the same sort of thing he had seen happen with a Howler, but Ginny wasn't yelling. Instead, she sounded resigned more than anything else.

"Harry, I know you have no reason to believe me, but I do still care about you. I want to be your friend if I can't be your lover. You took my advice about making Ron happy—I could see that at Christmas—and that's pleasing."

Harry bared his teeth. "Ron said absolutely nothing to you about why he's feeling better, did he?" he asked, but Ginny's words simply continued. Apparently the letter wasn't enchanted to respond to what its recipient said.

"But I want more than that. Please. The way we broke up was unavoidable. Could you please acknowledge that it was for the best? And I'd like to hear more from you, about you. I want to be friends."

The letter fell into place on the table in the middle of the room. Harry stared at it, fists clenched, breath coming fast.

"What was that about?"

Harry twisted his head, blinking. Draco stood in the doorway of their rooms, his face wearing an expression of mild questioning. But the expression in his eyes wasn't mild at all.

"Ginny won't leave me *alone*." Harry began to pace. His hands rose once or twice as if he would smooth them through his hair, but he didn't, because he had seen how much that annoyed Draco. Besides, the mood he was in would probably leave strands of hair all over the floor. "What does she *want*? She insulted me, she broke up with me, and now she's upset because I'm ignoring her letters?" Harry laughed bitterly, feeling as though walls were about to fall in on him. "And I can't even ask Ron to make her stop, because I'm sure that he wouldn't understand."

A heavy footstep sounded, and Harry started and glanced over his shoulder. Draco stood right behind him. Harry had been so involved in his own ranting that he hadn't heard him cross the floor between them.

Draco lifted his hands, fingers delicately spread, and laid them on Harry's shoulders. Harry shut his eyes and sighed. The fingers didn't massage him, but a comforting warmth spread from them as if they had.

"Do you want me to tell her?" Draco whispered into his ear.

Harry sighed again, this time longingly. The vision of Draco telling Ginny off was one that sprang full-formed into his mind and which he knew he would think of often from now on. He could see the expressions on both their faces—the sternness Draco would wear, the absolute astonishment from Ginny—and he tightened his clasp on Draco's hands as he thought about it.

"Only say the word." Draco gave his ear a touch so light that Harry honestly wasn't sure if he'd licked it, nuzzled it, or merely brushed it with his nose.

"No," Harry said, after long moments of wrestling with temptation, opening his eyes. "That would be giving her too much attention. I think I should just ignore her."

"A good answer," Draco rumbled at him, his hands tightening. "Because you're mine now."

He turned Harry around, the motion as inexorable as gravity. Harry blinked up at him a moment before Draco bent and kissed him.

Harry hissed in satisfaction and reached up to clasp the back of Draco's neck. God, this felt so *good*. Not as hard as the kiss he'd given Draco the night they faced Nusquam, but that meant he could think about it a little more and breathe through it and get the taste of Draco's mouth unmixed with blood on his teeth.

He let himself revel in the kiss for long enough that his legs seemed shaky and his head too small when he pulled back. It seemed as if he still should have been breathing in Draco's scent, tasting his tongue. Draco left his hands in place and blinked as though he, too, had forgotten how to

stand on his own.

"There's no way that I would ever accept her back," Harry told him flatly. "You don't need to kiss me just to make sure of that."

Draco smirked at him. "I kissed you because I wanted to," he said. "As well as to make sure that you never think of her again." He stepped away from Harry and turned to retrieve the map of the secret corridor that Arrowshot had drawn for them, missing the way Harry rolled his eyes. "The wards sounded five minutes ago. We have to leave soon."

Harry nodded shortly. His heart was still beating with reaction, and, when he glanced at Ginny's letter lying open on the table, with anger. But that was better than the fear that had been haunting him since he heard about this gathering of trainees who were supposedly loyal to Nihil. He couldn't help wondering what would happen when he and Draco finally caught up with them.

If they existed. If Arrowshot hadn't mistaken what she heard.

Draco straightened, shaking his head a little and swatting at hair that had got in his eyes, and Harry stared, transfixed. Draco looked like someone framed by light at the moment, and the knowledge of how very far he was from that sometimes—when he used Dark Arts, when he stared at Harry with anger, when he was stupid and thought Harry's manners and appearance were more important than anything else—made Harry feel a warm sense of pleasure at how well he knew Draco. *He* couldn't be fooled by outer appearances, not any more.

Draco glanced up, his mouth open as though he was going to say something, and then caught sight of the expression on Harry's face. Harry didn't know exactly what it looked like, but it was enough to make Draco stare at him and then lower his eyelids across his eyes in pleasure.

His hand traveled across the distance between them and caught Harry's. Harry squeezed it in a fervent grip and tried to say something. He didn't think he could, though, so in the end he just shook his head again and swallowed.

"We don't have any need to fear them," Draco whispered, his voice so low that Harry had trouble making the words out, "by each other's side."

It was what Harry was thinking, but he couldn't have phrased it so well, so he squeezed Draco's hand again.

"This way."

Arrowshot had performed a Disillusionment Charm on herself, but Draco could track her by her voice and the trailing edge of her robe, which made a shifting patch of slightly darker air against the walls. He pressed forwards, Disillusioned himself, with Harry right behind him. Harry, in addition to his own Charm, carried his Invisibility Cloak, in case they were spotted and had to make an escape.

Draco licked his lips, which were absurdly dry. On the one hand, he was right to fear people who would sign up to serve Nihil, even if Auror Gregory had played a part in tricking them. On the other hand, Arrowshot covered her fear with rage and Harry had plenty of practice going against his fears to act with courage. Draco would not be the only one who trembled like a child if he could help it.

Arrowshot stopped suddenly. Draco dug his nails into his palms and tried to calm his breathing, wondering if they had been wrong to trust her after all. He didn't recognize any of the corridors around them, and this would be an excellent set-up for a trap.

Of course, he and Harry had known that and chosen to come anyway. But Draco would never have Harry's blasé acceptance of danger.

The short corridor ahead of them narrowed out beyond Arrowshot, with no doors. Draco couldn't imagine what it had originally been built for. Perhaps simply a passage from one place to another, swallowed up by stone walls and offices piled on top of offices as the Ministry grew. Draco wondered absently if anyone who worked in the Ministry knew how far it actually extended.

Whatever had alerted Arrowshot, it seemed it had passed. She relaxed after a minute and took a few cautious steps forwards. Draco followed, his neck uncomfortably tense as he listened. Still there was nothing but the beating of their hearts, and Harry's noisy breathing behind him, and the scuffing of their feet.

The corridor turned at last, and Draco saw a single door ahead. It was made of wood, with a fan-shaped series of holes in the upper panel. Draco sneered at it. A door of such a foolish shape wouldn't be found in any self-respecting Malfoy home; someone would certainly try to spy through it.

That seemed to be Arrowshot's idea. She laid her eye against one hole and motioned Draco and Harry to take up positions at the others. Draco chose one in the middle, and Harry the lowest one on the left, exactly opposite Arrowshot. Draco was glad that he could feel the warmth of Harry's body next to his, even though he saw only a faint shimmer when he glanced in that direction.

The room Draco saw through the holes contained very little in the way of furniture. A single chair stood near the far wall, with a desk in front of it. A group of excited trainees paced back and forth between the door and the desk. Draco looked carefully, but didn't see anyone he knew. These were all third-year trainees, he thought, or possibly second-years. No one among the group seemed to have come in with them.

"Watch," Arrowshot hissed. "That's the same one I saw leading the meeting last time."

Before Draco could ask what she meant—she hadn't said anything about a leader one way or the other when she conveyed this information to him—a door opened behind the desk and a cloaked

figure strode in. Draco's eyes began to water when he tried to focus on it. A glamour was wrapped around the figure, he was almost certain, and yet he couldn't see it. His head simply pounded with a steady ache whenever he tried to see the person's features clearly.

The figure's entrance made the milling trainees immediately form into two lines. As they did, Draco could see there were fewer than he'd thought, or feared. Only about twenty, which didn't matter much next to the vast amount of people in the Auror program.

Of course, if Nihil controlled this many, then he could recruit more, through their offices if nothing else. Draco licked his lips and tried not to duck or shiver when the figure's invisible gaze, contained behind that painful shimmer, swept over him. The Disillusionment Charm would hide the sight of his eye pressed against the hole in the door, too.

"Welcome," said the figure. Draco started. Its voice wasn't the brassy yell he'd somehow expected, but a pleasant, melodic one on the edge of music. He thought an auditory glamour was probably responsible for that, rather than nature. "If you will please be seated?"

The trainees sat on the floor in the same lines they'd formed standing. The figure surveyed them until the least trace of movement ceased, and then nodded and lifted his hood from his face.

Even that didn't lessen Draco's pain as he tried to see. He could make out a male face, but the color of his hair shifted constantly, from auburn to brown to purest white. His face was high, his eyes round and bugging out. Then he wore glasses. Then his face was disfigured with a jagged scar down the chin. He could have been anyone.

Like Nusquam, Draco thought, tightening his jaw in frustration.

"I am the one of whom you have heard," said the man. That made Draco sure they were looking at Nihil, or one of his masks. "And I have a pleasant surprise for you tonight, someone in a position of some power who has been brought to join our ranks." He turned and gestured at the door he'd come through.

Samwise Ketchum limped in, head bowed, limbs moving heavily as if he were being controlled in spite of himself. Draco bit on his lip to control his gasp. Arrowshot wasn't that lucky, but the clapping and cheering from the trainees in the room was enough to cover the sound.

It might have been a mistake to tell Kepler of our plans, Draco thought grimly, *since she is Ketchum's trainee.*

"Another instructor has agreed to join us," said Nihil complacently. "Of course, he will need your help and cooperation. If you—"

That was when Ketchum whirled around and kicked Nihil in the stomach.

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Chapter: 34

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Four—A Crash Course in Strategy

Harry didn't hesitate. There was Ketchum, and there was Nihil falling backwards, and there was a whole crowd of trainees who roared like a hydra with twenty heads and drew their wands at once. Ketchum couldn't face them by himself.

He smashed his shoulder into the door and then went rolling into the room. He couldn't keep his feet at first, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he could draw his wand if he staggered and bumped along, faster than he could have if he was worried about keeping his dignity.

He cast *Incarcerous* three times, as fast as he could, and managed to bind three trainees on the floor.

Three more turned towards him. Ketchum had whirled and dived under the desk. Nihil was back on his feet, the painful glamour that kept Harry from seeing anything still over his face.

Harry wished he had an extra pair of eyes so he could watch the enemies in front of him and Nihil both at once. Pushkin was right; Observation *could* be the key to surviving a battle like this.

Then Draco was beside him, snarling low in his throat about Harry being stubborn and stupid and bloody impossible, and Arrowshot was slightly behind, her footsteps hesitant. But she had come into the room, and that was a good sign, Harry thought.

He used the Shield Charm to hold back the first curse the first trainee hurled, and felt the compatible magic roll smoothly over to Draco, offering him strength in return. At least Draco was smart enough not to use Dark Arts in a battle where they weren't alone. He used the Unbalancing Charm, and the tallest trainee's eyes crossed as he fought to keep his balance, his inner ears rebelling.

"*Protego Maximus*!" Arrowshot barked, and a larger shield than usual spread over them, bouncing two jinxes back at once. Harry nodded gratefully to her and used the brief breathing space to look towards the front of the room. If the rest of the trainees weren't coming after them, they were probably fighting Ketchum, and Harry couldn't imagine that he would survive that. They had to fight their way through to him as soon as poss-

Harry felt his thoughts fall silent as he stared.

The desk was hovering in the air like one of the floating boulders that Ketchum made so much use of it in the Battlefield Tactics classroom. It whirled and lowered and lifted and hurtled sideways, hitting the unprotected trainees and knocking them aside like billiard balls. Meanwhile, stones Ketchum must have plucked from the walls joined the dance, smashing in heads just hard enough to lay the victims out cold, and the floor regularly rippled and rolled under the feet of his opponents, interrupting their spells and making them fight not to join their comrades in unconsciousness.

Ketchum was clinging to one of the walls, his smile brilliant, his wand held in a relaxed grip.

I reckon there's a reason he's the Tactics instructor.

Behind the place where the desk had first stood was Nihil, who seemed content to regard the fight with his arms folded. Harry thought his face might have worn an expression of disgust, but it was rather difficult to tell.

Harry's attention jerked back to the fight he was actually in as one of the trainees' hexes nearly pulled his feet from under him. He cast a spell he'd seen in the margins of the Half-Blood Prince's book a long time ago, and her shin turned backwards. She fell with a yelp, and the next moment Draco Stunned her.

That left one trainee, since the first one had fallen over from Draco's Unbalancing Charm a minute ago. He backed up in front of them, his eyes flickering from one to the other of them as though he was trying to decide which one was the weakest. Then he turned and ran into the crowd of trainees.

Draco's Blasting Curse sent him spinning end over end until he collapsed into a pool of blood. Harry caught his breath as the compatible magic rolled back to him with its gift of strength; it was hard to speak in a calm voice. "You could have used a Stunner, and then he wouldn't stand so much chance of dying."

"I didn't feel like it," Draco said, and then he gasped in turn. Harry followed the direction of his eyes, and understood.

Only two or three trainees were left on their feet now, and Nihil and Ketchum both seemed ready to ignore them. Ketchum had come down from the wall and was stalking towards Nihil, his wand in his hand. Nihil had his wand out, too, and from the looser stance he had, Harry supposed he might have been amused. He squinted at the wand, trying to decide if it was familiar, but even that had a glamour on it.

"I don't like people corrupting our trainees," Ketchum said, causally, but with an undertone of anger that Harry could feel burning in his bones like an electric shock.

"How fortunate for me that I am making use of them and not corrupting them," Nihil said.

Ketchum shook his head once, though Harry couldn't tell if it was in disagreement or irritation, and then gestured with his wand. "*Sum auctor ieiunitatis!*"

The air between him and Nihil vanished in a sheet of white flame. Harry had no idea what it was supposed to do, because it stopped short of Nihil by inches. Nihil said, "A spell that will not work on someone like me, Samwise? How like you. *Duco!*"

Ketchum gasped as his head snapped backwards, and Harry thought it looked as though someone had suddenly jerked on invisible puppet strings tied to him. His wand twitched and his lips moved, but Harry couldn't hear the spell. Maybe it was nonverbal. Anyway, the strings suddenly fell away and Ketchum was flying towards Nihil as if launched from a catapult, snapping, "*Salta!*"

Nihil's body jerked to the side, but he said something Harry couldn't make out and that stopped. Ketchum landed and rolled under the desk, which had come back to the floor. Nihil destroyed it with a Blasting Curse, but Ketchum was already on his feet again, behind it, and nearly burned the floor between Nihil's feet; it might have worked, except that Nihil leaped into the air and floated to the other side of the room like a feather.

Spells rained down from him, flying so fast that Harry wondered if there was *time* to pronounce the incantations that must have controlled them. Ketchum met Nihil defense for defense, his arms twisting in impossible directions, his face concentrated and scowling, his hair flying.

When we're full Aurors, will we be able to do that? Harry thought wistfully. *I hope so.*

Stones joined the battle, and part of the ceiling tried to fall on Nihil. He deflected Ketchum's weapons with barely a shrug, once by opening a pit of absolute nothingness in front of the stone that was flying towards him. It vanished as though eaten by a vast mouth. Harry shivered, and felt Draco edge closer to his left side.

Purple corkscrews decorated the air between Ketchum and Nihil. Lightning leaped from wand to wand, and Harry and Draco had to duck more than once. Bronze shields formed and faded. The ground heaved again, but this time it extended all across the room and made Harry and Draco both fall. Harry made sure to curl around Draco's head with his arms, shielding him as best as he could from impact with the stone.

Ketchum barked some spell that Harry couldn't identify; it didn't sound like Latin. The air in front of him turned white, and a small dragon flew straight towards Nihil.

Nihil recoiled. He yelped something, and then he was gone and so were all the trainees in the room, as suddenly as if they'd Apparated—though Harry didn't hear the crack.

What he did hear, as he knelt there blinking in the sudden aftermath of battle, was Ketchum's cursing.

Draco made sure that he and Harry were on their feet by the time Ketchum got around to glancing at them. He had noticed three things that he didn't think Harry had, and that meant *he* was the one who had to prepare defenses against them.

One was that Ketchum had obviously been in control from the first moment Nihil marched him into the room. No one broke the Imperius Curse that suddenly, and he hadn't had the expression on his face characteristic of the Imperius Curse anyway. So the instructors had known about and planned to invade these meetings, and Ketchum might accuse them of interfering.

The second was that Ketchum had looked at them when they first burst through the door with a critical, assessing glance. He would ask certain questions, and Draco didn't think Harry would answer them gracefully.

The third was that Arrowshot was gone.

"Trainee Malfoy, Trainee Potter." Ketchum had a bright, cheerful voice when he wanted to. Draco had learned to watch his eyes to learn how difficult an obstacle course would be. At the moment, those eyes were frozen harder than he had ever seen them. "Very strange that I should meet you here." He nodded to both of them. "Mind talking about the strangeness?"

Harry shifted sideways next to Draco, and Draco knew he was probably opening his mouth to give an answer that would be unfortunately honest. He touched the small of Harry's back, out of Ketchum's eyesight, and Harry drew a startled breath. That was enough time to let Draco speak.

"No stranger than it is seeing you, sir," he said coolly. "We followed the advice and guidance of a trainee named Catherine Arrowshot who told us about the trainees meeting here. But how did *you* come here?"

Ketchum paused, and Draco felt the moment teetering on the edge of a blade .Sometimes his father had looked like that, right before he got angry, and sometimes Professor Snape.

But in the end, the balance tipped the right way and Ketchum laughed. "You must have already guessed," he said. "I saw the way you were looking at me, Malfoy. Was I under the control of anyone else when I stepped into this room?"
Draco relaxed. Though Ketchum's manner was bold and unconventional, and though he was still a Mudblood, Draco preferred this kind of rough honesty. "No, sir," he said. "This was part of a plan to spy on Nihil and try to stop him."

"Yes." Ketchum studied Harry now, glance so keen that Draco felt Harry shift uneasily under it. "I'm starting to think that we should have included you in those plans, since you are prone to show up when we execute them."

"Of course you should have," Draco said, making sure to keep his tone mild and not confrontational. Ketchum might appreciate their abilities, but Draco doubted he would feel the

same about a consistent challenge to his authority. Mudbloods were especially touchy about that, since many of them could feel the natural superiority of pure-bloods when they were in close contact with them. "Wouldn't it make more sense for us to work together, instead of blundering about in ignorance of what the other is doing and then meeting in the middle?"

Ketchum nodded. "But after this…" He jerked his head towards the empty room. "And the way your companion disappeared with them, and the fact that Nihil has Merlin knows how many other recruits, we'll have to take strict precautions about who we tell." He looked Draco straight in the eye. "How do you feel about Veritaserum?"

Draco shivered in spite of himself. And then Harry stepped forwards and stood between Draco and Ketchum.

"He shouldn't have to take it," Harry said fiercely. "He's been the victim of most of Nihil's attacks and he had to undergo Veritaserum interrogations during his trial in front of the Wizengamot. Leave him *alone.*"

Draco put a hand on Harry's shoulder. This wasn't the right time, but he would have to tell Harry what that defense of him had meant to Draco. For now, all he could really do was rub gently back and forth, hoping the sheer motions of his fingers would manage to convey the right meaning.

"I understand that, Trainee Potter." Ketchum nodded to Harry. "But everyone will have to do it. I'm not singling Malfoy out because of…unfortunate choices he may have made in the past." That was perhaps the most diplomatic way Draco had ever heard it referred to. "We need to make sure that we can trust everyone who forms a part of this team. As you said, Trainee Malfoy has been attacked. That means Nihil might have had a chance to infect him with more than grief magic."

Harry gave a small, tense shake. "I insist on undergoing it, too," he said.

Ketchum raised an eyebrow. "Of course."

"*Before* he does," Harry said. "And from the same vial, just so we can be sure no one is mixing anything nasty with the potion."

Draco wished he could lean his head on Harry's shoulder and simply breathe into his ear, because he doubted he could find the words. But they weren't alone, and Draco would not betray weakness to a stranger like Ketchum. His mother and Harry were the only people who had a right to see it.

"Your unshakability on this point is touching," Ketchum said dryly. "I can assure you that we planned to do that anyway." He raised his wand, and a door appeared in the far wall at his gesture, not the one that Nihil had come in by or the one that Arrowshot had shown them. Draco wondered if it was advanced Transfiguration or simply the revealing of a passage that the full

Aurors knew about. "Now. Follow me. I can't decide what to tell you until I see the others."

He strode off. Harry immediately followed him. Draco tried to pass him, but Harry shifted again. Draco realized that Harry was still protecting him, probably because he envisioned Ketchum turning around and launching a curse.

Ketchum had vanished into the newly revealed corridor without waiting for them. Draco could snatch a moment. He laid his chin on Harry's shoulder and breathed into his ear "Thank you."

Harry's step faltered for a moment. Then he reached up, snagged Draco's hand, and squeezed so tightly Draco thought his circulation was cut off for a moment.

They followed Ketchum.

Harry's head was starting to ache with the way that the instructors argued. Around and in circles and sideways and upside down, and all because they didn't want to mention the plan that Ketchum had tucked about—how to infiltrate Nihil's ranks and fight him—in front of Draco and Harry, because they hadn't decided if they should trust them yet.

I never knew how many variations of "that thing we talked about the other day" there were in the English language, Harry thought, and cast a series of golden sparks down the center of the table. At least it had the effect he wanted. People turned to him, their mouths open in astonishment, and shut up. Harry stood and looked around at them all. Portillo Lopez, looking harassed, her scarf half-undone around her hair; Hestia, her face pale rather than pink; Dearborn, watchful and calm and amused as always; Ketchum, irritated with all the rest of them; and Pushkin, glancing away from the glass he had been studying with faint disappointment, probably because he hadn't got to observe it longer. They hadn't included Morningstar in this meeting. Harry wondered why, but then decided she was probably too new to trust. And this group seemed particularly close, because they hadn't included Draco's Battle Brewing professor, either.

"Will you just tell us what the bloody plan is?" he asked.

Dearborn's eyes darkened. Portillo Lopez paused in patting her scarf, giving Harry a stare that made him feel eleven years old and new to the wizarding world all over again. Hestia squeaked and put a hand over her mouth. Pushkin gave him a long, slow, considering look, as if Harry should take the place of his glass as a subject of observation. Even Draco reached up and pinched Harry's side with a ferocity that Harry knew meant they would have words later.

Ketchum laughed, and laughed loud and long. He leaped to his feet and grinned at them.

"I told you it wouldn't work to keep them out of this forever," he said happily. "They aren't like other trainees."

"You keep saying things like that, Ketchum," Portillo Lopez muttered, and her hands closed on her wand. "This is the first time I've seen it come true."

"He has said that one hundred and sixteen times in the last fortnight," Pushkin said, with the same calm tone he used in class when he wanted a student to be more precise about an observation. Harry was glad that they weren't the only ones who got to hear it. "And this is the first time he has been proven right. On the other hand, he need only be proven right once. If you would wait, I can calculate how many times he is likely to say such words again before he is proven—"

"No," Portillo Lopez said.

Pushkin gave a shrug that Harry could read as clearly as words, maybe thanks to his classes. *You have no patience.*

"It doesn't matter," Ketchum said fiercely. "I've said all along that we can't fight Nihil with silence and secrecy. It's too obvious that he has allies inside the Ministry, and if some of those allies are gone now, because you said that the trainees didn't come back, that doesn't mean they're *all* gone. We should do what I said we should do: form a force that can effectively fight Nihil and his cohorts, and use proper tests to make sure that we can trust everyone inside it."
"Of course you should!" Harry said, astonished. He had suspected that the instructors' plan wasn't complete, but it had seemed clever, persuading Nihil that Ketchum was going along with him and then having him turn at the last minute. But if they didn't have any organization in place to deal with things like this…"Dumbledore ran the Order of the Phoenix, and he assigned people tasks, and there were secret ways of getting messages around and secrets that not everyone in the Order knew. Do you mean to say that you don't *do* that? What kind of idiots *are* you?"

"*Harry*," Draco whispered.

"You forget yourself, Trainee Potter." Dearborn rose to his feet and leaned across the table as if he could intimidate Harry that way.

Unfortunately for him, Harry had faced world-class experts in intimidation. He stood up and leaned forwards in response.

"We're fighting another war here," he said harshly. "I don't know everything about Nihil's goal, but I think it's more widespread than just the Ministry. Draco and I have seen signs of his work outside it." Even as angry as he was, he had enough sense not to mention the party he and Draco had attended. "I have experience in a war. And during the last year, I studied a journal Dumbledore left behind. It had a lot of the contact information for the Order of the Phoenix, descriptions of how it worked. Apparently he wrote it after the first war with Voldemort and then charmed it so that no one else could read it until after Voldemort was safely gone forever. I think I can improve your plans—no, scratch that, I *know* I can."

"You would tell us that we have reckoned without the Boy-Who-Lived, would you?" Harry didn't think even Snape or Draco had ever sneered at him with more contempt than he could see on Dearborn's face right now.

Harry stared back at him, and replied, "That's exactly what I'm saying. This stupid title ought to be good for *something.*"

Draco had been staring at Harry in shock ever since he'd begun this little charade. He could understand that Harry was frustrated because Nihil seemed to escape again and again, and they couldn't put the pieces together, and now Arrowshot was gone and they didn't know if they'd been wrong to trust her, but he shouldn't take out his anger on the instructors.

Only when Harry began talking about a new war did Draco realize he was entirely serious. A bolt of dismay shot through him and tried to pin him in his seat.

I don't want to fight again.

Luckily, he managed to realize on his own that that was ridiculous. He wouldn't have become an Auror if he couldn't stand the thought of fighting. And he knew Harry was right. Besides, he was Harry's partner and friend and to-be lover. He couldn't let him stand unsupported.

He rose to his feet and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry reached over and clasped his arm in return. He hadn't moved otherwise, he was still standing with his eyes on Dearborn, but, just like when Harry had defended him from Ketchum, Draco didn't need direct eye contact to make the gesture resonate for him.

Dearborn's face cooled somewhat when he saw Draco rise, but he only studied them, for so long that Draco was sure his reserve would break and admit something loud and snarling any moment. Then he glanced down at the table and nodded.

"Perhaps I have been hasty," he murmured.

"Not hasty *enough*." That was Ketchum, springing in again, and Draco breathed, because the dangerous moment was past and they had some support from the full Aurors. *Even if he is a Mudblood.* "We need to move faster. We need to conduct the tests of who we can trust. We need to decide what we can do to fight back."

"At the moment, I do not know if there is anything we can do." Dearborn shook his head, but he was wearing a more normal expression now. "If they can infect our people through light, if they can corrupt such a large portion of our trainees…"

"I believe I can counter the infection," said Portillo Lopez. She smiled thinly at the way their heads turned towards her. "Since I had the chance to study the infection working through Trainee Malfoy's magic, I have been at work." She sniffed. "Hard, but only on the surface. They used an Alexander's Knot underneath—"

"Observe the way that their faces went blank just now," Pushkin told her in a flat voice. "That is a sign that you are getting too technical."

Draco bit his lip to hide a smile. He honestly didn't know if the Observation teacher was making a joke or not, but it left Ketchum free to jump in again.

"I'll start gathering up the Veritaserum," he said. "I can tell them it's for my classes, and that's even partially the truth." His eyes shone, and he canted his head to one side. "What are we going to name ourselves?"

"Pardon?" Dearborn curled his lip and touched his onyx ring so that it flashed, something Draco had only seen him do in front of other Aurors when he was desperately bored.

"Dumbledore's group was the Order of the Phoenix." Ketchum shifted from leg to leg. "What are we? I think we should call ourselves the Fellowship."

"Your parents have corrupted you for life by naming you after a character in those ridiculous Muggle books," Portillo Lopez snapped.

The rest of the meeting fell apart into unimportant bickering from there on in, and Draco felt free to sit down again. Harry sat beside him and squeezed his hand so hard Draco gasped a little.

"Thank you," Harry leaned over to whisper.

"I didn't say anything," Draco felt compelled to point out.

"But I know what you would have said."

Such pride and trust shone in Harry's eyes that Draco had to close his own a little and look away.

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Chapter: 35

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Five—The Bracelets

"Trainee Potter, Trainee Malfoy, see me after class."

Draco looked up sharply when Dearborn spoke. There was a drawl of cold disdain in his voice that made him wonder what they had done wrong. But when he saw Dearborn's half-lidded eyes and the slow tilt of his head, he thought he understood. The instructors probably wanted to meet privately with them to discuss the group that would fight Nihil, and no other instructor was

capable of asking them to stay and talk with as much nonchalance as Dearborn.

Draco nodded back, magically nudged Harry in the ribs to stop him from staring, and then bent over his notes again. This was a day for studying battle positions rather than practicing in groups, since most of the trainees continued not to understand what was required when they moved to working with more than one partner. Draco understood in theory, but in practice, he thought he and Harry did better when they were allowed to work alone. They inevitably dominated the group, anyway, and that produced jealousy and resentment.

Sometimes wanting to be fair to everyone has to yield to practical necessity, he thought, as he dipped his quill in ink and crossed out one of the positions Dearborn had demonstrated with an illusion. It required him and Harry to work opposite each other, casting not in tandem or one after another but at random times. The compatible magic limited them from doing it. At the very least, their spells wouldn't have the power their companions had come to expect unless they could do otherwise.

And that gives Dearborn a perfect excuse to ask for us to stay now, Draco realized. *Everyone knows that we haven't been doing as well as he would like in the practice training exercises.*

Draco relaxed and was able to concentrate again, at least until Harry's elbow nudged him in the side and Harry's voice whispered in his ear. Even though Dearborn had separated them today, they had learned spells that would let them speak to each other as if they sat no more than a few inches away.

"Why does he want to see us?"

"Business for the Fellowship or the Order or whatever it's to be called," Draco said, enough under his breath that no one else could have heard him. He raised an eyebrow as he heard a quill snap somewhere behind him. Hopefully that hadn't been Harry, but someone else concentrating so hard that they destroyed their quill rather than used it properly. "Perhaps the instructors have finally decided on a battle plan."

Harry said nothing more for the rest of class. When Draco glanced up as they prepared to meet Dearborn, however, he saw Harry's shoulders slumped.

What is the matter with him? Draco refrained from rolling his eyes in exasperation, but only because Harry—or Weasley, who watched him more closely than ever nowadays—would see and misunderstand. *He was the one who wanted to be included in their plans, the one who said that he could offer leadership and survival experience. Sometimes I don't understand him at all.*

Dearborn stood at the front of the classroom, his arms folded. He turned a blank look on them as they came up to him. Draco marveled. Not even his father could have shown so much disdain by refusing to show any disdain at all.

"Auror Ketchum has located an artifact in the Department of Mysteries that he believes will

assist us in determining Nihil's adherents from Ministry loyalists," Dearborn said, barely moving his lips. "If you wish to be part of this, then you are to meet us in Auror Portillo Lopez's office at seven this evening."

"Yes, Professor," Draco said. Harry nodded in silence.

"Good." Dearborn went on staring at them with an unreadable expression. Draco was happy to see that Harry, wisely, stayed still instead of assuming that they could simply leave. He'd made that mistake more than once before.

"While you may have been distracted by what has been happening to you," Dearborn said abruptly, "I will not allow that to take your attention from your studies. You should remember that you are here to become Aurors first of all, and not Dark wizard hunters."

Draco held back a laugh and nodded. *What are Aurors if not Dark wizard hunters?* It was best to nod and look solemn when a professor contradicted themselves like that. Not even Professor Snape had always been right.

He felt a small squirming in his conscience when he thought about that. Professor Snape's Pensieve still sat in the back of his closet, where he had moved it when Harry came to share his rooms. Draco wondered if he was afraid to look at it, and didn't think he was.

But then, why hadn't he done it yet?

I've been a little busy in the past few months, he thought defensively, and then realized Dearborn had waved a hand to dismiss them. Harry took his arm and hauled him out of the classroom, hurrying him towards Auror Conduct. Draco walked slowly, though, and forced Harry to slow down. Harry sighed and took his hand away.

Draco caught his arm in turn. Harry glanced at him. "What?" he asked, sounding grumpy. "Hestia might forgive me for being late, but she doesn't like you that much."

"Why are you depressed that they're doing as you asked and including us?" Draco asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Harry shook his arm free. "Come on, I don't want to show the Aurors that we're not professional about being on time. They might take the wrong idea. You know that Portillo Lopez and Dearborn will have us out of the group if they can."

"But—"

Harry strode ahead of him, not looking back. Draco hissed with exasperation and followed. He didn't want to seem as if he was arguing with Harry. He knew Weasley, if not the Mudblood, was watching for just such an opportunity to come over and take Harry back. The Weasel would work any row into a permanent crack in their relationship, if he could.

He didn't like Harry having secrets from him.

He wondered, then, what Harry would think if he knew about Snape's Pensieve and how long ago Draco had received it.

"Regulation 2.53 specifically states that there is to be no conversation with arrested suspects who are able to charm through the voice alone, such as Dark wizards who have taken the Siren Potion…"

Harry scribbled away at his notes about the stupid things Hestia was saying, keeping his head bowed. He could feel Draco's gaze burning into his back between his shoulder blades, but he didn't look up. Hestia supported them, but she would probably think they were pushing their boundaries if they spent too much time talking or looking at each other in class.

Besides, Draco wouldn't understand Harry's anxieties if he voiced them. He was wondering if he had moved too fast in the meeting with the instructors two nights ago.

What did I really do, after all, except hunt Horcruxes? I didn't fight *Voldemort. I defeated him by dying. And Draco's made it clear that I'm not to try that method of defeating my enemies again.*

Harry found the spirit for a brief smile then, but it slipped away again.

Nihil is completely different. We have people to fight. I'm not the one who hurt Nusquam. That was Draco. What happens if I'm too arrogant in insisting on being included? I want to save lives, but what if I wind up destroying them instead?

That wasn't all, of course, but Harry wasn't ready to even *think* about the other secret that he was keeping from Draco yet. And when his thoughts slewed in the direction of something else again—the hope he carried at the bottom of his mind—he started wondering if any place in his brain was safe.

I'll have to do the best I can. It's too late to turn back now.

"The Unspeakables have been working on this artifact for a long time," Ketchum said proudly, holding it up. "And now they've finally discovered how to make copies of it, so we can all have one." He looked from face to face, beaming.

Looking around, Draco couldn't see any more signs of enthusiasm. Dearborn appeared as grave as he had when speaking to Harry and Draco in class. Portillo Lopez had a cup of tea and sipped it as if finishing it was the most important thing in the world. Jones sat upright with her hands clasped in front of her, apparently trying to look older. Pushkin held a lens to his eye and examined the surface of the table, tracing a crack with a finger.

"Ah," said Ketchum, apparently undaunted, "you look like that because none of you know what it does yet. Well, watch." He clasped the jade bracelet around his arm and then nodded to Portillo

Lopez. "Please, Maryam, as we discussed."

The Battle Healer set the teacup down with a precise click and drew her wand. Draco stifled the urge to move out of the way, even though he was sitting on the other side of the table. The grim expression on her face seemed to require it. Harry, next to him, stiffened but didn't retreat.

Portillo Lopez aimed the wand at Ketchum and said, as clearly as if she was casting the spell in front of the Wizengamot, "*Commuto mentem tuam*."

The line of blue light struck Ketchum. His jaw started to fall, and a dreamy look entered his eyes. Draco hadn't recognized the incantation, but he knew it must be one of the legal suggestion spells that were related to the Imperius Curse.

Ketchum had just started to draw his wand when a loud, urgent buzzing sounded from the arm he had placed the bracelet on. Then a circle of white light formed around it, and the buzzing grew louder, shrill enough to make Draco's teeth ache. Ketchum cried out and dropped his wand, then flung himself down and rolled on the floor.

"I told him that he would get hurt," Portillo Lopez muttered. She stood and walked around the table, moving faster than Draco would have thought; if she'd been willing to cast the spell in the first place, it seemed perfectly likely that she would leave him to suffer. But she probably had Healer ethics.

I would find that inconvenient, Draco decided as he watched Portillo Lopez press her wand against Ketchum's temple.

He stopped rolling immediately. The bracelet had already stopped buzzing and glowing. Draco frowned in confusion as Ketchum stood and beamed at them all.

Ketchum probably saw the confused expression on several faces, because he said, "The bracelet reacts to the presence of magic imposed from outside—magic that's meant to change someone else's mind or core. It gives an unmistakable warning, as you saw, and the minute the changed person attempts to use magic, it sends a jolt of pain up their arm. Then it confuses and disorients them, filling their mind with distracting visions. There's no way that someone who wears this bracelet and has been corrupted by Nihil would be able to fight for him."

He leaned forwards and put a hand on the table, not smiling. Portillo Lopez muttered something at him about not moving too fast after his ordeal, but Ketchum ignored her. "I suggest that we all wear copies of this bracelet. It will enable us to know in a moment if we shouldn't trust someone who's not part of the group. Yes, Nihil might still be able to infect us without our noticing, but he wouldn't be able to *use* us. And since Maryam says that she knows how to cure the infection now, we could rescue that person."

Draco glanced at the jade bracelet, just visible under Ketchum's sleeve, uneasily. "I would have preferred an artifact that would enable us to identify the people on the other side, sir," he

murmured.

"The Unspeakables are looking for one like that," said Ketchum. "But the problem is that this bastard is able to make his side out of ours. We have to have a warning that will last past the first moments. Even if someone can swear under Veritaserum, once, that they don't have any intention of joining Nihil, there's no saying what might happen later—and they might have been corrupted without knowing it."

"This certainly fulfills the criteria of being noticeable," Pushkin said. "I hope that it does not interrupt my classes and prevent my students from observing other phenomena that are smaller and quieter." He nodded to Ketchum's end of the table. "Do you have the Veritaserum with you?"

"Yes." Ketchum dug out several vials and placed three drops from one of them on his tongue before Draco could even blink. "Daffyd, if you'll do the honors?" he added, and handed the vial off to Dearborn.

One would have to know Dearborn well to see the flicker of interest in his eyes, Draco thought. His face maintained an expression of utter contempt as he spoke the test questions that asked for Ketchum's name and status. Then he asked, "Do you serve Nihil?"

"No," Ketchum said promptly. Draco relaxed in spite of himself. He had known, of course he had, that Ketchum's appearance in the room with Nihil and the trainees was part of the instructors' plan, but it was good to know that he could rely on that being true.

"Have you ever served Nihil?"

"No."

"So far as you know, is your magic corrupted?" Dearborn leaned forwards. Draco supposed that he might be especially interested in the answer to that because he used Dark Arts himself, and there were some people who would say that using Dark Arts was a sign of one's magic being corrupted.

"No."

"Do you know the identities of any of Nihil's servants that you have not revealed to the rest of us?" Dearborn leaned back now and stared at his fingernails.

"No."

"Have you been approached by anyone who has tried to seduce or corrupt you into the service of Nihil?"

"No."

And on it went, exhaustive questions being asked until Draco's brain felt wrung. Every possible variation on a question he could think of, Dearborn asked. At the end of his interrogation, Draco still didn't think it was impossible that Nihil would manage to infiltrate them—he had proven himself unexpectedly clever in many ways—but he did think it was a lot less likely.

Ketchum swallowed the antidote to the Veritaserum, and smiled hopefully around at them all. "Can I name it the Fellowship, since no one else seems to be interested in suggesting a name?" he asked.

Portillo Lopez rolled her eyes as she picked up the Veritaserum. "Only you, Samwise," she said, in the moment before she downed the potion and Dearborn took up the questioning.

Draco watched faces as the time came nearer and nearer when he would have to take the potion, but saw no suspicious flinches or dread. Of course, someone who served Nihil would probably have come up with an excuse to be absent from this meeting instead of coming. He *did* look forwards to finding out if anyone would refuse to wear the bracelet, but that didn't happen, either.

Harry made sure he took the Veritaserum before Draco, as good as his word. Draco didn't think he needed the protection as much as he had thought he would, since Dearborn was the one asking the questions, but he squeezed Harry's elbow in a gesture of appreciation anyway. Harry smiled back at him before his face became slack.

Draco's questioning was anticlimactic. They asked him the same questions as anyone else, and he heard the same answers slide through his lips. Then the jade bracelet clicked into place around his arm, and at least didn't start buzzing and glowing right away. That didn't prove nothing would happen in the future, of course.

"It's the Fellowship," Ketchum said defiantly when the last of them was fitted with a bracelet and Dearborn had shown them a charm that could keep their new accessories hidden.

No one disagreed with him.

"You never told me that you'd read one of Dumbledore's journals."

Harry froze and stared down at his Observation homework for a moment. They were supposed to come up with fifty things they remembered about their childhood bedroom. Harry's report was currently a mixture of things that wouldn't sound too incriminating and extremely creative lies.

He shook himself a moment later. *Why would Draco try to make me feel bad for not telling? It's not like it was something that had much of a chance to come up before.*

"Yeah," he said, laying down his quill and turning around. Draco sat on the edge of his chair, but not tensely, as if he was that interested in what Harry was saying; he was toying with his own quill and yawning occasionally. That gave Harry the courage to go on. "I went back to Hogwarts last year, just to confirm that I could have other memories of the school besides the battle.

Headmistress McGonagall told me that a few of Dumbledore's old books had been discovered behind wards that fell when Voldemort died, and they were wrapped up and addressed to me. The journal was one of them."

Draco nodded. It appeared that he didn't consider not mentioning the journal a lie. Harry relaxed.

Then Draco asked another question, one that made him tense all over again. "For someone who got all this knowledge out of the journal, you didn't seem eager to employ it at the meeting today." He was toying with the jade bracelet, a habit Harry hoped he would get over soon. It would tell anyone who looked that something was hidden there under the glamour charm.

"Well, I started wondering," Harry said, and then stopped.

"Yes? Go on." Draco's eyes were mild and merciless.

Harry swallowed. *He won't kill you. If he didn't kill you when you first put yourself forwards in the instructors' meeting, he's not going to do it now.*

"I started wondering how useful my experience would actually be," Harry said, shrugging. "I never led any battles. I never saw the original Order of the Phoenix operate. It's reading and hearsay. The most I did was kill myself, or let Voldemort fire the Killing Curse at me, which was the same thing." He laughed nervously. "How much war experience does that translate into?"

"You still went through a war," Draco said quietly.

"Yes, but so did others," Harry said. "Some of them were Aurors, even if none of the instructors fought. There are people who could do better than I could. I stood up and said something about it because I was just so frustrated and it was the one thing I could think of that would make them listen. But now I wonder why they aren't inviting other tacticians in. And generals, if there are any." Harry wasn't sure about that. The wizarding community in Britain seemed so small that no general could possibly exist unless they were under the control of or in the pay of the Ministry.

"You made a contribution that they seem to have accepted," Draco said. "Is that what's been worrying you the past few days?"

Harry nodded too quickly, and knew it by the look Draco scathed him with.

"Out with it," Draco said. When Harry hesitated, he added, "What do you think I'll do to you for telling the truth? Got the image in your head? Good. Now compare it with what you think I'll do to you for telling lies."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He knew he'd told Draco a lot of other things, things that were more damaging than this, but Draco had found out about most of those because Harry had no choice. He'd overheard the conversation with Ginny and been there for Nihil's attack on his magic. Harry had never had the option of keeping them quiet.

This, he did.

"Harry."

When he looked up, there was acceptance in Draco's eyes. Not resignation, not anger, not the hatred that Harry sometimes dreamed would appear there again, but acceptance. He wasn't going to scold Harry for keeping it secret. He simply wanted to know what it was.

Truth was more important to him than anger.

Harry's whole body seemed to breathe out at once, not just his lungs, when he replied, "I had another fit while you were in Battle Brewing."

Draco nodded and stood up to wrap an arm around his shoulders. Harry allowed himself to lean briefly against Draco before he sat up again and added, "It was the Fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement this time."

Draco stiffened. Harry wrapped an arm around him in return and held him until the words that he could feel working their way up and down Draco's brain came out his mouth.

"Why is that one of your worst memories?" Draco whispered. "I mean…I thought…you rescued me. I know Vincent died there, but I didn't think you cared about him."

"I care about him the way I care about everyone else who died in that damn war," Harry said wearily. He felt tired now. He'd had a few nights of broken sleep, and then the heavy, dreamless slumber that couldn't refresh him because he knew that a fit always followed it. "Besides, the memories that come back to me aren't exactly the way they originally happened. In this one, you fell off the broom behind me when I swooped too low and burned to death."

"God, Harry."

Draco choked the words into his hair, and Harry stood up now and embraced him completely. He was more comfortable when he had someone else who required protection, and Draco was imagining how awful it was for him as well as revisiting his own memories of the fire. He was the one who needed a soothing presence and voice.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I know it didn't happen that way. And I woke up from it pretty soon."

"They shouldn't be happening at all," Draco said, lifting a pale face. "And I do wish that you hadn't kept it from me."

Harry winced, but nodded. If that was all the scolding he got, he would count himself lucky. "I know, but I don't think that we can afford the time to research just them right now. I kept it from

you because—I don't know. It makes me feel weak."

Draco gave him a silent glance of perfect understanding. Then he turned and looked at his closet, biting his lip. Harry followed his gaze curiously, wondering what was wrong.

"There's something I didn't tell you," Draco said in a low voice.

Harry nodded, more than happy to shift the conversation to Draco and Draco's problems. He had the uncomfortable, jagged feeling in the back of his throat and the desire to take it all back again and pretend he'd been joking that always followed his urge to talk about himself.

Changing the subject especially helped because that way Draco, who seemed to have an almost miraculous ability to spot his lies, wouldn't see the secret hiding in the bottom of Harry's mind.

Draco could forgive him lying about a fit, but not for thinking about this.

When he laid down the covered Pensieve in front of Harry and explained how he got it, Harry blanched for some reason, but said, "I can't blame you for not wanting to look into it." He hesitated, then added, "Do you want to look now? I'd go with you."

Sometimes, Draco thought, staring at Harry's face, his gentle expression and worried eyes, *he knows exactly the right thing to say. He's not eloquent, but he's true.*

"With you," he said, in a calm voice before he could change his mind, "I think I would."

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Chapter: 36

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Six—What Can Be Held In Memory

The first fall into the memory was so dizzying that for long moments Harry only held onto Draco, disoriented. Then he blinked and looked around, and the confines of the room seemed to snap painfully into focus.

They stood in a small, dark house, with a dim window that Harry could believe looked out on a garden full of deadly nightshade and strangling vines. The walls were lined with shelves covered with vials, clusters of leaves, and corks, and that meant potions, and he had never been comfortable around potions.

Draco pressed hard on his arm. Harry turned around and looked the direction he was looking in.

Snape stood over a bubbling cauldron in the middle of the room. Harry started. He had known that he would probably see the man, of course; he hadn't expected to see him looking so exactly like he had just before he died. These memories must be recent, then, from the second war. Harry didn't know why he'd expected them to be from the first.

The cauldron belched up green smoke that made Harry shudder. Draco leaned forwards, his shoulder pressing against Harry's, his eyes intent. Presumably he understood what the potion was about. Harry didn't and had no wish to.

Snape thrust a silver ladle into the potion and rapped it sharply against the side of the cauldron. As though the ringing sound the silver made was a signal, the potion belched one more time and fell silent. Snape bent down, muscles tensed as though he knew he'd have to flee any second, but the potion seemed to satisfy him. With an ugly smirk on his face, he stepped back and made a beckoning motion at a door Harry hadn't noticed before.

"Come in, my lord. It is ready."

Voldemort stepped through the door.

Harry bared his teeth and drew his wand. It didn't matter that this was just a memory. It was an instinctive reaction.

Next to him, Draco turned white and swayed as if he would fall over. Harry promptly put an arm around his shoulders, his own disgust calming. If he had someone to take care of and help, then everything *he* suffered was simple in comparison. He could put it aside and concentrate on those other people he should help.

"Well done, Severus." Voldemort barely seemed to look into the cauldron. Maybe he could tell what the potion was from just a brief glimpse. Harry didn't know, because he still had no plans to learn anything about potions any time soon. "It is only a beginning step, of course."

"My lord, of course." Snape simpered and bowed, and Harry could understand why Voldemort never seemed to have suspected he was a spy. He had the manner of a cringing, cowardly Death Eater down pat. "The first step along a long and glorious road to an ending of your creation and vision. Who else could have dreamed this up? Who else would have dared interfere with natural law in this way?"

Voldemort laughed softly. Harry shuddered and felt Draco tremble as though with an electric shock. He pulled him closer, but didn't look away from Voldemort. It really did seem as if he would attack any moment, and Harry had to be ready to defend Draco.

"Such *power*, Severus." Voldemort crooned the words and spread his fingers. A handful of the potion rose from the cauldron and turned about, glittering. It was partially transparent, like thick

green glass, so that Harry could still see his white and staring face through it. "The power to conquer death."

Harry stood straight up. Draco jolted next to him. Snape bowed.

And then the memory twitched and threw them into another memory.

"When will they be ready, Rabastan?"

Draco blinked. Professor Snape's house seemed suddenly to have ceased to exist, and they stood in a broad, flat room with plenty of space. Draco would have thought they were outside, except that there wasn't the slightest gleam of light from above, either sun or moon or stars.

Not a room, Draco understood when he finally looked up to understand the contradiction, but a cave. The roof rose to a height of perhaps thirty feet above them and then dropped back. It was all plain grey stone, unmarked. Draco had thought at first that Professor Snape had sent him these memories so that Draco could track down the Dark Lord's hiding places, but how was he supposed to do that without some kind of identifying mark? The professor's small dark brewing lab could have been anywhere, and so could this cave.

"My lord." The sound of cloth scraping the floor, and Draco glanced up. Rabastan Lestrange was bowing in front of the Dark Lord and Professor Snape. Draco shivered. At least the Dark Lord had his back to the watchers this time, so Draco didn't have to confront his face. "Their capabilities are close to the strongest they can achieve, but they obey commands imperfectly."

The Dark Lord swayed his head slowly back and forth like a snake considering where to strike. It was a gesture Draco had seen several times in the Manor when the monster was feeling thoughtful. The sight now made him want to vomit or flee, preferably both at once.

Harry's arm around him tightened, and Harry whispered into his ear, "It's all right. I fear him, too."

Only Harry would comfort me by making a confession of his own weakness. But Draco relaxed and fought back the nausea because of that anyway. He wrapped his own arm around Harry's waist, returning the support, thanking Harry for it, and, though Harry might not realize it, staking his own claim.

There was no way he would let someone who could do this much for him, who meant this much to him, go.

"Show them to me, Rabastan," the Dark Lord commanded at last. "I have an ideal in mind, but in reality, they need only be ready for attack."

"My lord," Rabastan repeated, and lifted one arm in a sharp gesture that looked longer than it really was because of the flowing robe that trailed the movement.

The air above him shook and rustled. Then several shapes dropped from of the roof of the cavern and stalked forwards on unsteady feet.

Draco narrowed his eyes. They had four legs, he could make out that much, but a shadow seemed to cling about them and baffle his gaze when he tried to see more details than that. Their heads swayed back and forth in a way that made him think they had snakes in their ancestry. The tips of horns showed, and their feet scraped along the rock as though they bore hooked claws.

One of them opened its mouth and spat a gout of something red across the cavern, which fell with a lashing hiss and left pockmarks in the rock. Harry started beside him and murmured, "They look a little like the things that I fought in the Forbidden Forest."

Of course. Draco thought he could understand now why Professor Snape had left him these memories, and that let him forget his fear. He straightened and nodded to Harry. "I think Nihil and the others must have found some of the experiments that the Dark Lord left behind," he said. "They've improved them. I never heard of any Death Eaters able to return from the dead."

"Except Wormtail," Harry muttered.

Draco frowned at him.

Harry shook his head. "Private joke."

From his twisted smile, it was no very amusing one. Draco would have liked to pursue the matter, but certain lines of hardness about Harry's mouth convinced him it would be out of the question to ask about it now. Promising himself to ask later, he continued, "And these beasts are clumsy, nothing like the enemies you faced. Still, it's not out of the question that Rabastan came up with the idea first and Nemo, or whoever really created those animals you fought, simply refined on it."

"That *would* explain how Nihil and his followers became so powerful so quickly," Harry mused. "If they didn't have to do all the work themselves, then they could skip over years of magical theory and experimenting and go straight into practice."

Draco found himself lifting his head higher and smiling at Harry. It was still a novel experience for him to have Harry agree with him instead of resisting and resenting Draco on principle. "Exactly," he said. "And, for the first time, we have something concrete to tell the rest of the Fellowship." The name still made him roll his eyes, but no one had proposed anything better and it was easier to say than "the group of people wearing jade bracelets" or "the instructors, you, myself, and whoever else they decide is trustworthy enough to be informed."

"How concrete?" Harry gestured at the beasts, whom the Dark Lord was currently praising, with a raised eyebrow. "We might know that Nihil and Nemo and Nusquam aren't entirely original now, but that doesn't mean that we know how they bred these animals, or how they used the

potion that Snape came up with to stop dying or conquer death or whatever it was. Snape himself said it was only the first step and they'd need a lot more research before they perfected it."

Draco opened his mouth to retort, and the memory ended and spun them into another one.

Harry blinked and stared. This was a room at Hogwarts, or at least it might have been; the slimy stone walls looked like they were in the dungeons. The room was empty, though, except a single wooden table. Snape bent over a piece of parchment on the table, his lips moving silently.

"Why do you think *this* is important?" he asked, turning to Draco.

But Draco ignored him, stepping up and bending over the parchment. A bit disgruntled, Harry followed. He already suspected that whatever was written on the parchment wouldn't be interesting enough to justify the way Draco and Snape stared at it.

He was right. It was a bunch of tiny pictures and lists, which were probably directions for brewing a potion. He stirred and sighed. "This is a picture of Snape's own research," he said. "Do you think it's research for Voldemort? But what's the use of putting this memory into the Pensieve if it doesn't show us what the potion does? In fact, what's the use of most of these memories? Why did he want you to know about all the experiments and such Voldemort did?"

"He showed me because he must suspect that these discoveries weren't simply going to go away," Draco said tightly. "He also must have known that few people would recognize them for what they were once they started appearing, and there were fewer still he could trust with the knowledge. So he gave it to me. Right now, I'm memorizing the instructions for this potion, and I can't tell how long the memory will last. Be *quiet*, will you?"

Stung, Harry turned his back and wandered to the other side of the room. It wasn't completely empty, he could see now. There were shelves near a door that must lead into another room, and various things that *weren't* potions supplies stood on one of them. Harry could see books, a long rod that had a crystal bead at one end and a mirror at the other, and a Pensieve. That gave him a turn. It was probably the same Pensieve Snape had sent to Draco, the same one they were standing inside right now even as he looked at it.

Most of the books looked boring, but there was a single large one at the end, draped with dark cloth, the way Draco had had the Pensieve covered up, instead of properly bound. Curious, Harry reached up and took it down. It weighed heavily and strangely in his hands.

What's this filled with, anyway? Rocks? But maybe it was; Harry knew that some wizards used hollow books as storage containers. He pulled it open, expecting to see no pages but just a hole in the middle that had rocks in.

No, there were pages. But they were covered with photographs. Harry frowned. He recognized none of the faces, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. One and all, they were staring at the camera in terror and cowering as if they would have liked to run out of the side of the frame.

Harry flipped slowly through, trying to find someone he knew or at least a label of some sort. There was nothing of the kind. Probably whoever had put the album together had known these people and hadn't thought about strangers looking through it. Harry didn't have labels in his, either, but those pictures were of a much smaller number of people and he knew them all. He couldn't imagine that Snape could remember the names of all these.

Maybe they were the victims he tested his potions on?

"Harry!"

Harry started guiltily and put the book back on the shelf before he turned around to face Draco. Draco shook his head, as though to say he *would* ask what Harry had been doing, but he knew it would be ridiculous before he heard the explanation, and then latched on to Harry's wrist.

"I've memorized the recipe for the potion," he whispered. "I can see why the professor thought it could lead to immortality. And of course the Dark Lord was afraid of death, so it's not surprising that he would have had Professor Snape researching how to defeat that."

Harry gnawed his lip. He wanted to say something about Horcruxes and how Voldemort had *already* secured his immortality, but he wasn't sure how much he should say to Draco about that. Besides, it wasn't as though Voldemort had to have only one way to be immortal. He'd been paranoid. He would probably always be interested in ways to secure his life in case the Horcruxes failed him.

And Draco knows more about potions than I do. If he says that it's an immortality potion, I can't disbelieve him.

"Is that the end of the memories?" Harry asked. "This one's lasted longer than the others. Maybe we should leave the Pensieve?"

"This memory is longer than the rest because Professor Snape knew I would take some time to memorize the recipe," Draco said impatiently. "But there ought to be at least one more, related to the beasts. If he ever managed to spy on Rabastan breeding them, that is."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "No offense, Draco, but I really don't want to see what the mechanics of that would look like—"

And then the world around them rippled, blurred, and faded again.

Draco blinked. He knew the room they were standing in now, for the first time. This was Professor Snape's private sitting room, where he occasionally called his most talented students for "talks." Those talks were ways to try and pressure them into pursuing Potions-related careers, but since Draco had always intended to do that in any case, he'd found the conversations pleasant.

This room had stone walls and floors, just like the other dungeons, but the floor was covered with brilliant rugs and the walls with tapestries. Each portrayed an intricately woven scene of the triumph of some Dark wizard or another, or sometimes their falls, provided those falls were glorious and also managed to kill many incompetent "good" wizards around the way. Draco found himself turning instinctively to seek out his favorite tapestry, which showed a black mountain illuminated by lightning and a full moon. A gold-robed wizard stood on top of the mountain, calling the lightning into his hands and using it to stab his enemies at the base. Professor Snape had never been able to tell Draco for certain which wizard that tapestry depicted, or maybe he had known and preferred the advantage of secrecy, but that had never destroyed Draco's pleasure in its beauty.

When he turned about, it was to recognize the comfortable green chair sitting in the middle of the largest rug, with a bright lamp beside it, and Professor Snape sitting in it. A book was open on his lap, but he glanced up and began to speak as if he knew they were there, despite the fact that Draco knew they must have appeared as empty space to him.

"Draco. I wish you to know that I believe you will survive this war. The Malfoy family has managed survival, if not always success, for a long time. Your father's error lies in mistaking money and political connections for the surest markers of success, when in reality one must live to enjoy those first."

Harry lightly touched his shoulder and then faded back towards the walls. Draco swallowed a lump in his throat. Harry had a delicacy that Draco wasn't sure he could have practiced himself, if he was curious to hear what someone said to Harry in a memory. No matter how impossible it was to prevent himself from overhearing, Harry would at least *act* as if he could leave Draco in privacy.

"You are a Malfoy," Professor Snape went on, with the thin smile that always made Draco uncertain if he was being sarcastic or not, "but you are more than simply the sum of your father's traits, and you will have gifts undreamed of by your father. Perhaps your mother has dreamed of them, but I rather suspect not. Constant, quiet, humble, and yet unsurpassed, they are these.

"You have the ability to observe and the wit to use those observations. You do not, as Lucius does, assume that what you do not want to be true cannot be true, even if you see it, or simply use your observations to support foregone conclusions. You can change your mind. You can admit your mistakes. I have seen this in the Potions classroom, and I am confident enough of my own perception to believe it extends beyond those confines.

"You will survive, Draco, but you will not necessarily become powerful in the way your father envisions." Professor Snape leaned forwards, his eyes intent. "*You* will realize that the changed nature of the wizarding world, after the war, to some extent limits you. *You* will know that blood purity is no longer the guiding or only criterion that someone should use to make friends and allies."

Draco started. *He was sure that early that Harry's side would win the war?* He didn't know exactly when the memory had been made, but he thought it must be at least a few months before Snape died.

"You must employ your talent and your intelligence." Professor Snape leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the cover of the book. "Thank heaven, you have those things to employ. There are few Potions masters; you could pursue that route. You might also use your father's political connections to bring your abilities to the appropriate person's attention. Or you could simply look at what surrounds you and make your way by your own effort."

Draco had to smile, then, wondering if the professor would be disgusted to know that Draco had chosen the Aurors, or simply pleased that he had chosen one of the most powerful careers in the Ministry.

"You will make something of yourself," Professor Snape said. "However, no one can go entirely without help. To you, I bequeath two things and recommend one.

"The recommendation is a good memory. Never let this fail you. Books succeed at preserving much, Pensieves and letters are useful, but they are outside your head and not inside, where they might be kept from others."

Draco nodded. He could see why Snape would say something like that when he had left a whole potions recipe for Draco to memorize.

"However, books do have their place." Snape absently smoothed the page of the one he was reading. "I bequeath my private library to you, all the books in my personal quarters at Hogwarts. No one should have disturbed them, since the rooms will have locked themselves upon my death. You must repeat the three most common names of wolfsbane in alphabetical order to unlock them."

Aconite, monkshood, wolfsbane, Draco thought. *That's no problem.*

Something else distracted him, though. Why had Professor Snape been so certain he was going to die? The way the Dark Lord had killed him was not something anyone could have foreseen. Perhaps he was simply pessimistic in general and had seen no reason not to make this memory. He could always destroy it if it turned out that he had no need for an heir.

"The second thing is the knowledge that you will have divined exists because of this Pensieve." Professor Snape's stare could have drilled holes in steel. "That knowledge must be used well and wisely, but it cannot be left to lie. Someone else will discover it if you hesitate, and they may not wield it to your personal advantage."

Someone else already did, Draco thought, but that presented a new mystery to him. *How* exactly had Nihil, whoever he was, stumbled into the Death Eaters' caches of artifacts and books and experimental notes? Pure luck? Draco would have thought he was a Death Eater, but the

mocking use of their cloaks and masks for his attack force stuffed with grief magic argued otherwise.

Still, who else would have known about those caches besides the Death Eaters? Who else would have been there?

"Take this memory with you," Professor Snape said, a faint sneer lifting the corner of his mouth. "A memory within a memory, as a moron like Potter would say. *Tabula arcana.*"

A starburst of light went off in front of Draco's eyes, and he stumbled backwards, his arms flailing. He felt someone catch him, and knew it must be Harry, but he was so disoriented that he couldn't be sure what was happening. The memory twisted around them, he thought they were leaving the Pensieve, and then—

The darkness behind his eyelids, burning with afterimages from Snape's spell, turned the color of parchment. And Draco saw a vast map stretching there, showing England as well as Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and some of the islands scattered in the sea along the coasts, marked with burning spots where the caches lay hidden.

Draco gasped and shivered. He had not known such a spell was possible, or that it could be cast in a memory and affect the observer of that memory. He wondered what had happened to Snape when it was cast. Probably nothing. If he had the knowledge of the map already, he would have no reason to acquire it a second time.

"—aco! Draco! Are you all right?"

Draco blinked, and the map vanished, though he felt it lingering in his mind, ready to be called back at any time. He stood in their rooms again, and Harry had his hands clasped on Draco's shoulders, massaging them. Draco turned around and felt a brief pang of sympathy. Harry looked the way he had, he was certain, when Harry had gone chasing monsters into the Forbidden Forest.

"I'm well," he said at last. "And with some quite interesting knowledge to take to the Fellowship. A map of the places the Death Eaters hid their experiments."

Harry nodded and cast the Pensieve a dark glance. "Snape to the last," he muttered. "Leaving knowledge to you because he thought you might make use of it rather than because it could do good."

Draco snorted and stretched his cramped fingers; his palms hurt where he'd dug his nails in. "What else would you expect him to do with it, Potter, truly?"

"Harry."

Draco squeezed Harry's shoulder in apology, because he sounded hurt. "Harry, what else would

you expect? He was a Slytherin, and a faithful Death Eater at one time, no matter what else he might have been."

"I know, I just—" Harry shrugged and looked away.

Draco thought it best to change the subject. "Look at it this way," he said, and waited until Harry turned to face him again. "Now we know where Nihil got some of his material, and we'll have knowledge that he didn't expect—and maybe more knowledge from the caches he hasn't found yet."

This time, Harry's smile was a hunter's grin that matched his own.

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Chapter: 37

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Seven—Decisions Made

"Of course we aren't going to tell them everything."

Draco spoke the words as if they were a settled argument. Harry frowned as he glanced down at the map of Death Eater caches throughout the British Isles that Draco had sketched, and didn't answer.

"Why should we do that?" Draco's eyes were brilliant as he paced around the central room, avoiding the furniture with the ease of someone who had lived here for months; Harry still occasionally bumped into it himself. The instructors had originally said they would move the pair of them into other rooms, but that hadn't happened. Harry wondered if they had forgotten or decided it would be better to leave Harry and Draco alone, because bodyguards were already enough of a mark of favor.

"Why *should* we?" Draco repeated, turning around abruptly. At least that caused him to almost run into Politesse, who had been trotting at his heels. The little dog appeared offended that he'd been left out of most of their adventures lately. He scrambled up Draco's leg now while Draco was still blinking over almost stepping on him. Draco blinked again and then focused on Harry. "What if there's a traitor in the group despite everything we've done to prevent it? What if they make sure that Nihil learns this information? He would go and raid the caches he hasn't already raided, and probably booby-trap the ones he has."

Harry nodded absently, turning Ginny's latest letter over in front of him. He hadn't opened it. At

least it didn't appear to be a Howler of any type.

"You look as if you doubt me," Draco said, suspiciously enough that Harry had to glance at him and smile.

"Well, yes," Harry admitted. "You said that we were going to start trusting more people when we reached out to Arrowshot and Kepler and Margate. We can't act alone. But isn't making decisions about releasing the information to only certain people before we even see what reaction it causes—I don't know, premature?" That had been a long sentence, and he stopped to catch his breath.

Draco shook his head. "I don't trust these precautions to keep Nihil out, as intelligent as he is. I think that he'll find a way around them soon, if he hasn't done so already."

Harry frowned at him. "Then how can we risk *any* of the information? We don't know which caches are which. The memories only gave us a few hints about the things that Nihil might have done or built on. I don't see that it really makes a difference what or who we tell, as long as we have no more clue than this ourselves."

Draco half-lidded his eyes. His right hand stroked Politesse's back. Harry studied him warily. He didn't think Draco was actually considering his words and coming up with a counter to them. Draco had this particular expression when he'd already made up his mind and had decided to persuade Harry around to his way of thinking.

"Perhaps," Draco said, voice so low that Harry at first heard the words more as a puff of breath, "this is the time for us to talk about trusting the other people you've always been so keen to have me trust." He smiled at Harry, and the smile took half of Harry's objections away.

Only half, though. "Ron and Hermione?" he asked.

Draco nodded.

Harry scowled. "You're only saying this so that we can do *something* with the information, aren't you?"

Draco gave him a perfect smile, a brighter version of the one he'd just offered, and then stood there, waiting.

Harry sighed heavily. He didn't think he stood a chance of convincing Draco otherwise, not when Draco had already made up his mind. And he *would* feel more comfortable having Hermione's advice, and doing something to reconcile Ron to the situation. Ron had started looking upset again about Harry and Draco spending so much time by themselves.

"All right, then," he said.

This time, when Draco strode across the room and kissed him, Politesse did nothing more than wag his tail and lick Harry's cheek with a sharp tongue.

"If I do this for you, then I want something in return."

Draco nodded. When he had gone to retrieve some Veritaserum from Kepler, who had access to it as Ketchum's trainee, he had anticipated a price. "Name it."

Kepler leaned forwards. Her face remained without passion, even the suppressed greed that Draco was used to seeing in pure-bloods who demanded something from him. "I want you to bring Potter to meet my sister," she said.

Draco blinked. He wouldn't have thought this quiet, cold woman was someone to care about celebrity. "All right," he said slowly. "Why? Do you want her to meet him, or does she want it on her own?"

"She's dying," Kepler said. "A Dark curse during the war withered her legs." Even those words, she spoke calmly. Perhaps she'd had to say them many times already, Draco thought, just as he'd got used to repeating the fact that his father was in prison to those who asked. "The Healers are baffled." Kepler shrugged slightly. "But she got it in her head during the war that it was really being fought because of Potter, and so the injuries she suffered, as well as other indignities, would be easier to bear if she could have the chance to speak with him."

Draco nodded. He would insist on her repeating the words under Veritaserum before he subjected Harry to this, but the story sounded plausible on the surface. He knew people he could contact to make sure that Kepler's sister—who presumably shared the same last name she had—had really suffered such a curse during the war. "When do you wish the meeting to take place?"

"I can't bring Joanna to the Ministry any time soon," Kepler said. "In a fortnight."

"We need the Veritaserum before then," Draco snapped, and then cursed himself for betraying their need as Kepler inspected him with an unhurried, lizard-like gaze.

"Do you? Well, delay what you need it for." Kepler turned her back and strode away up the corridor that led to the second-year barracks.

Draco leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. Perhaps this would be a good thing. It would give him and Harry a chance to concentrate on their classwork and several upcoming exams. It would let him evaluate Weasley and Granger and decide how closely he could work with them. It would mean a little more time to speak to Margate and Kepler, as well as investigate a new angle that he'd thought of on researching the cause of Harry's fits, and to come up with schemes to slip away from their bodyguards. (Having been left behind several times, Timmons and Redworth were becoming uncomfortably persistent).

Matters could not continue at as high a pitch as they had been. Draco knew that.

But it still troubled him.

And, for the first time, he began to wonder if it had been right to promise something for Harry without his consent.

"You have discovered nothing new, Mr. Potter, I assume?"

Harry was afraid that he wouldn't be able to hide his scowl. Dearborn always made him the most uncomfortable of the instructors, and he didn't know why. Outwardly, he was no more like Snape than Portillo Lopez was, but there were things about him that reminded Harry of Snape. The way he would stand with his eyes apparently fixed on someone else and then speak to you, perhaps, or the way he walked, his robes swishing around him.

"No, sir," Harry said, picking up his books from his desk and keeping his gaze stubbornly fixed on them. Draco had left already. He had told Harry that he intended to speak with Hermione and Ron and try to get them to agree to a private meeting where they would share some of the information from the map. Harry wished he was here. He was Dearborn's favorite, and he was also better at lying. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you never go long without stumbling onto something new." Dearborn's voice was the gentlest that Harry had ever heard it, the most amused, but that didn't matter. "And it has been almost a week since our last meeting. It is improbable that that much time could pass without a new secret."

Harry shivered and scratched behind one ear. There was a prickling itch there. He wondered for a moment if Draco was in trouble—Draco had told him about the pain he'd experienced when Harry was facing the beasts in the Forbidden Forest—but the itch went away and didn't return.

"We haven't found anything new, sir," he said, and tried to sound dull and uninteresting both at once. *Go away and spend time with Draco,* he thought irritably at Dearborn. *I don't want anything to do with you. You've made it clear that you don't think much of my intelligence.* The insults had gradually become more common and more pointed in the last few weeks, though, really, Draco was only doing marginally better in the group fighting sessions.

"Now, why don't I believe you?" Dearborn said, softly but with steel beneath the tones. "Look me in the eye and say that."

"Auror Jones will be upset if I'm late for Conduct, sir," Harry said, and picked up the last of his books, turning towards the classroom door.

"*Impedimenta.*"

Harry tripped and went down. He held his breath in; he wouldn't show Dearborn that he'd banged his left arm on the ground and it *hurt* for the world. Now he knew why the man had reminded

him of Snape. He was a bully.

He began to pick up his books again, while Dearborn stepped close to him. From the low, cold tone of his voice, he was no longer amused or in anything like a gentle mood. "Holding such information to yourself when it may concern the safety of numerous others is a mistake, Trainee Potter. You must see that. If you are reluctant to trust me because you are reluctant to trust anyone, remind yourself of what I wear." He thrust his arm under Harry's nose. Harry could make out the faint shimmer of the glamour that concealed the jade bracelet. "I took the Veritaserum. The bracelet would warn you if I was infected by Nihil."

Harry hesitated, in an agony, and not just because of his arm. He'd made stupid decisions in the past, like running off to the Forbidden Forest alone. Maybe Dearborn was right and they should tell someone about this. And Dearborn was Draco's favorite teacher. Draco was a better judge of character than Harry. If he thought it was all right to trust him, then surely it *had* to be all right, didn't it?

"Harry."

Draco's voice spoke from the door. Harry lifted his head and gave him a small smile. "Hullo."

"What are you still doing here? You know that we have Conduct in a few minutes, and we do have to be there, though of course the material isn't as fascinating as what we learn in Auror Dearborn's class."

Draco's words sounded exasperated and chiding on the surface. When Harry stood, however, he could see the way Draco's head was angled and the sharpness of his gaze—as well as the way his hand swayed lazily back and forth above the fold in the left side of his robes where his wand was concealed. He looked at Dearborn much more than he did at Harry.

Warmed and supported by the way that Draco stood there, Harry nodded and forced himself to his feet. "I had a bit of an accident," he said. "Auror Dearborn was helping me up."

"I see."

Harry shuddered lightly. Those words didn't sound important, unless you knew Draco the way he did. They blew up his spine like a cold wind.

Draco was *angry.*

From the way Dearborn suddenly stilled next to Harry—he'd been reaching out a hand as though he meant to help him rise to his feet—he knew it, too. He retracted his hand a moment later and moved away, clearing his throat.

"I trust that I do not need to remind you, Auror Malfoy, of what could happen if the information that you are undoubtedly discovering through your private investigations fell into the wrong

hands," Dearborn said, when Harry had risen and picked his way over to stand by Draco in the doorway.

"No, sir." Draco still sounded angry. He moved so that he partially shielded Harry from Dearborn. "And if we discover anything important, then we will be sure to guard it particularly well from enemies."

Harry hoped Draco was looking into Dearborn's eyes when he said that. At least that ought to satisfy the bastard's desire for "truth." Draco was the kind of liar who could meet someone's gaze and still deceive them.

"Very good," Dearborn said in a distant voice. "If you would move out of the way now, so that my next class can enter."

Harry walked beside Draco towards Auror Conduct. It was hard, because Draco's rage made his footsteps quick. He waited only until they were in a side corridor by themselves before he caught Harry's arm and leaned towards him.

"Did he hurt you?" he whispered, his hand caressing Harry's arm.

Harry looked up into his eyes and smiled despite himself. Draco looked as protective as Harry could have wished Ron or Hermione to look. He covered the stroking hand with his own and shook his head. "No. He was demanding answers, and then he tripped me when I tried to leave." He moved his arm back, only to realize when it hit stone that they'd been standing closer to the wall than he thought. He hissed in pain as the bruise on his left arm was pummeled again.

Draco's hands were on his arm in an instant, drawing back the sleeve. Harry looked down and blinked. The bruise was more impressive than he'd thought it would be, extending in brilliant shades down from his elbow almost to his wrist.

"Liar," Draco breathed, crowding close. He was standing taller than normal, straining his shoulders and his neck as if he thought he had to make himself bigger and thus protect Harry from an enemy on the other side of him. "How did you get *this*, if he didn't hurt you?"

"I fell and hit my arm on the floor," Harry said, rolling his eyes and trying to pull free. Draco held on. Harry relaxed with a sigh. He reckoned he couldn't blame Draco for being overprotective, when Harry had done things that risked his safety before. "So you could say that Dearborn's tripping jinx caused it, but no more than that. He was probably frustrated with me."

"I've never heard you defend him before." Draco's voice had eased a bit, as had his grip on Harry's arm, but he didn't seem inclined to move back. Harry tugged on his arm and raised an eyebrow. That tightened Draco's grip again. "Why are you doing it now?"

"Because he's your favorite teacher," Harry said, "your mentor. And he *didn't do anything to me,* Draco. A tripping jinx, but that's nothing worse than some of the things Snape used to do. Will

you let me go now?" He could feel his ears burning. Yes, in one way it was very pleasant to have this much of Draco's attention, but on the other hand, they were in a corridor where anyone could come by any instant. Anyway, Draco was worried over nothing.

Draco's fingers curled beneath his chin and tipped his head up. Harry started. Somehow, he'd looked away from Draco's face in the last few minutes and hadn't even realized it. He was more than willing to look up again, and he tried for a mixture of defiance and exasperation.

The expression Draco looked at him with melted the exasperation away. He was staring into Harry's eyes as though he had discovered something new there, some new color or vision. Harry cleared his throat pointedly, and still Draco didn't move. Harry didn't think he'd blinked, either.

"I'm tired of thinking about Nihil," Draco whispered, "and about your friends—who weren't very positive about my trying to approach them without you, anyway—and about the instructors. We have another week before we can prove Granger and Weasley to be trustworthy. I want to spend them doing something else."

Harry opened his mouth to ask what that was, and Draco lowered his head and showed him.

The kiss was more intense than any of the others, so intense that Harry felt as though it had frozen rather than melted him at first. Draco's tongue moved fast, sweeping into his mouth, and his hands locked behind Harry's neck. Small sounds worked their way out of his throat, but Harry couldn't tell what they meant.

He worked past his stunned astonishment in a minute and actually forced Draco to step back a bit with the pressure of his return kiss. He curled his fingers into Draco's hair, tugging at it, and kicked his legs further open so that Draco was standing splayed and uncomfortable and Harry could move closer still. Then he moved Draco back, step by awkward step, until he was against the far wall of the corridor.

There he could get purchase and leverage to really take control of the kiss. Draco fought, making Harry cough sometimes with how fiercely he pushed his tongue, but for the most part he was the one who moaned when Harry's fingers dug into his shoulders, and the one who shifted his knees apart with a shudder when Harry's thigh insisted on parting them, and the one who gasped breathlessly when Harry pressed forwards again and began to rub.

"Do—do you know what you're doing?" he whispered, wrenching his mouth free somehow.

"No," Harry gasped, watching the way Draco's eyes widened and rolled and his fingers slid like rain down Harry's shoulders and to his arms, "but I like the way it makes you look."

Draco shook and tilted his head back, teeth clenched on his tongue as if to keep noises from coming out. Harry didn't like that, so he began the kiss again, and Draco's teeth and tongue moved to respond. Harry chuckled, and Draco heard him and started the fight again, wrapping a leg around Harry's waist and pulling him closer so that their rubbing contest was more even.

"*Trainees.*"

Harry leaped away from Draco with a squawk; he felt as though a bucket of cold water had been dumped on them. He turned around, panting, to see Auror Portillo Lopez behind them with a raised eyebrow. Her face was pale instead of red the way he would have expected to see.

She examined Draco, and then him, as if trying to determine who was more responsible for this catastrophe. Then she said, "I will require your attendance tonight as I make Blood-Replenishing Potion, trainees. Eight-o'clock, in my office. Do not be late." When she turned to stalk away, Harry thought he'd seen faces that were less eloquent than her back.

Draco hissed under his breath and fumbled his hair back into some sort of order. Harry cleared his throat and glanced at him. He tried his best to keep his eyes away from Draco's groin, he really did, but the outline of Draco's erection sent a thick pulse of satisfaction through him.

"Sorry," he managed to say.

Draco tilted his head. "Maybe it's for the best," he said. "We *are* expected in Auror Conduct."

Harry lifted his head high. "Does that mean that you regret doing it, then?"

Draco was suddenly close to him, touching his throat with gentle fingers, his face with heated eyes.

"Not for a moment."

Harry was so flushed when they sat down in Hestia's class that Hermione asked him with some concern if he was sick.

"I know you don't like Draco that much," Harry said, "but *I do*, and I think that should count for something."

Draco looked at Harry with quiet pride. They were meeting in Weasley's rooms, which were the most private now that Harry had moved out and joined him. Weasley had insisted on that, and had sat with his arms folded since the meeting began, while Granger sat in a chair at the table and took notes.

The meeting had started badly, with Weasley giving Draco all sorts of insults that only a Weasley would think clever and Granger alternating between trying to calm him down and looking at Draco with suspicious eyes. Then Harry had leaned forwards and insisted on making them listen to him.

He would make a finer leader than he knows, Draco thought, his eyes running over Harry's face, *if he would only stop doubting and distrusting himself so much.*

The thought of what else was fine about Harry made him flush, and he hastily turned his thoughts back to the conversation.

"But Harry," Weasley said, while his face turned an unattractive red color, "how do we know that he's really changed? How do we know that he won't call Hermione a Mudblood tomorrow just because he wants to?"

"Shall we ask him?" Harry asked with bright brittleness that should have warned his friends, and turned towards Draco. "Do you feel that way about them?"

"I think I can manage to refrain from insulting your friends," was all Draco had time to say, before Weasley plunged in again.

"How can we *trust* him when he says that?"

Harry whipped back towards Weasley, jaw clenched and one fist hitting the table with a shock that caused even Granger to jump. "The same way I trusted you when you said that you would stop interfering between me and Ginny," he said in a low, dangerous tone. "I didn't ask to read your mind. I'm not even asking you questions under Veritaserum—*yet*. I want you to accept his word."

"For his sake?" Granger spoke for the first time, shooting Draco a dark glance.

"No," Harry said. "For mine."

That has them, Draco thought, sitting back with a small smile. *That plays on their Gryffindor guilt complexes.* For Granger and Weasley were exchanging glances, and although Granger still looked distrustful when they turned back, and Weasley anxious, they both mustered weak smiles for him.

"If you insult me," Granger said to Draco, barely moving her lips, "the bargain's off."

"I understand," Draco murmured back. "Simply know that it applies both ways."

He turned to Harry, who was taking out a parchment with the information written on it that they had decided was safe for Weasley and Granger to know until they could retrieve the Veritaserum. Harry's face was flushed and happy, and he'd already started talking willingly about his fits to Weasley—something he would have withheld only a short time ago.

He can do anything he wants if he sets his mind to it, Draco thought, with a complacency he would never have imagined possible when contemplating Harry Potter's power.

That was before I stood at his side.

"Come in."

Harry took a deep breath as he led the way into Portillo Lopez's office. He wasn't looking forwards to making Blood-Replenishing Potion, though he *had* to think that Portillo Lopez would have Draco do most of the brewing. Harry's bad brewing skills were already legendary throughout the Ministry.

Portillo Lopez turned around from a table already covered with ingredients when she saw them. She nodded at them both and cast two spells. One Harry knew locked the door, but the other broke over them like a shower of fine mist and left him spluttering.

"Your pardon," said Portillo Lopez, "but I had to be sure that you were who you appeared to be." She stepped forwards. Her eyes looked intense and brilliant under her head-scarf, itself green and gold. "There is no one else I would trust with this information save the two who brought it to my attention.

"The infection in the magic of several trainees that I had discovered has vanished." She tapped her fingers together sharply. "As if Nihil's corruption of them has ceased. And other small signs I had noted of his presence in the Ministry are gone as well."

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Chapter: 38

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Eight—The Withdrawing

And that seemed to be the truth.

Portillo Lopez had a list of the trainees who had carried Nihil's infection in their magic, and the notes on the process she had designed to cure them. Draco understood a lot more of that than Harry did. He settled for shrugging and smiling when Portillo Lopez glanced at him for a response, and then Draco stepped forwards and filled the hole in the conversation so smoothly that Harry was convinced she didn't notice.

Almost.

"What about the trainees who vanished with Nihil in the trap that Auror Ketchum set?" Draco flipped his hair behind his shoulder and considered the lists of ingredients and notes again with a frown. Harry nodded. That was a question he could have asked, and he should have asked it before Draco, he thought, since he understood so little otherwise. But at least it was asked, and

for the first time Portillo Lopez frowned.

"I do not know," she said. "No one knows. Efforts have been made to locate them, but without success. Some of them are well-known, at least to their families, and they are young; they should not be able to hide in such secrecy. But it seems that no one has found or seen them."

Draco glanced at Harry, with an expression that said they would be looking into this on their own later. Harry nodded.

"Catherine Arrowshot?" Draco asked. "We trusted her, and then she vanished with the rest of them, so we're especially interested in her fate."

Portillo Lopez gave a small, grim smile. "Yes," she said. "The mysterious Miss Arrowshot, in whose rooms incriminating documents were found."

"What?" Harry breathed. He had thought it was strange that Arrowshot would put herself forwards to both of them if she was really supporting Nihil, because it would be much more sensible to stay quiet and unnoticed, part of his army instead of their special friend. He'd hoped she was just kidnapped. But it sounded more and more like they'd been fools to trust her.

"More lists of names, of the kind that we found in Gregory's possession," said Portillo Lopez quietly. She turned the jade bracelet on her wrist and looked at both of them as if she wanted to make sure that they still bore the glamours that would hide their own bracelets. "Some unknown to us, but pointing to the larger wizarding world outside the Ministry. And what looked like a confession from a friend of hers."

"She told us about that friend," said Harry, stunned to realize that he was the only one who remembered that. Draco simply blinked and looked blank. "Manders. She said that she'd been one of Gregory's trainees and she was working to clear her from suspicion."

"Of course she would say such a thing," Portillo Lopez murmured, voice rich with scorn, "if she was seeking to divert suspicion from herself."

"Was Manders suspected?" Harry asked.

"Yes, as all of Gregory's trainees were," Portillo Lopez said impatiently. "There was no sign that she was treated especially badly, and now that she has left the program, it is harder for us to be sure of her motivations. She should have stayed and borne the brunt of the attacks aimed at her if she was innocent. Others have suffered worse."

Harry grimaced. That reminded him of what some of his primary school teachers had said about Dudley and his bullying. Somehow, it always came down to Harry's strength instead of Dudley's stupidity and cowardice.

"Well," Harry said, "why should we trust what we found in Arrowshot's rooms? She acted like

she was straightforward with us, and it would have been stupid to fix our attention on her when she could have stayed in the background. It was stupid to reveal where the meeting with Nihil's trainees was, too. Maybe someone planted the documents to implicate her."

"The answer to that one is obvious." Portillo Lopez was looking at Harry with the expression he was used to seeing on her face in class. "She brought you to the meeting thinking you would be killed or recruited."

"But if she was Nihil's trusted servant," Draco said, "then she would have known that we'd been infected already and fought it off. Can someone get the infection twice?"

"I have not yet discovered evidence of that one way or the other." Portillo Lopez looked ready to crack in half from indignation.

Harry rolled his eyes as she went on. "And you forget that, although she was one of Nihil's servants, that means little. He seems to trust no one close to him. He used the false Death Eaters as nothing more than receptacles for grief magic. There is no reason that he should have told her about two of his more embarrassing failures."

"One thing bothers me," Harry said, pushing ahead in spite of the disapproving way Portillo Lopez looked at him.

"Only one?" Draco muttered.

Harry pressed a hand into the small of his back out of Portillo Lopez's sight, hoping that would shut him up. "Why do we trust the evidence that Nihil leaves behind at all? He's a *liar*. How do we know that all the people who supposedly were corrupted were? Why have only twenty trainees at that meeting instead of his whole army? Was there anyone at the meeting who didn't have their names on the lists? I just wonder if all these clues are too convenient, and we're being led along a blind path."

"What else do you suggest we trust?" Portillo Lopez lifted a hand when Harry tried to protest. "No, Trainee Potter. Your suspicions are well-founded, but we have *nothing*—" she laughed bitterly, probably at the pun "—if we do not trust at least some of these. We must proceed cautiously. We must also ask what the point is of leaving so much evidence if none of it is true. It is easier to think that he is careless sometimes than that he is omniscient enough to anticipate all our reactions. If that is so, then we have already lost."

"I don't think he's omniscient," Harry said. He hoped he'd said that right. No one was quite as skilled as Portillo Lopez was at giving him glances that made him feel stupid, not even Dearborn. "I just think that he wants to sow distrust between us. If we go around suspecting *everyone* and not attempting to recruit or persuade or convert anyone whose name is on one of those lists, then we're leaving people vulnerable and making people bitter and making them run away like you said Manders ran away from the program. It's the same thing that happened with some of the Death Eaters. People decided they were evil before they did a thing, sometimes just because they

were in Slytherin, and that made them decide they might as well do things like use Dark Arts and torture people."

He spoke without thought, remembering the images that Snape had shown him of his memories. He still thought his mother had been right to reject Snape—he didn't seem to see anything wrong with *killing* people like her—but his father and Sirius were a different matter.

"Well said, Harry," Draco murmured, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Yes. I wonder if, after all, Nihil is as powerful as he would like us to think."

"That is a matter for the instructors to consider," Portillo Lopez tried to interrupt.

Draco held up his wrist, though Harry had to choke back a smile. He didn't think the shimmer of the glamour around his arm was as impressive as the sight of a jade bracelet would have been. Sometimes, Draco seemed to forget that the bracelet wasn't visible.

But Draco's voice was implacable, and made up for any disappointment in the glamour.

"Harry and I are part of this Fellowship, too," he said. "I think you should consider *us* when you make decisions."

Portillo Lopez puffed herself up until Harry thought she would snap at them, and he rather dreaded what effect that would have on Draco. He didn't really want front seats on another row when he'd ended the one he was having with Ron not that long ago.

Instead, though, she examined them for a few moments and then nodded. "I am not used to thinking of students as equals," she said. "But I must admit that it would be for the best in this case. What Nihil sees to want in you, I still do not know. After all, the first attack happened before anyone knew about your compatible magic." She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Yet the fact remains that you are involved and likely to stay so. Remind me if I forget again to treat you as fully equal partners."

She turned away, and Harry closed his mouth on his gape. Draco seemed to do the same on a crow of triumph, and they smiled at each other while Portillo Lopez's back was turned.

Perhaps she isn't so bad after all, Harry thought hopefully.

Of course, then she made them brew Blood-Replenishing Potion for two hours, which went a long way towards changing his mind.

"Why did you hurt Harry?"

It wasn't the question that Draco had intended to let burst out of him. He had thought he would go into his next meeting with Dearborn calm and collected, letting his resentment burn inside him and act as an invisible influence on his actions only, another caution against trusting his

"mentor" completely.

But the moment he stepped into the private room they used for his training and saw Dearborn turn to meet him with that faint smile, as if nothing had changed, the anger flooded through him and demanded an answer.

"Hurt him?" Dearborn shook his head as he raised a smoky grey shield of a type that Draco didn't know. "A tripping jinx is hardly that. I did not know that he would fall so badly and bruise his arm. We shall have to train him how to fall," he added with a small frown. "It may not wait until next year."

"You threatened him," Draco said. He had begun as he had to go on, so he kept his voice low and threatening and didn't move from his place by the door even when Dearborn gestured at him in welcome. Nor did he return the smile. "I want to know why."

Dearborn sighed and leaned against the wall. More flicks of his wand raised glittering icicles that Draco studied with reluctant interest. The icicles began to spin around each other, blending together into spiky, icy figures.

"I am worried," Dearborn said quietly, "by Nihil. We all are, of course, but my worry is rather more personal than corruption in the Ministry, or even what the loss of our trainees must do to the reputation of the Auror program in the eyes of the public. Nihil is practicing magic so Dark, and succeeding so well, that he could throw the Wizengamot into panic. They might declare even more magic Dark than already is. It's happened in the past." He glanced over at Draco with haunted eyes, and Draco remembered how careful he'd been during their first term to give them the history of why certain spells were declared illegal, and how often that depended on simple whim or misguided fear.

"I have spent my life," Dearborn continued, his voice passionate, rising, "trying to make sure that the Dark Arts were not always considered forbidden, that someone could practice them and still be considered a good person. But all my work will be lost if Nihil succeeds."

Draco gave a slow nod. Yes, he could understand that. He knew Dearborn's passion partially came from the class he taught. He'd complained before that he wanted to teach certain spells as offensive and defensive magic, which they were, but the Ministry had stupid laws preventing him from doing so.

"That doesn't give you the right to take out your temper on Harry," he pointed out.

Dearborn snapped his head around. "If he knows something that I would need to defeat Nihil and doesn't tell it to me," he snapped, "then it does."

Draco fell quiet and said no more about it, attending closely to Dearborn's lessons about conjuring ice warriors and time-swallowing shields, but he decided that he would remember this. Why did Dearborn think that the responsibility of defeating Nihil fell on his shoulders alone?

Another question to join the endless procession of questions that it seemed he and Harry were always asking.

"I don't like Malfoy."

Harry sighed and picked at his sandwich. The crusts were dry *and* the bread was soggy, both at once. The only thing that the sandwich was good for was making him smile as he thought about how horrified the house-elves at Hogwarts would be if they saw it. "I know you don't, Ron. That doesn't matter, as long as you can work with him."

"You're always disappearing on your own." Ron leaned across the table. "They took you out of my rooms, for fuck's sake. How are we supposed to work with him if we never *see* you?"

Harry looked up, and saw from the way Ron's brows pulled together and his eyes flashed that this confrontation had been a long time in coming. This was the serious one, the big one, and not a whinging session.

He pushed his sandwich back and stood up. "Do you want to go to your rooms?" he asked. "I have nothing to do right now, and I think we should talk about this in private."

Ron darted his eyes around and seemed to realize just how many curious people were staring at them. He flushed and nodded. "Yeah, all right," he muttered, as he picked up his tray to take back over to the other side of the dining hall.

They walked back to Ron's room in silence—at least from them. The people around them muttered and whispered and collected in small groups and broke apart from each other to hurry down the corridors when they saw Harry and Ron approaching. Harry saw more staring eyes than he actually had when Nihil was attacking.

Harry snorted. Of course that would happen. Portillo Lopez seemed to be right—Nihil's influence had pulled back from the Ministry, and there hadn't been any attacks now for nearly a fortnight. So people had decided that meant he was hatching a new and more sinister plan, and some of them in particular had decided that Harry and Draco had something to do with that sinister plan, since they had been the targets of the first few.

Harry's hand tightened on his wand. He couldn't do anything about the stupid things people thought. That had been a truth he struggled to accept in the last year since the end of Voldemort. As long as people kept those stupid things to thoughts in their heads and the occasional malicious whisper, then he wouldn't try to interfere.

If someone tried to hex him or Draco, he wasn't going to stand for it.

This is what Draco's done for me, he thought, as he held the door of the room open for Ron. *I would have felt guilty about thinking that, before. I would have made up all sorts of reasons and*

excuses in my head why someone might just be frightened and cast a hex before they thought about it.

Now I think that I have a right to be respected, as much as anyone else, and I don't have to save people from themselves, because I think Draco has a right to be respected, and I don't want him hurt by watching me get hurt.

Harry smiled as he flopped back in a chair and waited for Ron to sit down, too. That was—wonderful. He knew some people thought caring about other people made you weak, because you could be hurt. It was like having a heart outside your body.

But having a heart outside your body made you twice as strong, too. Harry wondered why the people who said it made you weak never saw that.

"I don't like him," Ron said when he'd sat down, jerking Harry rudely back from his thoughts about Draco to thoughts that were not about Draco. "I don't trust him, and I don't think that you should, either."

Harry blinked, and then shrugged. "I told you," he said. "If you don't like or trust him, then that doesn't matter, as long as—"

"But I can't work with him unless I like or trust him!" Ron's voice was getting louder, and Harry was doubly glad that they'd left the dining hall. "And Hermione thinks the same way. And that doesn't answer the question of why you like or trust him."

"Why do you like me?" Harry asked. "Why do you love Hermione?"

"Well—because I do," Ron said, sounding baffled. "We've fought together and we joke together and you're my best mate. And Hermione…" His face was red with something other than anger now, and he stared at his lap while he muttered something that Harry didn't think he'd been meant to hear.

"It's hard for you to explain," Harry said. "Well, it's hard for me to explain about Draco. We have compatible magic and we get along a lot and we've told each other secrets and we've faced danger together. It's not the same kind of friendship you and I have—" he choked a little as he thought about the kiss in the corridor, and the way they'd danced around each other since then "—but it has a few of the same things about it."

"We neglected you," Ron said earnestly. "We should have thought more about you, and we drove you to Malfoy."

We, Harry thought in envy. *He thinks of himself and Hermione as we so easily.* He didn't know if he could ever do that, because there was nothing easy about his relationship with Draco.

Sometimes he thought there would be. And then he remembered that he'd thought his

relationship with Ginny was easy at one point, too.

Harry shook his head. There was no way that he could decide what he felt about Draco as far as sex went on his own, and he was *not* about to confess that to Ron.

"Maybe that had something to do with it," he said, because he thought that he wouldn't have needed Draco's friendship as much if Ron was acting less like a prick. "But there's still the compatible magic. And I think the instructors would have made us partners no matter what. They think we're too good at fighting together."

"You haven't been so good at it lately in Defensive and Offensive."

Ron looked so hopeful that Harry had to smile. "Yes, but no one has been," he said. "If anything, Draco and I are just so good together that we think about protecting each other first and everyone else second. So I don't think the instructors are going to decide that we shouldn't be partners anymore."

Ron sighed. "I don't like trusting him just because you do," he said. "I've never asked you to do anything like that."

Harry shook his head. "No, you haven't." Of course, he wanted to say, the situation had never come up because of how close they'd been all through school, and because Harry hadn't really got close to or stayed with Cho the way he had with Draco, and because Ron and Hermione had approved of Ginny so much. And Ron hadn't tried to make someone else part of their tight little friendship, either.

But since he had started dating Hermione, there was no one close left for Harry to bring into things unless he wanted to try dating another Weasley.

The thought made him shudder.

"So why should you ask me to do something like that now?" Ron asked, leaning forwards with his chin on one fist and staring at Harry.

"Because we're not in school anymore," Harry said. "And Draco is important to me."

Ron gave a little shudder of his own. "You say his name like you're in love with him."

Harry bit his lip, hard, so that his mouth wouldn't fall open. It sounded as though Ron knew more about his feelings than he did himself.

No, he doesn't, he decided a minute later. *I might speak Draco's name that way, but I don't know what I feel, and I don't know what I can give him. My voice might lie.*

"Maybe I could be," Harry did say, because he was curious what Ron's response would be.

Ron reared back, coiling in the corner of his chair as though he wanted it to rise up and carry him away from some imminent danger. "Don't do that again," he whispered, sounding as if he were pleading. "Harry, don't give me a *jolt* like that. I swear I felt my heart stop."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're the one who gave yourself the idea in the first place," he said. "I'm not asking you to approve of everything I feel for him, Ron. Just to tolerate him a little and learn to put up with him."

Ron sighed, which made Harry tense, but the sigh continued so long that he realized it wasn't angry. Instead, this was Ron's resigned sigh, the one he used to give before they walked into Potions and he realized there was no way to put off the class for five minutes more. "He's here to stay, isn't he?" Ron asked.

"At least for a long time," Harry said calmly.

Ron sighed again, and nodded. Harry knew that he would at least try to put up with Draco, for his sake.

He reached out, covered his friend's hand with his own, and smiled.

Someone knocked on their door just when Harry was yawning and letting his head slump into his arms. Draco glanced up curiously. He could hear Timmons and Redworth arguing quietly with whoever it was, probably because it was after nine at night and the trainees were "officially" supposed to go to bed not much later.

Finally, the door opened and Timmons thrust her head in. Draco might have thought her a beautiful woman before he found Harry, but right now she simply looked harassed.

"There's two women here, one in some kind of floating chair," she said. "They said you told them to come. What's this about?" She looked as if she couldn't decide whether she wanted the visitors to be intruding, so she could see them off, or to be telling the truth, so that she could scold Draco.

Draco knew instantly who it must be: Pollian Kepler and her crippled sister Joanna. The one who had wanted to meet with Harry because she thought he was the center of the war and it would all be worth it, somehow, if she could meet him.

The one he hadn't told Harry about.

He stood up immediately and said, "They must come in, of course. They're here to meet Harry." He turned around and stared at Harry, who was looking up with a startled, sleepy expression.

"Who?" he asked.

Draco explained in a low voice as Timmons gave a great, put-upon sigh and pulled her head back

to call to the Kepler sisters. "Kepler said that she would get us some Veritaserum if you met with her sister. But it was going to take her at least a fortnight to bring her here, and I forgot to tell you about it, and—"

"Draco. It's fine."

Draco shut his mouth. Harry pressed his hand and began to rise to his feet, a weary but resigned look in his eyes.

"I've done harder things, and for less important reasons," he told Draco as he walked past him to the door.

No matter what he thinks, Draco decided, in the stunned moment before he followed, *he is a hero.*

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Chapter: 39

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Nine—When Wielding Power

"Harry Potter?"

Harry would have wanted to do something for the owner of that voice even if he hadn't known who it was. It was small and quiet, as though someone had shouted at the owner until she was more inclined to shut up than say anything, even things that she knew she should say.

Harry remembered that feeling from the Dursleys'. He'd never been that afraid, but he had learned to keep his thoughts to himself most of the time.

"Yes," he said, leaning out of the room and ignoring Timmons and Redworth, who wore identical sour looks of disapproval. "What's your name?"

"Joanna Kepler."

She floated in a chair that looked as if it were made of cloth wrapped around wicker, with her legs extended in front of her. Harry could smell both the strong perfume of what he thought was a spell and the rotting stink that crept up from her legs anyway. Joanna's face was pale and tired, but she watched him with a greedy gaze that wasn't. She had dark hair streaked with grey and blue eyes. She held out her hand.

Harry stepped up to her and grasped it firmly. He was aware of Pollian Kepler watching from behind her sister's chair, arms folded, but he didn't see why he should have to pay that much attention to what *she* wanted. She intimidated him in Ketchum's classroom, but they weren't there right now.

"I wanted to see you," Joanna said, and her eyes were bright and her hand was so strong and hot that Harry thought he'd get burns from it. "*You* were the cause and the cost of the war."

Harry winced. He'd had people put it like that to him in the past year, but usually not so directly. However, he would have to get used to this. He'd probably have to appear in front of people more than once if their project of using Harry's name to appeal to pure-blood families worked. He pasted a tight smile on his face and nodded. "Yeah. I think Voldemort would have taken over Britain the first time if I hadn't stopped him, and then we would never have had a second war."

Joanna blinked, as if she hadn't expected him to defend himself that way. Then she laughed. The laugh was as strong as her grip. She leaned towards Harry and whispered, "I thought you'd be like this. Or I hoped it. There were so many stories about how you brooded after the war. I didn't want them to be true. I wanted you to be strong and to know your own rights. It was unfair of me to accuse you of causing the war. I'm sorry."

Harry blinked in turn. Then he found himself smiling without being sure when he'd begun. Joanna was a little like Draco, then, in the way that she would push him to respond with sharp words instead of wallowing in guilt. He found himself liking her for the first time.

"So many people said your name like a talisman," Joanna told him, still holding his hand and looking at him as if she would never stop. "They thought it would protect them. But a lot of them died anyway."

Harry met her eyes. "That was Voldemort's fault, and the Death Eaters' fault," he said firmly. "Not mine."

A delighted spark worked its way into her face this time. "Good," she said. "I'm glad. I wondered whether anyone would survive the war, sometimes, though I told myself not to be stupid; I knew someone would. But it's different being in the midst of war and thinking that, and being—*existing* after the war."

Harry nodded. Joanna shifted back in her chair and gestured to her legs. "There's no answer to this," she said. "There was no reason. I didn't do anything to deserve it."

Harry stared at her. *Did she used to think she did?* "Of course you didn't," he said.

"Just keep that in mind," Joanna said, "The world isn't fair. There is no ultimate justice. The good people don't always win."

"But they win sometimes," Harry said. "I wouldn't be trying to become an Auror if I didn't believe that."

"That still doesn't make the world fair." Joanna pulled her hand away from his and folded her arms, as if daring him to respond.

Her sister was giving him a long, heavy look from behind her head, but Harry didn't intend to let that stop him. She was still wrong. "No one said it did," he muttered. "But I can try to make the world a bit fairer, as long as I'm here."

"How do you know you'll succeed?" Joanna gave a short, sharp, bitter laugh, and slapped one of her legs. Harry winced when he heard the sound that came when she did, like someone slapping a wet rag into a wall. "Can you come up with an answer for crimes like this? Why should I care if the one who did this to me is arrested *now*? What good does it do me? It doesn't bring back my ability to walk again."

Harry frowned at her. He had the feeling she was much more intelligent than he was and he was missing the subtleties of all her arguments, but the only thing he could do was respond to what he understood. "But is that the only kind of good someone could do you?" he asked. "Some people would be happy to know that the person who hurt them was never going to get out of Azkaban. Other people want revenge. And other people want the chance to confront the person who hurt them."

Joanna fell silent again. A strong emotion that Harry couldn't read twisted her mouth. She stared down at her lap for a minute, and then shook her head.

"You're not what I expected," she said.

"Why? Because I'm not a hero? Or the cause of the war?" *I'm probably saying the wrong thing again,* Harry thought, *but this is all I can think of to say.*

"All those things," Joanna said. "Though I think you only give small meanings to the word hero, if you think that it can't mean you." She turned her head and nodded to Pollian Kepler. "I'm tired, and I've seen all that I care to see. I think I can die in peace, now. Remove me, please."

Kepler inclined her head, her eyes blinking quickly. Harry tried to make her look at him by stepping closer, but all she did was turn and start her sister's floating chair-bed down the corridor the right way. Harry thought she would have followed Joanna, but Draco cleared his throat from behind Harry.

"There was a small matter of what you promised if Harry spoke to your sister, Kepler," he said.

Harry started and glanced over his shoulder. He'd forgotten Draco was there in the intricacy of trying to deal with Joanna. Draco stepped up now so that his shoulder bumped into Harry's and gave him a single intense glance, as if to say that he knew he'd been forgotten and resented it.

Kepler turned back slowly. "Yes," she said. "The healing potion."

Harry opened his mouth to protest that it should have been Veritaserum, but Draco stepped on his foot and looked pointedly sideways at their bodyguards. Harry smiled weakly. "Yes," he said. "My joints are still paining me."

Draco stepped on his foot again, probably in a warning about trying to make the lie too elaborate, and extended his hand. "We'd like it now," he said.

Kepler took a glass vial out of her pocket and handed it to them. Harry tensed for a minute, wondering what Timmons and Redworth would say if they saw that the potion was clear, like Veritaserum, and then realized that the glass of the vial was tinted green. He sighed and hoped it would sound like relief instead of—well, relief.

These lies are too complicated for me, he thought, as he tucked the potion into his robe pocket. Draco nodded at Kepler before pulling him into their rooms again. Harry craned his neck so that he could watch Kepler and Joanna leave, but neither of them turned back.

Then the door shut, and Draco stood in front of it with his arms splayed out as if he was going to defend it from enemies. Harry arched his eyebrows. Draco dropped his arms and shook his head, evidently a bit embarrassed now.

"You weren't paying attention to me at all," Draco said, softly but piercingly, as he lifted his eyes back to Harry's. "I don't like it when you don't pay attention to me." Politesse hurried across the floor to meet him, and Draco scooped him up, but all Harry's hopes that he might be distracted were in vain. Draco kept staring at him, and the largeness of his eyes and the depth in his voice seemed to demand an answer.

Draco had just seen Harry playing the hero from much closer than he had when he saw Harry defeating the Dark Lord, and he'd been able to think about it from more of an emotional distance. Yes, Harry had been heroic when he snatched Draco from the fires in the Room of Hidden Things, too, but Draco had been rather occupied with trying to *survive* then, instead of thinking about the nature of heroism.

Harry cocked his head now and raised his eyebrows as if he couldn't understand what was the matter with Draco. His eyes looked ordinary, instead of shining with a deep and intense light they way they had when he listened to Joanna Kepler. His face was curious instead of calm and stern.

Does he even know that he looked so powerful?

Probably not, Draco decided after a moment's consideration. Harry seemed to think he was ordinary most of the time.

But he wasn't, and he had forgotten about Draco entirely in his focus on the woman. Draco could understand such things, but he still needed reassurance. Until this moment, he had thought Harry could never step so completely away from his body and leave Draco behind. He had resisted the entreaties of his best friends. He had talked to other people, but he always seemed to know where Draco was and turn towards him the moment he moved.

This time, Draco had moved away from the door into the corridor, and the bodyguards had reacted, but not Harry. He was seeing, thinking of, focusing on, Joanna.

"I know that," Harry said, and Draco had to struggle to remember that he'd said that he didn't like Harry not paying attention to him. "But it was only for a few minutes. And she needed it."

"Needed what?" Draco snapped. "You didn't give her anything."

Harry gave him a startled look. "You're not stupid," he said, after a moment's consideration.

"Thanks ever so much," Draco said. Politesse picked up his mood and started to stalk down his arm, rattling his scorpion tail at Harry. Draco put a hand on his back to halt the movement.

"I gave her reassurance," Harry said. "She seems to think that she can die in peace now. And that's enough."

He had a peaceful expression as he uttered the words. Draco drew in his breath through his teeth.

He *understood*, now, something that he hadn't before. If Harry hated being a hero so much, why did he go on doing it? Why not turn his back on the world and hide away? It wasn't as though someone had forced him into becoming an Auror. The world was wide and full of opportunities for the Chosen One.

But Draco knew the answer now. Some part of Harry needed the ability to give other people gifts, to protect them from all the dangers that he thought he could face but they couldn't. He wouldn't ever be able to turn his back on the suffering and vanish into his privacy as Draco had thought he could.

And that—that could be a problem.

"If I wanted the same kind of reassurance," Draco said, grateful that his voice was calm and steady and that Politesse had retreated to his shoulder, "would you give it to me?"

Harry smiled. "Of course, Draco. Anything that I *can* give you, I will."

It's the qualification that worries me. Draco licked his lips. "And what if I think I need something that you might not be able to give me?"

Harry tipped his head to the side. "What are you thinking of?"

"I need your attention all the time," Draco said, deciding that he might as well be honest. He didn't think Harry understood how much that aspect of their relationship was important to him. Of course, they'd barely talked at all about many of the things that Draco wanted to talk about, thanks to Nihil. "I want—I want you to be mine. I hate the thought that you've already had a lover. I get jealous when you spend too much time thinking of or talking to other people. You're *mine*."

The silence that followed was full of Harry's blinking and Draco's wondering if saying that had been such a good idea after all. Then Harry blew out a deep breath, blinked again, so hard that Draco thought his eye muscles must be getting a lot of exercise, and frowned.

"I—Draco, that's flattering in one way," he said carefully. "But you must realize that I can't think of you *all* the time. There will be times that my mind is full of homework, or Ron or Hermione, or even Ginny, when she sends me a letter." He rolled his eyes, and Draco knew he was thinking of the one he had received yesterday. He had Vanished it before it could begin to speak, the way he had been certain it would.

"I want you to pay me as much attention as you can," Draco said, more quietly. He was regretting saying as much now, no matter how true it was. He stroked Politesse's back and stared at the floor. "I *need* that. I want to be the most important person in the world to you."

Silence from Harry.

I was afraid of that, Draco thought. *He gives so freely of himself to other people that the thought of keeping himself for just one person, someone who has the right to demand more of him than others do, is alien to him.*

He felt fingertips beneath his chin, and Harry tilted his head up. He still spoke slowly, as though he had heard Draco's words for the first time in a foreign language and wanted to show his struggle to understand.

"I don't want any other lover. You'll occupy an important and special position in my life. But I don't know if you'll always be the *most* important to me. I wouldn't be more important to you than your mother, would I?"

Draco bit his lip and shook his head. Harry relaxed. "Then you know that it's a silly thing to demand," he said, sounding like someone who was convinced that he had the force of logic on his side. "Why would you *want* to demand something like that? It's impossible, and you would probably dislike me if I did it—think I was petty and obsessive and clinging. I'd feel unnatural, too." He gave his shoulders an exaggerated shake. "Let's forget about it for right now and discuss what we're going to do with the Veritaserum."

And Draco, whether he liked it or not, had to nod, and give in, and listen to Harry talking about a good time to interview Granger and Weasley.

Yet that didn't answer his dissatisfaction, which kept brewing in him no matter how hard he tried to make it be still.

I have to have some sign that he belongs to me. That isn't wrong or obsessive or unnatural. It's just the way it is.

"Are you Nihil?"

"No."

Harry winced. It had been bad enough to listen to the instructors and Draco giving their answers under Veritaserum, but it was worse to hear Ron's voice drained of life and excitement. He stared into the distance over Draco's head. Draco had insisted on being the one who did the questioning, but Harry was sitting at the same table to make sure that he didn't say anything too sharp. Hermione leaned forwards beside them, quivering sometimes with eagerness and impatience and giving Draco suspicious looks.

Harry turned away from her just in time to catch the edge of a smirk on Draco's face as he opened his mouth.

"No!" he said.

Draco glanced sideways at him. "You don't know what I was going to say."

"I know that *look*," Harry said firmly. "No."

Draco stuck out his lip. Harry rolled his eyes and tried to ignore the incredulous look from Hermione. Yes, he was a bit uncomfortable teasing Draco in front of his friends, but they would have to get used to it sooner or later. Harry wasn't about to give either of them up. They would learn to work together.

Or else.

"Spoilsport," Draco said, in a mild tone, and turned back to Ron. "Have you ever been approached by someone you suspected was connected to Nihil?"

"No."

"Have you had suspicions about any of the other trainees or the instructors?"

"Sometimes I think that bastard Dearborn is up to something," Ron said, which made Draco's face tighten briefly with anger. Harry put a hand on his arm. He could feel Hermione glancing at him again. He didn't care.

Or else.

"But you have no concrete suspicions?" Draco pressed.

"No."

Draco sat back, satisfied, and Harry asked a few more questions, though by now he expected the constant denials he got. Neither Hermione nor Ron was working with Nihil, at least consciously. Harry hadn't expected them to be, and yet the relaxation in his chest, from tense muscles, made him feel the way he had when he knew he'd finally passed his NEWTs.

I reckon I've got too untrusting, he thought with a frown, as Hermione cast the charm that should flush the Veritaserum from Ron's blood and bring him back to normal. *I haven't relied on anyone but Draco for months. When I was fighting with Ron, that was understandable—no, it wasn't, because it meant that I'd abandoned Hermione. If I want them to get along, I have to make a better effort myself to tie them together and associate with all of them, instead of expecting Ron and Hermione to accept it when I want to retreat into privacy with Draco and not say anything when I come back to them.*

And then there was Draco, who leaned to the side so that he could feel Harry's shoulder against his even though he was keeping his gaze fixed alertly on Ron and Hermione, and probably thinking about them. Harry knew he needed friends. He'd been talking the most to Catherine Arrowshot, and then she'd vanished. That had probably stung Draco and made him doubt his own judgment, but it didn't change things.

He needs other people so that he won't think he needs me so much.

Harry shivered, causing Draco to glance over at him curiously. He shook his head and smiled. Draco sneered at Ron the next moment, but shifted closer to the edge of his seat again.

Harry didn't like the idea that Draco wanted to be the most important person in the world to him. First of all, he couldn't do that for anybody. Second, he'd already failed at something like that with Ginny.

Third, Draco should want *more* than that.

I'm going to get him friends, if I can, Harry thought, and just like that, he had the beginnings of a plan.

He turned back to the conversation as Hermione said peremptorily, "So now that we've established none of us is Nihil, what are we going to do about those Death Eater caches? Have you shown the instructors the map yet?"

"Of course not," Draco said.

"But *why* not?" Hermione demanded. Ron was rubbing his jaw and glaring at Draco as if he'd like to say something, too, but wasn't quite sure the Veritaserum was gone. "You know from their bracelets and the Veritaserum that none of them serve Nihil."

"The information is mine," Draco said. He leaned towards Hermione, his arms folded and his eyes so dark and intent that Harry experienced the brief desire to protect Hermione from him. "Professor Snape gave it to *me*. And I still don't trust all the instructors. Nihil, when we saw him in that duel with Ketchum, implied that he knew him. There's a transfer of information going on. That we can't find it doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

"Then tell Ketchum," was Hermione's instant response. "After all, you saw him fighting Nihil. You know he can't *be* Nihil."

"That doesn't keep him from being Nemo or Nusquam," Draco pointed out.

"Paranoid little Death Eater, aren't you?" Ron muttered.

Draco stiffened. Harry said, "Ron, that's not helpful," at the exact same moment Hermione did.

He exchanged a glance with her and saw her lips quiver into a reluctant smile. He patted her shoulder and turned back to Ron. "Draco's right, and it's *his* information," he said, feeling Draco lean into him with smug contentment. "So we have to find a way to use it, but not to spread it around."

Ron grinned. "*That* sounds better. Why don't we visit one of these caches, the nearest one, and see what we can learn? There's a holiday coming up next week." Harry nodded; he knew that most of the Ministry would be gone, apparently because some long-ago Minister had decided that people started looking as if they wanted to explode if they weren't given a day off at the beginning of March. "We can see what happened to it, if it's full or raided, and we can see if we find anything that we should tell the instructors about."

"For once, Weasley," Draco said, speaking the words with obvious reluctance, "you're saying something like sense."

Ron beamed a moment, then seemed to remember who was talking. He looked haughtily displeased in the next instant. Harry glanced sideways to see Hermione's eyes rolling, and was glad that she shared at least that much of his opinion with him. Ron wasn't *inherently* ridiculous, just ridiculous when he ended up speaking with Draco.

"I think we should start with the cache on the outskirts of London," Draco said, pulling out his map. "I don't know if it's full or raided. I shouldn't think it would matter much, if this is only going to be a test to see what we can find out." He absently tapped his foot against Harry's as he began to make notes on the back of the map. Except Harry knew it wasn't likely to be absent at all.

I know that Hermione knows about Battle Brewing, Harry thought with determination. *She must know some of the other trainees in there, trainees who like Potions and who might be willing to become friends with Draco.*

He needs other people than me to be happy.

And his happiness is…really important to me.

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Chapter: 40

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Forty—The Cache

How did you go about preparing to raid a Death Eater cache quietly?

To Harry's surprise, it turned out not to be that difficult.

The instructors met with him and Draco at times, but they were still stiff, reluctant, distant—except Ketchum, but he didn't seem to have much solid information to share. Harry thought that their habit of shielding trainees from the realities of the world around them still controlled their actions.

Maybe they could have done more if they knew about the map and the caches around the country, Harry thought at one point, with a stab of guilt.

But his loyalty to Draco and his friends outweighed his loyalty to the instructors, a thousand times, and anyway, the instructors hadn't told *them* what the Minister had said when they explained the threat of Nihil, either, or what else was being done. He saw no reason not to keep silent and go ahead with their planned raid.

According to Draco, who met with them, neither Kepler nor Margate had heard anything that might indicate Nihil was still in the Ministry. There had been no more attacks, no more disappearances.

Of course, there was no solid information about what had happened to Catherine Arrowshot or the vanished trainees, either. Harry would have welcomed an attack for the sake of more clues.

Maybe I should wait until we can put together the clues we have, though, he admitted, one night after making a list of what they knew so far and finding it hopelessly confusing.

He sat back and studied the list, his arms behind his head. The clues swarmed and danced in his mind and refused to come together. What did Nihil *want*? What was the point of learning how to change their appearances so well and infect people's magic and ultimately bring back the dead? (Maybe. Harry had to qualify that, because Hermione was adamant on the point that it should have been impossible and Nusquam's apparent survival was probably because she'd never died). How were they getting through the defenses of the Ministry? Why hadn't Nihil tried again to infect him and Draco since they'd thrown off the attacks the first time?

Harry knew what he *wanted* the answer to that last question to be: that Nihil couldn't infect people who had resisted the infection once. It would have made him happy to know Draco could never be in danger from that corner again. But he didn't know, and the last few months had proven that it was ridiculous to assume.

Maybe I should leave this up to Draco and Hermione, he decided, and turned to the list of people in the Battle Brewing class that Hermione had compiled for him. He still hadn't given up his project to find more friendship for Draco than he could provide himself.

Especially since I won't be the one giving him just friendship, but something else instead.

He didn't know how to think about that or handle it any better than he did about the scattered information about Nihil, and so he shied away from it in his mind and picked the first name from the list. Agravaine Carbury. It had a nice, solid ring to it.

Draco watched Harry from the corner of his eye as he and Granger prepared for and discussed the raid. Harry was up to something. He knew that instinctively, with the same sort of silent alarms that used to ring in his head when he saw Harry walking down the corridors at Hogwarts, his face a mask of determination.

But Harry didn't come to him and talk about it, and far be it from Draco to force a confession out of him before he was ready.

He felt…well, sensitive, at least a bit, since that discussion with Harry about being the most important person in the world to him. Harry hadn't referred to it again. He might as well have forgotten it happened. He seemed to frown at bits of parchment and spend a lot of time staring at people he'd never spoken to instead.

Can't he at least think what it means that I want to be the most important person in the world to him?

Draco wanted Harry as his lover. But he couldn't accuse Harry of being the only one who lacked courage and initiative. Fear held him in place, too.

Far more than Harry, he had the sense of how large the change would be if they committed to each other, what kinds of traditions they would be falling from and abandoning.

His mother had always spoken of the continuation of their family bloodline as something assured, beyond question. His father, at least the last time Draco had had communication with him from inside Azkaban, had expected the same thing. Draco was sure that Narcissa had accepted his feelings for Harry so easily because she did not expect them to be permanent. A few years' liaison, and she would start hinting about the need for a wife and children.

Harry would undoubtedly laugh, but the fact of survival, of endurance, was so fundamental to the Malfoy mindset that it had taken Draco years to learn how to articulate the concept, and more years to see that not everyone shared the same driving desire.

He didn't see Weasley or his family accepting Harry's choice any time soon. Harry might be willing to stand up to his two best friends for Draco, but could he withstand the scrutiny of an entire family?

And that was nothing to what would happen when the news spread. Draco knew that Harry would have got plenty of mad post from adoring fans, but the Ministry's wards put restrictions on owls that didn't carry letters from people already personally known to the letter writer, at least for trainees. One of those fans might decide that Harry would be better off without Draco.

There would be the press in general. The taunting articles. The silent sneers and disdain of those circles who would tolerate Harry as Draco's consort for the sake of power and prestige, but would laugh in their sleeves when the alliance grew longer and longer.

With such thoughts circling in his head, finding no outlet and no end, Draco discovered, in Granger, a surprisingly good distraction.

"You're Agravaine Carbury," Harry said, wishing he sounded more sure than he did. But the tall wizard with the dark hair and thin pale face was the one Hermione had pointed out to him, and he didn't think there could be two trainees in the program who liked to wear bright green brooches on their cloaks. The brooch was an enormous, ugly thing made of jade, but Carbury apparently never took it off.

"And no need to ask who you are."

Carbury's eyes were narrowed in suspicion. Harry grumbled under his breath. Sometimes he would have been grateful for the chance to approach someone normally, without any questions being asked or his pure intentions being doubted.

But that wasn't the way the world worked, so Harry gave him a brave smile and said, "I hear that you're good in Battle Brewing."

"Yes." Carbury relaxed a bit and cocked his head to the side in a way that reminded Harry of a large, predatory bird. "Do you need something brewed?"

"What do you think of Draco Malfoy?" Harry asked, ignoring the question. He wished he'd thought of it, because it would have been the perfect reason and way to approach Carbury, but it was too late to think of something now.

Carbury raised his eyebrows. "Yes, well, you *would* ask about him, since you're inseparable," he said. "But you ought to know that, even though I've been earning higher marks than he has, it's not because I'm the favorite. If he was calmer or had more innate talent, then he wouldn't need to overcompensate with flashiness the way he does."

Harry frowned. He didn't think he liked Carbury. But what was important was that *Draco* liked him. He wasn't going to be Harry's friend, after all.

"Would you have any objections to being his friend?" he asked.

Carbury paused, staring at him, then laughed. The laughter was rich and rolling and went on forever. Harry had to stand there in the middle of the corridor as people gave them curious glances and feel like an idiot.

Finally, Carbury stopped laughing and shook his head. "He wouldn't want me for a friend if I was the last brewer on earth," he said. "I told you, I've showed him up too many times."

At least he could sound smug about it, Harry thought in annoyance. Carbury spoke as if it was a mere statement of fact. "But what about *you* befriending *him*?" he asked. "People treat him worse than they should."

"Maybe because he was a bloody *Death Eater*," Carbury said, one eyebrow rising to join the other. "He can't complain about bad treatment because of the consequences of his own choices."

Harry nodded. It was definite now. He didn't like Carbury. And he couldn't think of someone who would do worse as a friend for Draco.

But he couldn't just turn his back and walk away. It was important that Carbury realize how Harry disapproved of him.

"I'm sure you've never done anything in your life that you were ashamed of or angry about," he said. "Nothing you regretted when it was over, nothing you did because you were coerced to do it. Your will must be the most free in the world." He wasn't entirely happy with the way that last sentence sounded, but it was what he meant.

Carbury stared at him as if examining an insect whose wings he had to take off before he put it into a potion. Then he shook his head.

"I know you're his friend," he said, "so I'll tell you this for free. Sometimes, we don't get a choice about the consequences of our actions, even if we did do those things under constraint. Maybe Malfoy is an innocent victim. But other Death Eaters weren't, and they hurt a lot of people. He

has to understand where his reputation came from." Again, that tilt of the head, and this time Harry had the impression that Carbury was about to stab his eyes out. "And I don't think he would appreciate you fighting for his honor. He seems perfectly capable of doing that himself."

He walked away, and Harry shut his mouth and hurried to get back to their rooms, away from all the staring eyes.

"We need to take account of the traps we might find there."

Draco nodded, impressed in spite of his own reluctance. Granger thought through things more quickly and clearly and logically than either Harry or the Weasel. She saw the things that Harry would have missed, and she gave answers while Weasel would have been stammering his way through the questions.

Of course, whenever Draco thought she was *too* intelligent, he reminded himself that she had chosen the Weasel to sleep with. That put him back on a comfortable footing of superiority.

And there was the issue of blood purity, but Draco was ignoring that for the moment, because of how much trouble it would cause if he brought it to her attention, no matter how gently.

Let her pretend she's as good as a pure-blood for a while. In this matter, she can do anything a pure-blood might do.

"We can count on beasts, and people with infected magic, since he's used them so far," Granger murmured, quill scratching on parchment. Then she paused and frowned. "Or *can* we? Wouldn't he have removed the knowledge and artifacts he might have found there? What would be the point of leaving people to guard an empty cache?"

"To trap those who don't know that it's empty," Draco said impatiently.

"But where would they get the knowledge of the cache's existence?" Granger touched her lips with her fingers contemplatively, which made Draco have to look away, because his mother sometimes made the same gesture. *Granger and my mother are not equal.* "The Death Eaters are all arrested now. I'm sure Nihil knows that. Who else would he have thought would come after him?"

"What you're saying is logical, but it's not the way Nihil thinks, for all we know." Draco reached out and took the list of notes away from her, ignoring her offended look. She would be a lot more offended if she knew about all the thoughts passing through his head. "Maybe the cache is empty. Maybe it's full. Maybe it's partially empty and Nihil has guards there because he hasn't had time to remove everything. Or room to store everything," he added, scribbling furiously as he thought about it. "How do we know that he has unlimited space to store everything that he might like to keep? The abandoned Death Eater spaces would work as well as anywhere else. And maybe that's why no one has been able to find the infected trainees, because he's hiding them in one of the caches."

"We can't know that," Granger said.

"We can't know *anything*." Draco glared at her. "And that's why Nihil has succeeded against us so often, because he's had the advantage of knowing our motions when we don't know his. Fuck, we don't even know how he knows about the caches. I don't think he was a Death Eater, or he wouldn't find it so easy to mock the Dark Lord's symbols, but who *else* would you expect to be aware of the caches?"

Granger opened her mouth, and then froze with it half open. She looked stupid, Draco thought in savage satisfaction. Witless.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" she whispered. "Of course there's another group of people other than Death Eaters that would know about the caches, and Nihil being part of that group would explain why he wanted to mock Voldemort."

Draco was glad that she was too caught up in her own apparently *immense* revelation to notice his wince. "I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"The Death Eaters would know where the caches were," Granger said, raising eyes that were wide with something that looked like pity to his face. "And so would their victims."

Draco paused. *Of course.* That made a good deal of sense. If someone had managed to survive the tender attentions of people like his aunt, they would want revenge. And though they might not know where a certain cache was if they'd been forcibly Apparated to it, they could have found out if they were determined enough.

Draco had seen the expressions of the people who watched the Wizengamot acquit him and who hadn't wanted that acquittal to happen. That kind of determination could fuel a task much more difficult than the finding of caches that must have left *some* sign, no matter how hidden they were.

"That would explain why he mocks the Death Eaters," he admitted. "But why would he want to use the knowledge at all, in that case?" A possible answer to the question occurred to him as he spoke, but he wanted to know what Granger would say. "And it still doesn't tell us anything about Nihil's purpose."

Granger might not have heard him. She was staring at the wall, one hand over her mouth. Her fingers flexed open and shut. Draco wished they weren't in that *precise* place, as they muffled the words she spoke.

"Imagine someone being tortured," she said. "Imagine how he hated it, how helpless he was. And then he survived, but he saw most of the Death Eaters subjected to trials, not the insane vengeance plans he'd probably dreamed up. And Voldemort was dead, of course, so that meant he couldn't reach *him* at all." Draco wished she would stop saying that name. "He walked back

into society, and there were some of the people he blamed for his pain acquitted, not paying as he thought they deserved to. Well, he had the knowledge to combat them. Twisted by rage and pain…" She shook her head. "I doubt he hesitated before he decided to use that knowledge. To him, it would be a fitting punishment for the Death Eaters who were still alive and free, to be killed by their own weapons."

Draco licked his lips. He didn't like to admit that her vision might be the truth, especially because she spoke with a hollow sound in her voice that made him remember she'd been a victim of torture, too, in his home.

"That doesn't tell who he is," he said. "Other than enormously skilled. And dangerous."

Granger nodded. "I know," she said. "But it narrows down the list. The Death Eaters took a lot of victims, but not everyone in Britain. And I'd imagine the number of people who suffered horrifically but managed to escape is small."

"What is his *purpose*, then?" Draco flattened his hands on the table and leaned forwards. "I can understand why he attacked me, but why Harry? Why everyone else, all the trainees who were infected? Not all of them took part in the war."

"Maybe he thinks they should have," Granger said. "Maybe he thinks they should have suffered because he did, and it wasn't fair—it was mere chance—that they didn't and escaped. And Harry…" She sighed and shook her head. "He spoke for some Death Eaters. Take a mind twisted enough, and that would be enough to taint Harry in his eyes."

"And then he could find allies among people who *did* suffer with him, and who believed in what he was doing," Draco finished. "Whatever that is." He paused, then added, "I have to admit that my biggest obstacle to believing this is that most of his attacks don't seem to be focused on the Death Eaters in particular."

Granger speared him with a glance. "So," she said, "the *biggest* problem is that?"

Draco glared at her. "I just said so."

"And not the 'purity' of the person presenting the argument?" she asked sweetly.

Draco looked down at the parchment with a scowl.

"Let's go."

Harry started. He had thought Draco would be the one to speak and start them on the adventure now that they were out of the Ministry and, as far as the instructors and their bodyguards were concerned, at the Burrow or Malfoy Manor. But it was Ron who stepped forwards with a brilliant smile, almost *sniffing* the air, as though he could smell the track Nihil had left.

"Come on," he whispered, and reached out to clasp Hermione's hand, his face so bright that Harry smiled back. He was reminded now of why he liked to go adventuring with Ron.

He took Draco's wrist and pulled him along. Draco drew the map from his pocket with his free hand, moving stiffly. Harry glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. *Is he embarrassed? Well, too bad. Hermione and Ron are doing it, too, so he doesn't need to feel like we're behaving indiscreetly, or rudely, or whatever he thinks.*

"This way," Draco said, stabbing the spot they'd chosen again. "Remember, it has a little stream next to it, and it'll be a magically constructed cave under an overhanging boulder."

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes at the same time as Ron. The next moment, they were both gone with an echoing crack. Harry prepared to follow them. They were far enough from the Ministry that he didn't think the anti-Apparition wards should trouble them.

Draco's cold fingers on his arm stopped him. Harry opened his eyes and looked at him in concern. If anyone had thought of a reason why they shouldn't go, it would be Draco.

And Harry would have been half-glad for a reason like that. He didn't know if he wanted Draco to risk his life going into battle, or fighting traps, beside him. Still, Draco would insist on coming along if Harry tried to leave him behind, and it was better for him to be with Harry than somewhere else.

Draco leaned forwards and pressed his lips against Harry's. The kiss was desperate, his tongue working at Harry's lips until Harry opened his mouth, and then plunging inside and sweeping violently over his teeth. Then he stepped back again, nodded, and Apparated them both.

They landed with a bump on the bank of a small stream, and Harry shook his head in dazed wonder. *What was that all about?*

He looked around, because he knew he would blush if he tried to look at Draco right now. They stood on a sloping bank, scattered with old snow, a few trees behind them. Harry suspected that there would have been Muggles here, including Muggle buildings, but the soft hum of Repelling Charms echoed in his ears and told him they'd probably been pushed out a long time ago.

"There it is." Draco pointed ahead of them, and then pulled his hand back as if he thought that something would bite his finger—or as if he was shocked at himself for *pointing*, such a vulgar act.

Harry looked along the length of Draco's finger and saw the dark opening across the stream, in the mouth of another bank that sloped up considerably more than the one they stood on. Dusty clumps of icicles, mostly melted, clung around the mouth. Harry could see stones on the ground, oddly-shaped stones. After he looked at them for a minute, he thought they were the remains of doors.

Hermione nodded when he said that, her eyes grim. Harry remembered what she thought about Nihil and wondered if he had destroyed them when he had come back to claim the knowledge in the cache. That suggested that maybe he did things in uncontrollable rage sometimes; Pushkin was teaching them now to draw psychological and logical conclusions from the human activity they observed.

Ron was the first one to step forwards again, lighting his wand with a whisper of, "*Lumos*." He wore a grin like a boy's. Harry leaped the little stream and joined him, peering into the darkness. He knew it was just the angle they stood at, but it seemed the light really didn't pierce very far into the darkness.

"Ready?" Ron asked, turning and glancing at Harry. Harry blinked as the comradeship between them, strained by their rows and the way he'd spent more time with Draco lately, suddenly sprang back to life.

"Ready," Harry said, and they strode in at the same time.

The tunnel twisted several times, then plunged straight back. A few steps after that, it widened, and Harry stepped into the central room feeling as if he was ready for anything, including an immediate attack by infected trainees.

Anything, maybe, but skeletons strung on enormous wires across the ceiling and the walls, all of them draped with dried skin and hanging bits of gnawed flesh. Wide dark marks on the floor suggested that there had been dried blood spilled there at one point and never cleaned up.

Carved into the skull of every single skeleton, between the eyes, was the Dark Mark. On the single clear wall was the enormous word, in letters of magically preserved fresh blood at least five feet high, *NIHIL*.

"I think," Hermione said weakly into the silence that gathered around them, "it's safe to say he was *very* angry."

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Chapter: 41

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Forty-One—Some Answers

Draco found himself instinctively holding his breath as they explored the cache. There was no smell to speak of, save stone and dust; the fragments of flesh on the skeletons had been too long

in such conditions to stink, and the preservation charm on the fresh blood had kept its color but not its scent. That didn't matter. He expected it to reek, and so part of his brain was convinced that it did.

Sometimes Weasley gave him sideways, scornful looks full of pity. Draco didn't care. *Weasley* barely investigated anything, surging ahead from one cave to another and calling them to look at the new things he'd found. Draco was the one who bent down and studied the skeletons, the message, and the signs they found in other rooms in detail, and he could do so using any method he liked.

The signs were plentiful, and the more he observed them, the more Draco had to admit that they fit in with Granger's theory of Nihil being one of the Dark Lord's victims. Death Eater robes, moldered and moldy, had been thrown into corners, but slashed into fluttering rags before they were. More spills of dried blood crusted corners and out-of-the-way nooks, indicating that the wounds had spurted with some violence. A white mask had been ripped down the middle, then pieced back together with a clumsy spell—the way it would be clumsy if Nihil's wand was shaking in rage, Draco thought—and hung on a conjured piece of wood. The wood dangled from the ceiling on a noose, the way Draco thought Nihil would have liked to hang living Death Eaters. The wood had been carved with a mouth screaming in agony.

Draco couldn't tell for certain if the skeletons had been alive or dead when Nihil found them. He didn't think he really wanted to know.

Granger was frowning as they picked through the remains. Draco wanted to know what she was thinking, especially since she should have been crowing if her intuition was proved correct. He stepped past Harry, who stayed close at his side as if he thought Draco needed to be protected from the very atmosphere of hate and fury around them, and up to her. "What is the matter?" he asked softly.

"Besides all this?" Granger motioned at the spots on the walls. The room they were currently in had more bloodstains than usual. From the amount of shattered glass on the floor, Draco thought this had been a Potions lab, but he'd already tried to reconstruct the brewing from the fragments and found nothing. "That our enemy can somehow make elaborate plans and act sane, and yet contain this madness at the same time?"

Draco bit his tongue so he wouldn't tell her about what it had been like under the Dark Lord, the way so many people he knew had indeed acted mad while being perfect masters of themselves after the war. "Yes," he said in a controlled tone. "Besides that."

Granger glanced at him sharply, obviously hearing the difference in his voice, but wisely decided not to remark on it. She held out her wand, and one of the glass shards floated up in front of her. It sparkled, absolutely clean except for a smattering of dust.

Someone drew in his breath behind Draco. He glanced around and saw that it was Harry. He put a hand on Draco's shoulders. *Apparently the shard is going to attack me,* Draco thought in

amusement.

"All the evidence has been removed," Granger said. "*Everything.* And more completely than cleaning and stripping charms could account for."

Draco shrugged. "That part is the least surprising to me," he said. "We already know that Nihil has made use of what was in these caches. Of course he wouldn't want anyone else to be able to use it. Enough time spent on cleaning charms, and with enough help from people he's infected—"

"You don't understand!" Granger snapped, looking as if half her hair would fly out of her head with the way she was bristling. Draco started to say something cutting, but Harry pressed down gently on his shoulder, and he stopped. "I've studied Cleaning Charms." Draco had to work hard to keep his mouth shut *then*, too, because the only reason a witch would have to do that would be if she didn't plan to have a house-elf. "You can't *get* anything that's touched a potion to look like this. There must have been some evidence left behind. I don't know what he did." Her voice sank. "I don't think it was anything that's within the scope of most magic."

"We already knew that," Harry said, quietly and more politely than Draco could have brought himself to do at the moment. He rubbed Draco's shoulder blade in an absent manner, but Draco was sure that he knew exactly what he was doing and kept every movement in mind. "But why does this particular thing bother you so much, Hermione?"

Before Granger could respond, Weasley came bounding back into the lab and stood there looking at them in perplexity. "What are you doing?" he asked. "This place is enormous! There's at least five more bloody rooms to explore, and you haven't seen what's in the next one yet!"

"We're looking closely at some clues, Ron," Harry said, with an amused tolerance in his voice that Draco both liked and detested. That wasn't the way Harry talked to *him*. On the other hand, Draco had to wonder what it meant that he had never heard that tone. "Do you know any way that someone could have cleaned a potions vial so completely you wouldn't even be able to tell what potion was in it?"

"You're asking the wrong person, mate." But Weasley came up nonetheless and took the vial from Granger's hand as if he had permission—and she allowed him! Draco curled his lip. That was a difference between her and his mother, then. Not even Lucius touched Narcissa as casually as that. Weasley turned the piece of glass back and forth in front of him and squinted at it. "Unless it's like what Slughorn said."

"What do you mean?" Granger asked, sounding offended that there was a fact in the world she hadn't heard.

"I had a detention cleaning out cauldrons for him in our sixth year." Weasley screwed a finger into his ear, probably to claw at the wax there, and handed the vial back to Granger. "He said something about how, even when students did a proper job on them, they were never cleaned as

thoroughly as they could be. You had to use magic to remove trace elements of the potions, and then another, sympathetic magic spell to touch the 'resonances' or something. I don't know, I didn't listen closely," he added defensively when Granger glared at him. "I just knew it was some spell that would make sure the cauldron was really clean."

"There are always tiny trace elements left of a potion," Draco interrupted, because he felt they were ignoring his expertise in this area. Harry squeezed his shoulder again, but Draco ignored him. He would be polite and kind to Harry's little friends, certainly. He would stuff kindness and politeness down their throats until they choked on it. "The spell you're talking about would simply make sure that the cauldrons are clean enough for Potions work and tell you what elements are left if they aren't, Weasley, not make them as if they'd never been touched by an ingredient."

Infuriatingly, Weasley shrugged at him and turned away. "I told you I didn't know much about it," he said.

Granger, of course, wasn't going to let anything go *that* easily. "This spell," she said. "Do you think we could use it on the glass to tell us what was there? How does it work?"

"If they've cleaned the glass as completely as you think they have, of course not," Draco snapped.

Granger shook her head. "Not the glass, then," she said. One of the most annoying things about her, Draco reflected, was that she refused to simply give up or get angry when someone told her one of her ideas wouldn't work; instead, she tried to turn about and come at it from a different angle. Her ideas seemed more real to her than rejection did. "What about the rest of the rooms? If we used the spell on them, shouldn't it be able to tell us what was stored here?"

Draco glanced around at the walls, thought of saying that the caves had probably been magically cleansed in the same way the glass had, and then thought of the skeletons and blood and flesh in the first room and held his tongue.

"Let's try it," Harry said. He sounded excited, which made Draco smile, reluctantly; Harry would probably always be more interested in solving puzzles than was good for him. "Do you know the incantation, Draco?"

That's something, at least, that he automatically turns to me as the source of knowledge and not to Granger. Draco nodded and lifted his wand. "But I've never cast it on an entire room before," he felt compelled to say.

Weasley rolled his eyes. "I think he's trying to put it off because he knows that it won't work," he stage-whispered. "Go ahead, Malfoy, we can't possibly think any less of you if you fail," he added in a normal tone.

Draco glared at him, but caught sight of Harry's sympathetic, reassuring smile, and decided that

it would be bad manners to snap at Weasley in return. He would show that he could be the more mature person here if it killed him.

He faced the wall, held up his wand for long enough to build suspense, then moved it in the motion Snape had taught him and said clearly, "*Voco effigiam olim!*"

The rooms seemed to flicker around him, and a bright sheet of yellow light cascaded out of his wand, sparkling as if backlit by the sun. It settled on the walls, and Draco waited expectantly. This spell usually produced images of the past; in the case of a cauldron, it would show the ingredients that had fallen into the cauldron in their undiminished form. Draco was not without hope that it would show at least the human figures who had conducted their activities here, and perhaps even faces.

An enormous fist of white fire reached out of the wall and grabbed him.

Draco's scream rang through Harry's head and down to his heart. He knew that he couldn't actually hear it that piercingly, but he didn't care. His friend, his partner, the man he might be in love with was hurt, and he had to stop it.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" he roared instinctively, holding out his wand towards the white fist.

Nothing happened, except that the fist tightened and Draco was screaming so hard and in so frenzied a way that Harry thought he might well go mad. Harry gritted his teeth and tried another spell. *Come on, Draco. The compatible magic should build up and save you. It has to work!*

"*Abigo!*" he said this time, a spell that was meant to banish Dark creatures, but which Dearborn had told them would sometimes work for magical effects.

The magic leaped through the hand, which faded a bit in front of it, and then came back stronger than ever. Harry cried out in frustration. He had to hold onto his anger, or he would panic.

"Fucking compatible magic!" he yelled, and started to jump forwards. Maybe he could do something to the hand if he was closer to it.

Someone grabbed him and held him back. Harry spun around to see Ron holding him. He yelled again, incoherently, and lashed out with one fist. If Ron was trying to keep him from helping Draco because he hoped that Draco would die—

But Ron caught his arm and shook his head.

"You need more than one person to break through power like that," he said, as calmly as though Draco's screams weren't echoing through the cavern. "I can feel how strong it is. And he can't help you. Take my magic." He drew his wand and muttered a spell that Harry couldn't hear, but which sent scarlet threads spiraling out of his wand and towards Harry.

Harry didn't have time to apologize or even say thank you. He just nodded and grabbed the scarlet threads, pulling them into himself.

It wasn't like handling the compatible magic that flowed between him and Draco. That was much more of an equal, skillful sharing; Harry knew that if he dropped the magic, Draco could always recover it and keep the spool rolling. This time, he was draining Ron like a vampire drinking blood, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Harry bit his tongue and ignored the wrongness of the situation, because he *had* to ignore it. Rescuing Draco was the most important thing in the world, the most important thing he had ever done.

He hit out at the fist of white fire. He didn't want to banish it or stop it, since those things hadn't worked anyway. He wanted to *destroy* it, and he was going to do such a good job of it that Nihil, wherever he was, would feel the ringing of the spell in his bones.

The fist bent in front of him, but resisted him. Harry could feel the magic that made it up now, flexible but horribly strong, like a spiderweb. He attacked again, and again it bent and flowed away from him.

Draco had stopped screaming. That was the worst thing.

Harry took a breath that seemed to start in his feet rather than his lungs and turned his head. The fist sprang out of the wall, extending along an arm that was also made of white fire. If he couldn't banish it and he couldn't break it, maybe he could cut it off.

He didn't stop to think about what spell he was going to use. He just grabbed the incantation that was nearest the top of his mind and flung it out in front of him as if it was a weapon launched from his wand at the wall.

"*Sectumsempra!*"

Harry thought he could actually watch the unfolding of the web of power. The spell was bigger and more powerful than it had been when he cast it at Draco in sixth year; Harry had the vague, hazy thought that he had poured six cups' worth of water into a cup only meant to hold one. The spell would fly apart and shatter any minute, and he and Ron would have to deal with magical backlash, and Draco would die, and—

But, maybe because this was such a rare spell, it worked. The hand collapsed to the ground, the arm of white fire flying apart in sharp spatters that reminded Harry of the way Draco's chest had exploded in blood. This time, though, Snape's spell did him some good. The hand vanished in a puff of smoke like someone had blown out a candle.

Harry immediately ran to Draco and lifted him up.

He was scarred with strange, irregular burns. His arms and face and chest—his shirt had mostly burned away—were covered with them, but each had a few inches of pale skin separating it from the others. When Harry looked more closely and brushed a bit of ash away, his stomach turned. Each burn was in the shape of the Dark Mark.

"I think Nihil left this here as a trap specifically to catch Death Eaters," Hermione said, in the distant tone that she used when she was trying to avoid breaking down by concentrating on facts.

"Can you give me back my magic, mate?" Ron asked, sounding more choked than Hermione. "Having it tied to someone else like that is killing me."

Harry flicked his wand and muttered a *Finite* to disrupt the spell, hoping that it worked. He was unable to look away from Draco for now or to think of anything other than hopefully getting him to a Healer who could help him. He heard Ron gasp, and then he didn't say anything else, which would have to be enough.

"Come on," Hermione said, clutching his arm. "We'll go to Portillo Lopez. You told me that she knows about Nihil already, so she's a better choice than most of the others."

Harry nodded. He would have fought if someone had tried to take Draco away from him or leave him behind to die, but he didn't feel capable of making any other decision right now. He still couldn't look away from Draco's face as he stumbled across the cavern floor, which meant that Ron and Hermione had to guide him.

Guilt filled him, so thick and powerful that he would have choked on it if he hadn't known that choking wouldn't help Draco.

I thought you might be in danger and I still let you come along. I didn't do anything to help you until you had already been hurt. So much for compatible magic. So much for my fucking heroism.

I'm so sorry.

But being sorry like that doesn't matter.

Draco woke slowly. He thought he had already awakened several times, to pain and disorientation so great that it seemed the easiest course to close his eyes and sink back into the awaiting darkness. But this time, the darkness had actually pulled back enough to let him think rationally, so he would use the gift.

He turned his head from side to side. He didn't recognize the room he lay in, but it didn't have the characteristic touches of St. Mungo's. That cheered him up a bit. He was somewhere in the Auror Division, probably, and with someone who would understand the risks he had taken.

The room itself was small, full of heavy wooden furniture of the sort that Draco's mother would have banned from the Manor on the grounds of being too ugly. The bed was comfortable, at

least. Draco was shifting around to raise himself on his elbows when the door opened and Portillo Lopez stepped in.

There was a weight about her movements that made Draco pause and watch her immediately. She shut the door behind her as though the fate of the world depended on it closing quietly, and then stood there looking at him.

"What is it?" Draco asked. "Am I going to be permanently disfigured?" That was what he had thought of first, since he wasn't dead and he could feel his magic shimmering, still, beneath the surface of his skin. He thought all his senses and all his limbs were there, but maybe he'd lost a finger and he didn't know it. He hadn't exactly had a lot of time to check.

"No," Portillo Lopez said. "But you very nearly died." She turned and picked up something that lay on a table next to the bed, then held it up.

It was a mirror. Draco stared at his face and lifted a finger to trace the outline of the skull and the snake on his cheek. It was fading. That kept him from screaming, but it was a near thing, especially when he realized that he could see similar Marks on his chest and shoulders.

"These marks were killing you," Portillo Lopez said softly, "eating into your skin and your magical core, and from there your major organs. It was a trap designed to go on and destroy the intruder even after the initial fire had been removed. You would have died had I not cured you."

Draco caught her eye and tried to convey all his gratitude in a single stare. "Thank you," he said.

Portillo Lopez nodded, but she was not smiling. "This uncontrolled exploration of evil must stop," she said.

"I quite agree," Draco said. "As soon as I can learn what spell Nihil used that left me in this state, I intend to do some explorations of my own into appropriate means of punishment."

Portillo Lopez turned and stared at him. Then she shook her head, and her eyes were almost gentle when she spoke again, if her voice was not. "I meant that *you* and Potter must stop your investigations."

Draco clenched his fists. "We didn't know that this would happen," he said. "And we won't be kept out of fighting someone who seems to want to target us particularly. Why should we give up and act like helpless children when we clearly aren't?"

"Trainee Malfoy," Portillo Lopez said, reaching out one hand as if she would touch him and then retracting it, "the Minister has declared that Nihil is too dangerous for *anyone* to fight. The War Wizards are being called together again. Do you know what they are?"

Draco frowned. There had been a mention of them somewhere in Auror Conduct, but the information had been shoveled together with all sorts of useless facts that Jones wanted them to

memorize, so he couldn't remember it easily. "No," he said at last, hating the admission as he made it.

Portillo Lopez nodded. "Even I had to check the Auror regulations, because they have not been used since the war with Grindelwald. They were not even called out for the battles with You-Know-Who, because for so long his attacks were small and confined to Muggles or individual witches and wizards, and of course before that the Ministry was involved in denying his return." She took a few quick steps back and forth, as if pacing out her disgust.

And you were all depending on Harry to save you, so the Ministry probably thought it didn't need them, Draco thought, but he had the sense to keep his mouth shut. This might be their last source of free information for a while, if the instructors were really intent on keeping them out of the investigation.

"The War Wizards are Aurors who are meant to handle full-scale battles," Portillo Lopez said. "Among us all, they are the only ones who have the permission to use Dark Arts, and who are regularly trained in the *combination* of the disciplines that we teach separately here, such as hand-to-hand combat and healing. A War Wizard can inflict a blow that would heal you." She sent Draco a faint, dark smile, as if she could feel the stirring of interest in the back of his mind. "They are used only when the Ministry declares the battlefield truly a *battlefield*, and thus unsafe for ordinary citizens or Aurors to enter.

"Minister Shacklebolt has said that the whole of Britain is a battlefield. Not only you and Trainee Potter, but all of us here, are ordered to keep out of the war's way unless it seeks us unavoidably." She paused, then added, "I do not say that the war might not someday come to us. But it has not, and therefore you and Trainee Potter are ordered to cease your efforts to find and confront Nihil forthwith."

"Or what?" Draco asked, crossing his arms. She had already healed him, which meant that she couldn't hold the threat of leaving him in pain over his head.

"Or you will be expelled from the program," Portillo Lopez said calmly.

Draco clenched his jaw and said nothing. He wanted to shout it was unfair, but he would do nothing so childish.

"That would leave us unprotected," he said at last, when he thought he could do something *other* than shout. "Not an intelligent move."

"You are destroying our ability to protect you with every move that you make!" Portillo Lopez took a quick stride to the side of the bed that made Draco cower in spite of himself. She gained control of her anger with a hiss and shook her head, staring at him. "You have evaded your guards again and again, attempted to set up your own spy network, and excluded us from information that you should have shared. Believe me, some of the Aurors have asked why you were allowed to stay. If Auror Dearborn and myself had not mounted a spirited defense, you

would be expelled even now, and recovering in St. Mungo's."

Draco lowered his eyes and said nothing.

"Accept your fate, and accept that the war with Nihil has moved onto another plane entirely," Portillo Lopez said sternly. She paused, and her voice softened. "Now, I will allow Trainee Potter to see you. He has been quite frantic throughout the last twenty-four hours he was held away from you."

She turned to the door, and a moment later, Draco had an armful of protesting, murmuring, terribly relieved Harry.

Draco closed his eyes. *That is not the last word on this matter. We can find a way around this and still help with the war, and I fully intend to.*

For now, though, it was enough to lie back and bask in the warmth of Harry's concern.

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Chapter: 42

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Forty-Two—Rumor, Refusal, Temptation

"I don't understand."

Harry kept his eyes on the books in front of him. He didn't feel up to a confrontation with Draco right now. "What's not to understand? I'd rather concentrate on studying and making sure that we're not expelled from the Auror program. That's more important to me than finding out who Nihil is."

He could feel Draco's stare from the other side of the room. That didn't mean that he needed to look up and respond to it.

He turned a page, and that seemed to be the signal for Draco to lose control of the temper he'd been so carefully keeping back.

"You're a coward sometimes, you know that?" The table Harry was studying at rattled when Draco stalked closer. Without a lot of weight—he was still slender no matter how much he ate while he was recovering under Portillo Lopez's care—he walked in a way that made his point. "Just because I was hurt, is that enough to scare you off from learning more about Nihil?

Especially since we were so close to finding more substantial answers? Especially since your friend Granger's suspicion is probably right and Nihil looks more and more like one of the Death Eaters' victims?"

"*My* friend Granger?" Harry felt free to look up now, because he could give Draco a teasing glance. "When you're the one who's spent more time with her than me lately, trying to find out what spells could have scrubbed those potions vials clean and why the resonance spell triggered that trap?"

Draco leaned nearer, his nostrils flaring. "It's not about that," he said. "It's about your being afraid because I was hurt."

Harry sighed. It seemed he couldn't escape this no matter how much he wanted to. He put the book down and leaned back in his chair so that he could put a bit of distance between himself and Draco. "Yes," he said. "It is."

Draco shook his head and paced away again. "Why? I don't *understand* why that makes such a difference to you. After I was wounded during that battle with Nusquam, you never thought of giving up."

"You came closer to dying this time," Harry said.

Draco gave him a blank look. "No, I didn't. I think burns aren't the same thing as the corruption of my magical core."

"I couldn't help you this time," Harry said, "except by ending the spell. And even then, I needed Ron's help to do it." He grinned when Draco grimaced. No matter how many days passed since their journey into the cache, it seemed that Draco was no nearer coming to terms with the fact that Ron had saved his life. "That's—different for me, Draco. It clarified a lot of things. I could risk my life, but not yours."

Draco stared at him again. Harry looked back. He had no idea what other words he should use, because those words were the truth.

"What are you saying?" Draco whispered.

"Exactly what I said," Harry replied, confused by the way Draco's eyes were shining. "I care more about your life than my own."

"But you didn't say anything about your friends," Draco breathed. He took a step closer, and now the air in the room had changed and was charged in some strange way, and Harry didn't know why. "They were with us. Why didn't the danger to *their* lives change the way you felt about this?"

Harry frowned and shifted. *Yeah, now that he says that, it should have. Maybe Ron and*

Hermione weren't in the same kind of danger that he was, but they weren't safe. "I don't know," he said. "It's just different."

"You feel differently about me than you do about other people." Draco was still whispering. He reached out and closed his hand around Harry's wrist. Harry started. He hadn't realized Draco was that close.

He looked up and met those glowing eyes and felt as if he should swallow or say something or cluck his tongue to break the mood. But he couldn't.

"Yeah," Harry said at last, though he didn't know if Draco heard him, with his voice reduced to a whimper in the back of his throat.

Either Draco did or he could tell from the shape of Harry's lips what he was saying, because he looked suddenly smug and dropped Harry's wrist, stepping away. "That was all I wanted," he said, voice both satisfied and wistful. "To know that you thought about me differently than you did about other people."

"No, you wanted to be more important to me than everyone else," Harry snapped, but the force of Draco's smile stopped him.

"I know what I want better than you do," Draco said calmly, and then turned around and picked up his Auror Conduct book. When he came back with it, he sat down across the table from Harry, turning pages as though he had intended to study all along.

"And that's it?" Harry demanded. "You aren't going to argue anymore that we should hunt Nihil down no matter where he is?"

"It isn't getting me anywhere right now, is it?" Draco looked up, his face calm. Harry thought it was the cool and collected expression he had tried to achieve many times in school and had done so little. "I'll wait until your fear's worn off a bit. Then we can investigate. I want to get revenge on Nihil for what he's done to me."

Harry nodded almost against his will. He had wanted much the same thing; he simply hadn't seen how they could get it.

"We'll find him," Draco said. "But there's no reason we can't wait until the instructors' vigilance wears off, so we can do it without being suspected. It's probably for the best, anyway. We should do what will heighten our chances of success, not what will obscure them simply because we're stubborn." He looked down at his book again.

Harry went slowly back to his own, now and then looking up to eye Draco. Draco presented a supremely innocent, busy picture, no matter how long or when Harry looked at him.

He'd been thrown back into uncertainty again with just a few words from Draco.

But, he thought, uncertainty with Draco was a lot better than certainty without him.

Draco hesitated, then pushed the door open. The longer he hesitated, the worse he would make it, as his mother had told him when he was reluctant to have some wound opened and healed.

The rooms beyond were so cluttered that Draco nearly turned around and left again. Books, half-open, dangled off the table. The table itself was balanced on more books and an essay that looked as if it bore more of the professor's comments than Weasley's own words. The chair was wrinkled and had a large stain in the middle of it that Draco could have sworn was mustard, or at least mustard-colored. The door had several scratches in it. Draco shook his head. He didn't know what had caused this mess, and every reasonable explanation he could think of caused unwanted images to rise in his mind. He could only hope that Harry had never lived in quite this state of disorder, or at least that he had cleaned off the lice and fleas by now if he had.

"Mate, I—*Malfoy*?"

At least Weasley sounded as displeased to see him as Draco was about being here. It was some small comfort to think that he was causing someone else distress. Draco raised his eyes to Weasley's face.

Weasley was red, but that was nothing new. It *was* new for him to be dressed in a trailing bedsheet, and Draco tried, and failed, to not imagine Granger in a similar state in the next room. He shuddered and cleared his throat, while he tried to pretend that he was peering intently at a book sprawled on the table.

"I came to thank you for the magic you lent to Harry in the cache," he said. His words sounded odd and stilted to his ears, unfamiliar.

"Harry already thanked me for that." From the sound of things, Weasley was rubbing his neck and probably heartily wishing Draco out of the room. "But thanks, of course," he added hastily.

"You don't understand," Draco said, and felt a bit of irritation work its way through his embarrassment. "I thought you would, since you know more about the pure-blood ways than Harry does. I owe you a life-debt."

"Yeah," Weasley said. "And I don't want it."

Draco stiffened his courage and glanced back at him. Luckily, the bedsheet hadn't slipped more than an inch, and he didn't have to see more than that of a chest covered with fuzzy red hair. "You can't *refuse* a life-debt that way."

Weasley squinted at him, and then laughed. "Of course you can. What kind of 'pure-blood ways' did you grow up with? Dad always taught us that life-debts only mattered when there was some kind of attachment between the wizards. So I reckon you and Harry should consider how much

you owe your lives to each other—" He made a gagging noise. "But you and I don't have to."

Draco stared again. It was true that his father had sometimes mentioned the existence of debates over the life-debts and how much better it would be if wizarding society could choose one way of conforming to them, but he had not imagined anything like a positive refusal existed.

"Why did you save me, then?" he asked, when he had his breath back. "If not to have me under your control because of a life-debt?"

"There's this little thing," Weasley said, "called friendship. Harry cares about you. Don't ask me why. And don't give me details," he added defensively, as though Draco had offered to spend the Galleons of his innermost thoughts on *him*. "But I saved you because I knew he would have been devastated if you died. And…" He paused.

"Go on," Draco said, keeping his eyes narrow and his voice arrogant despite the warmth he felt. *I'm important to Potter. His best friends recognize the fact and have to put up with it. And isn't that just too bad for them?*

Weasley stared at the ceiling, rolled his eyes, looked at the floor as if the answer would be there, and muttered something inaudible.

"You were the one who indicated that you had more to say to me." Draco leaned forwards. "At least do me the courtesy of speaking plainly. *Both* of us the courtesy, in truth. I don't want to be here and you don't want me to stay when you could be fucking your girlfriend instead."

Weasley gritted his teeth and turned red enough that Draco expected an attack of apoplexy any moment, but nodded his head and said in a clipped voice, "Fine. I did it because no one should have to go through the kind of pain I could hear you were going through."

Draco stood still. He would have made fun of that kind of Gryffindor idealism if Harry exhibited it, secure in the knowledge that it meant he was dear to Harry. He had no idea what to say when *Weasley,* of all people, showed it.

"Don't tell anyone about this," Weasley said. His voice was low. There could have been many emotions causing that, and Draco was not inclined, at the moment, to try and disentangle them. "I mean it."

Draco snapped himself out of his trance and nodded, eyes resolutely fastened to Weasley's. "You don't have to worry," he said.

"Good." Weasley flung himself back into the bedroom, in an action so near a flounce Draco would have laughed if his lips didn't feel numb. He slowly let himself back into the corridor, licking his lips absently, trying to figure out what he was going to do next.

Someone else cares about me—at least a little. You don't save the life of someone you're

absolutely indifferent to.

I don't—I don't know how to cope with this.

"I still can't learn anything about him."

Harry watched Ketchum pace back and forth across the room the instructors had chosen for their private meeting with Harry, Draco, and, now that they had undergone the trial by Veritaserum and were wearing jade bracelets, Ron and Hermione. The Battle Tactics instructor looked more harassed than Harry had ever seen him. He kept running his hand through his hair and tugging at the roots as if he thought it would soothe him to have it come out.

"We know that he's powerful," Ketchum continued. "We know that he has, or had, a position of influence in the Ministry. But why did he pull back? Where is he hiding now? What is his real name?" He shook his head and halted, staring around as if he had just now realized that his audience might be getting dizzy. "I'm a trained investigator. It should be easy to find this out. But it's not."

"From my observations," said Pushkin, with a slight pause after the word as if it was sacred for him, "it is not surprising that he pulled back his influence from the Ministry. We made things too hot for him. He could not stay in a place where his every movement was suspected and where Maryam had discovered a way to cure the magical disease that he inflicted on others." He inclined his head to Portillo Lopez. "Why would he wish to continue a confrontation which would simply escalate, with more exposure of his motives and methods and more disadvantages to himself? A retreat to a prepared, safe location and a recovery of his forces was to be expected."

"One thing I don't understand, sir," Hermione said, speaking a lot more respectfully than Harry had thought she would. *But then,* he thought, propping his chin up on his fist as he turned to look at her, *she was the only one of us who was relieved to find out we wouldn't be allowed to investigate on our own.* "Why did he flee when you cast that dragon at him in the battle? Harry described it, but it seemed such a simple spell. Does he have an allergy to dragons?"

Ketchum laughed, though Harry thought Hermione hadn't meant her last sentence to be funny, from her little frown. She was desperate to find some kind of weakness to Nihil, or at least to Nemo and Nusquam. "I've been pondering that myself," he said. "It was a standard defensive spell. None of the others I used made much impact. He hardly bothered to protect himself from most of them. Why should he have feared that one? Badly enough to leave the Ministry with his trainees, even?"

Hermione gnawed her lip. "Can you cast the spell again, sir? Just so the rest of us can look at it and get an idea of what would scare Nihil?"

Harry looked hard at her. Hermione was trying to look innocent, which made him sure she had some other motive behind the request.

Ketchum studied her as if he was wondering the same thing, but nodded and held up his wand. The incantation was carefully and loudly pronounced. Harry saw a smile tugging at the corners of Ketchum's mouth, and thought he probably liked being able to show off without anyone accusing him of being superficial. "*Draco vitae me defend!*"

The air in front of him coalesced and pulled together into a burning pool of light, and then the dragon Harry remembered from the battle hurtled away from his wand, wings spread wide and mouth parted. The light about it boiled and danced, and built up to such a peak of brightness that Harry couldn't bear to look at it. It vanished before it hit the wall, though, or at least he didn't hear it hit.

"Why did you say *Draco vitae*, sir?" Hermione's voice was eager.

Harry blinked away the afterimages and glanced sideways at Draco. His face bore a complicated mixture of emotions. Harry wondered if it was easy for him to think about Nihil when he had almost died, and placed a compassionate hand on his arm. Draco leaned towards him and whispered.

"It's disconcerting to hear your name as part of an incantation."

Harry blinked, then bit the inside of his cheek so he wouldn't burst out laughing. Sometimes, he thought, he worried too much.

"I'm not a Latin scholar," Ketchum said. "It's just the incantation I learned." He glanced over his shoulder, and Harry saw that he faced Dearborn. Now that he was thinking of it, he remembered Draco saying Dearborn had also conjured a dragon.

"The incantation literally means, 'Dragon of life defend me,'" Dearborn said, his posture in the chair elegant, his voice polished and without inflection. "The spell draws on the life-force of the caster, which is one reason that many of us feel weak afterwards." He raised an eyebrow at Ketchum.

Ketchum puffed out his chest. Harry had to work hard to contain another laugh. He didn't think the professors at Hogwarts had ever seemed half so petty and jealous to him. Was it because they were better people, or just because he was younger then and hadn't known them as well?

"That's it, then," Hermione said, her voice high and excited. Harry stared at her, but he could feel Draco nodding slowly beside him. That was one thing he envied both Draco and Hermione, the ability to have their minds dart ahead like that and reach some conclusion that wasn't immediately obvious. "Don't you see? The spell is made of life-force. Nihil's specialty is death, and coming back from death. It's no wonder he couldn't deal with it."

Harry felt a burst of pride in his chest, and wished he could have put a hand on Hermione's shoulder, but he was too far away. He glanced around the table, though, and saw more than one

face shining with the revelation.

"We may have the beginnings of something to deal with him, then," Ketchum said. His voice was softer, and his smile had gone away, though his eyes were no less wide and bright. Harry thought he had the growl in his tone that he had heard when Ketchum was fighting Nihil in the middle of the trainees' meeting.

"We almost certainly do," Portillo Lopez said, and shook her sleeve. Quill and parchment popped out of it, and she began to scribble. "The method is similar to what I used to cure the infection in the magical cores of the students I tested. Why did I not think of this *before*?"

"From my observations," Pushkin said, again with his reverent little pause after the word, "we did not think of it before because we were thinking that the magic that we must use to defeat Nihil would of course be complex and rather like the Dark Arts. We would have distrusted a solution like this as too simple."

"Now we know of it," said Dearborn, with a slow smile that changed his face remarkably. Harry thought that he actually looked human, and didn't wonder anymore that Draco had wanted to study under him. "Now we can use it."

In the middle of the excited chatter—even Hestia was talking now, as she rarely did at these meetings, leaning across Pushkin to ask Hermione questions about what other spells she could think of that used life-force—Harry glanced at Ron and Draco. Ron had a hard little smile on his face Harry wouldn't have wanted to face in battle. Draco was glancing from person to person as if he wanted to memorize all the suggestions that everyone was making for testing later, now and then tapping his fingers together as if he was making mental notes.

No one was looking at Harry, so no one (probably) had seen the odd expression he knew had crossed his face when Hermione talked about death magic and life magic.

Yes, it made sense. He knew it made sense, even though he hadn't thought of it before because he had had no idea what Ketchum's dragon was actually made of.

He knew it made sense because he had lingered behind in one of the rooms they'd explored in the cache and picked up a book that had caught his eye. The book looked like it was about necromancy.

Maybe it was trapped. But so far, it didn't seem like it. Harry had had it hidden in their rooms for weeks now, and it hadn't exploded or poisoned anyone.

He knew Hermione and Draco would both disapprove of him having it. Probably Ron, too. But he just—he just needed—

It was a thought. He hadn't done anything so far.

He just needed to think about what could happen if, maybe, he could bring some people back to life who had died unfairly.

It was a thought. He hadn't done anything yet. It wasn't wrong.

"Draco?"

Draco immediately strode to the fireplace and dropped down to kneel in front of it. His mother's face was floating in the flames, and she looked so distressed that Draco had to bite his tongue so he wouldn't offer to come back to the Manor.

"What is it, Mother?" he said, gently. Only later, thinking about it, did he realize that was the tone his father had always used with her when she was upset.

Narcissa took a deep breath and extended one hand. She didn't actually reach through the flames, however, pulling back her hand at the last moment. "Have you heard anything about the rest of the family, Draco?" she asked. "Anything at all?"

"The rest of the family?" Draco repeated, mystified. There were distant Malfoy cousins in other parts of Europe—some of them distant enough that the family would have considered them possible allies instead of competitors for the Manor and the vaults—and he recalled, dimly, that he might have a great-great-aunt still living. Maybe his mother meant the Blacks. "Is there something wrong with Aunt Andromeda?"

Narcissa gave her head a quick little shake. "That's not what I meant. You're sure you've heard *nothing*?" She was watching him with wide eyes, but her panicked breathing had calmed a little.

"No, nothing at all." Draco paused. "Is it Father?" He was trying to brace himself for the news that Lucius had died in Azkaban or suffered some worse fate, while dimly aware that he would fall over if it was true.

"No." Narcissa swallowed. "I thought—there was a rumor." She passed a hand over her forehead. "But you would have heard something if it was true," she murmured. "They would have been obliged to let you know, since you are the head of the family now."

"I wish you would speak plainly, Mother." Draco drew his legs up beneath him and tried to get comfortable. "Is there some problem with the vaults? Is the Ministry threatening you again?" Either of those were crises that he had expected before and ones that he thought he could deal with.

"No." Narcissa closed her eyes. "I must—of course it was only a rumor. Amelia Ravenhurst doesn't know what she's talking about."

"I wish you would speak plainly," Draco said again, while he was trying to make sense of what she'd said. The Ravenhursts were a family so minor that he was somewhat surprised his mother

had contact with them at all. Of course, they might be some of the allies that she'd found who had made promises to her based on the weight of Harry's name.

How would they know anything about our family?

"All's well," Narcissa said brightly. "But I have duties I must attend to." And then the flames went out.

Draco stared at the fireplace, shaking his head. His mother had never done something so discourteous as to end a Floo call like that.

Troubled, and hoping that this didn't turn out to be something worse than it seemed on the surface, he rose and went to fetch the books Harry had asked him to bring to the library, where they would begin a study session.

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Chapter: 43

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Forty-Three—The War Wizards

"They're magnificent."

Harry glanced curiously at Draco. He didn't think he'd heard that particular tone of voice from him before. Draco sounded as if he *meant* the words he was speaking, and that was remarkable when he was talking about something that didn't belong to his family.

Draco caught his look and frowned at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry said hastily, and faced the spectacle in front of them again. Yes, he had to admit they were magnificent, though it wasn't the first word that he would have chosen.

The War Wizards wore robes of dark scarlet, which Harry had thought were so they wouldn't show blood and Draco had told him resembled a dark rose—though he'd admitted there was no real *reason* they should resemble a dark rose when Harry asked him. Their collars had a silver edging attached, and a symbol at the throat. Harry thought the symbol was a wand crossed with a sword, which he had seen on several pamphlets the Ministry had handed out about the War Wizards.

Currently, they were training in the middle of a large hollow that Harry thought was a crater and

Draco said couldn't be, somewhere out in the country where Muggles wouldn't come. The Auror trainees had been released from classes for the day and Apparated to the spot to watch them. Harry thought the instructors, and Shacklebolt himself, were hoping that any spies among the trainees would warn Nihil about what he was up against, and perhaps make him think twice.

If anything can, Harry thought, shifting his position on the thick grass. So far, all the War Wizards had done was march about in drills and lift their wands to cast an illusion of a rising golden dragon, which it seemed was their signal for help. Harry thought their discipline was impressive, but he didn't see how it would help them win battles.

Then the tiny, green-robed figure in front of the War Wizards, one of their trainers or commanders, stepped back and made a shrill noise, a whistle louder than any whistle should be.

The War Wizards broke apart into dizzying patterns of red robes. Harry's eyes crossed as he tried to track everything at once, so at first he didn't realize what they were doing.

Then he saw.

Some of the War Wizards unleashed terrible boiling storms of light at each other, or small, concentrated beams of red and green light which Harry knew from studying with Dearborn could be more powerful curses than the flashier ones, or conjured weapons and animals out of nothing to attack their comrades who stood opposite them. A storm of spears streaked the sky. True, living dragons as big as the Hungarian Horntail Harry had faced in the Triwizard Tournament appeared and lunged forwards, their jaws parted, their fire real. The earth cracked open. The smell of smoke rose to Harry's nostrils. The valley became dazzling with magic, and his skin tingled and his jaw ached in that way which meant Dark Arts were nearby.

The War Wizards who stood opposite the attackers answered.

Shields appeared in every form and variety that Harry had learned, and some he hadn't: shields of smoke, of silver, of wood and stone and ivory and ebony, of teeth and what looked like the thighbones of giants. Swarms of enormous bees swooped down on the dragons and bore them from the sky with their sheer weight. The beams of red and green light were eaten by glowing golden dogs that started up from the ground in front of the defenders, snapped their jaws twice, and then dug back into the soil when they were done. The earth softened and firmed, burned and disintegrated and reformed, so fast that Harry had to piece together what had happened afterwards.

Draco's hand closed on his arm. Harry looked at him, at his pale face and staring eyes, and nodded. He'd felt it, too. The magic rising out of the valley was more powerful than their mingled compatible magic, many times over. It was the first force they had encountered since they started working together that was, unless you counted the various tricks that Nihil had played.

"I have to learn how to do that," Draco said, his voice reverent.

Harry looked into the hollow again and wondered what kind of "that" he was talking about. There were so many to choose from, and it looked as though the War Wizards were turning around and exchanging places so that they could launch another, new wave of spells. Of course, Harry thought. You couldn't have half your army only knowing how to do one thing. "I don't think they offer training outside their ranks," he said aloud. "That was what Portillo Lopez said, anyway."

"I want to find a way to get in," Draco insisted. "Think of what we could do with it."

Harry smiled, touched that Draco had included him automatically even though he hadn't expressed any interest in learning about War Wizardry. "I wish you good luck with that," he said. "But I think you'd have to give up learning how to become an Auror."

Draco hesitated just a moment. Then he flicked his hand in the stubborn, dismissive motion Harry knew he used whenever he didn't want to consider that something might be beyond his reach. "Lies," he said coolly. "Why would I? It would be much easier, and better, to combine the two types of training."

"Define 'easy,'" Harry muttered. "Besides, I don't think that you could. They would insist that you choose one or the other."

Draco rolled over to face him more fully. "And you think that doing things the old way will defeat Nihil?" he demanded. "You really think that simply flinging defensive spells and hoping for the best will work?"

Harry met his gaze evenly. He was getting better at not taking offense when Draco said something like this, because, most of the time, he wasn't the one Draco was angry at. "I don't," he replied. "But the Aurors and War Wizards probably think exactly that, or we would be fighting at their side."

Draco rolled onto his stomach again and stared down into the hollow with a scowl on his face. Harry reached out and laid a hand on his back, hoping that he could convey silent sympathy.

At one point, Draco tensed as if he would shrug Harry's touch off, but then he sighed and cuddled closer to him. Harry made sure that he kept his smile private.

"What do I have to do to get training from the War Wizards?"

He must have startled Portillo Lopez, although Draco had thought he'd made enough noise as he was coming into the office to warn her. Her hand slashed a black line of ink across the page she was writing, and she stared at it in deep offense for two minutes before turning around to face him. Draco swallowed but forged ahead. "I watched them training. They were magnificent. Why don't we learn that? Can I?"

"I expected better of you, Mr. Malfoy." Portillo Lopez lowered her quill to the table and tapped her fingers together. "To speak such questions in such a tone, as if you were a two-year-old asking what certain words meant."
Draco flushed, but told himself the Battle Healer was manipulating him in exactly the way his mother had when he was a child, by commenting on a loss of dignity and expecting him to flinch before her.

The problem was, it was working.

Draco looked at the wall in a way that he hoped would mingle shame and a way to regain his composure, and asked in a neutral tone, "I'll limit it to one question, then, the one I asked before. What do I have to do to get War Wizard training?"

"Leave the Auror program," Portillo Lopez said, arching her eyebrows. "I must admit, after our attempts to keep you in the program, I find it ironic that you would depart of your own free will."

Draco glared at her. "I won't leave Harry behind."

"Your loyalty is admirable," said Portillo Lopez, so smoothly that Draco wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not. "However, the restrictions on combining Auror and War Wizard training are long-lasting, firm, and just. You will not persuade the Ministry to relax them simply because of your whim."

"It's not a whim," Draco said. He knew it. Nothing in his Auror training had provoked such a settled awe and hunger in him as the display he had seen yesterday, not even his private training sessions with Dearborn. "I want to combine the two. Yes, I entered the Ministry as an Auror and I'll stay here as one. But why can't I learn some of the spells and techniques, even if I never use them the way the War Wizards do?"

"Because of what would happen if you *did* try to use them within the confines of Auror work," Portillo Lopez said. "Are you that stupid, not to see what would happen if you attempted a combination?"

"Suppose you tell me." Draco leaned against a table and did his best to look cool and nonchalant. His effort shook a bit when the table wobbled and he had to stand upright again and check on the welfare of some potions vials on the shelves.

Portillo Lopez's lips twitched, but her eyes remained serious. "The demonstration that you saw yesterday occurred because we are on the brink of a war," she said. "Imagine what would happen if you used such spells to attack fleeing criminals, to intimidate suspects that you wished to interrogate, or to investigate a disturbance, all the most regular parts of Auror work."

Draco frowned. He could see the point she was trying to make: that they were too flashy, too dramatic, and, in a way, too much overkill. "But why can't we learn the defensive spells and not the offensive?" he asked.

Portillo Lopez changed her tactics and gave him a withering stare. "Because none of the Ministry hierarchy are stupid enough to believe that you can separate one discipline from the other," she snapped. "Why do you think we have a class called Offensive *and* Defensive Magic?"

Draco tapped his fingers against his arm. He still wanted to learn both Auror work and War Wizard arts. He wasn't interested in fighting any more battles, but to know that he had that power at his command, even if all he ever did was show the very edges of it in dealing with ordinary criminals…

"It is a dream others have had," Portillo Lopez continued in a milder tone. "But that does not mean they can be allowed to practice it."

"Could I leave Auror training for as long as it takes me to become a War Wizard, and then come back?" Draco asked.

"And leave Trainee Potter?" Portillo Lopez leaned forwards and scrutinized him with lively interest. "I must say, you are less loyal than I thought you were. Pushkin may be pleased to hear it, because his observations have not entirely convinced him that your partnership will work out for long-term success."

Draco scowled. He kept running up against that barrier. If he wasn't interested in fighting another war, he could only imagine that Harry would be even less interested.

But the image of the spells he had seen in battle yesterday rose before his eyes again, and he licked his lips. There had to be a way to share in that—the power and the glory—and he was honest enough, with himself at least, to admit that it was the power of the spells that attracted him more than anything else.

"I should be able to," he whispered.

"Perhaps you should," Portillo Lopez agreed.

Draco looked up quickly.

"But you cannot," Portillo Lopez finished, and turned back to her writing.

Draco let himself out of the office, eyes narrowed in thought. So the instructors would not be enough help, but he would find another way.

He had to. His soul had been marked by what he'd seen yesterday.

Nihil really did seem to have vanished from the Ministry.

No matter how anyone searched, no matter what they studied, they uncovered no clues that could

prove he was still lurking about. Harry had asked about the documents they'd found in Auror Gregory's rooms, and Portillo Lopez had admitted that most of them were false, involving the names of people who had never existed or trainees who were able to say under Veritaserum that no one had approached them. Ketchum had taught them all the incantation that would call up the life dragon, but he admitted that he didn't know many more spells that would be useful. Hermione had promptly run off to the library to look some of them up.

Harry had thought that perhaps the other people Draco had recruited for the spy network would prove useful, but Margate continued to protest that he'd seen nothing. Pollian Kepler, whose sister Harry had talked to, seemed to think she'd paid her debt by bringing them the Veritaserum they'd used on Ron and Hermione. She never looked at them in any special way in Ketchum's classes, and otherwise Harry didn't think they ever saw her.

He tried to resist becoming absorbed in the normal routine of classes. After all, sooner or later Nihil would come back, and Harry didn't want to be caught sitting when he did.

But the days passed, and nothing happened. April whirled away towards May, and the only significant change was that Draco got more and more obsessed with becoming a War Wizard and started spending more time looking up the regulations that separated them and the Aurors.

Well, and Harry had to admit, to himself at least, that he was probably in love with Draco.

It was a hard thing to say. What did he *really* know about being in love? He'd had a crush on Cho, and of course that hadn't worked out. He'd thought he was in love with Ginny, and then it had all fallen apart. Harry wasn't really afraid of how Draco would react when he told him; he was afraid that *he* wouldn't be able to hold up his end of the bargain. Or maybe the publicity that would come with dating the Boy-Who-Lived would be too much for Draco.

You can't know that until you tell him and it happens.

Harry sighed and blew his fringe out of his eyes. They were in the middle of their room at the moment. Draco dozed on the bed—he'd been up most of the night trying valiantly to find a loophole that would let him at least get the basic War Wizard training—and Harry was supposed to be looking at the latest painting Pushkin had assigned them, coming up with two hundred facts about it.

Harry bit his lip and focused his gaze on Draco again. He would have to be careful that his list for Pushkin didn't include any facts about Draco, he thought. That could easily happen, since Draco was the centerpiece of his mind these days.

The danger Draco had been in after the fist of white fire attacked him had clarified and sharpened Harry's feelings at last. He knew what he wanted. He was sure about what he wanted.

But if it failed…

It'll hurt so much more than it ever did with Ginny. And how could we go on being partners if we didn't work out as lovers? I don't want any other partner but him. I don't see why he would want to stay around if we just had row after row, though, or if it turned out that I couldn't protect him.

Harry rubbed his hand across his mouth. He was getting disgusted with himself. The best way to make things happen the way he wanted to would be to speak out and see what Draco said.

He just had to pick the perfect moment to do it.

Now wasn't it, since he would have to wake Draco up and then Draco would be cranky. Harry convinced himself of that without much effort and bowed his head, fixing his eyes on the page in front of him.

Harry obviously had something he wanted to say to him.

Draco could tell it not only from the way that Harry kept opening his mouth and almost starting to speak, then shutting it again, but the coy glances he kept giving at Draco before he looked away. Harry wasn't hard to read once you got used to him. His eyes and his mouth told the truth, and so did the way he played with his fringe, and rustled his papers more than usual, and took care to sit next to Draco in every class but then didn't speak to him.

Draco wondered if it would be about the disastrous attempt to get Carbury to agree to be friends with him. He knew about that, thanks to an owl from Carbury. Draco had rolled his eyes at the time and dismissed the incident. Harry had done no lasting harm. Besides, at that point Draco had thought he was close to getting an interview with a War Wizard.

It had turned out that he wasn't. Now Draco had to admit that he might never gain his desire, at least not by the official routes that he'd been using so far. He would have to retreat and think it over until a plan came to him.

Now he could think of other things than Nihil and training, he was beginning to notice Harry again.

While Draco waited for Harry to make up his mind and speak, he took pleasure in noticing the envious gazes that came his way—never from Granger and Weasley anymore, but from others. There were plenty of Auror trainees who would have been glad to be Harry's friend, or more, his partner or lover. Harry never noticed.

Draco smirked back and made sure to touch Harry's shoulder or neck or arm. That heated the glances with hatred, but Draco didn't care. It was their own fault for lifting their eyes to a treasure too high for them to possess.

And the weeks went on, and there was no sign of Nihil, and Harry grew a little stronger, a little firmer, every day. He was moving closer and closer to a declaration of some kind.

Based on his behavior, Draco thought he knew what it would be. And, when he thought of that and what would come once it was said and how things would change and how he would have to face up to what had so far been only fantasies or nightmares dancing through his head…

For once in his life, he didn't mind waiting.

Harry chose the first day of May to speak the words to Draco. It seemed appropriate, somehow.

He wished he had some kind of gift to give along with the words, but everything he could think of was stupid. Ginny would have liked flowers, but Draco was a boy. Sweets and cards of some sort were out for the same reasons. Maybe Draco would have liked potions equipment, but he had everything Harry had thought of, and Harry had some vague idea that that wasn't romantic *enough*. Draco already had Politesse, and Harry knew he couldn't afford other expensive gifts like that. He never could have afforded Politesse if he hadn't been given away for free.

I think I know everything about Draco, but I can't think of anything he'd like for a gift, Harry decided in frustration. *So much for knowing him.*

On and on his buzzing thoughts went, until he decided this was another delaying tactic to put off the moment of the words. He should just say them, and if Draco wanted a gift after that, maybe he could mention one and Harry could get it.

Their last class of the day was Observation, and for once, miracle of miracles, Pushkin didn't keep Harry back to recite more useless facts about a stone or a leaf. They both got out at the same time, and Draco was talking, as usual, about ways that he could find an in with the War Wizards.

"Maybe they take extraordinarily talented people," he said, striding down the corridor with a restless motion Harry had realized recently that he loved, like almost everything else about Draco. "We're talented, aren't we? The compatible magic, the way we fight, the way we survived against Nihil, the way we've managed not to go mad despite all the things we've been through—"

His expression was brilliant and keen, cutting like a hawk's. Harry could have stared, mesmerized. Instead, he put out one hand and touched Draco's shoulder, halting him.

Draco turned around, mouth open to deliver some sarcastic remark, and then paused. He seemed to have sensed the words behind Harry's lips, his shaking hand. His mouth shaped other words entirely. "What is it?" he whispered.

"I love you."

The universe didn't crumble into flames after all when Harry said that. Draco didn't fling himself away and sneer about how Harry hadn't been able to say that and mean it to Ginny. Instead, his eyes fluttered, and he stood very still. Harry would have thought he was unaffected, except for the way his pulse beat madly in his throat.

"I really love you," Harry said, his voice growing stronger. "I want to have sex with you. I want to stay with you. I want to be your friend. I want to be your partner. I want to be with you in as many ways as you can imagine, and some that we can invent together."

Then Draco was drawing him closer, mouth clamping down on his, face hard with passion, and Harry didn't have time to think about it any longer.

The wall was against his back, smooth and cool. Draco's fingers slid along his skin, warm and urgent and stabbing into places along his ribs and under his shoulders that Harry didn't even know he had. Their breath mingled between them in wild pants, and Harry found himself looping his arms around Draco's neck without knowing how they'd got there.

They kissed, and moved closer together, and kissed again. Harry was beginning to feel faintly smug. *Maybe my words were enough of a gift for him.*

A flash of soundless light tore through the air. Harry pulled back from Draco, blinking. His first thought was that his excitement had made him lose control of his magic and it was lashing out around him.

Then he heard the alarms singing, and the students screaming, and he fell back close to Draco for another purpose, drawing his wand.

And then a voice, Portillo Lopez's voice carried on some spell Harry didn't know, spoke from every corner of the Ministry.

"Nihil has come. To arms, Aurors."

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Chapter: 44

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Forty-Four—Nihil

Draco ran, panting, beside Harry as they headed for the front of the Ministry, because the loudest noises of fighting seemed to come from there. He took a moment to reflect, grimly, that he would have tried to run *away* from those sounds just a year ago.

But that was before he had Harry beside him, Harry who had smiled at him and fought beside him and shared compatible magic with him and kissed him.

Harry, who told me he loved me.

Draco suffered a single intense pang of regret that Nihil could not have held off for *five minutes more.*

They sped up a corridor that opened into the Atrium, and saw a glow of white light from ahead. Draco licked his lips. A glance at Harry was sufficient to show him that this was Dark Arts; Harry had a disgusted expression on his face.

Draco nodded to Harry and drew his wand. Harry drew his in what looked like the same smooth motion, though Draco knew it wasn't really, and they whirled to face the threat.

The white light dimmed enough that Draco could see the creatures cantering forwards out of it. They might have been centaurs, but their flanks were a dark purple color that had never been seen on any natural centaur, and their human heads were covered with horns, tusks, and odd long projections that looked like stingers.

The creatures reared, and Draco saw they held bows in their hands, bristling with multiple flexible arrows that whipped up and down like cattail stalks.

It was as if they shared one mind. Harry cast *Protego*, and the magic rolled over to Draco, drenching him in a spray of confidence, relaxing his muscles. He knew he was smiling as he cast the Fire-Giver Curse, but that wasn't a problem as long as it didn't interfere with his casting of the spell.

It didn't. The pseudo-centaurs shot their arrows, and they began to burn in mid-flight. Then they halted, hovering halfway between Draco and Harry and the archers, before they turned around and stabbed the centaurs in their flanks and heads and chests. Draco could smell the scent of burning flesh, and hear their screams.

He laughed aloud, exultant, though he felt Harry's hand clamp down on his shoulder. Then Harry wheeled around and began running towards the sounds of battle from further up the Atrium.

Draco ran with him. If Harry was too weak to enjoy the sight of an enemy dying, well, Draco would enjoy that for him, and Harry would be the one to offer protection. His magic was better-suited to that sort of thing anyway.

The floor surged up to meet them suddenly. Draco fell, his legs knocked from under him, and felt Harry crouch over his back, drawing a circle with his wand that raised a circular shield of green light. An instant later, something slammed against the shield, something with multiple legs and chattering jaws loaded with chitin that might once have been human. Draco shuddered and stared in fascination as it slid down the shield and scuttled off.

"Saw it from the corner of my eye," Harry explained breathlessly, reaching for Draco's hand and

helping him back to his feet. "Are you all right?"

Draco nodded. His breath and his dignity were gone, but they would both recover. He looked around, scanning the floor beyond the fountain for signs of the screaming they had heard, but again, the battle seemed to have moved further off just as they were about to catch up to its fringes.

He did see streams of blood running from a pile of broken limbs. He winced and wondered if he should try to screen the sight from Harry, but when he turned back, he realized from Harry's grim, transfixed stare that he had already seen the bloody mess.

"They'll pay for that," Harry said, in a voice that was more a threat because he didn't raise it, and then stabbed Draco with a single glance. "And they'll pay with death if they try to harm you."

Draco couldn't help it; he preened a bit. One of his favorite fantasies when he and Harry had still been enemies was that someday Harry would step between Draco and someone who was tormenting him—the Weasel, perhaps—and declare that he had changed his mind and Draco was worth protecting. This wasn't the same situation, but hearing Harry promise to kill for him was no small gift.

"This way," Harry snapped then, and nearly hauled Draco off his feet running to the right. Draco fought until he had his balance back, and then ran willingly alongside his partner.

He would follow wherever Harry led, as long as he was allowed to play an equal part in the leading.

Harry crouched behind a cubicle wall, grateful beyond words, at the moment, for Ketchum's Battlefield Tactics lessons. There was some kind of conference going on in the middle of the Auror Department between several of Nihil's followers, and Draco and Harry would never have got this close without practice in Ketchum's obstacle courses.

They were close enough to hear, but not close enough to catch every nuance of the argument. Harry leaned his head on the wall and sighed noiselessly, for which Draco still nudged him as if he'd sighed aloud. The most vital part of the row to hear had probably been the very words they had missed.

"I don't understand why he's so intent on bringing them down," said a figure in the middle of the group, surrounded by a shifting, arctic-white glamour that kept Harry from seeing any details about it. "After all, they're only two Auror trainees in a sea of them."

"Two Auror trainees who resisted him, escaped him, and denied him their magic." That was a tall woman with a sweet voice, a voice that gradually wore on Harry's nerves the longer he listened to her, because it shouldn't belong to someone who seemed so irredeemably evil. "I can see why our leader's fascination extends to them."

"But he wanted to make them resources, and he failed," said a third figure, who had dark hair that appeared to completely encircle his head and deny Harry any glimpse of his face. Draco had whispered that he thought that was a glamour, more complicated and thicker than most of the ones they could identify—not that complicated and powerful magic was unusual for Nihil's servants. "That has happened with others. He was wise enough to give up on them and go on. Why can he not give up on these?"

"Because think what a resource Harry Potter would have been." The tall woman made an impatient motion with her head, maybe because another of the glamoured figures had stepped towards her to argue with her. "Oh, it doesn't matter. He simply wants them found and neutralized. We can do that for our master without necessarily knowing what he wants them for."

"That's true," said the figure with the hair around its head. "And you have a means of locating them, don't you, Isola?"

Harry moved his lips over the name, wondering if he had heard it before, or whether it was the name of anyone who had gone missing in the last few months. He glanced at Draco, who had more contact with those pure-blood circles. Draco simply shook his head and pointed two fingers back at the conversation.

"I do." Isola drew a hand out of the pocket of her robe and stared intently at something in her palm. Harry saw a flash of white light like that kind that had announced the centaurs. Isola laughed. "Ah, they are not far from here. It will be easy to find them."

And then Draco grabbed Harry's arm, leaned over to whisper in his ear, "Just follow me. You'll thank me for this later," and hurtled over the cubicle wall, bearing down on the glamoured people. Harry had to go with him, at first because of the pull on his arm and his sheer astonishment, then because he would never let Draco go into battle alone.

Isola spun to face them. Harry made out a carved white bracelet in her hands, glowing like the sun, before she flung it away and drew her wand. The glamoured figures fell back into a semicircle and linked their hands. The bodies of the two on the farthest ends of the semicircle tore open, and two boiling masses of grief magic rose up and hurtled towards them.

Draco jerked to a halt and stood back-to-back with Harry, whispering, "The curse to banish Dark magical creatures?"

Harry agreed, his words seeming to fly ahead of his mind. He was in the middle of a situation so unexpected and urgent that he had no time to think through it logically. He felt the warm pressure of Draco's back against his, the bony pressure of his shoulder blades, and heard him yell, "*Abigo!*" The incantation pulled the word from *his* mouth along with the one from Draco's.

The masses of grief magic tore apart like clouds before a blast of powerful wind. The same wind apparently came back again and caught them up, and the red and black tendrils shuddered and faded. Harry nodded in satisfaction.

Then the shimmering blast of compatible magic hit him again, and he discovered that he was smiling and speaking so fast that Draco surely couldn't understand him. *Did we trade minds as well as leadership in magical power just now?* "Let's Transfigure them. That way, we can embarrass Nihil and avoid having to kill him."

He didn't wait for Draco's agreement. He knew it couldn't be long in coming, given the powerful, compelling current that held both their minds. He pointed his wand at Isola, with Draco's wand rising next to his like a mirror image but pointing to the figure with hair around its head, and together they chanted, "*Commuto pullum!"*

Isola and the glamoured figure tried to raise shields, but they either didn't know shields against Transfiguration or Harry and Draco had moved too fast. Their targets began to shrink, sprouting feathers as they did so. Their eyes turned small and round and black, and their voices turned into shrill piping. A moment later, there were two small yellow chicks running around where Isola and the man had stood, their stubby wings beating in pathetic strokes.

Harry stared as the rest of Nihil's servants fled. He panted and leaned against Draco. It felt as though someone else had possessed him and powered his spells, made his decisions, and given him the spell that he *knew* he hadn't known, or at least couldn't remember learning. He licked his lips and turned to face Draco.

Draco looked at him sideways. "I read about that in one of the books on compatible magic," he mumbled. "But it seemed so powerful and so far away from anything that we were doing that I didn't think we'd be able to do it for years." He blinked several times, and staggered.

Harry caught him and held him up. The chicks had scuttled under the desks, and Harry decided they could leave them there. They could hardly transform themselves back if they weren't Animagi.

"How much rest do you think we need?" he asked. "Only we should try to join the battle again as soon as we can."

Draco nodded shortly, bending down so that his hands rested on his knees. Harry noted with quiet satisfaction that Draco inclined towards him at the same time, as if he trusted Harry to support him more than his own body. Harry curved an arm around his shoulders. "I know," Draco gasped out. "Give me a few minutes to rest, and then I'll be ready."

Harry nodded, and glanced around the Auror Department. He and Draco had been running from floor to floor of the Ministry, striking where they could, joining a few of the other Aurors and trainees and then breaking apart from them again. It didn't look as though there were any wounded or attackers in the Department right now, but—

Then Harry saw a shadow waver from under one of the cubicles, and quickly sprang forwards, holding up his wand.

"At ease, Trainee Potter."

It was Portillo Lopez's voice. Harry still eyed her carefully as she came around the corner, but she held up her arm in answer, and Harry saw the shimmer of the glamour that hid her jade bracelet. He nodded, supposing it was the best answer he could have for right now.

He still stayed close to Draco as they moved forwards to join Portillo Lopez and the people who walked behind her, though. Harry saw two of the trainees in their class, Pollian Kepler, and a blonde woman whose name he thought was Anna Kasanova. She had a long wound on her face that had been knitted together with a spell. Now and then she raised a hand to touch it.

"Don't do that, Trainee Kasanova," Portillo Lopez said, without even looking around. She was examining Draco and Harry, probably for wounds, and nodded in satisfaction at the end of the examination. "Very well. Come with us. We are attempting to form small pockets of resistance throughout the Ministry which can combat Nihil when he moves away from his initial attack." Her robes swirled about her as she turned to face the entrance of the Auror Department.

"What happened?" Draco demanded. There was still a breathiness in his voice that Harry didn't like, but he was walking on his own. Harry settled for walking beside him in case he started to fall over again. "I thought the War Wizards were supposed to fight Nihil and use their all-powerful magic to keep him away from the Ministry?"

His voice was sharp and mocking. Harry gave him a warning look, but he didn't think Draco noticed.

"Even the War Wizards cannot be everywhere at once," said Portillo Lopez, sounding unfazed. She cast a spell that toppled two of the cubicle walls. Harry shook his head. *If Nihil's servants had thought to do that, we would have been dead.* "They are away from the Ministry at the moment, looking for Nihil in the hiding places they thought likeliest. But Nihil circled back to the Ministry, around them, and he has disabled the alarms and the Floo connections so that no one can reach them."

"Is *that* all?" Harry demanded. He held up his wand. "I can send my Patronus with a message, Auror, if you just tell me who to send it to."

Portillo Lopez gave him a long, slow look. "That has been tried," she said quietly. "I saw the Patronus bound into one of the wards that Nihil has raised around the Ministry. A moment later, the body of the woman who had tried it exploded."

Harry winced and lowered his arm. Draco gave him a wry look and moved closer, as much as to say that he wasn't the only one who needed protection from his own recklessness.

"How did Nihil get so powerful?" Harry asked instead, determined to relieve his feelings of frustration somehow. "I mean, *somebody* has to know. What about his followers? Do you

recognize any of them?"

"Some of them have faces similar to those I have seen in the past, but I recognized none of our trainees." Portillo Lopez paused near the lift, or what should have been the lift. Metallic wreckage filled the chute instead of doors. "We will need to climb down. Nihil has blocked the staircases, and I believe that the major battle is taking place in the Atrium. Trainees, if you would?" She stepped back and gestured with one arm.

Harry grimaced, but it *was* true that they had all received training in climbing in Ketchum's class, so it could be done. It was simply uncomfortable and dangerous.

He surrounded his hands with small shields of the kind that Ketchum recommended for navigating dangerous territory, and then reached out. Sure enough, two fragments of metal would have pierced his skin except for those shields. He could feel Portillo Lopez nodding in approval in the moments before she commanded Draco to follow him. Draco said something that was probably a question as to why, and Portillo Lopez said sharply, "Your magic is strong enough to support you both if you were to fall, and to support the others if they stumble."

That was evidently enough for Draco. Harry managed to glance up and exchange smiles with him as they carefully picked their way down the lift shaft, their hands scrambling madly for holds, their feet braced on either side of the shaft. Harry didn't know what they would have done if it was only a few inches wider. As it was, he felt like a spider—a clumsy spider who was going to fall any moment.

Shut up, Harry told his stupid brain that insisted on feeding him thoughts like that. *It's no worse than being high up on a broom during Quidditch.* Really, he was together with Draco and one of the Auror instructors; things were a lot better than they could have been.

What are they like for Ron and Hermione?

Again, Harry had to control an overexcited spasm of his arms against the walls. He bit his lip and waited a moment, despite the fact that he could practically feel Draco's boots on his back, before he continued climbing. Speed wouldn't do any good if it meant that he fell.

By the time they reached the level of the Atrium, Harry's body was shaking with pain and fatigue, but he stepped out of the lift shaft and dropped into a crouch the way Ketchum had taught him, looking around. The floor was covered with rubble, and in some places the walls had half-collapsed. Harry could see twitching bodies lying here and there, in poses that reminded him sharply of the Battle of Hogwarts. Not all the bodies were human.

Draco landed beside him, and suddenly exhaled hard, pointing. Harry turned to look even as he adjusted himself automatically so that he could shield the people who were climbing down behind him.

A figure in a painfully heat-haze-like glamour—Nihil as they had seen him in the fight with

Ketchum—was striding across the rubble, his feet skimming over it and rebounding, so that he seemed to actually be walking through the air. And a single figure stood facing him, his eyes wide and still and dark.

Dearborn.

"I have been waiting for this for a long time," Dearborn said, and then lifted his wand and launched lightning at Nihil.

Draco, who had spent time with Dearborn and trained with him privately, thought he understood the level of skill in this battle more than most of the people who crouched behind him, transfixed and staring, or the survivors he could see peering over some of the blocks of rubble.

But even he was startled by the grace that Dearborn brought to the battle, and humbled, a bit, to realize that at least *one* person had managed to achieve a level of power comparable to the War Wizards' without their training.

Nihil struck with complicated curses that Draco knew should have taken him minutes to weave: webs of light that turned the floor to a marsh beneath Dearborn's feet, pinwheeling tigers that descended from the air and struck at Dearborn's head, arrows of light that flared fit to blind him, a spell that briefly withered his arm and turned it into a stick smaller and more useless than many twigs Draco had seen.

And, swaying back and forth sometimes before the power of that magic but always stepping forwards again and bringing up more strength than Draco had realized existed, Dearborn answered.

The marsh shimmered and turned back into stone. The tigers burst into sparks that fell harmlessly around Dearborn the moment they got within a foot of him. His face already wore a shield of darkness that defeated those arrows of light. When his arm twisted and shriveled, Dearborn tossed his wand into the air, caught it with his left hand, and spread skin and flesh along his right arm again as if the wand was a spider spinning out silk.

And then he began to go on the offensive, and Nihil fell back in front of him, replying in the same language of power.

Stones flung themselves into the air like suicidal attackers, and bounced back again. A stone wall came into being between them, then puffed into dust. A plate of iron nearly fell on Nihil, but he danced aside and heaved it back at Dearborn, who made it vanish. Bloody wounds opened along their arms or shoulders or backs, but it was only a moment before they startled rolling shut, the skin gathering and knitting itself at the upper end of the injury before the lower end could finish being slashed open.

Nihil opened a pit below Dearborn. Dearborn soared out of it on a conjured pair of fairy wings made of dust and light.

Dearborn tried to impale Nihil with a set of iron spikes that rushed up through the piece of floor he was standing on. Nihil smiled, and they turned to jets of water that rushed over his skin and splashed harmlessly along his arms.

Nihil called vultures that stooped on Dearborn with toothed beaks, joined a moment later by a vampire. Golden eagles appeared on Dearborn's shoulders and launched themselves out as straight as arrows, multiplying as they went, downing the vultures viciously and staking the vampire through the heart and the eyes with talons of light.

Dearborn moved his wand in a swirling pattern, and Nihil's face turned blue as the air left his lungs and body in a rush. Nihil stepped to the side and moved his wand down his body, and Draco saw one of the bodies turn into air, which rushed to sustain Nihil until he could cancel Dearborn's charm completely.

Hex blended into defense, curse into countercurse, Transfiguration into reversal, until Draco could no longer pick out the individual spells. It was a simple contest of magic, and Draco felt awed and humbled to be present at it.

Sometimes another thought tried to intrude, which wondered how they would survive if ever Nihil or Dearborn lost control of the destructive forces that danced beneath them. Bu he could feel Harry's shoulder under his hand, and as long as he had that, he couldn't stir his mind out of the hypnotism that gripped him.

And then Nihil raised his hands, extending his arms above his head, his voice hoarse as he shouted words Draco thought were Greek. Light followed his gesture, welling up like a stylized rising sun, and this time Draco was sure Nihil was trying deliberately to destroy the battlefield and the spectators.

Dearborn, his face desperate, dashed forwards and jumped into the light, his arms spread and his voice shouting more Greek in response. His wand danced over his head; Draco thought he had thrown it away, but it evidently floated along with him, casting spells on its own.

There was a soundless explosion that made Draco's ears pop and caused him to open his jaw in a scream. He thought one of his eardrums must have burst, so intense was the pain. He flailed on the floor for a minute, trying to get rid of the pain and make sure Harry was well and watch the conclusion of the battle at the same time.

The light faded, slowly, reluctantly. Glowing chunks of air still clung to the walls and the dust of what had been the fountain.

Nihil was gone. Draco didn't know if he was destroyed or not. He suspected there was no way to tell.

But Dearborn lay where he had stood, his head flung back, his eyes wide and glassy, his limbs

cut from his body and his throat slashed.

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Chapter: 45

Thank you again for all the reviews! This is the last chapter of *Soldier's Welcome*; I'll be starting the second story in the trilogy about a week from now. That one will be called *Ceremonies of Strife* and cover the second year of Auror training.

Epilogue

Harry thought the moment of staring, fascinated silence lasted for several minutes, but it couldn't have, because Portillo Lopez plunged past them and ran up to Dearborn, and she couldn't have thought she had a chance of saving him if he had been lying there several minutes.

That was the kind of thing Harry had to tell himself as he stood up and touched Draco's arm so Draco would continue to know that he was there. The world around him seemed dazed and shaky, echoing the way he felt. When he looked at things, it took his eyes and brain an instant longer than usual to come together. When he studied the dead, his emotions seemed mired in mud. He would feel the urge to cry when he was studying a broken wall instead.

He watched Portillo Lopez working frantically over Dearborn and stroked Draco's shoulder in the meantime, because he could feel how tense Draco was at the thought of losing his mentor. And of course Harry didn't want Dearborn to die either. Sometimes, he'd been a prick to Harry, but that didn't mean he deserved death, any more than it had meant Snape had.

Then Portillo Lopez gave a cry that sounded—wounded was the only description that Harry could put on it. He looked back in time to see her staring at her fingers, and a patch of empty floor beneath them. He wondered where Dearborn's body had gone. Had someone snatched it away or Apparated it away so that they could give it a proper funeral?

His eyes had focused on the pile of dust before his brain let him know, as much from Portillo Lopez's babbled comments as anything else, what it must have been.

"He crumbled beneath my touch," Portillo Lopez whispered. "It's as if he had been dead for years, with no life-force left in his body. As if he was a still image, like the tapestries you see sometimes in ruins that preserve their original forms but will crumble if you touch them." She covered her face with her hands.

As people crowded around her to reassure her, Harry heard the tramp of marching feet. He whirled to face the far end of the Atrium, stepping forwards so that he could shelter Draco and

perhaps the others, and lifted his wand.

Ron and Hermione came into view, running madly the moment they saw him, shouts breaking from their throats. Behind them were the dark red robes of the War Wizards, come, at last, and too late.

Harry spread his arms wide to embrace his best friends and grunted with the impact of their hug, while trying to use the pressure of his shoulder to comfort Draco.

"As we gather this day to remember the fallen, I hope that everyone here will demonstrate the bravery and heroism they did…"

Draco bowed his head and let the useless words wash around him. Useless words couldn't change the fact that the War Wizards had been far from the Ministry when they were most needed, and that the Aurors had fought the incursion of Nihil's forces alone. Useless words couldn't make him feel better, when he knew that they were in the middle of a second war so soon after they had escaped from the first.

Useless words couldn't make Dearborn come back.

He sneaked a glance around at the spectators who stood about him, studying the expressions on their faces. They mostly consisted of Aurors, but there were other Ministry employees who had fought beside the Aurors on that dreadful day. Most of them looked grim. Some were weeping; Dearborn had not been the only person who died in that chaos. Other people wiped away leaking tears with their sleeves and stared at the Minister as if they expected him to make it all better.

Minister Shacklebolt stood in front of them all on a raised stage of what Draco's eyes had first seen as bones but his mind knew was really white stone, conjured for the occasion. The graveyard around them was bright with newly-turned earth. Draco hadn't realized before now that the Ministry owned several cemeteries around the country, where they buried people who died in the line of duty—at least, if their families would allow that.

In Dearborn's case, there hadn't been any family to ask. His parents were dead. He had had one brother, Caradoc, who had been a member of what Harry called the Order of the Phoenix and who had vanished during the first war with the Dark Lord, probably to be killed by Death Eaters. Dearborn had given his life for the past ten years to the training of young Aurors and sometimes fieldwork if he was needed. So the Ministry had accepted that he would want to be buried as an Auror and done it with full honors.

Draco let his gaze fall briefly on the stone, carved with nothing more than the name *DAFFYD DEARBORN*, the dates he had been born and died, and the Latin inscription *Cum summo honore,* before he looked away. He had to find some other target for his gaze; otherwise, it would start watering, and some people would make unfortunate assumptions about a Malfoy's possible weakness from that.

The gathering was encircled by a large panoply of War Wizards. Draco sneered at them, but half-heartedly. He'd done some asking around since the battle, and one thing had become abundantly clear: the Ministry didn't call them up often because the War Wizards were *expensive.* They cost a lot to train, to maintain, to find places that would permit them to exercise their magic without Muggle notice, and to outfit, never mind the pay they got for heading into dangerous situations like the hunt for Nihil.

As much as he disliked it in one sense, Draco could understand the pure cold practicality that had concentrated the War Wizards in the places Nihil had been thought most likely to haunt instead of keeping them circled around the Ministry. If that had happened, then Nihil would simply have struck somewhere else, and then the public could make a justified outcry about those expensive wizards protecting people who should be able to protect themselves.

Last, his glance went to Harry, who stood quiet and proud beside him.

Harry had never once left his side in the last few days until Draco asked him to. He hadn't always spoken, either, but simply sat reading in the same room, offering the quiet strength of his presence. He had touched Draco's shoulder with a flat hand, had embraced him, and had kissed him when Draco had said that he wouldn't object to that. Draco had never known how comforting it would be to have someone there he could turn to if he wished and ignore the rest of the time. Malfoys were supposed to bear their grievances privately, in silence.

I like this way better, Draco thought, and leaned his shoulder into Harry's. Harry had been paying more attention to the Minister's speech than he had, but he still had the time to give Draco a quick glance and a smile.

"And the heroism of those who have fallen should remind us…"

Draco rolled his eyes and turned to the left to study the spectators over there again. This was the reason that he didn't feel he had missed much by ignoring Minister Shacklebolt's speech. It was all repetition, over and over again, of the same few themes and key words. If someone could feel better from that, they were welcome to take the comfort that should have been Draco's and spread it all over themselves.

He caught a glimpse of a tall woman with long dark hair, standing with her head bowed, whom it seemed as if he should know. He watched her idly for a moment until she turned towards him and smiled at him.

It was Nusquam. Draco couldn't be mistaken in that pale face or those brilliant blue eyes.

He pinched Harry's arm, and Harry looked, too, with a muttered exclamation about how Draco didn't have to pinch so hard. The moment he saw Nusquam, he stared, his mouth falling open and slack, and Draco could have no doubt that he recognized her, too. Why shouldn't he? They had been face-to-face with her in one of their worst battles, more than close enough to know her later.

Nusquam turned and took a few steps in the direction of the outer cordon of War Wizards. Draco opened his mouth to yell, to alert someone to her presence.

Her body dissolved into golden spheres of light that swirled into the sky and were gone in moments, popping like bubbles.

Draco shut his mouth and swallowed. The weight of Harry leaning into him from the side felt less reassuring than usual.

Nowhere is safe.

To Harry's astonishment, they didn't make the trainees clean up the Ministry. Instead, they hired professional cleaners and curse-breakers and pushed the trainees back into their classes as if they didn't want to remember what had happened.

Or, more to the point, Harry thought more than once as he bent over a page of notes taken in the new Offensive and Defensive class under Pushkin, *as if they want us to concentrate on other things.*

The weeks seemed to gallop from that point forwards. They had essays to write, classes to attend, spells to practice, exams to revise for. The instructors hurried them from point to point, scarcely giving them enough time to stop or slow down. Harry was lucky if he got to exchange a few words with Ron and Hermione about anything that didn't relate to their classes.

Hermione still wanted to investigate the Death Eaters' caches, but, as she said regretfully, there was no *time*. Ron was interested in the report Harry and Draco had of Nusquam at the mass funeral, but again, there was no more time to do anything about it. And the instructors seemed uninterested in hearing about Nusquam, telling Harry and Draco flatly that they had other things to worry about, and anyway, the Ministry was preparing a new offensive that would take place during the summer—a time when they would be out of classes but still should not act so as to embarrass the Auror program.

Harry felt as though he would like to collapse many times during the following weeks, but he had Draco to concern him—Draco, whom he didn't think had recovered as well as he had pretended to from Dearborn's death—and Hermione's grim determination that he *would* pass all these courses. Many questions occurred to him, but he put most of them out of his mind to think about later.

Two things only would not be put so conveniently aside.

The first was his private choice to spend some time alone at Grimmauld Place during the first weeks of summer. There was a book on necromancy that he needed to read so he could make some decisions.

I haven't done anything wrong. And in fact, I'm going to read the book so that I don't.

There's nothing wrong with thinking about it.

The second was a sight he saw during their Battle Healing exam, which, to his astonishment, he managed to pass because his knowledge of wounds and healing spells as used in defensive magic more than made up for his piss-poor knowledge of potions. He glanced up from healing a slash that a Slicing Curse had left in a flesh dummy and saw Portillo Lopez bending over to address another student. Her hair was disordered, her sleeves singed. As well as proctoring the exam, she'd been on hand to stop some of their more intricate incantations from going wrong.

A piece of her robe on the shoulder was burned away. Harry's tired eyes focused on the skin beneath, and it was as if he was back in the aftermath of the battle again, trying to make sense of what those eyes were telling him. He blinked and blinked again, and finally it snapped into place.

It was a small dark symbol, something Harry didn't think he would have noticed in most cases. It was this hyper-sensitive attention he was feeling at the moment that made it seem so special. He thought it looked like a wheel, and in the center, along the spokes of the wheel, were drawn odd, tapering leaves and black berries.

He reached out to nudge Draco with an elbow, and then remembered that Portillo Lopez had separated them for this exam. She didn't want their compatible magic unduly influencing the results.

Portillo Lopez straightened up, and the robe slid over the mark. Then she came over to examine Harry's work, and he forgot about the symbol for the moment in the nervousness of whether he was about to pass.

He and Draco both passed, and met after the exam for a celebratory snog. Harry told him then, when they had finished the kiss and drew back, at least with *him* feeling unaccountably shy, about the symbol on Portillo Lopez's shoulder.

Draco froze. Then he rolled upright and Summoned one of his Potions books. He leafed through the pages, frowning, then held out the book towards Harry. "Is that the plant you think she had in the tattoo?" he asked.

Harry focused on the leaves and the black berries, and nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"That's belladonna," Draco whispered. "Deadly nightshade. Why was she wearing it, I wonder?"

Harry shook his head helplessly and pulled Draco back down for another kiss. He and Draco had both been too exhausted to go further than that in the past few weeks, but he was hoping—

Draco shoved back suddenly, one hand flat on Harry's chest, and shook his head. His hair was loose around his face, his eyes so glazed that he had to blink several times before he could focus

on Harry, and Harry was at least glad to see that.

"I can't," he whispered. "Not right now, Harry. Not when we're about to part for the summer."

"But we'll *see* each other," Harry protested, pressing up until Draco could feel the ridge of his erection. "Won't we? You won't deny me the right to come to Malfoy Manor?" He cuddled close to Draco and lowered his voice. "Would you?"

"No." Draco licked his lips. "But, Harry, there's something my mother's hiding from me, I think, something I'll need time alone with her to get out of her. And you wanted to spend a week by yourself, at least? Didn't you?"

Harry nodded, collapsing back on the pillow and at the moment ready to tell Draco all about the necromancy book, if it would break apart this stupid distance between them. A second's thought convinced him what a stupid idea that would have been, luckily, but he couldn't help the whine that crept into his voice. "But we can do something over the summer? You promise?"

Draco ducked his head and rolled out of the bed. "Yes."

Harry stared at him, caught by the flatness in his voice. Then he reached out and seized Draco's hand before he could get too far away. Draco tensed, but didn't try to break his grip. Harry took a deep breath, so that his voice would be as gentle as possible when it came out. "What's wrong?"

Draco turned to face him, and Harry couldn't mistake the flat sheen in his eyes for anything but what it was.

Fear.

Harry immediately leaned forwards and embraced him. "It doesn't matter," he whispered. "We'll go as slowly as you need to." He laughed, and hoped it didn't sound false. He was always worried that what sounded perfectly reasonable to him wouldn't to other people. "Can you really think that all I want from you is sex, when we've been together this long?"

"No," Draco whispered into his hair. "But I thought you might be getting—impatient. And there are so many other people who would go to bed with you in a heartbeat."

"I don't want them," Harry said fiercely. "I want you."

That was the right thing to say, because Draco's arms tightened around him, and he kissed the nape of Harry's neck. Harry held him and let him whisper the words he wanted to say, about how he thought this would change his whole life, and he *wanted* to, but he also wanted to be sure that he wouldn't regret it or think about it only under the shadow of other things, like the exams, and how the summer would be perfect…

There is no perfect time, Harry thought, the experience he'd shared with Ginny aching like an

arrow wound in his chest. *Only the time that you make.*

But because he understood, he kissed Draco and let him go, with the prospect of a future to be looked for and won.

Draco sighed and shut his Potions books. Looking up deadly nightshade and the significance it might have when bound to the spokes of a wheel had yielded exactly nothing. There were tantalizing hints and clues, sometimes, in the descriptions of the potions it was used in, but Portillo Lopez was more than a potions-brewer. Draco couldn't be sure that that was the key to understanding what the plant meant to her.

He wasn't even sure if the tattoo was important, to be honest. Yes, it was hidden, but many people got marks they weren't exactly proud of, which they couldn't remove later and had to hide. (Draco glanced at his left arm).

Still, they couldn't afford to ignore what might be clues, and that meant he would research it over the week he and Harry were apart, and hope to have some answer by the time they came together again.

Draco smiled wryly. *So that's it. I was mostly thinking about this to use it as a distraction from how empty the rooms seem with Harry gone, and now I can admit it to myself.*

There was really no reason to delay any longer. Harry had already left for Grimmauld Place, and his mother had indicated that he would be welcome to return home to the Manor at any time. Draco had tried to put it off mainly because, here, he still had a sense of Harry's lingering presence.

He slid the book into a satchel that would shape itself to carry as many objects as he wanted, stood up, and walked to the fireplace. The instructors had given as many trainees as needed it Floo powder to allow them to travel home from the barracks, assuming they didn't want to Apparate or were headed for locations that were covered by anti-Apparition wards, like the Manor.

"Malfoy Manor!" Draco called, and the flames seized him and carried him away.

He stumbled out, coughing, onto the carpet of a small anteroom, and looked around curiously. This wasn't the usual room that the Floo connections were set to spit their visitors out into.

The carpet was thick and soft, a diamond-shaped pattern of red on black, and the soot that fell on it vanished at once, a sign that house-elves were not needed or welcome in this room. The furniture was ebony, the clock on the wall gold with black accents. Draco laid his satchel down on a small, shiny table and looked towards the door, wondering if an explanation awaited him there.

His mother did indeed stand in the doorway, and her smile was both proud and bloodless, as if

she rejoiced in something that had happened but doubted that Draco would. She came forwards to take his hands, kiss his cheek, and smile into his eyes.

"Oh, Draco," she whispered. "Something wonderful has happened. Without *notice*. That is what I cannot understand. To manage this, that is one thing. It has been managed before. But to manage it without *notice*, so that we will not get in trouble, and yet we can have what we most want."

Draco blinked at her, wondering what in the world she was talking about. His mother turned and gestured to the doorway with one slender hand.

Draco looked up again.

His father stepped into the room, ducking his head slightly to avoid the lintel, and nodded to Draco. "I escaped Azkaban without their notice, my son," he said. He wore much the same smile that Narcissa did, but the haughty tilt to his head was all his own. "Welcome home."

The End.