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Name: Providence
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Chapter 1 to 18

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Chapter: 1

Title: Providence

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Summary: Harry is in love with Draco. Draco won't look at him twice. But even though Harry can't have him, Draco still needs someone who makes him happy. And Harry has an obvious solution: write Draco letters whilst pretending those letters are from Astoria Greengrass, so that Draco will fall in love with Astoria, who adores him. It's so brilliant it just has to work!

Rating: R

Pairings: Harry/Draco, Draco/Astoria

Warnings: Slash and het (no het sex, but Draco and Astoria share long scenes together), described sex, profanity, brief violence, some angst, EWE, lots and lots of letters, deeply clueless Harry.

Author's Notes: This will be a short novel-length fic, probably around the area of 11-15 chapters. The title refers both to divine good luck and Harry's attempts to "provide" for Draco.

Providence

Chapter One—What Harry Potter Knew

There were three things that Harry Potter knew.

The first was that he had fallen in love with Draco Malfoy, but hadn't a Muggle's hope in an Auror fight of getting Draco to look at him.

Harry scowled and dashed a hand through his hair, then turned around sharply as he reached the end of his drawing room. At least, the room was *supposed* to be used as a drawing room, but Harry had cleared all the furniture out of it and then decorated the walls in soothing shades of blue and green. It gave him a place to either calm down if he could, or pace off restless thoughts.

If I'd known what would happen, I would never have paid so much attention to the git after the war.

But it had seemed *natural* to pay attention, then, when he realized that Malfoy was making some sort of effort to extricate himself from the mud that had splattered his name. Harry did think he was less guilty than his father, but if he dreamed he could walk away from his crimes and have no one remember them, he should dream again. Harry had carefully tracked his spending habits, as well as the reports of the Aurors who combed through the artifacts taken from Malfoy Manor.

Amazingly enough, Malfoy's actions turned out to be sincere. He had actually given up the Dark artifacts to the Aurors of his own free will, and he sold many of the rest that were too powerful, according to the new laws, for him to retain. He bought new furniture for his Manor. He donated to charities, but anonymously and often to the smaller ones that publicity ignored. He faithfully visited his father in prison and his mother in St. Mungo's, where she had been taken after Azkaban had broken her health. Harry had slowly relaxed and decided that Malfoy, contrary to all expectations, had actually learned a lesson.

Now, Harry slid a hand into his hair and tugged at it in annoyance, since he couldn't actually go back in time and strangle his (slightly) younger self.

He should have looked away then. He should have let himself become involved in the routine of Auror training, in the mad bustle of Ron and Hermione's wedding preparations, in the clever tricks he came up with to fend off presumptuous requests for interviews and "just a moment of your time" that had surrounded him since Voldemort died.

But he hadn't. He had watched, interested to see whether Malfoy would become a recluse once some of the stigma had faded. Ron had predicted it, saying that even *Malfoy* wouldn't be able to show his face in public after what his family had done.

Instead, Malfoy had moved out into the world and made a few less anonymous donations. Then he'd made some mysterious purchases the Aurors couldn't track, since they'd been forced to relax their vigilance; the Ministry needed them for other things. Harry had tensed, deciding instinctively that Malfoy was building up to something big, and ready to fight him if he tried to become the next Dark Lord.

Instead, Malfoy had opened a…sanctuary for people who were trying to cope with the aftermath of the war. They could come to his tightly warded set of six buildings, numerous gardens, two meadows, and a small patch of woods, and talk to Mind-Healers, or sleep for twenty hours a day, or try to drown their sorrows in brisk walking. Or they could think of any other therapy that

might help them, and Malfoy would try to provide.

Harry had visited the place in disguise a time or two himself, and cast all the spells he could think of that would have detected Dark magic at work. Nothing came to light. And Harry had felt a longing travel through him when he peered into some of those rooms—a longing for peace, rest, light. He didn't have very bad nightmares, not now, and his mental scars were far less than, say, George's, but he still could have lain down on the wide blue bed in the middle of a sunlit room that he saw, with every wall glass on every side so that one could look in all directions for enemies, and simply fallen asleep.

He'd been impressed by the amount of consideration the place showed. Malfoy was trying to work with the people who had the most reason to hate him. He faced constant possibilities of being rejected, sneered at, even attacked. And Harry, who had suffered from six years of irritants at Malfoy's hands because of the boy's hatred of rejection, didn't imagine it was any easier for the man.

Harry paused; he'd reached the other side of the room, and he banged his head for a moment into a patch of specially softened wall that he kept there for just this purpose.

Even that wouldn't have been enough. Harry could have admired Malfoy, sympathized with him, saluted him in his mind, and let him go.

But *no*. Instead, he'd had to pay more attention still, and then more attention, and then more attention, to notice all the small subtle ripples that came from Malfoy integrating himself fully back into society.

He sent an anonymous apology to the Weasleys, along with a handsome gift of Galleons that was just the right size to convince the Weasleys to accept it, instead of rejecting it out of pride. Ron had been utterly astonished, and had selected five or six Death Eater families it might have come from before deciding it *had* to be from the family of whoever had killed Fred. No one had ever mentioned the Malfoys in front of Harry, though, and if he hadn't stared at Malfoy's handwriting on countless letters over the last three years, he wouldn't have recognized it.

Then Malfoy had started saying publicly that he welcomed correction on his beliefs against Muggleborns, but if no one had any logical arguments, he'd go on believing in pure-blood superiority. He dealt gracefully with the letters he received. Several times, Harry had heard the screams of a Howler berating Malfoy for his prejudice, and scrambled breathlessly towards it—in time to see only Malfoy's slightly raised eyebrow and the contemptuous flick of his wand that removed the Howler's ashes. But better still were the debates he held in public, and the slow increase of his quoted remarks in newspapers that showed, yes, his beliefs were changing.

And Harry had been there the day Malfoy brought his mother home from St. Mungo's, circling her with a number of protective spells whilst the newspapers and photographers fought like sharks for a glimpse. Someone had yelled at Narcissa, "How does it feel to be married to be a murderer?" And Malfoy had turned and aimed a glare that literally made the woman who'd asked

the question stumble several feet backwards, her camera falling to the ground and breaking as her face went pale.

That was the day *Malfoy* became *Draco* in Harry's mind.

And that was the day Harry realized he had a serious problem, because Malfoy only dated women, he'd never shown the slightest interest in a bloke, and even if he was bisexual or gay, the chances that he would want Harry, with all the history between them, were slim to none.

Harry paused now, sighed, and drubbed his forehead several more times into the patch of softened wall before moving away from it.

The second thing Harry Potter knew was that Draco was lonely.

He dated women, sure, but he never stayed with them. Harry had seen him on several dates, first on reconnaissance trips after the war when the Aurors still felt it prudent to keep an eye on the descendents of Death Eaters, and then through the newspapers and his own fascinated spy—er, observation. Draco would start the evening laughing or flirting. He would smile at his date's jokes. He would look with obvious admiration at her hair or her jewels or her robes or whatever it was that she wanted him to notice; he was one of the few men Harry had seen who was sensitive to that kind of thing. Merlin knew Harry had never managed to be that good with Ginny.

But towards the end of the evening, he would lean back in his chair and his eyes would begin to wander. Slowly, he'd make shorter and shorter replies to his date, or no replies at all. Most of them didn't notice, too enthralled with their own glitter and fashion. But Harry saw the way Draco stared searchingly at each new person who entered the room, and he understood, especially with the wistful smile that twisted Draco's mouth. Harry had felt like that himself, before he gave up general dating as a bad job and decided to hope that he would find Ginny attractive again, someday. Harry wanted someone who would be as interested in *him* as they were in appearing with the Boy-Who-Lived, whilst Draco wanted someone who would return his level of interest.

Whenever Draco sighed and turned back to his date with a determined little smile, Harry ached with empathy. And when he was directly *in* the restaurant or the theater or the pub with Draco and his date, he had to stop himself from whipping off the glamour or the Invisibility Cloak and marching over there to announce that *he* had noticed Draco, and the bint he was dating could clear right off.

Only Harry knew he couldn't do that. Draco needed to be *happy*. He needed someone who would return his interest, his attention, his time. He needed someone who would admire the strides he had made whilst still gently criticizing him for the times he slipped. He needed someone—

Beautiful. Female. Desirable.

And so Harry realized, more gradually than he'd had the first realization, that he had a second problem, because the man he was in love with wasn't happy, and that made Harry wake up at night with a jolt as though someone had pinched him.

The third thing Harry Potter knew was that Draco had an obvious choice for a partner, but it was someone he never seemed to notice.

Early on, Harry knew, Draco had developed a blind spot to people who were infatuated with him for his beauty or his money alone. Harry sympathized. He'd had to do much the same thing, until it occurred to him that he could get along best if he just restricted his attention to his friends and adopted family in the first place, and didn't seek out someone beyond them, someone who would never understand.

But sometimes blind spots could be too large, and in this case, Draco's was. It included Astoria Greengrass, who had the misfortune to be two years younger than Draco and Harry; to be the sister of Daphne Greengrass, whom Draco had dated and then decided he didn't like; and to have fair skin that always showed a blush and bright green eyes that couldn't hide what she was feeling for the life of her.

Draco had looked at her and dismissed her as an infatuated girl. Harry had looked at her and seen something more.

Astoria followed Draco about in the same unobtrusive fashion Harry did. She looked at him in the same starry-eyed way that, Harry was sure, he did. But she had three advantages Harry didn't have.

She was female. Draco *might* want her, whilst there was no hope in the world that he would ever want Harry. (And Harry hit the wall particularly hard with his head at this point, and then told himself not to be stupid. Why should he wish things were different? If Draco was different, then Harry probably wouldn't have fallen in love with him in the first place).

She was of a pure-blood family just like Draco, and understood small things about him—*reacted* to small things about him—that Harry never would.

And she was unscarred by the war, which she'd spent away from Hogwarts in a hidden sanctuary with her family. Draco would never have to look at her and see someone he had hurt, or someone he had to make things up to.

Astoria loved Draco the way Ginny had loved Harry. Yes, it might look like infatuation on the surface, but Harry knew what strength underlay an emotion like that, knew how pure and deep it could run.

So there was Astoria, a solution to at least Harry's second problem, the problem of Draco's happiness, the most important one (since the first one wasn't a problem for anyone but Harry).

But she presented a third problem in and of herself. How was Harry going to get Draco to fall in love with her? How was he going to get him to *notice* her, even?

And so all three problems and all three pieces of knowledge came together and had him pacing his drawing room, or what would have been the drawing room if he had had any furniture in it, and all three together caused his pace to become faster and faster and his grumbling to get louder and louder, and then he fell over a bump in the carpet and slammed his head into a patch of wall that had *not* been specially softened.

And in between saying, "Ow!" and picking himself up, the idea came to him, in all its brilliance.

"Hullo, Astoria." Harry made sure to smile as he opened the door and look as friendly as possible. The young woman on his doorstep already had her lower lip locked between her teeth, something Harry knew she only did when she was nervous. "Please come in."

"Mr. Potter." Astoria's voice was low and gentle—musical, almost, Harry thought approvingly. It would have hurt more to lose Draco to anyone who wasn't attractive. She took a step into his entrance hall and looked around as if she thought that predatory plants would unfold from the walls and eat her at any second. "I—I'm glad you invited me here, but why did you do it?'

Harry smiled more widely. *Yes, she's direct when she wants to be. She'll be able to criticize Draco and support him the way he needs.* "Because I wanted to talk to you about Draco Malfoy."

Astoria promptly blushed to the roots of her very long, very smooth blonde hair. "Was it that obvious?"

"Only for someone who's looking," Harry said gently, and led her through the entrance hall into the smaller drawing room he'd had done up for guests—most often Ron and Hermione. Astoria, looking relieved, sat on a comfortable yellow chair that put as much distance as possible between herself and Harry. Harry smiled at her again. "Tea?"

"I—of course." Astoria's hands darted out and smoothed down the folds of her robe. "Mr. Potter, to be quite honest, you're upsetting me. Why did you want to talk about Draco? Do you want him for yourself?"

Harry was glad that he was only carrying the teacups at that point and not drinking from one, or he would have sprayed the hot liquid all over the room. As it was, he kept his eyes on the cups until he felt ready to look Astoria in the face again. "I want to talk about him because I think you could be the partner he needs," he said. "You're strong enough to support him, and you love him *nearly* as much as he deserves."

Astoria flushed again, but this time her lips parted, and Harry nodded approval. Yes, she wasn't going to lie to herself about the strength of her love. She understood her own emotions, and that was a good mark for her in Harry's book.

"But how are we going to get him to look at me twice?" Astoria ran a hand over her hair, rather than through it. Harry thought his own would probably stay tamer if he did that. "It doesn't matter if I love him, if he never looks." Bitterness crept into her voice for the first time.

"I've been thinking," Harry said firmly. "What he needs is something to make him pay attention, yes, but dozens of people try that every month. So we'll try a slightly more indirect route. Letters. It'll probably appeal to him, since he gets so many that are nothing but blame or mindless praise. Give him something witty to respond to, and I think you'll intrigue him."

"I—I'm really not a good writer." Astoria's flush changed color again, and she looked down and fiddled with a diamond ring on her smallest finger. "I don't think I could do it."

"Then let me," Harry said.

"You?" Astoria stared at him.

Harry nodded. "I understand him, because I went through school with him," he said. "And I feel differently than you do." *No, I don't, but she doesn't need to know that.* "I'll tell him about my respect and admiration first, and then challenge him to be more, do more. You could do that in conversation, right?" Astoria nodded, seeming dazed. "So I'll do it in writing."

"I—" Astoria swallowed. "You *really* don't want him for yourself? Forgive me, please, but this seems like a lot of effort to go to for someone you don't want."

"I want to see him happy," Harry said. *At least I can tell the truth about that, and it's pure and uncomplicated truth.* "He's not. You know that. He's lonely."

Astoria had started nodding with every word. She had flushed again, and Harry could see where Draco's impression of her weakness came from. She looked much too prettily flustered. Still, Draco didn't stop at surfaces with the people he argued with; he would have to learn to see beneath his future wife's blush.

"I *can* see him happy," Harry said. "But he would never trust me if he knew it was me trying this. He won't notice you, for whatever stupid reason, until we *make* him glance your way. I'll make two copies of the letter, one for you and one for him, and of course I'll share any of his replies with you. So it'll be exactly as if you wrote it."

"I can't ever repay you," said Astoria, joy shining in her voice like stained glass. "But I want to try somehow. What—what can I do?"

Harry caught her hand and kissed it. "Just make him happy. That's all I ask."

Harry sat down to write the letter later that evening with a delicious feeling of anticipation in his stomach.

This was a way he could be close to Draco, legitimately, because he wasn't trying to force Draco to be with *him*. He was doing it for Astoria's sake, and for Draco's. He was going to make someone he loved happy, and solve two of his pressing problems at once.

And maybe, once he saw Draco smiling into Astoria's face on their wedding day, the first problem would be solved, too. Maybe Harry could let go of this love he had for Draco and move on to someone else.

He'd known what he wanted to say to Draco for a long time, so it wasn't a problem to pick up the quill and write.

Dear Ferret-face,

I'm sure that nickname probably made you sit back and stare at the parchment. Now you're looking over your shoulder to see if I'm in the room. Trust me, I'm not—although I'm very good at Disillusionment Charms and also *at finding sources of information to tell me about events I didn't witness myself. I just wanted to make sure I had your attention.*

No, I don't really think you look like a ferret. And though you're handsome, your looks are the least important thing to me.

This is a letter from someone who really respects and admires you for the changes you've made in your personality since the war, because I know what you were like before it. You were small and petty. You struggled to be civil to people you thought were beneath you because of their blood. You snarled at people when things didn't go your way. You gave information about Harry Potter away to the newspapers. Making up for your mistakes was beyond you. You had far too much pride.

But you've turned around and, Draco, I'm proud of you. Do many people say that to you? I hope your mother does, but a mother isn't the same thing as a lover. And I know some of your dates would simper about pride, but they really wanted you to compliment them.

I'm not looking for compliments, except the compliment of a steady answer to this. If you're not interested, say so at once. But if you're interested in someone who notices all the bored glances you give around you at restaurants—someone who held their breath each time you were about to do something huge, in case this was the time you messed up, and who celebrated when you proved yourself with every single one—someone who thinks that you really should stop looking past people you'll never end up with and spend less time stringing them along—

Then reply to this. I can't say you'll get a response immediately; my life doesn't revolve around you. But it'll probably be in a few days. Or a week. Two weeks at the very outside.

You're wasting your life and your time the way it is. You could do so much more.

Yours,

A very sincere friend.

Grinning, Harry sat back and surveyed the letter. Then he leaped to his feet and went in search of Grimoire, the owl he'd bought after the war—a great horned owl with dark feathers, as unlike Hedwig as possible.

If everything worked out, then Astoria and Draco would both be happy, and Harry would be happy by proxy.

And of *course* it was going to work out. How could Draco fail to be intrigued by the letters, and how could he fail to work out that it was Astoria sending them when she dropped little hints from them into conversation?

Harry had never come up with a plan that couldn't possibly fail. He figured he was due one now.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you for all the reviews! Just to answer a few questions: I've never read or seen Cyrano, so this was inspired by it only indirectly; and it is a comedy, not a tragedy.

Chapter Two—What Draco Malfoy Read

No one, Draco thought, as he nodded and smiled across the table at his latest date, *understands how boring it is not to be opposed.*

Anne Carter, of course, his date, didn't notice the boredom behind his smile either. On she chattered, turning her head from side to side and flashing the diamond earrings that Draco had bought as if she thought he'd forgotten spending that much money on her. Of course, it was really for the benefit of the restaurant they were in, and to make other women jealous, and to make them think how much they would want to be sitting in *her* place, but they *couldn't*, because—

Draco clenched his jaw muscles hard, stifling the yawn before it began. He'd got quite good at that.

When he was sure Anne was deep in the middle of a conversation with herself about flirtation and the surprising adventures it involved one in, he leaned back in his chair and stared around the restaurant. As always, he hoped to distract himself by finding one interesting person. Just one was all he needed. If that person got up and left the restaurant in the next minute, Draco could exist on the slender morsel of bread he'd been offered.

As always, there was no one. Oh, Draco knew some of the people in here; there were always those who followed him around hoping for his attention. But if he had found them *interesting*, he would already have been dating them. There was little Astoria Greengrass, her eyes bright with hope and adoration like a kitten's for the last person who fed it, and there was Celestia Halcombe, lowering her gaze demurely to the plate when Draco turned in her direction, and there was Brutus Adorno, who stumbled over his feet in interviews with Draco trying to come up with good business propositions. He was powerful enough among the Muggleborns that Draco had spoken with him more than once, but that didn't mean he wanted to do so again.

"And then *she* said…"

Draco clenched his jaw muscles against a sigh and picked up his glass. He was doing this, he whispered into the sweet wine, for his family and not himself. His mother needed money to protect her in case something happened to him; she needed good reputation and standing to store up against the time that Draco left England, as he would have to, because everything here was so *intolerably boring.* And his children, if he had any—a prospect that was becoming increasingly unlikely when he couldn't find a woman he wanted even to go to bed with, let alone consider as a Malfoy mother—would appreciate what he had done for them.

In the name of his family he had pretended to turn his back on his father's beliefs; in the name of his family he had spent time rubbing shoulders with people who made his flesh crawl and pasted bright smiles over his face whilst the cameras flashed. At least the sanctuary he had set up for war trauma patients afforded him a certain smug satisfaction. Everyone gushed with praise over his actions in providing whatever therapy they wanted and never noticed the hefty price tags. And being such a good liar that everyone assumed some sort of soul-deep "redemption" instead of a plan to get his family respected again was its own reward.

But there was no one who could share that reward with him. His friends were either in Azkaban, furiously pursuing social redemption schemes of their own, or living abroad. His father would never see the sun again. His mother's shattered health assured she barely left the house, and though she would exchange smiles with Draco about the success of his schemes, that was not the same as discussing them.

Or opposing them.

Draco had once envisioned having everything his own way in Hogwarts, the teachers bowing down to him just as his tutors did and other students acting like house-elves. Only now did he realize how much that would have suffocated him. It was one thing to dream about life as an endless parade with no enemies to fight, and another to experience it.

He'd experienced it for three years now. He was drowning in ennui.

No one to tell him he was wrong. No one to criticize his arguments; debating the Muggleborns had been fun at first, but ever since he'd pretended to agree with them, as he must if he was to

regain the rightful Malfoy position in society, they'd been all smiles. No one to steal a Snitch from him in Quidditch, for God's sake. Draco would have settled for that if nothing else, but the few times he'd tried to play Quidditch since his "redemption," there was barely a decent Seeker on the field, and they hesitated in actually *defeating* him.

That was why Draco thought he would have to leave England, in the end. On the Continent, he must be able to find *some* city where his money and beauty would win him the attention he found indispensable but there weren't all the complications of reputation.

"Draco, are you listening to me?"

That was bad. Normally Draco's mask never slipped enough to let anyone else realize he was paying attention to the infinitely more interesting person, himself. He leaned forwards with a sympathetic smile. "And so you rowed with Sarah?"

"Not so much a row as a quarrel," Anne said, her feelings relieved. "And then *she* said…"

"Mr. Malfoy? An owl for you."

Draco turned and looked up in surprise. This particular restaurant, the Hunter's Delight, had a set of wards up that captured all incoming owls, told the waiters who the letters were for, and let them decide if they wanted to interrupt the diners or not. Draco wasn't usually interrupted when he ate here; the manager ferociously protected his privacy.

But he could see, at a glance, why this waiter had decided on such an unprecedented course of action. The bird on his arm was an enormous great horned owl with shining dark feathers, talons that looked as if they could puncture human skulls, and a ferocious glare. Owls like that didn't ordinarily consent to serve masters who were inclined to wait. And none of the waiters at the Hunter's Delight would want to be responsible for losing Draco Malfoy, social darling, another chance to make a difference.

"Excuse me, Anne," Draco said, giving her that made her flutter her eyelashes like she was about to faint. He took the letter the owl extended to him with a jerk of its foot and opened it.

Dear ferret-face.

Draco felt his mouth fall open at the "salutation," whilst his eyelashes fluttered like Anne's. The next moment, a rush of adrenaline kicked through him, and he looked for the signature he was sure must be there.

He snorted when he saw the blind. *Clever, Granger, but you should have considered that the beginning would give you away.*

He read through the letter slowly, anyway, savoring the half-taunting, half-admiring words. The "mystery" would not last long, but that Granger found herself hopelessly in love with him and

thought to intrigue him like this was an interesting novelty.

He rose when he was done, tucked the letter away in his pocket, and offered his most charming smile to Anne. "I'm afraid I must leave," he said. "But please stay here and treat yourself to whatever wine you like. I'll pay," he added, with a subtle nod at the waiter. *Yes, please stay here. Perhaps enough wine will shut that chattering mouth of yours.*

Anne blushed again. She was always doing that. Draco couldn't stand girls who blushed so much. "Thank you, Draco."

And there's a simper. At the very least, if dating Granger was even a remote possibility, I could be certain she wouldn't do that. Draco turned away with a shudder and stepped towards the doors.

Astoria Greengrass intercepted him.

She had her eyes downcast as usual, and as usual she looked stunning in a sheer silver-white gown that hinted without in the least being transparent or offensive. Draco drew in a sharp annoyed breath. If she had only had the kind of sparking, diamond-like personality that her robes promised, he would have been interested. But no, she was insipid, and so he would be polite, but no more.

"Excuse me, Miss Greengrass," he murmured, taking the time to construct a proper expression of sorrow. "I can't stop. I'm on my way as a matter of somewhat urgent business."

"I understand." Astoria lifted her head and looked him in the eye for the first time since Draco could remember. "Is it about a new house, perhaps? Or a new pet? Perhaps a ferret?"

Draco gasped, the first time a woman had been able to make him do that since he saw how his mother was wasting away at St. Mungo's. Astoria flushed, but much less than was her custom; she kept her head up, which Draco would have thought her incapable of if he hadn't seen it, gazing at him in inexorable challenge.

She's speaking—she's speaking as if she's the one who sent the letter.

Which was impossible, Draco knew. But the writer said that she had particularly good sources of information, and was it more impossible than Granger having decided out of midair that she had a fancy for Draco?

"My dear," he said softly, "the business is not that. Which I am persuaded you might have an idea of."

Astoria's color mounted a little higher, but still she didn't blush in that disgraceful manner that usually caused Draco to discount her. "Do I?" she said, and ducked her head so that he had just enough of a glimpse of eye through her eyelashes and sweeping hair to catch him. She was a

beautiful woman; that had never been his problem in relating to her. And now, now he began to think that perhaps a mind to match that beauty burned behind it after all. "I'm *so* glad." She paused as though to think, then added, "But surely you should leave now, since you said the business was so urgent?"

"Not so urgent as—other things," Draco said, and glanced over his shoulder. Anne Carter was staring at them with her mouth half-open. He sighed. He couldn't pursue the matter with Astoria now, however much he would have liked to, or he would probably gain a reputation for not treating his dates well. The Malfoy reputation was too important to sacrifice even a splinter of it like that. He faced Astoria and held out a hand. "Yes, I had perhaps better proceed to my business. But we will speak again later."

"Yes," Astoria said, and a thin smile crossed her lips. "But I am persuaded that *I* will set the time, Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps within the next fortnight—perhaps not." She raised her eyebrows in a delicate arch, nodded once, as regal as his mother, and then turned and glided out the door. She hadn't even given him her hand to kiss, which was an invariable feature of their other encounters. Draco gazed after her in wonder.

Then he turned, blew a kiss to Anne that he felt more deeply than normal, and aimed in a different direction, so no one could say he was following Astoria even though he had left the restaurant. He still thought a visit to Granger important and amusing enough to arrange.

A new thought rustled in his head and demanded his attention, and Draco smiled in a way that would have shocked most of the people who knew him.

Things are changing.

Harry grinned and had to keep from flinging off his Invisibility Cloak to do a dance of triumph right there in the restaurant. He'd been sitting in an excellent position to observe Draco's expression when he read the letter.

He's intrigued. He'll pay attention. He'll flirt and woo and let himself be flirted with and wooed. And did you see the way he looked when Astoria spoke to him about ferrets? He can be suspicious, because that is some damn specific information about his past, but I'll still have the advantage because he'll want *to listen. And now that Astoria seems to be a good writer as well as a good talker, he'll become more and more interested in her, until he falls in love with her.*

Harry experienced a momentary stab of guilt. After all, the letters *were* lying to Draco, in a sense. And the sentiments started with him and not Astoria, so it was making Draco think things about Astoria that weren't true.

But then he shrugged. Of course it wasn't perfect. But in a perfect world he would have been able to date Draco, and that wasn't going to happen. At least he could put Draco with someone he *knew* would make him happy.

He sneaked out the doors and then Apparated to the point—a neglected corner of Diagon Alley with some heavy walls around it—where he'd arranged to meet Astoria. She was pacing back and forth when he got there, and her eyes were alight. She spun around to meet him with her wand drawn.

Harry raised his hands calmingly, raised his eyebrows, and smiled.

"Did you *see* him?" Astoria burst out, and did an impromptu dance of her own that swung her expensive gown around her. Harry smiled wider. He half-wished Draco could see her like that, with her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed and her mouth slanted in laughter. It did her more good than all the gowns in the world. But this was Draco Malfoy, and at the moment he needed a polished surface, like a mirror, to attract him. Astoria's real beauty would put him off as much as Harry's gender would. "Did you see his face when he read the letter?"

Harry laughed and nodded. Yes, he thought Draco's face in that moment would remain one of his most treasured memories for the rest of his life. His eyes had widened and his nostrils had flared as though someone had *dared* to pinch him, and his hands had closed on the letter and torn a corner off the top. Then he had begun reading with a kind of attention that Harry had never seen him give, even to debates with Muggleborns where he wanted to win and look respectful at the same time. He had jumped up from his chair as if stung when he was done reading.

He's not perfect, Harry thought smugly. *If he was, this plot would do no good at all, because he wouldn't need anyone to complete him and he wouldn't need interference in his life. But he still has that pride of his, and it needs to be humbled a little. Being lied to will be good for him.*

"I couldn't believe it." Astoria clapped her hands, then clasped them together and smiled at him. "I was a little uncomfortable at first, because I couldn't believe he wouldn't figure it out. But now…"

"I know," Harry assured her. "I knew he'd immediately suspect my friend Hermione, because not a lot of people know about the time he was Transfigured into a ferret and he couldn't *imagine* a man daring to write him a love letter." He felt a small pang as he said that, but resolutely squeezed that emotion out of his heart. That was just the way the real world was. "But when you start dropping references, it's easier to think it must be you."

"I owe you so much," said Astoria, and her eyes had gone soft and misty.

Harry kissed her cheek. "Just be ready to receive the reply he sends me," he said, and Apparated home while Astoria was still nodding.

Yes, the next best thing to being able to have Draco for myself is to be able to give him to someone like that.

"Granger."

Five years since the war had not improved Granger's looks a whit—or so Draco thought, until he got close to her and saw the coldness of her eyes. It appealed to him in a way that Astoria's young-girl openness (until tonight, anyway) had not. She gave him a short nod. "Malfoy. I was working late, which is the only reason you've got an interview at all. What is it? Do you need to know more about house-elf laws?"

Draco sat down in a chair across from Granger's desk, trying to decide what the best way would be to ask her about the letter. Granger looked back at him impassively. They were in the office she had long since earned in the Ministry. Draco found it easier to think about the office than about her position, the title of which shifted from week to week. Sometimes she was a special Undersecretary to the Minister; sometimes she worked with the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures; sometimes she was part of Law Enforcement. It depended on what her pet crusade was this time.

Draco would say one thing for her. Granger was an expert at *winning* crusades, not simply proposing them.

And that might be a reason she sent me this letter. Draco had wondered if it was Granger after all since Astoria confronted him, but he had to ask. Now he thought he might have a motive for it, if she had. A woman well-suited to winning crusades might decide she could win the heart of any man she wanted, even one considerably above her. He took the letter from his pocket and handed it to her. "I need to know if you wrote that," he said quietly.

Granger's eyes narrowed as she read. She said nothing, and the coldness of her expression didn't change. Instead, she set the letter down on her desk, drew out a parchment, quill, and ink, dipped the quill, and wrote several quick lines, which she handed over to him.

Draco understood her point when he read the transcription of the first paragraph of the letter. Her handwriting looked nothing like the sample he'd received. *And yet.* "There are handwriting charms," he said.

Granger waved her wand, still without uttering a sound. Her words on the paper swirled and changed. Draco compared them with the letter, and they looked nothing alike. Then Granger cast several more common disguise charms, and each time, her handwriting became unrecognizable from her original copy—but still nothing like the letter Draco had received.

Draco looked closely at her and cast a small charm that would tell him if Granger's heartbeat or breathing changed in the next few moments, which were some of the telltale signs of a lie. "Did you send it with another disguise charm, perhaps?'

Granger finally spoke, and her voice was icy and disdainful enough to make Draco admire her. "That you immediately decided on *me* as the plausible explanation irritates me beyond belief, Malfoy. For the record, no, I did not write you this letter. Plenty of people saw you transformed into a ferret; it happened in the open, remember? Now, whether all of them *remembered* that incident, I can't say. But I know Ron has talked about it in the Ministry before and even

enchanted an inkwell to bounce like you. Anyone could have overheard him."

Draco bowed his head slightly and stood. Astoria looked like the more likely suspect after all. "Thank you, Granger, for granting my request for an interview."

Granger smiled tightly at him and flicked her wand again. The sample of her handwriting Draco clutched dissolved into ashes. "You're welcome, Malfoy," she said, and turned back to her files.

If Granger was a pure-blood, with greater beauty and more money and less of a work ethic so that she could devote herself to me, Draco thought, as he took his leave, *I might not mind her being the letter-writer.*

And then he shook his mind free of that thought, and free as well of the plan to use his Auror connections to get Weasley sent on a humiliating assignment next week. He had a letter to compose.

Harry's throat tightened when he opened the window to Grimoire, who had flown to Draco's house for an answer this morning. Even though Grimoire wasn't a snowy owl, his eyes still looked far too much like Hedwig's for comfort.

He sighed and accepted the letter, tossing the owl a scrap of his bacon as thanks. *It was a long time ago, Harry, and you need to stop thinking about it. Draco would probably say that you're weak for feeling that emotion.*

Yet another reason that Draco and I will never belong together.

Harry shook his head and tore open the envelope. If he should stop thinking about anything, it was what he couldn't have and had already reconciled himself to not having.

He paused when he got a whiff of the letter. Draco had used *scented* paper. Harry didn't think he recognized the smell, but it was musty and woodsy. He sneezed, then raised an eyebrow. *There's probably some symbolic significance there that Astoria would recognize in a moment.*

He couldn't savor the scent, and he had no excuse for putting off the reading, so he looked at the letter.

My writer,

I must call you that as you have given me no name.

You might think the pronoun "my" presumptuous, possessive, paralyzing. But I do not. You are proposing to enter into the most intimate of relationships with me—that of opponent and critic. Many people have aspired to enter that position in the past, but not so many in the last few years. I warn you, my standards have only grown stricter rather than slackening. I want someone who can understand the thoughts that pass through my head, who will use me as a whetstone and

allow me to sharpen myself on her.

Harry smiled a little. "Astoria will understand those thoughts," he said aloud, but his eyes had already skipped down to the next paragraph.

That you have chosen to approach me in mystery adds an intriguing potential to your offer. One can see this as weakness; you do not feel yourself strong enough to speak openly—

Harry snorted and rattled the paper. "Keep dreaming, Malfoy."

But one can also see it as strength. You fling me a challenge of your own, and dare me to dig under the surface. If I cannot find out who you are and pin the letters to you beyond the shadow of a doubt, then I am as unworthy of you as many others would doubtless say you are unworthy of me.

I could never resist a challenge. And in the last few years I think I have shown myself more than fit to meet one.

The dance is begun, my writer. I will find you. I will make you confess, in the end, that you have written these letters. I will make you soften the mouth that you would use to speak harsh criticisms and open it to admit my tongue.

I am coming.

My writer,

I am your

Draco Malfoy.

Harry swallowed at the end of the letter, and closed his eyes. Part of him didn't want to show this to Astoria. It seemed so intimate.

And part of him was worried that Draco would keep his word and track the letters to their real source.

Then Harry shook his head. *Astoria* is *their real source, and you're worrying over nothing. And he thinks he's writing to a woman, remember? Or he wouldn't be that open with the flirtation. There's more than one reason he'll never figure out that it's you.*

Hermione had told him about Draco's very strange visit to her. She had, of course, recognized his handwriting on the letter. And she had warned Harry sharply about playing games with Malfoy, but she hadn't given him away or told him to stop.

And there had never been a sign, she said, that he had considered Ron or Harry as the letter

writers.

Men aren't even on his map as lovers. He thinks the writer must be a woman, and that will have him looking in the wrong direction. And even if he did find out some distant day, by then he'll be in love and willing to forgive what happened. If he despises me, it's no more than he already did.

Before he copied the letter and sent the copy to Astoria, Harry did trace two words with one lingering finger.

My writer.

But then he sighed, and went to make the man he loved happy.

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—What Astoria Greengrass Said

"I'm nervous."

Harry smiled, because Astoria was standing with her back to him and couldn't see his face. She was also fiddling with a golden bead braided into her hair—nervous, as she had said—and so Harry reached up and gently restrained her hand. Then he turned her around. Astoria looked up at him with determination, but also a gently trembling lip.

"You don't need to worry," Harry said. "He's going to love you." He liked that phrase, because of its double meaning, and Astoria's face relaxed a bit, as though it had reassured her.

"But if he asks me some question about the letters," said Astoria, and then didn't finish the sentence even though Harry waited for her to do so. She was spinning one curl around her finger, and again Harry stopped her before she could ruin her hair. She had explained that this was a traditional pure-blood hairstyle, a conglomeration of golden beads and even small bells that would add a soft music to her movements without becoming obtrusive.

"So what?" Harry laughed at her. "I've showed you everything I've written, and the one I received. You wrote them. You have to remember that. And you'll make him the best partner."

"You're certain." Astoria raised an eyebrow at the end of that sentence, as if she had started to doubt him. Harry couldn't stand for that to happen, because doubt was *not* the way to deal with

Draco Malfoy. One had to be sure and go fearlessly ahead, the way that Harry was. He gripped her shoulders and shook her a little.

"Of course. Other people want him, but they haven't taken the initiative to win him, like you have, have they? They just sit around waiting for him to notice them. You're the one who understands that his notice has to be compelled."

For some reason, Astoria frowned and slowly shook her head, causing a ripple of melody that Harry *knew* Draco would find attractive. "I could wish that it didn't have to be this way," she said. "I did hope, at one time, that he would notice me if I was just patient and pretty and accommodating enough."

"Well, now you know better," Harry said. "He's not going to choose someone passive. He wants an active partner, one who challenges him, one who's willing to take the first step and pursue *him.*"

Astoria still had a shadow in her eyes when she looked up and smiled, but before Harry could ask her why it was there, she said, "And you'll be in the restaurant in case something happens. You told me that."

"Of course I will," Harry said bracingly. "Under a glamour, because I don't want to distract Draco's attention from you—and he would feel the need to come over and argue with me if he saw I was there—but ready to intervene if something happens."

"Good." Astoria walked across the main room of her house to study the mirror set into the wall. Harry had never seen a house with so many luxuries, though he didn't doubt Malfoy Manor was worse as far as that went. *Good job I'll never be living there with Draco, then.*

Astoria bent close to the mirror, adjusted the gold beads, and gave a twitch of her hips beneath the golden gown that was too subtle for Harry to follow. Then she spun on one heel, making the gown flare about her, and nodded decisively. "I'm ready."

Draco strode into the House of the Sun with a high step, barely controlling his energy. He could feel the blood beating in his cheeks and his head, roused by the letter that had arrived barely an hour before the set time of his date with Astoria Greengrass.

Bone-skull,

I'm sure you didn't expect me to be writing so soon after your last letter. I know you, you see, and I know that you're used to being the master of every situation. You would have sat back and reveled, certain you'd intimidated me. You would have thought that one line about opening my mouth with your tongue enough to make me shiver and tremble and collapse on the couch in a fit of maidenly modesty.

Idiot.

I might love you—and really, that's so conditional that one might as well give the emotion a different name—but I'm not in awe of you. I see all your mistakes with a cynical eye. I see the pride that turns into arrogance when you have to deal with other people. I see the way you smile viciously when you win an argument. Those debates that you held with Muggleborns weren't all sincere. You were as glad when you won as when you lost and had to admit you were wrong. I'm starting to wonder how many of the things that you do in public are for *the public and not signs of a true change in your character. If that's the case, then you're a better liar than I ever expected.*

But you're also entitled to less of my respect.

I want someone who can change, someone who can challenge me *to change, someone who can offer me a perspective I've never considered. Of course I've lived through much the same experiences that you have: the parties, the dances, the meaningless conversations. I want something different. Another smooth, insincere liar and actor isn't it. I can have a dozen of those ready to marry me by snapping my fingers.*

I'm a conqueror, the same as you are. And if you think you can blithely stick your tongue in my mouth, you ought to know one thing.

I bite.

A sincere friend.

Draco wasn't sure he believed half the things that Greengrass had said in that letter, but half being true would still be enough. And it was possible that he had been mistaken, too, and that she had concealed the personality of a conqueror beneath a little girl's front. Why not? He had never had incentive to pay her much attention before this.

He came to a halt in the middle of the restaurant and turned his head in a leisurely circle that would allow him to scan the whole thing, at once looking for Astoria and admiring the place's beauty. The House of the Sun was an enormous round tower of glass, with an automatic Apparition point between the front door, which opened from Diagon Alley, and the tower, so that one need only take a step to suddenly be several hundred feet above the ground. The sun shone in through every window, though spells muted the dazzle to a reasonable glow. The floor was decorated in large, slightly raised wooden shields of deep red, green, blue, and purple, making the interior a riot of color. Larger shields supported round glass tables, themselves stained so that they bent and colored the sunbeams traveling through them. Draco had always enjoyed coming to this place because it filled him with a sense of fire and height, as though he were a transforming phoenix, its wings fretted with flame.

He saw Astoria almost immediately, and smiled his approval. She was dressed in yellow, and had taken care to get a table in the middle of a golden shield. Draco stepped up to her and took her hand, raising it to his lips. She met his eyes coolly, without flinching, and took her hand back

again the moment his lips had brushed it.

"Well, Malfoy," she said. "I wondered if you were going to show up."

"I said," Draco murmured lazily, taking the chair on the other side of the table from her, "one-o'clock. And it is that. I would never be late. It would be vulgar."

"I do not think," Astoria said, her voice hardly loud enough to reach his ears, "that you would be above being vulgar. If it suited you."

Even that mild insinuation was more than Draco had received in months, and it affected him like a drug. He leaned forwards, blood pumping with the challenge of the fight and the hunt.

"I can, in fact, be rather dirty," he said.

Astoria raised an eyebrow but neither looked away nor blushed. Draco had to concentrate to keep from wriggling like a child.

Everything is going splendidly.

Harry grinned and held a cup of wine to his mouth, sipping slowly. The last thing he wanted was to be drunk in the same restaurant where Draco and Astoria were talking. Still, to make sure he didn't irritate the staff of the House of the Sun, he had ordered a large meal earlier and eaten most of it, and he had already asked for several smaller things. They seemed happy to let him sit at the table as long as he wanted to.

Harry was trying to listen to the conversation, but he kept being distracted by Draco. Draco wore charcoal-grey robes that Harry had seen him in before. He had his hair as neatly combed as always. He carried his wand at his waist in a specially-made sheath. His eyes were bright, his face looking as if it had been chiseled.

All of that was the same.

And yet, he didn't look the same.

Harry thought his eyes were the main difference. His eyes were keener. He stared at Astoria as if he were estimating a game animal for the kill, and wondering how much of it he would be able to eat. And yet Astoria didn't seem disturbed. The glamour Harry had taught her that concealed her constant blushes helped.

Draco was *engaged* with someone for the first time Harry could remember. He was alive and countering Astoria's gently witty suggestions for food with an eagerness that Harry hadn't thought he was capable of.

Yes, he's engaged with her. And soon he'll be engaged to her.

Harry swallowed a rather larger gulp of wine than he'd been in the habit of taking in the last hour, and then set down his glass and shook his head. He had no right to feel this little glowing ember of hurt that appeared to have lodged itself in the middle of his chest. He had no right to wish that Astoria had taken longer to fascinate Draco and that he would have to watch more of these meetings.

After all, if these meetings hurt you, then it's best that they be done as soon as possible, right?

Harry glanced into his cup again. He had learned a spell from Hermione that would turn any reflective surface into a scrying mirror—though Hermione, still bitter against Divination after all these years, had told him that the term "scrying mirror" was incorrect. He could only see something that was actually happening, and preferably close at hand, not the future. Harry had reassured her that he would never try to see the future, and she had seemed satisfied.

It was an excellent way to watch Draco and Astoria without turning around, though.

Harry blinked when he glanced into his wine this time. Draco was still leaning forwards, his eyes focused on Astoria's face and his smile slight and appreciative, but something had changed. Harry didn't think he could name it, and he probably would never have noticed it if he hadn't watched Draco for years. Draco was just—not as engaged as before.

That was stupid. Harry *knew* it was stupid. No line of his face had altered. Perhaps his smile had grown slightly smaller, but that was only to be expected. Draco wouldn't want to show too much emotion even here, in a restaurant where only the rich or the pure-blooded came. Some of the richest customers would think it prudent to increase their wealth by selling secrets to the newspapers if they could.

And Astoria was sometimes looking away from Draco, staring moodily into a corner of the restaurant. Her fingers tapped on the table, which Harry could put down to nervousness. But combined with the stare, it looked like boredom.

I wish I could hear them better, Harry thought. Seated as he was, he caught most of their conversation, but something had obviously passed between them whilst he was distracted with his own irrelevant pain that he'd missed.

Pay more attention, he told himself, and cast a slight charm to sharpen his hearing. *This is about Draco, and not you.*

Draco had learned not to ignore his intuition. It had warned him twice about people who had come to the Manor intent on assassinating his mother, and it had warned him not to press ahead and demand his father's freedom even when the Minister seemed to be in his most generous and forgiving mood.

And at the moment, his intuition was insisting that the person who sat across the table from him

was not the person who had written those letters.

But that didn't mean he always had to act on his intuition. And he didn't know very much about Astoria yet. He certainly hadn't known she could make asking for a plate of delicate, rare fruits sound like an invitation to a private room. He had formed a certain picture of his writer in his head, but the picture wasn't exact in all particulars.

More problematic was the fact that Astoria seemed to have lost interest in *him*, which shouldn't have happened no matter how long their conversation ran. She was staring off into a corner of the House of the Sun, her fingers tapping on the table. That wouldn't do at all. Whether or not Draco ended up being taken as her challenge and conquest, he intended to take her.

"I wondered," Draco said softly, in the sibilant tone that had worked so well at drawing so many women's attention, "what you thought of my efforts to influence the Muggleborns about separate schools for their children and the pure-blood children."

Astoria glanced back at him from the corner of one green eye, and her voice became more coquettish than it had been before. Draco was pleased. At least that showed he was having an effect on her.

"I am interested in your part in the affair," Astoria said. She gave a delicious weight to *affair* that made Draco shift a little. "But other than that, I must confess, I can find little to touch my interest concerning them. If Mudblood and pure-blood children are educated separately when young, they will still be educated together in Hogwarts. The matter of pure-blood teaching, the truth that they come from the highest and noblest part of the wizarding world, should be instilled by their families. We are both products of that system of education, and we are rather marvelous works, are we not?" Her eyelashes dipped.

Draco smiled back, and assumed she would think the added edge to his smile a matter of predatory interest—

Rather than surprise and anger, as it was.

My writer used the term Muggleborn, as if even in private writing they deserved respect. And she says Mudblood, casually, in public, where anyone might hear.

I do not think they are the same person.

He went on talking to her easily, fluently, about Slytherin House and people they had both known in it, about her sister Daphne, about esoteric magic. She kept up with him easily, even when he ventured into the outer branches of esoteric magic, and ordinarily Draco would have been impressed to have such a conversational partner.

But not now, not when his being reverberated with the shock.

Who is writing to me, then? And how would Astoria know the content of the letters?

A conspiracy was the obvious answer, but there Draco ran up against an obvious wall. Why would a woman who knew him so well, and knew how to bait him and lure him into chasing her, give up her *own* chance to have Draco just so that she could give Astoria one?

Perhaps she's married.

But then offering a challenge like this to Draco was simple madness. If she knew him at all, she must know that he would soon divine Astoria was not the writer, and also that he wouldn't take marriage as a true obstacle to his will. Marriages could be dissolved. Many of them had been, in the last few years, as pure-bloods married Mudbloods for the greater social standing and then discovered that their loyalty to their traditions was stronger than their loyalty to the good opinion of the world.

Perhaps the woman was stupider than she had seemed. But Draco did not think an inferior mind had produced those words. If it had, then the words would never have exercised the powerful influence over him that they had in the first place.

It made no sense, so Draco had to return to his original conclusion. Astoria hadn't written the letters. Someone else had. And he would have to write a letter back that baited and trapped and lured his writer into exposing herself.

"It's been very interesting, Miss Greengrass," Draco said, at the end of the evening, and extended his hand to help her to her feet. Astoria seemed fully focused on him again as she stood, but Draco reminded himself that was as likely to be a deception as anything else, and smiled into her eyes with a mask firmly in place. "I look forwards to meeting you in other times and other places."

Those were words he had said to dates he never contacted again. Draco smiled peacefully on, and waited to see if she would recognize them.

Astoria's gaze narrowed, but she said, "I think I will set the time and place of the next meeting. I find that the House of the Sun is uncongenial to intimate reflection."

And she nodded at Draco and turned away.

Draco waited politely for her to leave before he went after her. No need to make others think they were together when soon that would no longer be true.

Besides, he could use those moments to reflect on the letter he had to write.

"I don't understand," Astoria said in a low, troubled voice, pacing across Harry's pacing room. "But somehow, being with Draco wasn't the way I imagined. He's less captivating when he's close to you. I wasn't as desperate to have his attention once I had it."

Harry sat on a chair and tried to look as if he understood what she was talking about. But since sharing a date with Draco and having Draco smile, even in the half-abstracted way he had smiled at Astoria as she left, was a long-cherished dream of his, he doubted that he would sympathize, no matter how long he concentrated.

"I want someone who notices me for *me*," said Astoria suddenly, turning around and staring at him. "Not someone who has to be coaxed and persuaded into noticing."

"But I don't think Draco would notice anyone of his own free will," Harry pointed out. "He thinks he's too good for them. So you're in the same situation as any other woman trying to court him would be."

Astoria blinked. "I hadn't realized that. I always believed that he would marry as soon as he found someone who could intrigue him sufficiently. He wouldn't want to let her get away, not after he's searched so long."

"And I've seen him date hundreds of women, of many different kinds," Harry retorted, rising to his feet, "and I think that if it were that simple, he would have found her by now. He never gives people a *chance*, Astoria. It's his greatest flaw. He's convinced that he's the most interesting person in the room, and he would sit around smugly examining himself in his soul's mirror if you left it up to him. No one is good enough for Draco bloody Malfoy. So you need to hold and catch his attention long enough to make him see the good things about you." He paused, and looked at Astoria looking at him. At least there was wonder and speculation in her eyes now, and he suspected that he'd made her think. "Is using the glamour to conceal your blushes somehow a form of cheating?"

"He would never have looked at me, comments about the letter or not, if I didn't wear it," Astoria murmured.

"So?" Harry spread his hands. "We're just using the tactics that anyone would have to use. You're simply the lucky woman who thought of them first." Astoria smiled at that for some reason, but Harry didn't pause to ask why. It was too important to convince her. "Say that you'll go on at least one more date with Draco."

Harry hated how desperate he sounded on those last words, but if he didn't win Astoria for Draco, who in the world would he win? There was no one else in Draco's immediate circle remotely suited to him, no one who was as genuinely attracted to him as Astoria was.

Astoria nodded slowly. "All right. I can see that. And I do like being close to him. I did feel a fluttering in my blood. I'd—like to be there. I'd just like him to know who I really am."

"You can tell him about the letters as soon as he's safely in love," Harry promised her, smiling. "And he'll hate and despise *me*, because I'm the one who thought up the plan and tried to trick him."

Astoria nodded. "All right."

Grimoire swooped in then, and from the ruffled look of his feathers, Harry knew that he must have been to Draco. He grinned encouragement to both Astoria and the owl, took the letter, and opened it, expecting some sort of pleasant reminiscences of the dinner Draco and Astoria had shared.

My writer,

You present me more of a challenge than ever. You must think I am truly stupid if you expected me to believe that a clumsy, tiresome little girl like Astoria Greengrass was writing your *letters. And yet you know me so well. It is a conundrum.*

It makes me but the more determined to capture you. This is our second pass of the contest only, and so I forgive you for thinking me unarmed. Merely do not make that mistake again. Make new and more interesting ones, but few enough to keep my interest in you high.

I want you. When I walked into the restaurant, believing I was going to meet you, my blood roared like a dragon in the mating contest. And when I got over my first anger and disappointment in realizing that Greengrass is not you, and saw the mysteries that still surround your identity, I experienced the strongest attraction yet.

You betray yourself by your manner. You think to conceal yourself from me, but you cannot conceal everything. You know me. You dare to taunt me. You knew me at Hogwarts. You use simple, straightforward words compared to most in my circle. I no longer think you are a pure-blood, and I believe that I have narrowed your Hogwarts attendance down to within the last nine years. It is inconceivable that a child younger than that would be writing in this manner, and someone older would have used other ways to approach me.

Every flourish of your quill is my spy upon you; every carefully considered word, in reality so ill-chosen for anything but showing your blazing spirit, brings me closer to the secret.

You warned me that you bite, that you are a conqueror. I do hope, my writer, that your surrender is as beautiful as your struggle.

My writer,

Behold the signature of your conqueror,

Draco Malfoy.

"Harry?" Astoria asked from somewhere far away. She sounded concerned. "What's the matter? Only you've gone so pale."

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—What Harry Potter Decided

"But the game's all over now." Harry hated how quiet Astoria's voice was, and especially hated the way she stared at her hands, folded in her lap, as if she thought that staring at them would relieve her of responsibility for dealing with this problem. "He knows that I'm not really writing the letters. I don't see what good it can do to go on pretending that I am."
"There's a difference," Harry snapped. He was pacing in front of Astoria, and he hated that, too. Usually, he went out of his way to prevent people from seeing him upset. But it didn't really matter this time, he thought. He *was* upset, and Astoria had guessed that before she even saw the letter.

Besides, she was so distracted by her own worries at the moment that she was unlikely to notice if Harry was a little out of temper.

"What difference?" She looked up at him, and Harry could see how desperately she wanted his reassurance, how much she wanted to believe him. That was a good start, and encouraged him to stop pacing and smile at her. This would have been much harder if she had sat there sulkily weeping, or stormed out the door and declared that they had been fools to try and deceive Draco in the first place.

"He says he knows the writer isn't you," Harry said. "But he doesn't know the writer is me. He's sure of a negative, but not a positive."

Astoria's face fell again. "But it's still one that will prevent him from wanting to date me again. And maybe that's for the best." She cleared her throat. That didn't keep Harry from hearing a faint note of relief in her voice. "If he needs these letters to be interested in me, then how disappointed would he be when he finds out that I couldn't write anything like them?"

Harry snorted softly. "More of Draco's existence is lived in real life than on paper. I think you should be more worried what would happen if he found you boring there."

"But this does matter to him." Astoria picked up Draco's letter again, which rested on the chair beside her. "You're the one who said he had to be coaxed and enticed to notice me. The hook is more important to him than the bait, though." She sighed and stood, sweeping her robes close about her. "I think we should simply accept that this scheme failed. I won't have my chance with him."

"You can't walk out the door and be done with this," Harry reminded her. "Draco knows you know something, now that you've quoted from the letters. He would still come and question you. Do you think you could resist one of his interrogations?"

Astoria opened her mouth, then paused, looking thoughtful. "Probably not," she admitted. "But I don't know what to *do*."

"I have a plan," Harry said. And he did. It had formed in his head as he paced, as if the frantic speed of his feet had forced his thoughts to run faster. He knew that, in some ways, that was the way it worked. It was why he had a pacing room. He smiled at Astoria, who looked both intrigued and wary. "And it will keep the letters intact, *and* it will keep his interest in you intact."

"I hardly see how it can do both," Astoria said tartly.

Harry Summoned a sheet of parchment and an inkwell. He already had a quill on the table across the room. "That's because you haven't seen what I'm going to write yet."

Draco raised an eyebrow and closed the book. Tracking spells on owls were more difficult than he had anticipated. And it seemed that great horned owls were particularly resistant to that type of magic.

A pity. But at least it does show how clever my writer is, that she would choose such a bird to carry her post.

And it shows how impossible it is for my writer to be Astoria, who would never think of such a tactic.

He stood up, stretching, and wandered over to the corner of the gardens where his mother was resting. She was asleep when he reached her, and Draco stood watching with a quiet smile for a few moments. His mother rested much better at home in the Manor than she ever had in St. Mungo's, which was one reason he had insisted on fetching her when he did, apart from general distrust in the Healers' efficacy and their interest in a Malfoy patient. Her breathing was soft and even, her face regaining some color and fullness.

I would do anything for her, and anything for my children.

Draco paused suddenly, and turned to thoughtfully glance up through the broad fronds of the garden's ferns at the glass ceiling, through which sunlight poured.

Would I be willing to put in the same amount of effort for my wife, I wonder?

It was a question he had never considered before. Somehow, his imagination had leaped often to his future children without touching on the wife who would have to come before that. Draco was not fool enough to surrender to passion or pure physical necessity and have bastards. Bastards

could be legitimized, yes, but he wanted children with a true claim to the Malfoy fortune.

But his wife would not be a member of the family by birth. Would he be as loyal to her as he knew he could be to someone born of his blood?

He didn't know. And that was disturbing.

Draco frowned and folded his arms, pacing in a soft, smooth circle around his mother's bench, carefully not making enough noise to awaken her. *Why haven't I considered it? It's a natural thing to think about. And why can't I give an answer? At least I should be able to say, "My children are more precious to me than my wife," and accept the existence of that preference. I cannot give the excuse that she is imaginary so far, because so are my children, and I have put in much work and effort for them.*

After some minutes of walking and pondering, Draco believed he had the answer. At least, it was the only one that survived the immediate brutal testing of his own questions.

I knew I would marry someday without believing *I would. I need a woman who is worthy of me to marry, and I didn't really believe I would ever find one.*

Draco paused and spent a moment scanning the air for signs of a great horned owl, a small smile touching his lips.

But perhaps my writer is.

And as if his wishes had conjured the bird into being, Draco saw the owl coming towards him now. He reached up, caught the letter handily, and let the bad-tempered owl fly away into a corner to find shelter from the sun. It gave a sullen hoot at him. Draco ignored that in favor of tearing the envelope open.

He expected—

A declaration of surrender. An admission that the writer was not Astoria and a step closer to the *real* business of this writing, which Draco knew must be a meeting with him. An admiring acknowledgment of his power of penetration.

None of that was what he got.

I have spent years thinking you were a clever man. Many people spoke admiringly in front of me of your intelligence, and certainly, if you are as bored behind your mask as I think you are, you have a certain brute cunning to have fooled everyone into thinking you are content.

But at least I *can admit my mistakes. That cleverness is a pathetic deception.*

Draco stared at the letter with his mouth open. Then he reminded himself that a true Malfoy

would never be caught like that, and quietly brought his jaw up.

What? How?

He couldn't even finish his own thoughts. He sank back on the bench he had risen from and went on reading furiously.

You still have no idea who I really am. I can see that much from the sneering arrogance of your letter, which attempts to define negative knowledge as positive, and cast one hasty decision as the defining feature of my *life.*

Tell me, if I were not the person you name, would such a letter as yours encourage me to confess? Did you really *think that you could intimidate me by using words on paper?*

I have told you what I am. I am a conqueror. I require someone who can change and challenge me, and who changes himself in a dance with life that I begin to think you incapable of truly engaging in. That is knowledge from the quill that you claimed to believe because it would betray me to you. But you must not believe it, because you tried to cow me as you would a child.

Truly, Mr. Malfoy, you disappoint me. I begin to wonder if I was wise in writing to you at all. I had assumed that part of your public appearance was a deception, that you were not as humble as you presented yourself to be. But for you to be all *pride and conceit? I did not anticipate that.*

I should have. I know you. I knew you when you were a student in Hogwarts, and I remember how you struck out against people whose only crime was not bowing to you, as if that was on a par with actually attacking you.

But I gave you more credit than you deserve. I thought the years must have made you more flexible and capable of accepting contenders with some amusement. And yet, each time, you speak only of surrender, not of enjoying the contest.

Competition is the essence of life to me. I want an equal, a partner.

You do not. You want someone you can control, someone who will lie down beneath you and spread her legs and moan at you when you push into her. That is becoming abundantly clear.

Has it occurred to you that part of my behavior is a test? That perhaps I may be different in person than on paper? That I wanted to see the differences between your own public mask, the focus of admiring eyes, and what you put down in a letter that you think will be read by only one other?

You have failed the test. That, too, is becoming abundantly clear.

In memory of what could have been, I do offer you this last letter. Grimoire has been instructed not to wait for a reply.

Draco spun around. Sure enough, the owl was flapping heavily up through the trees and towards the skylight by which it had entered. Draco cast a quick Summoning Charm, but apart from a small wriggle of its tail feathers, the bird took no notice.

His teeth clenching so hard that they hurt his jaw, Draco looked back down and read the last paragraph before the signature.

Perhaps I will contact you at some time in the future, if I think you have made up for your faults with some truly gentlemanlike conduct. But that contact will be under my power and of my choosing. If you ever want to capture a wife who appreciates your (tiny) virtues, then I advise you to subdue your arrogance.

A sincere friend.

Draco found it hard to breathe for sheer rage for long moments; it was like trying to swallow smoke and not cough. He flung the letter down next to him and raised his wand, ready to cast *Incendio* on it.

And then he stooped and gathered up the parchment again, running his fingers over the words that spelled out exactly what was wrong with him.

Competition is the essence of life to me. I want an equal, a partner.

Draco came to the second uncomfortable realization about himself in an hour, then. That was what he wanted, too.

But he had gone about showing his desire for that contest in a bloody poor way.

Draco frowned and tapped his finger against his teeth. Was it possible that, in the long parade of people praising him and bowing to him and allowing him to take his place in society again, he had lost the edge that would allow him to win a competition like this? He had pitied Lucius's poor decisions that had led him to become a Death Eater and wondered how they could have happened. But here he was, making decisions of the same quality, if not as devastating for the family.

It was hard, to think that his pride was perhaps not justified. And it was harder still to think it was up to his writer—or Astoria, if it was truly she—to contact him again, since Draco had no means of finding the owl.

Then Draco jerked his head and whirled towards the tree where the owl—Grimoire—had been sitting.

Unless…

He ran to the tree and ran his fingers gently over the bark. In a moment, he had located what he wanted: a single dark feather, tipped with a spot of white that Draco thought was shaped like a teardrop. He wondered if that was a good sign or not.

Then he smiled and spun the feather between his fingers. He might have to change his mind and humble himself a little, but he would not become superstitious and start thinking that random marks on owl feathers meant he was doomed to shed tears himself or something of the sort.

There was sympathetic magic that could be performed to locate a creature or a wizard based on its body leavings: blood, nail clippings, and the like. It was rarely performed much anymore because it was considered so basic and lowly, which, ironically, meant that Draco would have to spend some time studying it.

But he was a true Malfoy, and not the caricature of one that he had become in his writer's mind. He would not disdain to use the smallest weapons to win this contest.

And how sweet it will be, he thought, as he jogged into the Manor and towards his private potions lab, *to show my writer that I can reach her if I wish? That is not the same as making a statement that I know who she is. It should be strong enough to intrigue her, but not forceful enough to irritate her.*

If someone had outlined this situation to Draco a day before and asked him what he would have felt if he was in the middle of it, Draco would have laughed. Pride was the center of his being. He could not sacrifice it for a woman he didn't know, especially someone who might be the insipid Astoria Greengrass.

But he was smiling now.

"I haven't asked you this before, Harry." Hermione put her glass down and leaned forwards. "But I have to now. Are you *sure* that you know what you're doing as regards Malfoy?"

Harry sighed and spent a moment toying with his own glass, which contained a soft, sweet wine, the perfect accompaniment to the chicken he had cooked. Draco would probably think his tastes were plebian, but Harry didn't care. He was too proud of himself for making meals that were fit to eat. He'd never had to do anything so complicated at the Dursleys, even when Aunt Petunia made him make the meals, and his lack of talent for Potions wasn't a good sign, either.

At least I know she didn't ask me before because she was too busy eating. Harry looked up into his friend's eyes and answered honestly. "I'm not sure. Not anymore. After the last letter, he started suspecting that Astoria hadn't written it."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "That quickly? Harry, what did you *do*?"

Harry bristled. "Why do you assume I did anything? Why couldn't it have been something Astoria did, or just Draco exercising general cleverness?"

"Because you wouldn't look quite as forlorn if it was someone else's fault." Hermione's fingernails rang as her hands folded together, and she leaned across the table to stare directly into his eyes. Her voice had become quiet, and Harry recognized the tone that she used when she especially wanted to persuade someone of something. Of course, Hermione usually wanted to persuade someone of something, so that wasn't much different from her usual tone. "Harry, even if you get his attention, do you really want to start a relationship with him based on deception? I can't see him forgiving that."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I explained this already. *I'm* not starting a relationship with him. *Astoria* is starting a relationship with him."

"That won't work, either." Hermione shook her head. "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying this?"

"And I already explained that, too." Harry ran a hand through his hair, wondering why no one was listening to him. Astoria had reluctantly agreed to his plan to send a mocking letter back to Draco, even though Harry knew it was perfect and the only way to convince Draco he was mistaken about the writer's identity—or, rather, to get him to ignore that issue. "Because she's the one who can make him happy."

Hermione shook her head, and her eyes had softened. This was the side of her that most people didn't get to see, Harry knew. Years of working in the Ministry, often in capacities that other people would like to see her demoted from, had hardened her. "You don't know that, Harry. Maybe there's some other woman out there."

"Then she hasn't come forwards," Harry said stubbornly, inflexibly. "And I don't have time to look for her."

"Time?" Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Does he have some deadline for getting married?"

"I mean, I don't have time now that I'm sending the letters." *Maybe,* Harry acknowledged ruefully, *other people are having trouble understanding me because I'm not explaining myself well.* He stood up, pushed his chair back, and began pacing restlessly. The dining room was too small to be ideal for this, but Hermione thought it was ridiculous that he had a room only for pacing and refused to eat there. "Astoria is the best candidate. She understands what I'm doing and she wants Draco badly enough to take all the risks that come with it. Someone else would have to be fed the explanations all over again, and in the end they might decide to tell Draco the truth."

"All right," Hermione said. "So her stake in this is equal to yours; I get that." She spread her hands. "But I still think it would be best to go to Malfoy, explain why you started this in the first place, and find out if he's interested in men at all."

"I know he's not."

"So confident a declaration," Hermione said. "From someone who *also* thought that Malfoy would never see anything wrong with the letters and would just tamely fall in love with Astoria."

"I was wrong about that," Harry admitted. "But I've never seen him in a situation like this, so it was *natural* to be wrong about it." He couldn't figure out why Hermione smiled then, so he pushed doggedly on. "But I'm not wrong about this. I think Draco would probably make a big announcement if he wanted to date men. He would show that he's modern and progressive enough—for a pure-blood—not to care so much about children and marriage. But he hasn't."

"Maybe he just wants Astoria for a mother of his children, then," Hermione said. "Have you considered that?"

Harry snorted. "Of course I have."

Hermione looked wrong-footed for once, which made Harry grin, because it was *hard* to catch her by surprise. "And is that really the kind of wife you want to help him win?" she asked carefully.

"If she's agreeable to it, and it'll make him happy," Harry said, not really understanding what the point of the conversation was, "why not?"

Hermione closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead as if trying to massage away a headache. "Harry," she said in a low voice, "it matters because she might deserve more than just to be a mother to Malfoy's children."

"She's a pure-blood, too," said Harry dryly. "I think she expects to have children, or at least one. Narcissa Malfoy just had one."

"You make it *sound* so sensible," Hermione muttered. "But it's not. I know it's not."

Harry shrugged cheerfully. "If it ends up making Draco happy, and Astoria happy, then who cares? Who else would be left to be hurt?"

"You," Hermione said, staring at him.

Harry shook his head. "But I never had a chance at the deepest possible happiness anyway. At least I'll get the secondary happiness of helping the man I love."

Hermione spent the rest of the evening looking at him in concern, but since she didn't actually *voice* an objection, Harry presumed he'd got away with it.

"Darling?"

Draco glanced up. He had one small portion of the owl feather isolated under an upside-down

bell of blue glass, and was watching intently as it cycled through a red potion. If he had done the calculations and performed the spell correctly, the potion should be able to tell him where the owl was at this moment.

It was a surprise to see his mother standing in the door of the potions lab. She usually never came here, saying that it reminded her too much of St. Mungo's. But maybe this was a good sign. Maybe she was recovering. It made Draco's belly ache as if he were going to vomit to see his proud mother so broken and weak.

"What is it, Mother?" He made sure to shield the potion with his body as he stepped forwards, just to keep her distress down to a lower level.

"I found this in the garden," Narcissa said, holding out the piece of parchment, "and I thought it was very unusual."

Draco cleared his throat when he realized it was his writer's letter. In the excitement of finding the owl feather, he'd left it behind. "Well, yes," he said, and tried not to picture his mother reading the section where his writer had talked about Draco wanting a woman who would writhe beneath him and spread her legs. "Er. It's a letter from someone who won't tell me her name. Supposedly it's Astoria Greengrass, but I have my doubts."

Narcissa drew herself up with a small snort. "Well, I certainly would, in your place!"

"Do you know something about Astoria that I don't?" Draco asked in interest. "Or the Greengrass family?" He thought he would know Astoria better than his mother, since he'd been in her company more often in the past few years, but on the other hand, his mother was much more familiar with old pure-blood secrets.

His mother gave him an unreadable look for long moments. "Darling," she said at last, "if I had to guess, with no prior knowledge and no name to guide me—"

"Yes?" Draco asked eagerly, wondering if he was about to steal the ultimate march on his writer.

"I would say," Narcissa said, enunciating every word as carefully as though it were testimony about Lucius's crimes before the Wizengamot, "that this letter was written by a man."

Draco staggered and caught at the table behind him. He felt as though one of his own potions had exploded, with no noise but a great deal of force and white light, into his face.

"I—see," he said.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—What Draco Malfoy Thought

Draco left his mother as soon as he decently could, and as soon as he confirmed that one test on the owl's feather had failed and would afford him no useful information. He retreated into his bedroom, shut the door, and put the letter on the table beside him. He had thought he would stare at it whilst the latest revelation whirled through his brain, but it turned out he wasn't equal to that after all.

All he could do was tuck his hands behind his head and stare at the ceiling.

His brain barked and flung itself in circles.

A man. A man is writing these letters—why? A man is referring to himself as a woman?

Is this a joke? Did he think I wouldn't find out?

A great, slow anger began to stir in Draco at that idea. He imagined his writer laughing with friends in a room somewhere, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. His mother told him that it was undignified to actually snarl, but there was no one here to see him right now.

But then he picked up the letter and scanned the words again, and his anger faded, leaving behind it only steady bewilderment.

This is a lot of effort to go to for a joke. Someone would have to observe me for years to accumulate this amount of information, to know what would appeal to me and what would irritate me. And then, if one was *to put that amount of effort into a joke…to only use it to write letters, and perhaps to make me go on dates with Astoria? I do not see the point.*

Draco laid the letter slowly back on the bedside table. Perhaps he was being foolish, but for the moment, he would continue to think that his writer meant her words seriously.

No. His words. I must think that, now, unless I plan to doubt my mother's perceptions.

Draco spent some minutes sitting on his bed with his legs curled beneath him, staring out the window. His bedroom was a space of soft green and silver, the colors he still felt most at home among after seven years with them at Hogwarts, and the window gazed over the outdoor gardens to the distant greenhouses. The view drained the agitation slowly from his mind and replaced it with great swathes of calm instead.

And he needed calmness to think about the perception that had come to him now.

Could I accept a man as a lover?

It was a question he had asked himself before, but only in an idle, academic way, the way that everyone must at some point in his life or another, unless he was terrifically unimaginative. And he had thought of the awkwardness stroking another man's cock would bring on—at least he knew where to put his hands and what expression to wear on his face when he was with women—and mentally compared a few men's arses with women's, and then laughed silently and forgotten the whole thing.

But that was before he was confronted with the possible chance of a male lover who knew him extraordinarily well and was content to offer him exactly the sort of challenge he most craved.

Yet here his thoughts ran into another barrier.

He could have written about himself to me openly, or at least in gender-neutral terms, and then begun introducing references to his sex and seeing how I responded. Yet he has gone out of his way to make me think he is a woman. He has gone out of his way to make me think he is Astoria, *for that matter.*

If he thought that I wouldn't accept a man as a lover, why write to me at all? If he wants me to date Astoria, why not use terms that could refer more plainly to her?

Unless he thinks I am stupid enough to look no further than the words that intrigue me and decide that the writer must be Astoria after all, with no positive evidence.

Draco showed his teeth to his invisible adversary. *He takes a great deal about me on trust.*

And that produced another barrier yet. *Why would he know so much about me and yet have these odd blind spots? Why would he assume that he could fool me even as he admires my intelligence? And why would he push me towards Astoria if he had the chance of making me want him with his brilliant writing?*

Draco shook his head and then smiled suddenly. He had a collection of scattered pieces that, as yet, made little sense.

But his mind was working at a fast pace to solve them. He could pick at the connections, spot the things that didn't make sense, and work to leap the barriers, to fuse the pieces that at first looked so different together.

He was not bored. He was not looking languidly forwards to nothing more than another date with some pretty girl, who *might* become the mother to the next generation of Malfoys but was highly unlikely to.

That gift, at least, my writer has already given me.

And he would give more yet when Draco had been able to figure out who he was, and whether he wanted a male lover.

Harry stepped out of his office and yawned hugely. He'd been sitting still most of the morning, completing the paperwork that was necessary to life as an Auror, but so boring compared to chasing criminals around. He thought he deserved a holiday.

Even if that holiday is only five minutes away from the paperwork while I fetch myself a cuppa.

He paused when he heard voices speaking around the corner. One was a voice he knew very well, because he'd heard it most days of his life since he was eleven years old: the voice of his best friend, Ron Weasley.

The other was Draco Malfoy's voice.

Harry sucked in a soft breath through his teeth and crept forwards until he could see around the corner. Draco stood with his feet planted beneath him as if he were about to meet a charging dragon, staring at Ron. Ron was staring back at him, red in the face, but more bewildered than anything else. Harry licked his lips. That was something, at least, if Ron wasn't about to beat up Draco and Harry wouldn't find himself compelled to intervene. If he met Draco right now, Harry couldn't *guarantee* that he wouldn't slip up in front of him.

But he also couldn't ignore the conversation, and so he had to remain where he was, even as the risk of Draco seeing him.

"I don't remember," Ron said. "And even if I did, why would you want to know something like *that*?"

"Because it concerns me," Draco said, his voice clipped and quiet in the way it always was he said something distasteful to him, "and it was as the result of your careless tongue that the word spread. Now. Try again, Weasley. Tell me where you were and who heard you when you talked about my being turned into a ferret. Think *hard.*"

Ron scowled at him, but apparently the unexpectedness of the request was too strange for him to get angry. He rolled his eyes in the next moment and said, "Um. I know it wasn't that long ago. If someone's taunting you about that, then just tell me who it is, and I'll deal with it."

It is the letters, Harry thought, as he watched Draco's back stiffen. *There's no other reason that he would be so reluctant to give out names.*

"An exact date would be appreciated," Draco said coldly. "And as for disciplinary action, I doubt this individual is someone the Ministry could touch." He wrote something down on a piece of parchment and handed it across to Ron, who took it, shaking his head all the while, as if getting Malfoy's Floo address was the strangest predicament he had ever found himself in.

Draco started to turn around.

Shite! Harry ducked out of sight and crept back into his office with all the skill and quiet he could muster. *I don't care how fascinated I am with him, that's still cutting it too close.*

He shut the door almost all the way, and stood behind it, one eye to the crack, as he watched Draco stride down the corridor. Draco moved with the smoothness and ease of a shark in its natural environment. He didn't look from side to side, the way he usually did, probably because he assumed there was no one in the Ministry that he wanted to impress. It wasn't a place for pure-bloods these days.

Harry let out a soft breath and stepped back from the door, frowning. He knew Hermione had told Draco that Ron had been talking about Draco's transformation into a ferret—which he had—to throw him off the scent, but he hadn't thought Draco would *talk* to Ron. Come near a Weasley? He would scald his own skin off first.

But perhaps I don't know Draco as well as I thought I did.

And if he didn't, Harry knew, then he could be in for a lot of fucking trouble.

But even as he sat down to his paperwork and tried to consider soberly what his next response should be, there was a flaring of glee in his chest. Draco was intrigued enough with the mystery of "his writer" to come to the Ministry and speak to Ron. He was intrigued enough, in other words, to put something *before* his pride, since it was his pride that would have kept him away.

He could be giving some of it up. He could be becoming the perfect partner—

Harry caught his breath a moment later, because his mind was turning in a direction that he didn't like.

For Astoria, remember, he told himself sternly. *You're courting him for Astoria. And it's a good thing that he has less pride, because she wants someone who can actually see her.*

It didn't matter how much of a pained edge his smile had, Harry thought. His plan was working, and *that* was what he wanted.

Draco cursed as another tiny piece of the owl feather winked out of existence in the middle of a blue potion without changing anything. Either Grimoire was well-defended against magic, or Draco himself wasn't using the sympathetic magic the right way.

It has to be the latter, he thought, pushing his hands through his hair and pacing around the potions lab. *At bottom, my writer wants me to find her—him. Otherwise, he wouldn't have mentioned that ferret incident or given the name of his owl. He's not playing a perfectly cool and collected game, any more than I am. This matters to him too much, and so he's giving away little*

subconscious clues. He won't be perfectly protected, because his mind and his soul, which is reaching out to mine, won't let him be.

He slowed his breathing down, then turned around and gave the blue potion a *calm* deadly glare.

I suppose this means that I have accepted the idea of having a male partner, or I would have given this research up as too much of an effort.

But once again, Draco had to admit that he really didn't *know.* The challenge his writer offered was teaching him new things about himself even in the absence of taunting letters. He didn't know yet whether this man was worth the effort, and he doubted he would until they met face-to-face.

With all that irritating clutter about Astoria out of the way, and some idea of his motives. If I get the chance to write another letter, then I must find some way to convince him to shed part of his disguise, to respond honestly. Yes, I have some honest responses, but I was exaggerating when I said I knew everything about him. I don't yet know what's honest and what isn't.

Still, Draco knew he wouldn't trade this confusing existence for the boring one he had been living such a short time ago.

I'm on the verge of something big. I can feel that. And it doesn't matter that Weasley hasn't contacted me with that list of names. It could be someone he didn't notice, someone who was listening on the edges of the crowd and chose that story for an entirely personal reason. I would almost rather it were that way. Perhaps I'll manage to discover him for myself.

Wings beat suddenly above his head. Draco looked up, his wand in his hand, though he didn't consciously remember commanding his fingers to make that movement.

Grimoire hovered there, twisting his head from side to side as if he disapproved of the way that Draco stared at him. Then, with an equally disapproving hoot, he dropped to Draco's nearest table and extended his leg.

Draco edged towards him, heart beating fast. But though the owl opened his beak in a click of disdain, he didn't move, even when Draco reached towards his head. A quick motion, and Draco had both the letter and a feather torn loose from Grimoire's neck.

The great horned owl spread his wings and leaped at Draco's face, talons out as if he were striking at a mouse. Draco ducked, and then dropped flat to the floor and rolled under the table when he realized that Grimoire had merely turned in midair and come back at him. This time, the owl had to fly over the delicate potions equipment, and Draco had the chance to aim his wand and cast a Confining Spell. Grimoire gave a defiant hiss as the conjured cage bars closed around him, and spread his wings to test the limits of his freedom. When he discovered that they could extend only just to their full length, he folded them again and fixed Draco with the full force of his unimpressed stare.

"Sorry," Draco whispered, wondering if the owl could actually understand him. "But I can't take the chance that you'll get away before I manage to give you a reply. Your master *is* going to listen to me, whether he likes it or not." And then he tucked the new feather safely under a mound of heavy scales and opened the letter. He was disgusted to see that his fingers were shaking. At least he had no audience but a mute owl, and even then, his fingers had other reasons to shake.

My Lord High Idiot,

I would be amused, if I did not pity you so strongly. These *are the devices that you take to find me out? Really? Visiting the Ministry, and asking a variety of simple questions, the answer to any of which is not worthy to occupy your mind even in idle hours whilst you're sipping wine?*

I would be more disappointed than I am, but I must only sigh as another illusion is shattered.

Draco paused. His writer knew about his conversation with Weasley, that was plain. But how? Had Weasley told him? But that would mean Weasley had known all along, and somehow managed to lie during his face-to-face confrontation with Draco.

Draco would give himself credit for many kinds of blindness, since he hadn't recognized that his writer was a man in the first place, but he would not claim that he was ignorant of emotions on Weasley faces. No, Weasley had not known why in the world Draco wanted the information about who had heard his ferret story.

That left the writer overhearing the conversation himself. And yet, Draco had been *sure* there was no one else in the corridor with them, and especially no one hiding under privacy wards or a Disillusionment Charm.

A strange feeling crept over Draco, a shudder in the skin over his spine almost like the one he had experienced the first time he saw a Mudblood. But it spread to his arms as well, and then the back of his neck, and he scratched lightly at the skin along his ribs before he caught himself. It was a thrill of pleasure.

My writer is clever enough to keep me from detecting him. At least I can be sure that his intelligence is real, then, and not simply a fluke resulting from the chance arrangement of his words, which I've made more of than it's worth.

It was one firm rock to cling to in a sea of sinking chaos. Draco continued to read feeling a bit more steady than he had so far.

I have been growing more disillusioned of late, and believe that I am almost used to the condition. You are not as intelligent as I had thought you were. You are more prideful. You want different things than I do.

I have always known the last was true, of course. At first I told myself that it didn't matter. We still shared enough common ground that we could live together. And sometimes the most fervent debaters are the ones who are the strongest and most loyal friends.

Draco narrowed his eyes. Was his writer proposing a friendly relationship, then? It didn't fit, not after the specifically sexual language of the last letter.

But he told himself that his interpretations were not always up to the mark, and read on.

But lately, I have wondered at how perfect your mask is. Perhaps it has hidden the real you from me, the one person who was persuaded I knew you best of all. Perhaps you really are nothing but pride and conceit down to the bottom, the cleverness I thought I saw restricted to your political plans, your compassion reserved for the members of your family.

Perhaps you are not my equal, only a squealing, puling little boy.

Draco heard the creak of wood. It took him a moment to realize that he still held his wand, and that he was squeezing it hard enough to bring out ominous sounds.

That would be…unfortunate. I would so hate to feel that I have wasted my time. Years of observation, in this case. Years of wondering and planning what it would take to make you notice me. I have moved in your circle for so long, and yet you won't glance twice in my direction. I assumed the fault was in me, and I hit on the approach of the letters as the one most likely to win your interest and give me a fair chance.

Draco hesitated. Was that a lie or not? His writer *could* have been in his circle, though Draco was convinced that it wasn't Astoria. And that statement about the real purpose of the letters sounded as if it could be true.

But this time, he had no certainty.

Lies piled on lies. Possibilities multiplying endlessly. It's like looking into a mirror set up in front of a whole line of mirrors. Draco snarled and actually permitted himself to run his hand through his hair recklessly. *It's like facing myself, or someone as clever and skilled with teasing words and lies of omission as I am.*

That gave him pause, and this time he actually had to catch the edge of the table against the thrill of pleasure spreading over him.

If the likeness was strong enough to be reality, if this person was Draco's equal in some skills as well as in the ill-defined way that the last letter had called for…

I must not let him get away. I don't know yet if I could take a male lover, but for someone like that, it wouldn't matter. I would keep him until I learned *to like taking a male lover.*

The letter continued, and Draco started reading hungrily now, having to continually slow down because he was reading too fast and skipping words.

I find myself unwilling to think of the possibility of failure and wasted time without more proof that I have failed and it was wasted. There are few ways to see beneath the mask, but I happen to know one of them.

I want to meet with you.

"Yes," Draco whispered, his eyes drifting shut. "I knew he couldn't want to give me to Astoria. I knew that this would come, sooner or later."

His writer appeared in his mind as an ill-defined figure, but one with a suitably trim body and hair that would be soft to the touch; Draco hoped it wasn't coarse and shaggy, because he didn't want someone *too* different from a female lover at first. The man's face was in shadow, but his voice recited the words of the letter with a mocking touch.

Draco felt the thrill reach his groin, and gave a breathless little laugh of surprise and delight. Perhaps he could get used to the notion of a male lover after all, then. Or perhaps this blazing personality was enough to attract him, regardless of what the body looked like.

Draco licked his lips and read on.

Come to the restaurant called Merlin's Tor on the evening of the seventh, at seven-o'clock. I wrote my first letter to you at seven in the evening. I find I like the symmetry. Come with nothing more than your wand. I'll bring the Veritaserum, and you'll bring the charmed parchment.

I will prove to you that I am your writer by writing a letter in front of you, on parchment that won't permit a lie.

Until then,

A sincere friend.

Draco licked his lips again. *Oh, yes*.

It was the sort of challenge that he never would have contemplated answering ordinarily, because of all the things that could go wrong with it. But the difference from any of his usual habits was part of what attracted him now. To go to a restaurant that he knew well but not well enough to have any special friends among the managers, to take only charmed parchment as a literal paper shield, to submit to Veritaserum…

It was the kind of reckless thing he hadn't done since school, when he had begun to weigh his every action for the kind of repercussions it might have on the Malfoy family. And that merely increased the attraction.

Draco wrote a flourishing answer on a piece of parchment that he fastened to Grimoire's leg with a complicated series of spells that involved him standing back from the cage, and then leaving the potions laboratory before he dissolved the cage that held the bird. The answer was not long. It didn't need to be.

My writer,

I will be at Merlin's Tor on the evening of the seventh, and bring everything I need with me to make you admit to my cleverness, my carefully chosen compassion that can indeed be directed to people outside the family when appropriate, and my fitness as a partner for you.

That is, I will bring everything I need with me to make you admit that you, too, are mine.

Willing to become yours,

Draco Malfoy.

"Are you *mad*?" Astoria really looked as if she would tear her hair out for a moment, making Harry blink. He'd always thought that saying was melodramatic rubbish that didn't actually happen. "Why would you offer to tell him the truth on charmed parchment? Why would you offer to *meet* him?"

Harry grinned at her. The sharp tone of jealousy in her last words said that she still wanted Draco. *Good. I'd hate to put all this work into things with no result.* "You're going to be the one who meets him," he said. "And if I didn't have a way to fool charmed parchment, do you really think I would have suggested it?"

Astoria stared at him over the top of Draco's letter. "I didn't consider that," she said. "I didn't think it could be fooled. Isn't that the kind that senses any lie in the mind of the writer and forces her hand to write the truth instead?"

Harry nodded. "But the Aurors figured out a way to fool it," he said. "We'll construct a limited telepathic bond between you and me, such that the parchment is sensing *my* thoughts and not yours, but it's still your hand doing the writing. That bond will also allow me to dictate the letter to you, so we'll convince Draco that, actually, you *are* that brilliant on paper, as well as face-to-face."

Astoria exhaled slowly through her nose. "You've done this before?" Harry nodded. "It works?" Harry nodded again. "You think this test will convince him?"

This time, Harry grinned. "I know it will," he said. "This is a romance conducted almost entirely by letter, remember—entirely by it if we don't count your one date. He doesn't possess enough information to make a decision otherwise. Ron told me that he ripped up Draco's request for information about the ferret story and won't consider answering it, because Draco's still a

Malfoy. Everything he knows and believes and wishes were true about 'his' writer—" Harry rolled his eyes "—comes from the letters. He'll *have* to believe after he sees you writing one."

Astoria looked half-convinced, half-questioning. "I would like to become his wife," she admitted. "I just don't think it's possible."

Harry leaned over and put a hand on her wrist. "You'll be his. And then you can make him yours, and show the possessive bastard what's what. Remember that you'll be questioning him under Veritaserum, too."

And then Astoria finally smiled, and Harry used the smile to put paid to the uncertainty that curled around his own heart.

Draco can't really suspect or know. And after he sees Astoria write that letter, he won't want to.

I may be manipulating him, but it's for his own good. And he'll probably even enjoy it, since he manipulates so many people himself.

But either way, he'll be happy. Isn't that what matters?

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—What Astoria Greengrass Wrote

Draco stood in front of his closet, head cocked to the side. He had to wonder what sort of robes would attract a male lover. He was experienced in dressing to the taste of women, but he had never done *this* before.

Then he shook his head and snorted. He would not put more thought into the matter than it deserved. It was entirely possible that he would find this man a bore in person, and nothing more would come of the meeting than a mutual distaste.

More to the point, the man had conceived an attraction to him when he was wearing nothing more than ordinary robes. He would be a fool to try to dress himself differently and probably have his writer *guess* why he looked different.

In the end, Draco chose a pair of charcoal-grey robes that he knew made his eyes shine, and then stood in front of the mirror admiring himself for some minutes. When he smiled, the expression

was brilliant and devastating, sparkling with an edge that could cut.

And now, he thought, as he turned and noted that the clock said six-thirty, *I am going to conquer the man who thinks he can conquer me.*

"Are you sure it's all right?" Astoria glanced over her shoulder, as if she could see the drape of the gown over her own arse without the mirror.

"It's perfect." Harry stepped back and studied her for a moment. Yes, it worked. The gown was white and shone with silver trimming. It floated around Astoria and made her look like an angel when she descended the stairs. He smiled and met Astoria's nervous gaze with a reassuring look of his own. "It's perfect," he whispered again.

Astoria swallowed and licked her lips. "I'm just trying to imagine what he'll think when he sees me," she said. "It's so hard to know."

"He'll be surprised, no doubt," Harry said calmly. He knew from Draco's conversation with Ron that Draco suspected someone who worked in the Ministry. But what did that matter? When he saw Astoria write the letter, he would *have* to believe. "But he'll accept you. Why wouldn't he? You're beautiful, pure-blooded, and capable of caring for him."

Astoria looked at him somberly in the mirror. "Many other women who aimed to capture him have been the same way," she said. "And *they* were all ignominiously refused."

"But you won't be," said Harry. "You have the Veritaserum?"

Astoria held up the small vial of clear liquid.

"Good." Harry touched his wand to her temple, coaxed her until her wand was at *his* temple, and then whispered the words of the spell that would construct the limited telepathic bond between them. Astoria gasped and shivered as it formed. Harry controlled the impulse to do the same. Suddenly it felt as if an echo chamber had opened inside his skull, and he could hear Astoria's thoughts like a distant buzz, wordless as the undifferentiated sound of a Muggle telly unless he concentrated.

Can you hear me?

He could. Harry smiled at her and replied, *Yes. What about you?*

Astoria's second gasp made him smile again. He was glad that he could at least be the means of showing her something new, in the midst of all the (necessarily) never-racking procedures of Draco's seduction. He offered her his arm.

Remember that I'll be just to the right of your table, under an Invisibility Cloak. The spell wasn't meant to work over long distances, and I'd rather not test it that way.

Astoria nodded. Already the pallor had begun to fade from her cheeks, and a lovely determination replaced it. Harry swirled the Invisibility Cloak over his head, led her out the door, and Apparated them to Merlin's Tor.

A silver-cloaked attendant met Draco when he entered, bowing. Draco stood patiently as the attendant took his cloak off. Granted, the man wasn't *quite* as delicate or deferential as a house-elf, but Draco had put up with worse.

Draco looked around Merlin's Tor as the man escorted him to one of the shapeless tables. It was an open building, with marble and glass walls that spiraled outwards from a single center and had unexpected gaps to admit the wind and the scent of jasmine and more exotic flowers, though the rain was kept out by common agreement. The panels of the walls rotated slowly on a predetermined round, showing various scenes out of Arthurian legend, and image after image of hills by night. On the whole, it was a silver, subdued place, looking haunted by moonlight even on a night like this, when the sun hadn't quite set.

Draco smiled, a little. So his writer had a calm side to him as well as a flamboyant one. That was good. Draco was not sure how well they would have got on if his writer *always* had to be dramatic and straining against the barriers. But a place like Merlin's Tor argued some appreciation for the finer things in life.

"A place should already have been arranged for me," he told the attendant, because he could not believe his writer crass enough to forget something like that. "My name is Draco Malfoy."

"Ah, Mr. Malfoy, of course, sir," the attendant said, and bowed him through the room, away from one shapeless table towards another. Above them, the stars spun, and Draco tilted his head back to catch a glimpse of his birth constellation. "I wish you a fine meal. May it be one half as good as the companionship."
Draco looked curiously at the man. Was he gay, then? Or was his writer so stunning that other men simply had to comment on his brilliance and beauty?

Well. Draco took a moment to preen, but subtly. *Of course the most brilliant and beautiful would choose me.*

"Here is your table, sir," the attendant murmured.

Draco turned around, a faint smile on his face, his heart leaping. He had no idea who he would see sitting there, and the excitement was doing him even more good than he'd realized.

And he saw Astoria Greengrass sitting there, and he had to freeze for long moments before he felt fit to move forwards.

When he did, of course, he had already decided on what he intended to do.

He looks angry. Astoria's voice skittered like an insect over the surface of Harry's mind, agitated and trying to spread her agitation further.

He was surprised at seeing you, and that's all it is, Harry answered firmly. Astoria paused, then relaxed visibly in her seat and leaned forwards to extend a hand to Draco. Harry wondered if it was his voice that had reassured her or the remembrance that he sat in a chair at the next table, carefully hidden under his Invisibility Cloak. He was right there. She couldn't be in danger.

If anyone's in danger, it's me, Harry thought. One look at Draco's face and his heartbeat and breathing had quickened. Of course, that wasn't enough to ruffle the cloak or anything like that, so he was still in no danger of being seen, but it was inconvenient. If he was swept up in the way Draco looked, then he might make a mistake.

And that just proved to him, once more, that he wasn't right for Draco. Would someone who really loved Draco be infatuated with his looks? Wouldn't someone who really loved him probe deeper into his faults, or learn to live with them? Harry hadn't done either. He vibrated between thinking that Draco's faults, like his refusal to surrender his pure-blood prejudices, were excusable and thinking that Draco needed to wake up and realize there were other people in the world besides him. But he couldn't criticize them consistently, except in the letters.

Astoria grew up in the same kind of world Draco did, Harry thought, as he watched Draco kiss Astoria's hand with a graceful bow of his head and then sink down into the chair across from her. *She wouldn't even see them as faults. They'll be far more suited to each other than he and I could ever be.*

Draco had hidden his anger and his desire for vengeance—for the moment. He wanted Astoria to confess the deception to him of her own free will. She was an integral part of it, and had been from the beginning. If Draco had enough patience and showed enough charm, he might manage to extract the information with less effort than it would take him otherwise.

One thing he was sure of, even when she showed him the Veritaserum and challenged him, eyes sparkling, to hand her the charmed parchment. She was not his writer.

It was not merely that he trusted his mother's perceptions above the "obvious" conclusion that his writer and Astoria were trying to push him towards. It was also that he simply did not think Astoria's body hid a conqueror's soul.

She was lovely enough when she smiled. She managed to score several conversational points off him in the first few minutes. But Draco had pictured his writer striving against him, and his simplest movement showed that he could enchant her, if he wished. Her pupils dilated when he moved his sleeve back from his wrist.

No, she was not his writer, but she might lead Draco to him, even if unwillingly.

When she offered to write the letter, though, Draco stilled. *One can't fool charmed parchment. I*

want to see this. Besides, she hasn't made me take the Veritaserum first, as I would have done if I'd been in her place. I lose nothing by agreeing.

"Certainly." Draco propped his chin up on one palm and stared steadily at her. "Write down your thoughts at seeing me like this, as if you weren't in the restaurant. Tell me what you want from me, or *would* want from me if we were going home together."

Astoria's pupils dilated even more, but the proud lift of her chin showed that she had accepted the challenge. "Are you so sure, even now, that we aren't?" she asked.

Draco felt a faint tinge of disgust. He knew he would have been tempted by that just a few days ago, convinced or at least shaken by Astoria's willingness to accept the test of the parchment. If his mother had not found the letter and opened his eyes…

My writer is clever. But not clever enough to escape me.

"This letter will take a leading role in convincing me," he said, and Astoria lowered her eyes and smiled at him from underneath the lashes.

"Of course it will," she murmured, and then picked up a quill she must have carried with her and began to write.

I think he's seeing through it. Astoria's voice chattered like an anxious squirrel in Harry's head.

He isn't. Harry could see the suspicious frown at the corners of Draco's lips, but he wasn't striding away from the table or throwing the parchment in Astoria's face the way he would have if he had some kind of proof. He wouldn't have minded making a scene in Merlin's Tor, since no one here knew him well, and it would have been worth it to him to humiliate poor Astoria. Harry frowned then, the conviction that Draco's faults were deep surging uppermost in his mind once more. *Now, write what I tell you to write, and remember the incantation for the spell afterwards.*

Astoria set her quill in the middle of the parchment and began to write in obedience to Harry's words.

Imbecile to put all others to shame,

I know your thoughts. I saw them when you let your eyes run around the restaurant as you stepped through the door. You estimated the value of everything in sight and then relaxed when you realized that none of it can challenge the luxuries that you already have in your Manor. If something had, you would have insisted on buying it and conveying it home.

You can't bear a challenge.

And that is, in the end, your most grievous fault and the reason I cannot understand my own love for you.

Astoria's hand faltered when she wrote those words, and her eyes darted towards him. Harry held still and projected calm reassurance through their telepathic bond. Let her have doubts about him if that was what she needed to do, but Harry understood his own deeper emotions, if not the surface that altered in response to Draco's actions. He had the kind of love that could give Draco up to someone who would do him good. He knew that.

So Astoria's eyes went back to the parchment, and she wrote steadily on, staring as if she were fascinated by the words that emerged.

Why should I want to be with someone who will only try to subdue me? I could enjoy a competition, but not a dogged struggle that I know would make you bitter because you couldn't make me submit to you. And if I submitted just to see what it would be like, then I'd grow bitter in turn and walk away from you. And I don't want *you to submit to me.*

This is an impasse.

This is why we both need to change. I need to understand you better, and you need to give up this idea that you're better than anyone else, more deserving of thought and consideration. You need to realize that other people have their own inner worlds that have nothing to do with you. Even more than that, though, you need to derive the willingness to pay attention to those inner worlds from—somewhere. I don't know where to advise you to get it. I've loved other people and paid attention to them all my life. If I don't know the origin of my own virtues, how can I help you gain them?

Impossible. Madness. I tell myself that whenever I think of living with you, of loving you. We wouldn't suit.

But I thought I would offer anyway, because it's possible *that I'm still wrong. I know you because I've watched you, but that doesn't mean I can predict your every move, especially since you hide so many of your motives and real emotions behind a mask. That mask could have fooled me the way it fools the public, although not as well. Maybe you can learn to accept an eternal opponent. Maybe I can enjoy submitting sometimes.*

I don't think I'll ever know, because I'm only half the answer to the problem. The other half lies in you, and what you decide to do—if you're willing to overcome your faults, if you're willing to meet me on the battlefield armed with only your native strength and cunning.

This is what I offer you, Draco, simply and fairly and without pretenses: someone who will never run away, someone who will never back down, someone who will always be there to grip you by the neck and try to throw you.

Yours truly,

A sincere friend (who hopes to become more).

Astoria was shivering as she wrote the last words. Harry reached out mentally and caressed the back of her neck.

Just keep the spell in mind, he told her. *I know that he'll wonder about the handwriting not being the same, but the spell will take care of that. And now, hand him the letter.*

All right. Astoria's voice was subdued, not as frantic as it had been earlier, and her hand didn't shake as she held out the letter to Draco. Draco took it and read it in devouring silence. Harry smiled his approval.

This will work. It has to work, he said in his mind, but he wasn't sure if he was comforting Astoria or himself.

Draco looked carefully at the letter. He would keep from pointing out the obvious until he had no choice; at the moment, he wanted to see the words.

And yes, they were words such as his writer would have written. Astoria, though he was sure she was not his writer, had managed to imitate that. The boldness was there, the half-disdain for Draco's faults, the laughter and the longing. Draco shifted, because the words had affected him in a way inappropriate for a public restaurant.

But, with Astoria staring at him over the table, her eyes shining, he couldn't keep the obvious to himself any longer.

"Your handwriting isn't the same as it is on the letters I received," he said. His voice was temperate. Someone would have to know him very well indeed to realize how angry he was. *I expected intelligent enemies, not one who would try to take me in with this pathetic stratagem.*

Astoria raised a brow and her wand at the same time. She cast the spell nonverbally, so Draco couldn't tell which it was, but the letters on the parchment swirled about just as they had when Granger was casting charms that would disguise her writing for him. In moments, they had assumed new shapes, and Astoria tapped the letter with one of her nails.

"I think you should look again," she said.

Draco looked down—and yes, now the writing was the same as it was on all the letters he had received.

He pretended to engage in an intense study of those words whilst silently scanning Astoria from beneath lowered eyelids. He watched until he'd seen it happen twice, which was evidence enough for him. Astoria's eye flicked to the right, towards another table. It could have been the telltale sign of a lie, but Draco, when he risked his own slight sideways glance, saw a shimmer that suggested someone sat there under a Disillusionment Charm or complicated glamour. He worked to keep his mouth from widening in a hungry snarl.

My writer is here. Astoria is getting advice from him. They worked out some way to fool the charmed parchment, some way to transform her writing into his. I still don't understand the motive, but I will no longer allow them to treat me as if I were stupid.

Draco at last looked up. Astoria leaned towards him with a confiding smile. Draco uttered a bark of a laugh, and she promptly paused. She was too well-bred to exclaim aloud, but a faint pallor worked its way across her face.

"I am not stupid," Draco said. "I do not appreciate being lied to. I do not appreciate being handled as if I were a child, incapable of making my own decisions about who is best for me." He didn't raise his voice, but he didn't need to; he saw the increased force of his words tear into Astoria like arrows. "You're not the one who wrote these words."

Astoria had the courage to flutter her eyes at him in confusion. "I don't know what you mean, Draco. You saw me write them—"

"The writer is a man." Draco lowered his voice still further. It would force them to pay attention: both Astoria, and his writer, who was resisting his destined meeting with Draco for some reason unknown. "I know that. Where is he?"

Astoria went a little paler, but she inclined her head with the grace of someone who knew she was beaten. "Perhaps we should have consulted you," she said, and once again her eye twitched sideways, towards the shimmer in the chair.

Draco stood and whirled around in the same smooth motion.

No! Harry couldn't believe she would give him away like this. *Astoria! What are you doing?*

I know what he wants, Astoria's voice said softly, resignedly, in his head. *And it's not me. I still hoped—I still thought I might be able to convince him, and if I could, then he would be in a fair way to being happy with me—but I can't, and that means an illusion won't do. He needs and chooses—Harry, watch out!*

Harry snapped his head back towards Draco, and realized he was on his feet, wand aimed directly at Harry's chair. His lips were already moving in the first words of a spell, and Harry recognized a Latin word used at the beginning of many binding incantations.

Utter panic seized him, and convulsing grief. He had made a mistake in trying to impose on and lie to Draco. He *did* need to make his own choices. But it was better that he should believe the writer was too cowardly to meet him—which might actually be the truth—than that he should realize the whole ploy had been the plan of someone he must still despise. This way, at least Draco could have his pride and think of it as a failed romance instead of a deception that had fooled him for a while. Hurt pride would cut him more deeply than anything else.

Harry twisted to his feet, paused a moment so the Invisibility Cloak could flow about him, and then began to run. Draco's spell struck the chair behind him, and he heard a complicated grinding of wood that must be its legs twisting up into a bound position.

Not even one full heartbeat later, Draco's feet pounded the floor as he ran after Harry.

Harry gasped curses under his breath as he skidded out the front door and leaped one of the magical engines that drove the rotating panels surrounding the restaurant. Merlin's Tor had anti-Apparition wards everywhere; you were supposed to walk up a long road to the restaurant and admire the sights on the way. Harry had at least a thousand feet to cover before he would be free to get away.

And you won't run it hesitating here, he scolded himself, as Draco fired another binding spell past his shoulder, and began to run again.

Draco had no idea why matters had worked out this way. His writer should have stood up to him when he realized all his plans had failed. He should have pulled off the glamour or the charm or whatever it was and explained himself. He should have acceded to Draco's tight clasp on his wrist and come back to the Manor for a few hours of talk.

He should not have *run away.*

But Draco couldn't deny that he was enjoying the chase. He had used binding spells at first, but then he remembered that the anti-Apparition wards would keep his writer from escaping immediately, and that he had always been able to run silently.

And that there was another way he would prefer to capture his writer.

He followed that shimmer as closely as he could without making enough noise to cause it to turn around, and counted steps under his breath. Soon, they were near the edge of the anti-Apparition wards, and the shimmer slowed down. His writer was probably fumbling for his wand.

But he wasn't paying enough attention to the world around him whilst he was at it.

Draco pounced. He grabbed his writer around his waist and bore him to the ground, twisting at the same moment so that he was straddling his writer's hips, legs firmly gripping the other man's knees. He laid his hands on his writer's shoulders and stared down into the invisible face, grinding slightly with groin and arse. He was already intensely excited from the chase and his anger before that; he could feel his writer responding, which made him stiffer with satisfaction.

"Why did you run?" Draco whispered, wishing he could lower his head and breathe into his writer's face, but too cautious to bring his mouth within range of teeth yet. "You've already practically said that you belong to me." He shifted from side to side, trying to gauge his writer's strength and physique as well as tell what sort of spell shielded him from sight. It felt oddly silky, whatever it was. Perhaps it was an Invisibility Cloak rather than a spell after all.

The man *was* nicely muscled, at least, and there was no problem with the erection pressing against him. Not that Draco was a good judge of other men's erections. But he would learn to be, he thought, and ground down again.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "Mine, at the very least." And he reached down to tear the Invisibility Cloak from the stubborn arse's face.

The bastard slipped to the side, brought his knee up into Draco's chin, and practically dislocated his shoulders squirming free. Draco fell back, reeling, and heard a quick, roughly chanted spell. He gasped before a whirling sequence of lights descended in front of his eyes, disorienting him and keeping him from getting a firm grip on his wand so that he could mutter a *Finite.*

When he could see again, the air still resounded with the crack of an Apparition and there was a note on the ground beside him, in his writer's hand. Draco snatched it up and read it immediately despite the pounding in his head.

I was wrong. I see that now. I shouldn't have tried to deceive you, and I acted far worse than you ever have. Accept my apologies, both for trying to foist Astoria on you and for writing in the first place. You deserve to make your own choices. I won't come near you again.

Draco crumpled the letter in his hand with a snarl.

"I *do* deserve to make my own choices," he whispered. "And you don't get to withdraw so easily from the contest."

He did have a second thought and hastily turned back to the restaurant then, but by the time he reached their table again, Astoria was also gone. Draco closed his eyes and composed himself, knowing he would have to give explanations of some kind to the owner of Merlin's Tor.

But that was on the surface of his mind only. Every other thought was full of his writer, full of pointed fury and cool appreciation and angry hunger, intent on tracking him down.

You don't get to offer me something like that and then draw the hook back when I snap at the bait. I'll find you, I'll know you, and I'll fight with you.

Draco felt a small smile widen into a large one across his face.

And whether I end up taming you or you tame me, I will deeply *enjoy this, my writer.*

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—What Harry Potter Felt

Harry slammed the door of his house behind him, flung off the Invisibility Cloak, and went straight to the pacing room. He knew better than to slow down and go to his bedroom when he was like this.

But even a few minutes of dizzy pacing didn't help. Nothing, he thought, could cure the disaster that he had just seen coming.

Seen coming. And caused. Really, it was happening all the time, but I was too much of a coward to face up to that.

Harry halted near the wall which he had stumbled into when he came up with the plan to write letters to Draco, and resisted—barely—the temptation to slam his forehead into a part that wasn't cushioned. He dug his hands into his hair instead, and shook his own head, whilst altering his voice into Hermione's.

"You should have known better than this, Harry."

Yes. I should have.

He had thought that Draco either wouldn't find out about the manipulation or wouldn't care if he did. After all, he himself used manipulation in his ordinary, everyday dealings with all kinds of people. He might appreciate the tactic being used against him, in an odd way. Besides, he could accept being Astoria's victim if not Harry's. Harry had seen that he treated the women who managed to deceive him for a while more kindly than the ones who were too open and honest—one of the reasons that Harry had taught Astoria the glamours that concealed her blushes.

It was why he had considered his plan perfect. No, it wouldn't have worked for someone like Hermione or Ron. But Draco wasn't his friends.

Draco is not your friend at all.

And that meant that Draco wasn't likely to forgive him for a mistake like this, the way that Hermione and Ron would have. Harry groaned again and smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand.

I was so stupid. I did take his choices away from him, and try to impose my own will. And perhaps he admires people for short deceptions, or accepts it as part of the courting game, but the letters weren't an ordinary courting game. Could he have put up with being tricked into

falling in love, if I'd managed that? I don't think so. And that puts Astoria in an awkward position, too, one that I should never have asked her to take. I hurt more than one person with this insane idea.

The more he thought about it, the worse he felt. He winced as his words in the letters came back to him—honest and open, yes, far too much so. They were probably embarrassing for Draco to read. Harry had written them in a blaze of energy, but if he could, he would have Summoned every letter back to him then and torn it up.

How could I be so stupid?

But the answer to that was simple, of course, and it was one that Hermione had told him more than once when she realized the real state of his feelings for Draco. *Love makes people stupid. You more than most, Harry. Remember the way you broke up with Ginny because you were convinced she would be safer that way?*

Harry sighed. Yes, he remembered. And Ginny had been left at school with Snape as Headmaster and Death Eaters as teachers. She had enough Gryffindor spirit and desire to help Harry that she'd also got in danger on her own account. She'd survived, but she would carry scars from that year. At least they could have shared some common experiences and maybe more sympathy if they'd been together.

I lied to Draco. I tried to manipulate him into falling in love with Astoria. I wrote letters that he has to have found insulting, personally challenging in a bad way, and pushy. And then I showed up at the restaurant and ran away from him like the coward I am.

Draco would have found it hard to forgive even one of those things. All together, Harry knew he had caused a wound unlikely to heal.

And how much worse would he feel if he knew it was Harry Potter who'd done this to him? No, the least I can do is leave him some *of his pride. I have to stay away. I have to stop writing letters to him, no matter how much it hurts. At least I left a note with some kind of farewell and explanation in it.*

Harry sank down to the floor and took several deep breaths. The thought of the pain he'd caused Draco caused *him* pain. His bones ached and his mouth was dry. He concentrated, turning the thoughts over in his mind until he believed he understood the full ramifications of what he'd done.

Not that that can make up for the way you hurt Draco. But at least you might *refrain from doing things that stupid in the future.*

The thought of Draco's pain went on and on for long moments. Harry was an Auror. He had saved people during the war. He had done what he thought was the right thing for as long as he could, and changed his mind when he found out it wasn't the right thing (like treating Slytherins

as the enemy). He was proud that he hadn't caused casual pain in years.

And now he had done it to the one person in the world he would have given anything to avoid hurting.

He didn't know how to start feeling better about that.

But, maybe because the pain was just too intense to stay at the same pitch it had so far, at last he began to feel a little better. He couldn't erase the past, but he could try to make up for his stupidity. He would apologize to Astoria. He would avoid interfering in Draco's love life at all, ever again. He would have to find someone on his own, like anyone else, and Harry wasn't stupid enough to think he would *never* find anyone. Draco had cleverness and to spare. If he grew bored enough with waiting for someone to choose him, he'd hunt the perfect mate down.

In fact, it would probably be the best thing if you stayed away from Draco altogether.

Harry winced as he stood up, but more because he wanted to instinctively reject the idea than anything else. He'd spent a long time learning about Draco, and watching him, and admiring his exploits when they appeared in the newspaper. Giving that up would leave a blank in his life.

But if it prevents you from acting like an idiot over him again, then it's the best solution. And you'll find something new to fill the blank eventually.

Harry felt his shoulders finally relax. He spent a few moments considering whether he should write Astoria a letter of apology, but shook his head in the end. No, that would be as cowardly as running away from her in the restaurant and leaving her to bear the brunt of Draco's temper alone. He would firecall her.

And he would try to keep his distance, and stop regretting.

Draco waited until the next morning to visit Astoria. He had to let his temper cool and the embarrassment at being fooled and escaped fade from it. He wanted only clear, glass-like hunger when he went hunting his writer.

And Astoria knew who his writer was. Draco intended to make her give him the name. It would be by far the simplest solution and save him time.

The sooner I know, the sooner I can start taming him and accustoming myself physically to the idea of a male lover.

There were other measures he could try, yes, but he would have been the idiot his writer called him to avoid the simplest one. So he stood in front of Astoria's door and gave her servant his name. He concealed his snort when the girl's eyes widened. This was why he avoided human servants in favor of house-elves; they weren't pitiable for showing their anxiety, since they could hardly help it. Draco couldn't have trusted someone he despised.

What happens if my writer is someone I despise?

Draco shook his head as he walked up spiraling staircases and past walls entirely covered with paintings, landscapes of volcanoes and tropical seas; it seemed Astoria had a fondness for art. There would be points in his writer's character that were deplorable, and he needed answers as to why the man had fled from him last night, but anyone who could write him letters like that had enough admirable points to compensate.

Astoria received him in a large, airy room with, Draco thought at first, enchanted windows on either side. It was only when he looked closely that he recognized them as more magical paintings, landscapes of rippling pampas grass with light subtly moving across them. They looked like simple sunlight on air unless one studied them.

"Draco. A pleasant surprise."

Draco studied her narrowly, but she met his eyes with no signs of embarrassment. Of course, now that he was alert for concealing magic after the encounter with his writer, he could see the glamour that hid her blushes, but he liked her the better for thinking of it.

"I need to know who my writer is," he said. She knew why he was here and he knew that she knew, so there was no dignity to be gained by dancing around the point.

"I'm not going to tell you."

Draco blinked. Then he wondered why. Had he expected her not to meet bluntness with bluntness? Or perhaps he had thought his mere presence would overpower her and make her confess, since he knew she was attracted to him.

He couldn't tell what he'd been thinking, and he wasn't about to waste more thought on it when there was a writer to be claimed. He would have to switch tactics. "Perhaps you might think I want to hurt him," he said. "I don't. I simply want to know who he is."

"Ah," Astoria said, with a sharp ironic edge to her tone that Draco had never heard before. "And *then* you'll hurt him."

Draco took a deep breath. He would have liked to clench his hands together the way he did when reading an insulting letter, but that was too obvious a gesture and therefore not one he could use in front of other people. "I want him. I might scratch and bite, yes, but I assure you it would be in a mutually desired context."

A faint blush moved behind the glamour and darkened her cheeks then, but she maintained her calmness. "I still won't help you. He's told me himself that he's sorry for involving me in this and that he won't come near you again. I think you should respect his decision. He admits the letters were a mistake. Think of them that way, and you'll be able to move on more easily."

"I won't allow him to determine the extent of the contact we have." Draco narrowed his eyes. "It's my choice as well."

Astoria laughed softly, which was not the reaction Draco was used to receiving to one of his decisions. "I don't think he'll think that way. He's in love with you, Draco, and deeply remorseful about hurting you. The way he sees it, if he talks to you again, or writes you any more letters, or even reveals his identity, he'll hurt you. Your pride, at least."

"Why?" Draco demanded, baffled and pleased both at once. It was a good sign that his writer *was* in love with him and had meant his words in the last letter, if he was so worried about hurting Draco, but at the same time he ought to have known that being deprived of his presence would hurt the most.

"Telling you that would be the same as telling you who he is." Astoria shook her head. "He's decided to end it. You'll have to, as well."

"I do not *have* to," Draco said, and this time he let his voice rise in sharpness. Maybe Astoria would talk to his writer again; maybe he was hiding here now. Draco had to fight hard, when he had that idea, to keep from looking around the room. Either way, Astoria should know he was serious. "I want him, and I am accustomed to getting what I want."

"That's the second time you've said you want him," Astoria said. "But you've never dated men. It was the reason he approached me in the first place, because he was sure you would need a woman to be writing the letters."

"His gender is a barrier to me, yes," Draco said. "But now I need *him*."

Astoria looked at him with her mouth slightly open, then shut it and smiled. "Well," she said. "That would surprise him."

"So you'll tell me who he is?"

"You *do* come on strongly," Astoria said, and regarded him with a slightly jaded expression. "I think I'm no longer quite as infatuated with you as I was. I should thank him for curing me of that."

Draco curled his fingers into his palm. Every fresh reminder that Astoria could communicate with his writer and he couldn't stung him like a whip tipped with salt water. "Then at least tell him I want him," he said. "And that I'm searching for him, if you want to give him some advance warning."

"At the moment, he's staying away from me as well as you." Astoria cocked her head to the side with an expression of mock concentration. "And I rather think you won't find him, because you have no idea where to look."

"I know that he owns an—" Draco began furiously, and then stopped. He took a few deep breaths and chided himself for stupidity. He had nearly told Astoria all the evidence he had, which in turn could have told his writer what steps he needed to take to cover up his identity. Astoria was cleverer than she looked.

"It doesn't matter where he runs, where he hides," he said at last. "I intend to have him, and so I will."

Astoria gave him a faint smile that could have hidden any number of emotions. The only one Draco could be sure she felt was amusement. "You are going to a great deal of effort to avenge your injured pride."

"If I say something three times, will you take it as true?" Draco raised his eyebrows. "I want him."

"Not enough," Astoria replied, and Draco knew that any chance she might have told him his writer's identity was gone. Not that he cared, he told himself. At least he knew this route was closed, and he knew some of his writer's objections to contacting him again.

Though they are stupid objections.

He would bear them down as he had borne his writer to the ground last night. And he moved his mind carefully and instantly away from that image, because the last thing he wanted was to get hard in front of Astoria. His writer was the only one who deserved to see that.

"Farewell," he said.

"Farewell," said Astoria. "And I think that you would be better-advised to give up this chase. You don't know how powerful his conscience is."

Draco didn't bother replying. There was another route he could take, and he had hesitated less because of the chance of getting information out of Astoria than because he knew he still didn't understand sympathetic magic very well.

But his patience and his intelligence had served him before where simple knowledge had failed—as with the Vanishing Cabinet in Hogwarts.

As for giving up…

There are forces in the world more powerful than conscience, and I am one of them.

Harry shook his head and pushed yet another report away from him. He'd read the same sentence five times now. He linked his hands together behind his head and leaned back in his chair, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

It was harder than he had realized it would be not to think about Draco.

Today, Harry had forced himself to shove away every newspaper that came, all with stories about Draco probably somewhere inside. He hadn't lingered to listen to gossip in the shops or the small pub where he went to lunch the way he usually did. He'd concentrated on Auror work, joked with Ron, and requested copies of old files from the Archives; sometimes he still tried to solve crimes that the previous generation of Aurors had given up on. Anything he could do to help people, he wanted to do.

And thinking about Draco hardly helps anyone.

Harry sat there for a few minutes casting about in his mind for something that *would*, and suddenly blinked and sat up.

Kingsley had been bothering him for years about doing more to help the reputation of British wizardry abroad; there were some magical communities in other countries who weren't impressed that the Ministry had done so little about Voldemort. He'd wanted Harry to take "holidays"—really publicity tours—in those communities and explain the situation. They were more likely to listen to the person who had finally got rid of Voldemort than a random Auror, though he had sent random Aurors when Harry refused, which he always did.

What if he was to take one of those "holidays?" It would get him out of the country for a while, removing him from the temptation to contact Draco again, and it would give him other things to think about.

Smiling, because for the first time in three days he felt like doing something rather than just sitting around, Harry picked up his quill and looked around absently for parchment.

A piece of it hit him on the head.

Startled, Harry reared back and stared upwards. A spectral figure hovered there, glowing blue. It looked like the ghost of an owl, but so faded that Harry could barely make out the talons. The only really clear thing was the beak, which had clutched the parchment it had dropped on him.

Is this a new form of sending memos? Harry raised an eyebrow and picked up the parchment. *I don't think I approve.*

No, he discovered when he opened the parchment. It was a letter.

Harry felt his blood freeze as he recognized Draco's handwriting. For a moment, he couldn't breathe and struggled against a strangling sensation. *How in the world did he find me?*

But he made himself calm down, especially because the letter began *My writer* instead of his name, and the first few lines also seemed to indicate that Draco didn't know who he was *quite*

yet. He looked back up at the spectral owl, and this time, when he concentrated, he could see something dark washing through its body like a dead leaf in a river. It resembled a piece of Grimoire's feathers.

Harry grunted in understanding. Yes, he had heard about this kind of sympathetic magic, and even seen it practiced in a murder case. Using a bit of an owl bonded to one owner, rather than a common postal bird, could send a letter to that owner. The spectral owl containing the feather would act like a homing pigeon. But Draco still didn't know who he was, and Harry knew from experience that the ghostly birds flew so fast he couldn't have followed it.

And he couldn't summon the bird back, either. Sure enough, as Harry watched, its blue body collapsed in on itself in a shower of sparks.

Harry slowed his breathing down and flexed his fingers several times before he relaxed fully. So, Draco had been clever, but all he could do was contact Harry once, not know who he was or follow the letter up. His pride had probably pushed him to have the last word, Harry thought, rolling his eyes, and began reading the letter.

My writer,

You are a coward and you have caused me pain, but that only makes me more determined to hunt you down. Astoria said something about your conscience being powerful, perhaps the most powerful part of you.

I am sorry for you if that is true, but of course Astoria is a common girl, even though pure-blooded, and one cannot trust what she says.

Harry narrowed his eyes. No matter how much Draco wanted to scold him, that was no reason for him to insult Astoria.

My will is the strongest piece of my own constitution. And at the moment, that will is bent to taming you.

You think that because you caused me pain I would let you go? I thought you knew my character better. I need vengeance when someone has wronged me. And in your case, I have decided that the vengeance that would please me best is having you in my control and teaching you to obey me.

Harry hissed under his breath. Draco hadn't listened to or learned a thing from his letters, had he? Harry had demanded an equal, and Draco was blithely disregarding that, assuming that Harry would become his slave because he loved him.

I felt you beneath me the other night, and that is enough to make me interested in exploring further. You were too hasty in assuming that only women excite me. A man may do the same thing, provided he knows his proper place—under me. Here I must congratulate you. You have

made an excellent beginning.

Harry slammed his hand down on the desk.

And lest you think I presume too much, let me remind you of the extra evidence projecting into my erection. You find submission to me exciting, and that compensates for the lack of a general submissive streak. Perhaps you do not surrender in ordinary life—in fact, I would think it unlikely—but then, I would not want someone who falls to his knees for just anyone. *For me is quite enough.*

Harry snarled, and felt his magic boiling up and down at the edges of his control.

My writer, it is not your place to make decisions for me. And so I will not accept your choice—or is it a plea, because the firestorm of passion you felt for me stunned you?—to cut off contact. I have many pieces of your owl's feathers left. I will send each one to you, and continue my study of sympathetic magic, until I can grasp your wrists with my hands and press my lips to yours.

Yours, but never in the same way that you are mine,

Draco.

Harry flung the letter away from him, spun around, drew his wand, conjured a glass of water, and hurled it against the wall so that the glass shattered and water sprayed everywhere. There came a startled shout from down the corridor, probably Ron, but at the moment, Harry couldn't care less. He was breathless with rage.

How dare he? How fucking dare he?

Harry wanted an equal, a partner. He'd said that over and over again. And Draco smugly disregarded that and nattered on about how he wanted someone who fell to his knees at the mere *sight* of him.

He'd interpreted Harry's erection, the sign of Harry's excitement at being close to the man he loved, as a sign of submission.

He was an arrogant, unmitigated bastard, who had taken the metaphor of his being Harry's conqueror all too literally.

Harry spun back to his desk and snatched up a clean piece of parchment. He dashed out the letter at white heat, the fire inside him burning away all his careful, cautious resolutions to have nothing further to do with Draco.

Master of nothing but your own stupidity,

I'll never yield to you. I'll never be submissive to you. I've killed my share of Dark wizards, and I

could destroy you as easily.

It's a good thing we're not together, because quite obviously you could never satisfy me. I require something other *than simple domination, and I've had enough experience to notice that sadists are the worst lovers—which, no doubt, is why they're so often paired with masochists who care more about pain than sexual performance.*

You couldn't hold me down. You couldn't hold *me. I don't really know why I've spent so much time mooning over you, if this is your real character.*

I can, in fact, make decisions for the both of us, the way that it's always been done when one person is mentally incompetent *to do it for himself. And I'll never reveal myself to you, never give myself away to you.*

Yours in disgust,

A writer (who rejects any sort of possessive pronoun).

Harry was panting when he was done, and he stormed from the room to find a postal owl. At least he wouldn't be giving Draco access to any of Grimoire's feathers.

If any more letters come after this, I won't open them, he promised himself as he watched the tawny owl flying away with his response. *He can't send that many. If he breaks up the feathers into too many pieces, they can't support the body of a ghost owl.*

But I had to do it this once. I had to. It's part of the process of winning myself free from the son of a bitch.

Draco laughed quietly when the tawny owl soared through his bedroom window and landed on his arm. A happiness as pure as sunlight poured through him as he took the letter away, offered the owl a treat, and then waved his wand. A second copy of the letter popped into existence, and Draco laid it carefully aside. He would save it and savor it as he had his writer's other letters.

The original must be torn up, because its parchment—parchment his writer had touched not an hour before—would form the ingredients for much more powerful sympathetic magic.

Sympathetic magic that, in the end, would lead Draco directly to his writer.

Draco had chosen the course that would most enrage his writer and *force* him to respond. There was nothing he liked better than when his prey contributed to its own entrapment.

He read the letter through, smiling slightly at each insult, and in the end brought the parchment to his lips and kissed it. He could afford to be gentle when he was winning.

"You won't give yourself away," he whispered, "but you *will* give yourself to me."

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—What Draco Malfoy Realized

"This is—sudden." Kingsley blinked and leaned back, his hands folded across his belly as he studied Harry. "You're sure about this?"

"Perfectly." Harry clenched his fingers on the shrunken trunk in his pocket. He'd already been home to pack, in a whirlwind of activity because he was afraid he might change his mind at any moment and decide to remain in England to be near Draco. But his mind was clear now, and he intended to see that it stayed that way. "I've even decided where I want to go."

"Do tell." Kingsley had a curious expression on his face, as if he thought that Harry wouldn't be able to come up with a destination and that would show he wasn't serious.

"Madrid." Harry leaned forwards and tapped a hand triumphantly on Kingsley's desk. "They had all that trouble with Dark wizards a month or so ago and asked us for someone to speak on our Auror tactics, didn't they?"

Kingsley blinked like a lizard, or like the way that Draco did when he was confronted with a disorienting surprise. Harry noticed that, and then told himself to stop thinking about Draco. "So they did," Kingsley murmured, drawing Harry's attention back to the problem in front of him. "I didn't realize you'd remembered that."

Harry folded his arms and glared. "Well, I *did*. And just because I didn't agree to it at the time doesn't mean I *never* would."

"Glad to hear it." Kingsley reached for a packet of parchment in front of him and wrote Harry's name on it, then handed it to him. Harry accepted the set of papers with a small smile. He thought that Kingsley had probably planned to send someone to Madrid as soon as possible, and if Harry hadn't wanted to go there but to Iceland or Germany, Kingsley would have tried to persuade him out of it. "This contains all the information you'll need to become a guest of the Spanish Ministry and stay out of sight of the Muggles, as well as the translation charm."

Harry opened the packet and studied the incantation for the charm a minute. As he'd suspected, it was depressingly long and complicated. *Oh, well. I've done worse things. One just an hour ago, in fact.*

After he'd sent his letter to Draco, he'd realized what a fantastically stupid idea that was and what he'd revealed about his identity when he said that he'd killed Dark wizards. But that just caused his half-made decision to get made all the way.

Sympathetic magic had its limits, and, in particular, letters sent with it couldn't cross salt water. If Harry went to the Continent, he'd put enough distance between them. He couldn't be tempted to answer those letters if he never saw them.

"You'll be expected to explain your own particular experiences as well as the general procedures of the British Ministry," Kingsley droned on. "I'm sure that someone will want to interview you about the Battle of Hogwarts. Emphasize the principles you acted on rather than the methods, please." He gave Harry a tepid glare. Harry knew that there were still times that Kingsley was disappointed the war had been won with a simple *Expelliarmus.* "And of course you'll be standing in as a representative for us. I expect you to act up to the highest standards you know."

"Of course," Harry said automatically, though he hadn't paid much attention to Kingsley's spiel. It was all obvious. He tucked the packet of parchments into his robe, all but the single sheet that contained the translation charm and directions for his Apparition points, and then turned to leave.

"Oh, and Harry?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised. "Yeah?"

"I expect to remain in ignorance of whatever is making you flee the country at the moment," said Kingsley flatly, and then turned back to his paperwork.

Harry marched out, his back stiff with offended dignity. *I'm not fleeing the country. I'm just…making a strategic retreat.*

But he could be honest with himself in his head, if not with Kingsley. He'd made a lot of mistakes in his attempts to approach Draco. The letters plan had been a stupid one. He'd been equally stupid to assume that Draco would accept Astoria without persuasion, or even with it. He hadn't counted on what would happen if or when Draco ever came near to discovering who had sent him the letters.

He didn't blame himself for not realizing that Draco would consider a male lover, though. There had never been any sign of that, and there was only so much that observation could do.

He needed to look at other things, other people, for a while. He needed to be in a place where he could answer normal owls, but not Draco's spectral ones. He needed to *think*, without the overwhelming pressure of the emotions that Draco always stirred in him.

And who knows? he thought, as he chanted the translation spell and then memorized the Apparition coordinates. He would have to hop several times, once onto a small scrap of land in

the Channel, since intercontinental Apparition was impossible. *Maybe it'll be a holiday in more ways than one. Maybe I'll find someone there who takes my mind off Draco entirely. That's not likely, but I really have to consider how much I love him, if I could pull something like this and then not know he refused to consider an equal partner.*

Draco took a deep breath and forced himself to spend a few minutes thinking of nothing, gazing in front of him at the plants in the garden. The fronds of the ferns were swaying; the marigolds were brilliant; the lilies and the narcissus that his father had planted long ago in honor of his mother shone in the sunlight. If he sat there long enough with his mind blank, then he would have to accept the peace into his soul.

Or that was the theory.

But the plants, growing in contentment, satisfied with their lot, only reminded him of how miserable *he* was. He hadn't been able to contact his writer for a fortnight. Every spectral owl he sent out failed to come back, and he'd received no letters.

Draco doubted that his writer had suddenly learned a miraculous self-control. Rather, he seemed to have moved himself into a place where sympathetic magic no longer worked. Draco thought that he wasn't in England any more.

But where he might have gone…there were too many places, too many choices. Draco had not the least idea.

He raised his head and let his hands clench into fists on the bench beside him. If he could not banish his anger, then he would accept it and work with it. He would not let it get the better of him, as it had of his writer when Draco sent the baiting letter. It would become a weapon in his arsenal and not a weakness.

There *were* ways he could find out where his writer had gone, given the collection of torn pieces of parchment floating in vials in his lab, locked under a preservation charm that kept their contact with his writer's skin vital and burning. He had wanted to wait to use the parchment pieces until he understood more about sympathetic magic, so that he wouldn't waste them. But then he had still anticipated responses to his letters, unguarded communications that would reveal more about his writer and perhaps enable Draco to discover him even before he felt ready to use the parchment.

There had been a particularly revealing line in the last letter, about killing Dark wizards. It was likely that his writer was an Auror. Draco could at least try to find out which Aurors had been sent away from the country in the last weeks.

Except that someone will wonder why you want the information. The Ministry workers had not, for the most part, fallen to his charm. They had been closer than most to the front lines of the war, since the Dark Lord had taken over the Ministry so decisively. Someone would, at the very least, report Draco's interest in Auror movements to the Minister, and then Draco might find

himself questioned regarding every unsolved crime that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had on their records.

No, sympathetic magic it was. Draco would simply have to force his mind and understanding to work faster, so that he would grasp its essence and not waste the parchment when he was ready to cast his spell.

He had not realized until now how dependent he was on the letters from the writer, on the knowledge that his writer was out there, regretting and impatient and in love, doing everything he could to evade identification and capture. Draco pictured the man without a face who still became daily more and more defined in his imagination, and pictured him taking someone else's hand, stepping into a new life, or simply ignoring Draco for the rest of his days.

It sent a pang of what felt suspiciously like panic through him.

Draco disliked that. This was a chance connection in his life, with a casual beginning, and he did not enjoy the suspicion that his writer, so eager to make contact at first, was now freer of the need for that contact than he was. But he thought it might be happening, and if so, the only way around that was to show his writer how much of the other man's attention he, in fact, deserved.

He stood up and retreated inside to spend time with his sympathetic magic books once more.

"Would you like to come with me to hear a concert, Harry?"

Harry grinned and swung the satchel he'd taken to carrying with him over his shoulder. He felt like he was back in Hogwarts, with everyone in sight handing him parchment—suggestions for further contact with the British Ministry, mostly, but also some testimony about Dark wizards that could be useful if this particular group ever showed up in England. "That'd be great, Rodrigo."

Rodrigo José López Martínez grinned at him and fell into step beside him as they left the Spanish Ministry. Harry felt a calm, deep contentment spread over him. Rodrigo matched him without appearing to notice what he was doing, walking as fast as Harry did and keeping up with him when he showed off his dueling skills. And he had a sense of humor, which Harry couldn't remember Draco ever having.

Stop thinking about Draco. Harry would much rather think about Rodrigo, who had dark hair and odd eyes—brown in one light, greenish-hazel in another—and the unselfconscious grace of someone who'd been trained in the Spanish Aurors' style of fighting.

Like Ron, he was comfortable company. Thanks to the translation charm, they understood each other perfectly, though Rodrigo teased Harry that his Spanish had a British accent. And Rodrigo had been able to tell Harry about international politics in a style that actually made it interesting, unlike the times he'd tried to learn anything about it from Hermione or Kingsley.

Harry wasn't prepared to say that he'd forgotten Draco, yet, but the holiday had been the mental vacation that he'd anticipated, and more.

They came out of the Ministry into a street that looked bigger than it should, thanks to the huge, billowing pavilions that had replaced most of the buildings. Harry gave them a rueful look. When he'd heard about the Spanish problem with Dark wizards, he had assumed that a small group of them had murdered enough high-profile people to cause news and maybe a panic. He hadn't anticipated a group larger than the Death Eaters that had destroyed half the wizarding section of Madrid.

"It was close," Rodrigo said, following his gaze. "At one point, we were backed up to the Ministry itself and fighting, with the Minister prepared to Portkey out at any minute."

"And you never found out what they wanted?" Harry asked in interest as they started to walk down the middle of the steep street, avoiding the architects who zoomed around the pavilions on brooms, measuring and arranging and arguing.

"The ones *I* fought told me it was revenge for what the Spanish Empire did in America and Europe centuries ago," Rodrigo said, and rubbed his face. "Which means, if that was true, that they'll never stop. There's no way to undo those atrocities, and if we kill everyone who comes after us for them, we'll only end up causing more bad feeling."

Harry nodded. He'd spent years listening to Hermione talk about British Muggle history and the way that pure-bloods abused house-elves; some of that had sunk into his skull even if the international politics hadn't. It was a huge knot of useless guilt and useless resentment on the part of those who felt "attacked" for the deeds of their ancestors and productive efforts stymied by hatred on both sides.

Rodrigo briskly shook his head and straightened his shoulders as if throwing the burden of the attacks off. "But I don't think that was true," he said determinedly. "I think that was just something the bastards tried to *use*, so that we would blame the wrong people and not look for them in the shadows. We'll find them yet." He smiled at Harry. "And I think I've spent enough time brooding on the subject. Come along."

Harry followed easily, but Rodrigo slowed to wait for him without even seeming to notice that he'd done it. Harry grinned again. He appreciated the consideration, and though so far Rodrigo had shown no inclination to flirt beyond a few smiles and interested glances, Harry wouldn't be adverse to seeing if any attraction bloomed between them.

Consideration is so different from what I would get with Draco.

Harry shoved the thought out of his head again. There were other reasons to admire Rodrigo, beyond the fact that he was very different from Draco. He had fought in wars in much the same way Harry had—not the same war, but that hardly mattered. Spain was battered by persistent Dark wizards, some of them working with Muggle terrorist groups, which meant that even the

pure-bloods had to be more aware of the Muggle world than was the case in Britain. His background was more like Harry's, therefore, than most of the people he tended to work with on a daily basis.

Harry liked feeling he had something in common with someone besides Ron and Hermione.

And Rodrigo had asked questions about the war against Voldemort and Harry's defeat of him, but in the learning-oriented way that one soldier would ask questions of another, not in the fawning way that people tended to do at home. When he'd got the answers he wanted, he nodded and switched the subject. And he didn't keep returning to it obsessively, either.

He was someone who had walked through the shadows, like Harry, but who hadn't allowed those shadows to taint him. Harry *liked* to believe he was free of the taint, though he wasn't sure he was.

If he had to find someone to fall in love with to replace Draco, surely he couldn't choose much better than someone like this.

So he and Rodrigo went to a small restaurant and then to the concert, whilst the sunset blazed overhead and declined slowly into the dark, and Harry's thoughts stayed resolutely away from a certain Manor in Wiltshire.

Draco stared down at the scraps of parchment spread in front of him on a map of Europe, soaked with sea-salt and creating a rough half-circle. Inside them lay another half-circle of torn pieces, these smaller in both their spread and the size of each individual piece. They'd been touched with Draco's own sweat and saliva, creating a link to him that was similar to the link the rest of the parchment had to his writer.

He'd used every piece of the parchment except a few ragged corners with no ink on them, which he'd judged his writer less likely to have touched. If this test failed, then he wouldn't have enough left to conduct another trial.

Draco took a deep breath, falling into habit despite the fact that deep breathing hadn't worked at all this evening to calm him down. If he failed, then he *would* find a way to get another letter and conduct another trial. It was possible that every single one of the original letters together could be as powerful as this one.

There were all sorts of things that could go wrong. He might have misread the books of sympathetic magic, or misjudged the strength of the spells he was going to use. He might have saturated the second half-circle too much with his own body fluids, which, being more recent, would be stronger than the older link with his writer. His writer might not be in Europe. That last was the strongest and the worst possibility.

But Draco refused to second-guess himself continually, as much as he refused to allow his writer to escape him.

Draco Malfoy deserved the best. He'd always known that. But he'd had a very limited notion of *best* until his writer had shown him new depths to the word.

He'd pictured someone who would obey him. But most of the women he'd dated had only been too happy to try that in the hopes of getting into his good graces, and he'd become bored with them. That should have told him something right there, but it hadn't, because he wasn't used to paying attention to his own signals and was too infatuated with the old picture of perfection.

He'd imagined that *best* would include beauty. Yet looks couldn't satisfy him without a corresponding personality. Astoria was among the better-looking women in his social circles. And still he grew hard for his writer, whose face he wouldn't recognize if he passed him in the street, because of the spirit and the will that shone through his words.

He'd once declared proudly that he could never date someone who opposed him during the war. His writer had as good as declared back that he'd fought on Dumbledore's side. And here Draco was, preparing to seek him out anyway.

He could change, if his writer demanded that of him and the changes were within reason. He'd already changed in the past fortnight, studying magic that he normally considered beneath him and spending time and effort on a person he didn't know.

If there was a way to hold his writer, Draco would find it, and then he would adopt it. He would enjoy engaging with that fierce pride more than he would dismantling it.

Because I deserve the best, after all. And doesn't that include the best entertainment?

He smiled faintly and held up his hands. His wand was in his right one, but he wouldn't be using it for the first few passes. As sympathetic magic depended on the touch of skin or blood, on toenail clippings and locks of hair, it was his bare palms that would begin the process of connection between him and his writer.

"I call myself," he said. "I acknowledge the bond." The books had made it clear that it didn't matter what words were used, as long as they were simple and offered some form of acknowledgment. Sympathetic magic worked badly when people resisted it.

The half-circle of torn parchment soaked with his sweat and saliva glimmered. Draco, watching it intently, waited until it had achieved a soft, uniform blue glow the color of frost. Then he touched his wand to his left palm and breathed, "*Diffindo.*"

A cut opened, across the furrow that hand-readers called the life line, and his blood flowed out. Draco twisted his hand so that most of the blood would fall directly on the shining pieces of parchment.

The blue light flared when his blood hit it, and the color changed until it was the green of foxfire.

"I acknowledge the bond," Draco whispered again. "This is blood, freely and willingly shed, with the intent of bringing me to a person whom I feel companionship for." The spell would have been stronger if he could have claimed *love*, but the books had warned him that a false statement was worse than having the spell be a bit weaker. Falsehood could destroy sympathetic magic altogether.

The green light twisted, and became red—the color of his fresh blood, the color of a beating heart. The light started to reach out lazy, waving tendrils like seaweed's towards the other half-circle of parchment, and then stopped.

"This parchment comes from the companion I would reach," Draco said, in a loud, clear voice this time. "I believe him to be somewhere within this area." He scattered his blood across the map of Europe, glad that he had taken the time to phrase his statement carefully. At least it wouldn't be a falsehood if it turned out his writer was in America or Australia, and so he wouldn't suffer from backlash. "I shed blood willingly, freely, and claim the touch of his hand on material sent to me willingly. I ask to be connected with him."

The red light embraced the parchment his writer had touched without hesitation this time, and then shot out in several separate arches to touch the blood scattered on the map. Draco gasped as he felt his own heart begin to labor in sympathy with the throb of the light.

There might be more reasons than one that this kind of magic isn't used often, he thought, and blinked the sweat of effort and concentration out of his eyes.

The magic swirled outwards, forming several cyclones on the map. When he squinted, Draco could see that each one centered in a different country. They grew brighter and brighter until it looked as if he'd chosen to paint his potions lab scarlet.

Draco would have laughed if he could have around the noise of his heartbeat, which was taking all his strength. *As if I would ever choose such a color.*

Then all the cyclones but one winked out. Bending closer, staring out of one eye, Draco could make out that it was hovering above Madrid.

And then the magic formed into a single glowing chain that led from his heart to the cyclone, and his hands tingled, and the bond tightened, yanking him through time and space to his writer's side.

"—and then I got to say, 'I *told* you so.' For the second time that night!"

Harry laughed aloud and stepped into the room he'd taken in a tiny house not far from the Ministry. The owners had been happy to have a lodger who could give them money to help them rebuild their other property that had been destroyed by the Dark wizards. "And his face was something to see, I take it?"

Rodrigo dropped his jaw and stared straight ahead in a good imitation of shock. Harry laughed again and moved back a little so that he could accept the implied invitation into the room, if he wanted.

Rodrigo did. His glance flickered sideways at Harry for a moment, and his lips curved up in a pleased smile. Harry grinned back, exhilarated. He'd never taken this kind of risk—Draco was the only man he had ever been attracted to, and of course Harry hadn't tried to come closer to him. But at the moment, with a man who matched him in experience and who had a sense of humor about others as well as himself, he wanted to try.

Harry shut the door and moved forwards, giving Rodrigo plenty of time to slide sideways and let matters sink back into casual again. But Rodrigo muttered something that sounded like, "Wondered when you would get the nerve" and was probably even more insulting in Spanish, and reached up to grip his chin.

The air seemed to explode, and Rodrigo was propelled backwards. Harry jumped and whirled around, his hand already on his wand. His first thought was *Dark wizards!*

It had nothing to do with Draco Malfoy, who was standing in the center of the room staring at him. In fact, seeing him made Harry realize he hadn't thought about Draco all evening.

Not that it mattered. Draco's eyes were wide and fixed on Harry; he didn't look at Rodrigo, who could as easily have been the one writing to him. His face grew paler and paler as he stared, until Harry thought he would pass out.

"*Potter*," he said, and his voice was thick with many complex emotions, but there wasn't enough of the ones Harry wanted to hear most, regret and anger—the ones that might have indicated Draco was thinking about walking away.

Harry's own anger and regret and frustration whirled up in him, and he pointed his wand at Draco, choosing the only spell he could think of that would remedy the situation. "*Obliviate!*" he snarled.

Draco ducked out of the way, and rose to his feet with a breathless laugh. "Oh, no," he said. "Not so easily." He flicked his wand idly at Rodrigo, and Rodrigo vanished out of the room, forcibly Apparated. From the curses Harry heard through the window, he'd gone no further than the street below.

But it was the sheer *nerve* of Draco's daring to do anything about Rodrigo at all that infuriated him. His emotions clouding his mind and rapidly tipping towards rage, his heart pounding with the injustice of Draco showing up when Harry had done his best to forget him and wasn't good for him *anyway*, Harry attacked.

Draco, who'd been casting locking and anti-Apparition spells, met him wand to wand, and the

battle was joined.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—What Harry Potter Did

Draco understood everything now, of course, and so he couldn't keep his mind from racing even as he danced back from the Cutting Curse Potter used and dropped flat to the floor under the Body-Bind.

Of *course.*

Potter owned an Invisibility Cloak. Potter was an Auror, and he could brag about killing his share of Dark wizards, including the Darkest of them all. Potter had every reason in the world to despise himself for liking Draco, what with their history. He could plausibly believe that Draco would never want to date him.

Draco had to roll to avoid the *Stupefy.* As he fought his way back to his feet, he gazed coolly into Potter's frantic, rage-filled green eyes and remembered all the things his writer had made him feel.

He hadn't connected them with Potter. He wondered, now, if his mind had consciously tried to prevent him from doing anything so ridiculous.

And he still wondered why Potter, even if he had excellent reason to believe that Draco didn't want to date him, would push Astoria into his place and then write letters he had to know would tempt Draco more than her weak charms.

Much as he wondered why Potter was fighting so furiously now, when everything he wanted had just walked into the room, and why he had almost kissed another man.

Asking depended on slowing him down.

So Draco moved from the defensive to the offensive, intent on stopping Potter from doing something stupid—as hard as that would be—and asking him those questions.

And perhaps doing other things, he decided, his eyes traveling over Potter and noticing the muscles that he hadn't quite dared to add to his writer's imagined body.

Harry could feel his mouth working apart in a snarl, especially when Draco ducked around the spells that should have laid him out harmlessly and didn't even bother with Shield Charms. His own emotions were throwing off his aim, he thought furiously. He forced his mind back to his Auror training and the ways that his instructors had taught him to focus his attention on the immediate goal.

Knock Draco out. Or bind him. Then use a Memory Charm on him, and send him back to Britain. And explain everything to Rodrigo.

That barely dimmed the fury, though. He had done his best to get away. He had recognized the wrong he'd done to Draco, and tried to make up for it by not contacting him again and allowing him to go his own way and live his own life. He'd found someone to take his mind off Draco, the way Hermione had said he should for years. He'd done everything *right.* For once, he had quieted his conscience with appropriate action.

And then Draco had to show up and try to drag him into everything he'd left behind. Worse, he had to banish Rodrigo and put anti-Apparition charms on the doors and windows, as if he had a *right*, as if his high-handed interference in Harry's life was natural.

Part of Harry wanted to throw down his wand and talk to Draco about everything that lay between them.

He crushed that part of him ruthlessly. He recognized it. That was the part of him still in love with Draco, the part that wanted to muck everything up because it was madly convinced that he could be with Draco if he wouldn't accept Astoria. But that was also the part of him that had come up with the letters plan. Harry couldn't trust his emotions anymore, and that meant he should ignore them.

React rationally. That's the ticket.

Which didn't explain why he was fighting Draco like a madman, but the path to rational action had to wait until he'd won the fight.

This all decided, Harry leveled his wand for the blast that should have laid Draco on the floor, his hands and legs bound together.

Only to have Draco, the right bastard, fight back.

Draco knew that Potter wasn't going to be an easy opponent to conquer, not with his Auror training. And he didn't want to use Dark Arts in a foreign country where, if the Ministry had heard his name at all, it was likely to be in connection with notorious criminals.

But there was no law against fighting dirty. Potter might know how to do that, but he couldn't do it as quickly as Draco.

So Draco started with a Transfiguration that altered the floor under Potter's feet to ice and made him slide and flail for almost a minute; he hadn't expected an attack under him and had tried to leap over a spell that he must have thought aimed for his knees. His helplessness gave Draco the time to set up a small Shield Charm fastened to his left arm and then consider his next spell.

Potter braced his back against the bed and snarled as he aimed his wand at Draco's head. Draco took a chance and ducked to the right. The air bowed inwards just above his hair, and he knew that it was the Punishing Blow Hex, which would have laid him out unconscious.

Draco snarled back. *So Potter wants to play like that, does he? Fine.*

"*Incarcerous sapiens!*" he snapped, and the ropes shot out of his wand and undulated towards Potter, intelligent ropes that would anticipate his movements.

Potter moved his wand down and then abruptly sideways, and the ropes fell, slashed by a nonverbal spell. He focused on Draco, his eyes wide and murderous, before his lips lifted into a smirk and he began to chant the opening syllables of a human Transfiguration spell.

He wants me as a ferret. He's so obvious. Draco's heart beat faster with rage, and he stepped forwards instead of backing away in fear as Potter would expect him to. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Potter's wand trembled in his hand. He maintained his hold on it, but it did ruin his spell, which made the idiot scowl in the moment before he had to fling himself sideways. Draco had hurled a curse that would have compressed his chest and distracted him if he'd stayed still; as it was, it shrunk the bed.

From the floor, Potter chanted his next spell in a rough voice, too low to be heard, and Draco's personal gravity reversed, his feet flipping up to where his head had been. He gagged against the sensation of all the blood rushing to his head.

Still, he had enough wherewithal to strike back, and he suspected that Potter wouldn't expect that, so overconfident was he. "*Vomitus*," he hissed, and the yellow-orange light encircled Potter. Draco smiled grimly as he heard the sound of violent retching a moment later. That ought to hold Potter long enough for him to figure out the counterspell for the magic holding him; he knew a simple *Finite* wouldn't do it.

Amazingly, Potter managed to cast in the midst of the vomiting. "*Rictusempra*!" he said.

Draco experienced an instant of startled displeasure before the sensation of tickling fingers ran all over his body and he began to shake with laughter, which rather distracted him from not hanging upside-down.

Harry had to feel a grim admiration for Draco; not many untrained wizards could have held their own against an Auror as long as he had, and especially not without casting Dark Arts, which

Harry had thought he would resort to at first.

But the admiration was rather tempered by the burn of bile in his throat and the vomit on the floor, which he banished with a wave of his wand. If it stayed, the smell would tempt him to start throwing up again. He climbed shakily to one knee and watched as Draco revolved upside-down, vibrating as he tried desperately to cast.

There, you bastard, Harry thought, and his anger began to calm. *I beat you. You'll have to admit that you don't have the right to barge in here and take over my life the way you tried to. In your own code, being beaten is a weakness, so now you'll go away and—*

Draco gave a wrench to the side and wriggled his wand in a motion Harry had never seen before, and the Tickling Charm and the charm that reversed his gravity both stopped at once. He flipped to his feet and managed to land kneeling, rather than on his head, which Harry would have expected. And then he nearly caught Harry gaping by flinging another *Incarcerous* before he even stood up.

Harry whirled in a circle, which confused the ropes, and then Vanished them the way he had the vomit. "Couldn't know when to give up, could you?" he muttered viciously. He cast a series of precise, firework-like flashes, which should blind Draco—

If he hadn't had his eyes closed already, as if he'd known what Harry was going to do. Harry backed up with a curse, and slipped on the part of the floor Draco had Transfigured into ice. That turned out to be fortunate, because it carried him under the nasty-looking jinx that flew past his ear with a buzzing sound.

"I don't give up someone I want as badly as I want you," Draco said, gasping slightly, but otherwise not looking the worse for wear.

Harry had to swallow at the jolt the words gave him. But then he shook his head. Hadn't he been *right* when it turned out that he was the wrong one for Draco?

On the other hand, Draco didn't think like him. He knew that. Maybe this perspective hadn't occurred to him, and he would go away when Harry suggested it.

The thought of Draco leaving felt like a knife stabbing him under the ribs, but he *had* to do the right thing for Draco's sake. He had to ensure that Draco was happy, no matter how much it hurt him personally, and that meant getting him away from Harry.

"Someone who really loved you, someone you should want, wouldn't have come up with the letters plan in the first place," Harry said. He conjured a Shield Charm that repelled the next curse Draco flung at him, but otherwise didn't move. He'd obtained good results before when he was working with criminals, making eye contact and speaking in a low voice, so he did that now. "You should find someone actually worthy of you."

Draco sneered, as unimpressed by good sense as he ever had been in school, Harry thought. A stir of anger returned to him as he watched Draco turn his wand over between his hands. Harry knew he had made a mistake, knew he had done something unforgivable. Why did Draco have to act as if he hadn't?

"Someone worthy of me excites and arouses me," Draco said. "The way you did. The way your letters did." He shook his head, eyes fastened to Harry's as if he also knew that Auror technique and was trying it out on Harry. "I want you. At the very least, I'd like to see how much you please me before I decide on giving you up."

Harry growled and took a step closer. The air between them seemed to have thickened like one of the *Incarcerous* ropes Draco had tried so hard to bind him with, drawing them together. Harry couldn't have walked out of this room as he'd walked out of Britain even if the locking and the anti-Apparition charms had both dropped away. "You arrogant bastard."

"Yes," Draco whispered. "That's me." He had a peculiar smile on his face.

"Only concerned about sex," Harry said, almost spitting the words now. "Or should I say, your own pleasure? With whether I please you, not with whether you please me."

Draco arched an eyebrow. "Of course I can assume you're pleased with me, or you wouldn't have sought me out in the first place."

"That's changing rapidly." Harry couldn't believe how soft his own voice had got, or how furious he was. It was making him shake as he stood there, the contradictory desires to pounce on Draco and make him *shut up* about things he knew nothing of, or to force his way through the anti-Apparition spells and into the street to apologize and explain things to Rodrigo.

"Why?" Draco made his tone coaxing, the way he might have called to a feral dog. Harry moved forwards a step before he could stop himself, his hand twitching to hit. "Just tell me what made you change your mind, Harry. That's all I want to know. I promise."

"Because of what you said in your last letter," Harry said. "You don't want me, not as I am. You want some degraded version of me, someone you can turn into a pet. And you're arrogant enough to reject Astoria, and try to capture me, and dump Rodrigo outside the door, and all to secure someone you should hate anyway."

"Hogwarts was a long time ago, Harry." Draco's eyes and smile both widened, and it took Harry a moment to realize that he had shuddered when Draco spoke his name, as if the word pulled on a cord connected to his groin. Harry bared his teeth, but Draco didn't change his expression. "I don't hate you now. I'm stunned, oh yes. Surprised, oh yes. *Lustful,* oh yes." He looked down Harry's body then, with lazy contentment in his eyes. "But not hateful."

"You should hate me for trying to manipulate you into falling in love with Astoria," Harry whispered. He couldn't have raised his voice or moved away from Draco to save his life, and he

didn't know why. He *wanted* to tear his eyes away from Draco and look out the window to make sure Rodrigo was all right. At least, that was what he told himself. "That's a wound that can never be forgotten or forgiven. And if you can't forget or forgive me, how can you be with me?"

"Would you never forget or forgive someone who did that to you?" Draco had admitted a jot of intense curiosity into the expression on his face.

"I would," Harry said, after a moment of uncomfortable silence when he realized he didn't really know the answer. "I think. But I know you, and you're different."

Draco shook his head and clucked his tongue. "I think we've established by now that you don't know me *that* well, Harry."

And for all that Harry had told himself to anticipate it, it still came as a shock when Draco flicked his wand and bound Harry from head to foot with a nonverbal *Incarcerous,* strapping his wand safely behind his back. Harry kicked hard, twisted, struggled, arched his shoulder until a rope was near his mouth and tried to bite through it, and tried to get enough give to dislocate his shoulders and slip out that way.

When he discovered that he was well and truly caught, he settled for glaring.

Draco approached in a leisurely manner.

Draco was working hard to keep from breathing in pants. The fight had aroused him uncontrollably, and so had the emotions showing as clearly on Potter's face as cracks in an enchanted mirror. And then Potter had come nearer and nearer to him, and lowered his voice each time, as if he imagined that would make him less attractive in Draco's eyes.

It was time, Draco thought, to test some of the differences between a male lover and a female.

He stopped a few feet away from Potter, eyeing him and the fury on his face in appreciation, and then came closer. Potter stared at him, surprised and disbelieving until Draco was near enough to slide a knee between his tied legs.

He hadn't mistaken his target. How could he, when it had drawn his eyes from the time he'd Apparated into the room? Potter's mouth fell open and he groaned breathlessly as Draco's thigh rubbed against his erection.

"I do want you," Draco said. The shock of leaping into the room with sympathetic magic and finding Potter there was still with him, but he was overcoming it, and it helped that he knew Potter was his writer now. He could focus his attention on his writer's words and personality if he needed to. Indeed, at the moment the most difficult thing was holding himself in one place instead of stepping the rest of the way forwards to grind against Potter. "I can forgive what you did to me—or claim payment." He increased the pressure and the force of his rutting, and Potter threw his head back, gasping and bucking his hips. His legs clamped around Draco's thigh as

much as they could, given the ropes that constrained them. "This is the kind of payment I like."

Draco had a hard time saying the last words. His cock throbbed to the point where he *did* have to push forwards now, involuntary little humping thrusts that made his need spiral up into his stomach like a rising summer wind. He leaned closer still and kissed Potter for the first time, wondering if that would center him.

It made his excitement worse. Potter's mouth opened to him, and the heat, whilst different from the warmth boiling in Draco's belly, and slick in a new way, piled on top of what he was already feeling. Draco snarled softly. He could sense the lust working like a flame on the threads of his control, burning through them one by one.

And then Potter clamped his teeth down, holding Draco's tongue still, and flipped forwards, using the magic of the *Incarcerous* spell that kept him floating above the floor and his grip on Draco's thigh to put Draco on his back beneath him. Draco blinked, dazed, as his head struck the floor. By the time his swimming vision cleared, Potter had already settled himself in a new position and was riding his thigh, his eyes screwed shut and his breath ragged as a running werewolf's.

"Can't resist me even when you think it's wrong, can you?" Draco whispered, because he still thought words might hold the flame at bay.

"*God*," Potter said, opening his eyes. They were glazed, drugged. He dragged at his arms, trying to bring them forwards, but they were securely bound behind his back. Draco experienced a moment's smugness that Potter couldn't get off unless he allowed it.

And then Potter whispered, "Damn you, damn you, I want it," hunched down as much as he could with the magic supporting him, and rubbed himself against Draco's leg desperately.

The flame had its way. Draco reached up, slung his arms around Potter's neck, and snogged him again, panting as he did it, so that his breaths flew down Potter's throat. He shifted to the side, flattening the leg Potter wasn't riding.

Potter wasn't stupid, no matter how much he might seem like it with his lack of foresight and his talk of wounds never healing. He dropped his own thigh into place, and Draco shuddered all over, because there was pressure against his cock, at long *last.*

And so they rocked back and forth, awkward as mating dragons, with the heat twisting tighter and tighter in Draco's belly, his body's jerking more important than the spasms of pain running up his legs and throbbing from his head, all his sophisticated plans for vengeance falling down in black and red ruin—

And the green, green blaze of Potter's eyes.

What are you doing? You're mad. You're stupid, Harry's mind chattered at him. *You shouldn't be*

doing this. You should pull back and Memory Charm Malfoy whilst you have a chance, whilst he'd distracted.

But Harry *couldn't* stop. He'd already tried, and his body went on seeking its satisfaction without him, dragging his mind down into a gulf of desire.

Something about the way Draco's eyes had rolled shut, the way his body flopped and pressed and rubbed beneath Harry, the desperation in the creased corners of his mouth, wouldn't let him stop.

Then the orgasm struck, and Harry screamed. It was as though someone had caught him on a hot pitchfork and tossed him up; his body jackknifed, and the wild motions the pleasure forced him into actually hurt.

Beneath him, Draco came, too, a moment after. Harry found himself staring avidly at his convulsions, and even savoring the way Draco clamped and curled his body around Harry's thigh as if it were his most precious possession.

And then, of course, rationality returned.

Harry shut his eyes and swore softly. He would have liked to bang his head against something, but he was far from his pacing room and he didn't think Draco would understand if Harry pounded against him.

Well, any more than I already have, anyway.

Harry cleared his throat. "Could you take off these ropes, please?" he asked.

Draco let his head fall back and laughed. Harry rolled his eyes and didn't interrupt. Draco was still the one who had to cancel the spell; it was just as well not to anger him.

Draco pushed him back slightly, and Harry let go of his tight grip on Draco's leg, so that he floated back into the upright position the *Incarcerous* spell had first tried to put him in. He winced as intense pain passed through his shoulders and arms like a heat shimmer. "Hurting a bit here," he said.

"You're not too proud to admit that, then?" Draco stood in front of him. He reached up and touched the back of Harry's head, combing his fingers through his hair as if trying to decide how in the world it had ended up that tangled and curly. His eyes were half-lowered, his eyelids concealing his emotions from Harry.

"Not now." Harry tried to twitch his arms in their bonds, but he couldn't move them. He attempted to look as miserable as possible.

Draco gave him a faint smile that could have hidden several different sarcastic remarks, but flicked his wand. Harry dropped abruptly to his knees on the floor as the magic holding him up

and the ropes dissipated both at once. Tenderly, he brought his wrists in front of him and rubbed at them.

"I do hope that you don't attempt to *Obliviate* me again, Potter."

Harry looked up. Draco had his wand trained on him, and his expression was intent and amused and alert. Harry stood up, deliberately tucking his wand into his back robe pocket. His mind churned with plans, but he doubted that any one he could select was equal to whatever plot Draco'd had time to formulate.

But there was still the simple old tactic of telling the truth and hoping that would do.

"Look, Malfoy," he said, because if Draco was going to call Harry by his last name they should be on even terms. "You can't *really* want to be with me."

"In fact," Draco said, "at the moment I'm not sure I want to. But I do know that I want the time and space to make that decision."

Harry let out a deep breath. "You're going back to Britain, then?"

"Not unless you come with me," Draco said, his voice so soft it might have sounded shy. Harry had heard threatening growls before, though, mostly from Kingsley, and he recognized one now. "You'll explain things to my satisfaction, Potter. You'll be as honest as you can be with that thick skull and that noble nature of yours. But you aren't leaving my sight until I've figured out whether I can tolerate a male lover, let alone as one as dim-witted as you are."

Harry stiffened and didn't care if Draco saw him doing it. "I'll be more than *tolerated*," he said, "or I won't stay with you, Malfoy."

Draco chuckled in delight and stepped towards him so fast that Harry only aimed his wand at Draco's midriff *after* Draco's hand had cupped the back of his neck and his mouth hovered an inch from Harry's face. "I know that," he whispered. His lips and the tip of his tongue scraped Harry's own lips. "But you must understand, now. We're too deeply snared in this. We're not letting go of each other because neither one of us can, not until we work this out. And not after that *spectacular* orgasm." He shifted so that his hip rested on Harry's.

Harry half-closed his eyes as he felt himself trying to get hard again.

A sharp spike of pleasure passed through Draco. What he had from Potter was not surrender, but, in the tiny nod that brushed hair and sweat-slick skin against his palm, the next-best thing: the promise of engagement.

Potter was smart enough to see the truth of Draco's statement: neither one of them could walk away now. And that boded excellent things for the future.

Draco didn't think the shock of discovering his writer was *Potter* had subsided yet. But now his excitement was on the wax, and other emotions would follow. Any fear that this might have been simply a plan to humiliate him was fading.

This was deeper. This was more complex.

This *could* be, possibly, the future he had hunted in all the women around him and failed to find.

Draco could make the accommodations he'd been thinking about when using the sympathetic magic. If Potter needed an equal relationship with Draco, then Draco could give him one.

As long as Potter gave him that passion that he'd kept hidden behind the exterior of 'perfect Auror' for so long. And it was obvious now that he wouldn't be able to help himself, wouldn't be able to give less than his full emotions to anyone he got involved with.

A pounding on the door made Draco start back from Potter. "Harry?" called a voice that was probably that of the Spanish man in the room when Draco appeared, trying to claim *his* writer.

Potter rolled his eyes. "I'd better go reassure Rodrigo," he said, and stepped away from Draco, ripping himself harshly free when Draco wouldn't let him go fast enough for his satisfaction. He gave Draco a narrow-eyed glance, shook his head, and faced the door, undoing the locking spells with a few swift passes of his wand. He could do it easily enough when he was concentrating—or not facing Draco.

Draco eyed Potter's arse in contentment. Not complacency; there would be very little of that in his life from now on.

But what he got in trade was more than worth it. There was a deep satisfaction in his heart, a languid relaxation of the emotions that corresponded to the post-orgasmic glow in his body.

Draco had never felt anything like it before. He would make sure to experience it many more times.

Not that he would let desire for Potter control his reactions or cloud his thoughts. That would be simply stupid.

But the chance that he would let Potter leave him now—male body and irritating devotion to "good" and all the rest of it—was one in a thousand.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—What Draco Malfoy Fought

"What is going on, Harry?"

Harry took in Rodrigo's folded arms and aggressive stance with a sigh. He would have to explain Draco's presence now, and he doubted there was anything that would adequately do it.

He ran a hand through his hair and said, "I'm sorry, Rodrigo. I left Britain because I was convinced that I'd made an utterly stupid mistake and could never be with the man I wanted to be with. I was trying to find someone else I could like. And I do like you," he added quickly. Looked at objectively, he thought, Rodrigo was still a better match for him than Draco. He didn't know how he and Draco were going to *fit* together. They might have smashing sex, but Draco would probably laugh when he discovered how long Harry had spent watching him from afar. "I didn't know he'd show up here. I didn't tell him where I was going. I didn't want to have anything more to do with him."

Rodrigo arched an eyebrow and flicked a glance at the door of the room, which Harry had closed behind him. "I'm not stupid," he said. "I know what you did in there."

Harry winced and nodded. "But I didn't anticipate that," he said. "I still don't think we'll really be together. He wasn't my boyfriend when I came here, and I didn't try to cheat on him with you." He hesitated, then shrugged. "That's really all I wanted to say."

Rodrigo clenched his jaw for a moment, as if trying to decide whether he believed Harry. Then he reached out and squeezed his hand, so tightly it could have been a blessing or shown anger. "Good luck," he said. "I do not know whether to hope you will succeed or fail."

Harry relaxed and shook Rodrigo's hand eagerly. "At least we're in the same situation, then," he said. "I don't know, either."

Potter came back into the room subdued, his eyes dark and thoughtful in a way that Draco didn't like. When Potter tried to think, he tied his brain up in a labyrinthine maze of contradictions and knotted innocent people—like Draco—in with him. It would be best to act before he had time to reconsider.

"Of course you'll come back to Britain with me tonight," he said.

Potter jerked his head up as if Draco had startled him from deep contemplation, which told Draco that he had interrupted those thoughts just in time. Then he scowled. "Of course I won't," he said. "I have to finish my business at the Spanish Ministry first, and even if Rodrigo can't be my guide, running away in the middle of the job would be extremely unprofessional."

"Hmmm." Draco let his eyelids fall. "Yet you wrote love letters to me whilst you worked. I hadn't thought a touch of the unprofessional would bother you."

Potter snorted. "My job as an Auror has nothing to do with this," he said. "Except that it'll probably exacerbate your arrogance and make it impossible for us to be together after all."

"I admit I would prefer a lover who worked in a field less—inimical to the history of my family," Draco said delicately. "But if you wish for me to let you go, you will need to find a more compelling reason."

"You'll see," said Potter, with an infuriating amount of gloomy satisfaction. "If it's not my job, it'll be something else. *Something* will make sure that we can't be together. You'll see." He nodded to himself and brushed past Draco towards the bed.

Draco seized Potter's arm and made him turn about. "Evidently you don't realize what a rare event this is," he whispered. Standing close to Potter, he could smell his sweat and see the lines of tension and scorn around his eyes. He considered a kiss, but decided it would work against his best interests at the moment. "*I* don't come after lovers. *I* don't give them chances when they've tried to run away from me. But I did for you."

Potter wrenched away, and such was his strength from Auror training that Draco actually let him go in surprise. Potter took a stiff step back and then stood there with anger radiating like heat off his body. Draco gave a slight gasp as he stared into his eyes. Had Potter's eyes ever looked like that when they were still students at Hogwarts and he was angry? Surely not, or Draco might have suspected that the passion he needed existed right in front of him.

"As arrogant as ever, I see," Potter said, his voice disagreeably cool. Draco would have preferred his voice riled and sparking to match his eyes. "Has it occurred to you that I'd done my best to distance myself? I didn't *ask* for you to make an extra special exception to your normal rule of treating other people like the shit that you scrape off your boots."

"You as much as said that I'd have to mend my manners to have a chance with you," Draco said, his irritation overwhelming his admiration. "And now my attempts to do it can't win so much as an acknowledgment from you?"

Potter sneered. It looked ugly and wrong on him, and Draco opened his mouth to tell him so, but Potter beat him to the mark. "The motive matters as much as the actions—not that your actions are so clever or far-reaching at the moment, given all the insults you've hurled since you saw me face-to-face."

"You were insulting me as well," Draco said, and rage crept into the back of his voice.

Potter gave him a look of devastating pity. Draco had to fight not to lash out. "Oh, please, Draco. You sound like you're at Hogwarts and trying to convince McGonagall that I should have detention instead of you."

Draco tried to count to ten in French, but Potter had flowed on, evidently mistaking his silence as acquiescence. "And you still haven't internalized the first part of your new lessons. The motive matters as much as the actions. If you're only changing your behavior to coddle me, then it can't last, not the way it would if you had actually decided that other people were worthy of your respect and attention. And I don't *like* being coddled."

"Oh, *bollocks*," Draco snapped, a thousand circumstances from the Battle of Hogwarts on filtering into his mind. "You're telling me that you don't appreciate the opportunities you're offered? The way that the Ministry smoothes your path every time you have to spend a day speaking to the public on the anniversary of the Dark Lord's defeat? The fact that—"

"I've never been the attention-seeker that you thought me," Potter said, leaning into Draco's personal space and curling his lip as if he were about to spit. Draco might have moved away in fear for the sanctity of his robes, but he knew Potter would interpret the movement as a sign of weakness. He would have to put up with a Cleaning Charm if Potter chose to bestow his saliva on Draco. "As it happens, the protections that I do accept are necessary so fame-hungry assassins can't *kill* me. There's this thing called death that Aurors face on a daily basis, though I understand how you may have forgotten that, living in the middle of a Manor that doesn't show you one plain natural fact—"

"You fucker," Draco hissed, and shot his hand out, gripping Potter's arm and clamping down. Potter gave him another look of pity, and Draco dug his fingers into Potter's bicep. At least that produced a minute flinch. "Have you forgotten what they did to my mother? I live with the presence of death and the war every day, even if I don't have a scar on my forehead to prove it."

Harry badly wished that he could be sure a Time-Turner still existed somewhere in Britain, so he could go back and erase the last few minutes.

No matter what happens, I say the wrong thing around him, he thought, and dashed his free hand across his forehead and the scar Draco had just damned. *I keep thinking that his experience wasn't so much different than my own and acting like he'll understand me and argue for a while and then make up like Ron would. But he won't, and I'm an idiot for trying this.*

"I'm sorry," he said, lowly, his eyes fastened on the floor because he would fuck matters up even worse if he looked at Draco right now. "I did forget. But I shouldn't. Your mother helped save me in the Forbidden Forest, and she was part of the reason I fell in love with you in the first place, because I saw how well you loved and defended her." He summoned as much courage as he'd needed to fight in the Battle of Hogwarts, or at least it felt that way, and looked up into Draco's eyes.

Draco was regarding him with the distant, imperturbable expression that Harry hadn't learned to read, except to know that he offered it to too many of his dates. Harry shook his head in frustration.

"Can't you see that this won't work?" he demanded. "We're together for half an hour and we duel, hump each other, and then try to bludgeon each other to death with words. There's nothing that can come out of that. It's a dead end, and you and I have both had enough of those."

Draco continued to watch him in silence. Harry fretted and clenched his arm in Draco's grip as the silence stretched to snapping point. *Why doesn't he say something? Any explanation, any accusation, is better than this.*

Finally, Draco said, "Do you honestly think it would be any better if we separated?"

Harry blinked for a while. *Is he stupid or what?* But Draco went on staring at him, waiting for an answer, and that showed remarkable patience, for him. Harry at last tried cautiously, "Well, yes. You would have some space to recover from the wounds I've dealt you. I would have room to think myself out of my feelings."

"I don't think it would work," Draco said, and his grip on Harry's arm changed subtly, drawing him near without demanding his presence. "I think that I would still be tempted to come after you, because of the excitement factor. And you said you're in love with me. One doesn't generally walk away from love." He paused. "And there's the fact that I brought my mother home from St. Mungo's almost two years ago. Can you honestly think you'll forget that emotion in another two?"

Harry exhaled a frustrated breath and closed his eyes. "The excitement factor isn't enough," he said. "You need other things. Children. Someone who knows and understands the pure-blood traditions. I know how important your family is to you. You'll have to marry to expand it sooner or later."

Draco waited for long moments before he could reply. If he tried now, then he would only curse Potter for his stupidity, which perhaps the idiot was trying to get him to do.

But Draco wouldn't play that game. He enjoyed the insults on one level; that level wouldn't get him what he wanted. Potter had taunted and coaxed and lured him with those letters. Draco could see that he would have to do the same thing in turn, at least for a little while.

"I don't have to get married *now*," he murmured, turning his head so that his breath brushed against Potter's ear. *Ah. A shiver. He's not immune to me.* "We don't know that this would be permanent. We might try it and see. And you underestimate how important the excitement factor is for me. It's something I've never had before. I want to try it now before I dismiss it as a mere childish temptation."

Potter hesitated.

It was a hesitation that Draco had seen too often to mistake. He smiled thinly, glad that Potter was looking away from him at the moment and couldn't see an expression he might have interpreted as reason for discouragement. *Good. He does want to be me with me. It's his own*

scruples holding him back, and nothing else.

"Think about it," he continued, keeping his voice soft but neutral. Unlike most of the women he'd dated, who were willing partners in their own seductions, Potter would balk if he saw the path leading to bed too clearly. "Why not date me? That way we'll learn more quickly whether we're suited for each other or not. If we go our separate ways, you'll always pine and I'll always wonder." He had thought of saying that he would pine, too, but refrained at the last moment. Potter didn't believe that Draco's feelings were as strong for him as his were for Draco—quite reasonably—and speaking too much in hyperbole could break the spell.

"Why not?" he said again, when Potter stood there in silence, and nudged his hip against Potter's. Potter clamped his legs together promptly, which made Draco smile, and smolder at the same time with the desire to get between those legs again. "A temporary arrangement can't do any harm."

"I told you that I didn't want to simply be tolerated," Potter said tightly, and turned his head. The look in his eyes matched the tension that vibrated in the lines of his throat. It would have helped if Draco hadn't immediately thought about how that throat tasted.

But he had pushed on before through more potent distractions, and he did now. "Temporary for the moment," he said. "It might grow and become something more permanent and lasting." He forced himself into a light shrug, and so lied with his body as well as his next words. "I don't think it will, with your desire to get away from me at all costs, but it could work."

Potter relaxed and tilted his head. It was obvious when his brain was running, Draco thought; the green eyes clouded and the lines around his mouth sharpened, as if he were determined to make himself look old before his time. Perhaps he could do with tutoring in hiding his emotions, and not only because of Draco's pure-blood social circle, who would look on his openness as gauche. It would help confuse the criminals, too, who could probably read every plan from his face as matters stood.

"It could work," Potter echoed at last, and looked up at Draco with hard eyes. "But I need to tell you the story of how I came up with the letters and enlisted Astoria first."

"Of course," Draco said politely, and easily stepped away now, knowing that he'd won and that Potter wanted to move into a more comfortable position. "I am eager to hear it."

Harry explained the story as briefly as he could, because it made him sound stupid and he didn't like doing that in front of Draco.

Not even though his stupidity might have convinced Draco to retire for his own peace of mind.

Harry berated himself for it, but he needed to stay close to Draco for a short time if there was some hope. He'd spent too long at a distance and trying to convince himself the distance would never contract. Now it had, and Harry was living in a mental and physical world that didn't make

sense.

If I stay close to him, then perhaps I can learn to dislike his arrogance more than I love the rest of him and get away, Harry thought hopefully.

Draco listened to the letter story without comment, though his face spoke—at least to someone who knew him as well as Harry did—with its flickers of eyelids and its bending of brows. At last he said, "And you were happy to see Astoria marry me?"

"Content," Harry corrected. "I knew it would be the best thing for you."

Draco's nostrils flared. "You've done an awful lot of thinking that things are good for me without considering what *my* take on the situation would be," he said.

"But Astoria does have stronger feelings for you than most of the women you dated, who only wanted to sleep with you," Harry said. Draco could think Harry was stupid—it would happen anyway, and perhaps it was the best thing in the long run—but Harry wouldn't hear him defame Astoria. "She was part of your circle already. And she was female. She would have been perfect if you'd fallen in love with her."

"You're the reason I didn't." Draco's eyes locked with his. "You wrote letters that portrayed someone she couldn't be."

Harry shrugged irritably, and wished he could look away. "So that's why I did it," he said. "I wanted you to be happy."

"And you would have been—happy, if I had dated Astoria?" Draco laughed in a delicate, sarcastic manner that made Harry's spine prickle. "Forgive me for not believing that."

"Not happy," Harry said. "Content."

"I understand the distinction," Draco said, "but not why you choose to make it for yourself."

"Because your happiness matters more to me than mine, of course," Harry said, frowning and wondering how Draco could have missed that. He was sure he'd put it in his story. "Why do you think I left England? I wanted to stay away from you and stop communicating with you because I didn't think I'd make you happy if I didn't."

Draco sat in silence, staring at Potter. He knew that he should come up with a witty reply; he had a reputation to protect.

But he couldn't, because he had never encountered any statement that summed up someone's nature quite so well.

He knew that most of the people he associated with would not have said the same thing. They

were too accustomed to negotiations, to games. One gave away information in return for information, and Draco had made no similarly revealing confession. Potter tossed the currency of his soul into the air as if he did not care where it fell.

Someone should.

And the strong hunger in his belly told Draco that he wanted to be that person.

Someone else might come along and claim Harry. Or Harry might drive himself into someone else's arms, the way he had chosen this Spanish Auror in an effort to forget Draco.

He was clever but with amusing blind spots. He was brave enough to face Draco in a duel instead of running away—even if he had tried to *Obliviate* Draco at first—and then admit the embarrassing story of the letters. He could bare his spirit without noticing he had done so, but still Draco didn't think it was something he did on a regular basis, or the interviews in the *Prophet* would have been a mite more honest and a good deal more arresting. He simply couldn't help doing it in front of someone whom he loved.

And Draco couldn't wait to find out what it was like to fuck him.

Yes, altogether Harry Potter was quite a bargain.

Draco stood. Harry watched him come with an arched brow. He didn't quite manage to hide the nervousness behind the gesture, but Draco knew it would have fooled many a less discerning audience. He laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. It tensed beneath his fingers, but still Harry didn't back away. Draco was beginning to fathom why that would be anathema to someone like him.

He bent his head and touched his lips to Harry's with far more gentleness than he'd shown so far. He wanted to persuade more than he wanted to seduce.

Harry made to pull away at first, but Draco delicately chased him, flicking his tongue once against Harry's lips before returning to a normal kiss. In the end, even if Harry didn't have much choice about Draco's trying to make this a permanent arrangement, it was best to leave him the *illusion* of choice.

Harry didn't understand Draco close at hand the way he thought he did when watching from a distance. Draco seemed to have more mood shifts than a hurricane and as few reasons for the change.

But he believed he understood the emotion behind this kiss. Draco seemed strongly affected by his words. He couldn't *say* that, of course, and perhaps he didn't want Harry to know it at all. He could use actions to show it, though.

Harry stopped flinching away when he thought that. He returned the kiss with interest, opening his mouth to admit Draco's tongue.

Even when invited, Draco took his time, probing slowly inwards instead of trying to conquer Harry's mouth as he had earlier. By the time Harry had felt dozens of soft touches to the insides of his cheeks and the roof of his mouth and the back of his teeth, he was wandering in a mental fog, half-ready to lie back and let Draco have his way with him.

As always, it was his love for Draco that saved him. Draco perhaps believed they could coexist; Harry was not so certain.

He braced a hand on Draco's chest and pushed him backwards. Draco went, but his pupils had become great blown dark blots of color and he rested both hands on Harry's shoulders as though he would fall if he let go. His gaze never stopped roaming Harry's face, collecting emotions from it.

"I do have to finish up my job in Spain before we go back to Britain," Harry said. His voice sounded hoarser than normal, and he shook his head. *Draco might not be good for my mental health.*

His body pulsed an enthusiastic suggestion about what Draco *would* be good for. Harry held his attention on what he needed to say with difficulty, waiting for some acknowledgment of his words.

Draco blinked languidly, which seemed to be the extent of his response. Harry drew a deep breath—unfortunately filled with Draco's scent—and forged on. "But then I'll come back to Britain with you, and we *will* talk. I want this, even if it's wrong. Even if it's temporary. I at least want to try."

Draco caught his breath, and blinked again, and then gave Harry a smile of such brilliance that Harry stepped backwards. Draco's hands firmed on his shoulders at once, and he gave a small sigh.

"That's all I ask," he said. "A chance. I want you. Give me a chance to love you."

Even suspecting that Draco had said that mostly to charm him, Harry simply didn't have the strength of will—or the bitterness—that would have been necessary to resist. He laid his head on Draco's shoulder and closed his eyes.

And Draco didn't mock him, but touched his neck and cheek and hair slowly and wonderingly, like a man under the Leper's Curse who had regained his sense of touch.

A pure, sweet, strong sense of life was driving through Draco, as if a tree were striving to achieve a hundred years' worth of growth through him all at once.

Yes. This is what I want.

It is wonderful to know at last.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eleven—What Harry Potter Argued

"I'm sorry to see you leaving us so soon, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled tightly at the Spanish liaison assigned to him, now that Rodrigo had made it clear he wouldn't work with Harry any more. He was a perfectly nice man with the first names of Juan Felipe—Harry couldn't remember his surnames at the moment—but he had keen brown eyes that made Harry feel as if he were being scrutinized to be chopped up into Potions ingredients. He'd had enough of that when he was still a student in Snape's class.

"Well, urgent business calls me back to Britain," he said brightly, and stepped away from the desk behind which Juan Felipe sat. *Urgent business, ha. I want to get out of here before I explode at someone.*

It didn't help that in the last day, he'd got very little sleep—thanks to Draco's insistence on taking the bed and his own inability to conjure a good replacement bed out of the floor—and that Draco had made several remarks about blood status that caused Harry to grit his teeth. It seemed Draco had changed his mind about fewer things than Harry thought.

This is never going to work. We're never going to survive.

But Juan Felipe didn't need to know about any of that, so Harry turned his back on him and started to walk away.

"Is that why another Auror showed up to retrieve you, the evening before yesterday?" Juan Felipe called, leaning out after him.

Harry choked on hysterical laughter. *Yes, Draco is an Auror. Because part of an Auror's duty is to curse people who displease him.* But it was simpler to have other people think that, so Harry simply shrugged and ducked out of the office into the hot bright day.

He couldn't enjoy the sight of the buildings—now more advanced than he'd seen them when he first came to Madrid—or the billowing pavilions the way he might have a few days ago. Draco's face obscured everything, and his drawling voice overpowered even the sound of Hammering

Charms.

Of course I wouldn't expect someone like Granger to understand that, with her blood. Blood runs to the brain.

Have you considered how lucky you are, that one *of your parents was someone?*

Blood traitor? You ought to know what it means by now, Potter, but I'm willing to explain it to you. It means someone who literally turns their back on their own blood, the most important thing of all. You can betray principles and people and still have a place of honor, but to betray what runs in your own veins… And Draco had finished with a solemn headshake that made Harry want to grip and shake *him*.

He despises me and my best friends, as well as half the people who work at the Ministry, since they're all either Muggleborns or committed to making things work with the Muggle world. What makes him think that he can get away with saying that to me? He was more polite to random people who wanted money from him.

And then Harry paused, leaned against a building façade to watch the architects levitating a ton of stone above his head, and swore softly.

He was polite to them because he thought it would damage his reputation if the news that he still hated Muggleborns got out, and they were strangers who cared nothing about him and might try to hurt him. But he believes that I won't do anything to him because I'm in love with him.

Harry snorted under his breath and began to walk more swiftly towards the house where Draco still waited. (It was with difficulty that Harry had persuaded him out of coming to the Ministry; he seemed to assume that Rodrigo would try to pounce on Harry the moment he was out of Draco's sight). If it were just him Draco was hurting, he might hesitate, yes. But this had the potential to hurt his best friends.

And if Draco thinks I'll give them up just to have him, he's *having problems with the connections between his blood and his brain.*

Something had changed in the time Potter was gone.

Draco scowled as they went through the last Apparition and landed outside the London Ministry with a slight bump. *I should have put the spy spell on him after all. That will show me to be too trusting.*

Potter stood looking at him with concentrated attention of the kind that Draco didn't like for a long moment, then turned towards the phonebox that would give them entrance into the Ministry. Draco followed closely. Potter didn't acknowledge him one way or the other. Even when they rode the phonebox down and emerged into the Atrium, Potter kept walking as if he had devastatingly handsome men at his heels all the time.

Draco felt jealousy waver up through him like the smoke from a bonfire. Potter was able to sustain attraction to men, as Draco had seen in Spain; it wasn't like Draco was the only one he'd ever looked at with admiration. And it was ridiculous to expect him to stay celibate and faithful to the *image* of Draco for two years, especially when his letters plot proved that he hadn't ever expected a chance.

He might have dated other men. Some other men might have had him, or even walked in Draco's exact same position.

That took Draco's attention away from Potter's arse, which he otherwise would have been watching. He jogged up to Potter's shoulder and hissed in his ear.

"Have you had a boyfriend?"

Potter slewed him a look of astonished disgust. "Do you really think the *Prophet* would have left me alone if I had?" he responded, never breaking stride.

Draco dropped back with a small frown. *Yes, I forgot that.* Rita Skeeter, at least, who had been so insistent on naming any woman whom Potter spent time with as his girlfriend, would doubtless pounce on the news that the Chosen One was homosexual.

He was angry with himself for forgetting that, and it made him step up closer to Potter when they got on the lift with another Auror—tall, handsome, dark hair and eyes—who smiled at Potter and started a conversation about some obscure criminological matter. That man looked at Draco and dismissed him with a single glance as someone who couldn't possibly be interested in their chatter. Draco half-lidded his eyes to conceal the rising rage.

He wasn't sure that he wanted anyone else to know he was dating Potter yet, but he had to stake his claim somehow. He rested a hand on Potter's arse and kept it there, out of sight of the dark-haired bloke, spreading his fingers and then relaxing them in a gripping, squeezing pattern.

Potter tensed, but didn't otherwise respond. When they reached the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, he did make a point of moving away from Draco as soon as possible.

Draco followed him, calmer now. Potter could be discreet when the moment called for it. Draco was glad to know that, as it destroyed several dangerous scenarios that had been building up in his mind.

"Back, then, Harry?" Kingsley Shacklebolt still had piercing eyes, but that was less troubling than the way he looked from Draco to Harry with barely concealed amusement.

Potter put his report on the table and began talking in a monotone. Draco leaned against the wall, arms folded, and met Shacklebolt's stare without flinching whenever the man had the nerve to look at him.

He couldn't wait to get Potter out of the Ministry and into the Manor. Potter was too comfortable here and had too obvious a familiarity with the ground. Draco wanted the walls of his own home around him, and privacy for such sharp, drawling words as he was pleased to speak.

He wasn't insensible. A coldness had fallen between them since the day before yesterday, when they'd made such sweet promises to each other. But Draco didn't intend to give up that sense of rich life without a fight.

And then they stepped out of the Minister's office and ran straight into Weasley.

Harry sighed silently as Ron saw him. His friend smiled and stretched out his hand. "Oi, Harry, we've been lonely without you for the last—"

Then his eyes focused on Draco, and they narrowed, and the last traces of pleasantness were swept away. Maybe Ron could deal with Draco when he was alone and asking questions about bouncing ferrets, but seeing him walking behind Harry was another thing altogether. And Harry knew that Ron still retained some trace of his old fear that Harry would abandon him for a different, richer set of friends.

Harry turned adroitly so that his body was between them and said, "Ron, you know Draco Malfoy, of course. Draco, you know Ron Weasley." He tilted his head back towards Draco and gave him a cold-as-glass look, so that he would know how he was expected to behave.

He'd done his work well, because Draco liked to set the tone of conversations. On the other hand, if someone had said something that should prevent a confrontation, then Draco wasn't gauche enough to start one. He glared back at Harry and held out his hand so that Ron could clasp it.

Ron looked almost ill, but at least he did it. Then he turned to Harry and said loudly, "I need to talk you to about important Auror business."

"Anything you can say in front of Harry, you can say in front of me." Draco's voice was all polite courtesy, but the hand he laid on Harry's arse was anything but.

Harry held his face still with an effort. *What is he playing at? He must know that Ron isn't interested in dating me. Not that nearly as many people are interested in dating me as he thinks.*

"No, I really can't," Ron said, his temper smoldering like a brushfire in his gaze. "It's also *private* Auror business."

Harry knew that Draco had widened his eyes, even though he wasn't looking at him right now, because that was in his tone. "But Harry and I are dating now, and I know that he's an Auror and does dangerous things. Don't you think I have the right to hear how dangerous they are, in case I lose my boyfriend?"

Oh, that's torn it now, Harry thought in resignation as Ron took a step closer and thrust his face right into Harry's. *Draco doesn't like to start confrontations, but of course he can manipulate people into doing it.*

"You're *dating* the prick?" Ron whispered to him. "What about Ginny?"

"Are you going to allow him to insult me, Harry?" Draco murmured into his ear at the same moment.

Harry badly wanted to smash both their heads together, but he preferred a direct answer, so he launched into it without waiting. "I gave up on Ginny a long time ago, Ron, and she gave up on me. She's happy the way she is. When she wants to date someone, then she will. And I've been in love with Draco for two years. I'll thank you not to insult him."

Ron blinked at him. Harry could feel Draco's smugness in the way he pressed closer to Harry from behind. He thought he'd won because Harry had taken the time to address Ron.

He fails to realize that I'm only addressing Ron first, Harry thought, and turned around. "And he has no reason not to insult you, not when you think he's a blood traitor," Harry said. "Really, Draco, I don't know why you want to stay with me. You've made it clear in the last few days that you think I'm nothing more than a half-blood who's lucky to have a chance with a fine specimen of pure-blood masculinity like yourself." He said the last phrase in an absolutely flat and neutral tone, which he knew would drive Draco mad. "You hate my friends, including my *Muggleborn* best friend, simply because of the families they were born into. If you want me, that will have to change. You'll probably say that you shouldn't have to change your beliefs for me, but the belief that other people are rubbish? That's worth changing. That's worth challenging. I'll try to respect your other beliefs, but I can't respect you for that one. And I care enough about you to *want* this relationship to succeed, so no, I will not just keep quiet and then burst out scolding you one day."

There. Clear, calm, powerful delivery, and fast enough that neither Draco nor Ron had the chance to interrupt. Harry fastened his gaze on Draco's face and waited.

That's what's bothering him? Of all the stupid—

But Draco caught his temper and threw it backwards when he saw the way Potter's eyes were narrowing. Obviously, to Potter, this was not a stupid objection, and Draco had not made his reputation as someone who could coexist with Muggleborns by disregarding his opponents' convictions. And he had to remember how long Potter had watched him, how well he knew the subtlest expressions of Draco's face. He might detect contempt that an ordinary observer would not.

Draco lowered his eyes and took a deep breath. He would wait a few moments, until the impact of Potter's speech had faded and he would not *look* as if he had an immediate reaction at all. Many people were impressed by the appearance of thoughtfulness. Potter would expect that at the bare minimum from him.

Weasley interrupted, loud and braying, before Draco could marshal his words. "Why would you give him a chance at all if he thinks that, Harry?" he asked furiously, shouldering towards Potter, who now stood with his back to him. He put a hand on Potter's shoulder and shook it. Draco had to repress an immediate snarl. *No one should touch him as roughly as that but me.* "Just ditch the bastard and have done with it."

"No," Potter said, and stepped forwards until Weasley's hand slipped off. He seemed to feel neither fear nor elation at being this close to Draco, but only intensity. His eyes had never wavered. "I want him. I love him. I'll give him a chance. He said that he did want to have a chance to love me. But he'll never get that if he can't change his mind about me and my friends." He raised a brow. "I won't sleep with someone who thinks he's slumming when he's with me."

"I never thought that," Draco snapped, stung into fury. "Why would I? Your name, your face—"

"Aren't good enough reasons," Potter said calmly. "I already know that you're attracted to me. That could be cause enough for some temporary fun." The faintest flush on his cheeks showed that he was probably remembering their encounter in the room at Madrid, but it didn't show in his voice. "But no more than that. If you want more than that, you'll have to meet and face this first test."

Draco thought swiftly. A mere promise not to talk about things like this around Potter wouldn't work. Neither would saying that he didn't mean it that way; he'd tried that and Potter had discarded the words the way he could an Imperius Curse. Potter wanted something more, a revolution in Draco's deepest beliefs.

And would that be so bad?

Draco wrinkled his nose against the thought, but the voice of his own and his family's advantage was not so easily silenced. *If you have children and teach them contempt for Mudbloods, they're likely to go to school and show that off, the way you did when Lucius taught you. Children that young simply don't have much respect for propriety, even when they try. And it will be far less easy for them to receive social advancement if they have those beliefs. It's a different world now than it was when you were a child, and by the time you raise any children, it will be more different still.*

Thanks in large part to Potter.

Draco forced himself to remain still for a few moments more, not only to look as if he would think over Potter's words but to really think them over. And each time, he met the same obstacle. There were several circumstances in favor of his giving up such a belief, but he couldn't change so fast.

And he couldn't abandon his pride.

He stared into Potter's eyes. Potter looked unsympathetic, his face stern, his eyes almost blank with seriousness, but Draco knew better. Somebody merely *asking* for help was usually enough to melt Potter's heart.

So be honest about your objections. In the end, Potter will help you over the barrier himself.

Draco cleared his throat. "I simply can't give up something I believe as if it were a missed meal," he said. "And you wouldn't believe me if I claimed I could."

A grim smile flickered along the corners of Potter's mouth. "Got it in one."

Draco did his best to ignore the mocking tone of the words. "So I'll need time, if I do commit to giving it up," he said. "And there's my pride."

"I don't want you to give up your pride," Potter said quietly.

Draco furrowed his bow.

"I only want you to give up your *arrogance.*" Potter leaned forwards. "You can be proud of your family. I'm proud of my parents, and especially when I remember that my mother sacrificed her life for me, and without that none of us might be alive right now."

A Mudblood's sacrifice shouldn't be strong enough to block the most powerful Dark Lord in a hundred years. But Draco was resigned to the fact that it had happened, no matter how much he might wish otherwise, so he only nodded in response to Potter's words.

"You can't treat others like they're rubbish," Potter said. "You need to respect that *I* have a viewpoint which won't always complement your own, though the women you dated in the past might have had one like that. You need to show respect towards my friends. You need to explain any serious objections to me, and I'll do my best to answer them."

"And what will you give up in return?" Draco demanded instantly. He knew that his father would see this as an unequal bargain, and training at home, in his House, and during the war had ensured that Draco would never make one of those.

Potter laughed in his face. "Find something about me that annoys you as much as your arrogance annoys me, and which you can persuade me to give up, and then perhaps we can bargain. Otherwise, this is simply a condition that I'm putting in place."

"An unfair one," Draco said, making one final try. "Would you demand that every pure-blood in the world change their beliefs?"

"Not every pure-blood," Potter said. "Ron's family doesn't have those beliefs. And I think there's a difference between beliefs in the value of your culture and beliefs that say other people literally aren't human and shouldn't be treated like they are. There's no *reason* for the last except to puff

yourself up and justify cruelty towards them." He stepped closer to Draco, and the intensity from before was in his face again. "Convince me that you're superior on your own, without denigrating others. Show me what you can do."

Damn him. Potter knew Draco as well as Draco knew him. He had chosen a tactic that appealed directly to Draco's pride. Of course he knew that Draco would want to show him exactly why the Malfoy way of life was so superior to the Mudblood one, and of course he knew that Draco's confidence he could do so was up to the challenge.

It appeals directly to my pride, Draco thought again, and then he thought of the letters from his writer, and the moment of lust he'd shared with Potter in the room in Madrid, which was more passionate than anything he could remember sharing with a woman.

And it's irresistible.

"I'll do it," he said abruptly. Then he sneered at Weasley over Potter's head. "And you should watch out, Weasley, because by the time you get your friend back you won't know him anymore."

Harry couldn't conceal his triumphant smile, so he didn't try. He knew that Draco hadn't entirely surrendered; he would still try to find some excuse for calling Hermione a Mudblood and separating Harry from his friends. But he could try all he liked. It wasn't as though he'd *succeed* at either of those things.

"Harry—" Ron said behind his back.

"Not right now," Harry said, in the same gentle, commanding tone that he'd sometimes used to calm criminals down. Ron knew not to interfere when he heard it. Draco sneered when he saw Ron back off, though, as though he thought Ron was some kind of obedient slave. Harry merely smiled. *He'll learn better soon enough.* "I'll talk to you later and explain everything, all right? But not immediately." He looked over his shoulder at Ron and smiled.

Ron squinted and flushed, but nodded. Harry squeezed his arm in gratitude. He knew that his friends would have to adjust to Draco as Draco adjusted to them, but not as much, so Harry felt free to ask for some indulgence from them at first.

"Shall we go?" Draco reached out an arm as if he were going to escort Harry from the Ministry the way he would a female date, then hesitated.

Harry took the arm, and Draco started a bit. *As long as I can keep him guessing,* Harry thought happily. "Of course," he said. "The Manor first?" He didn't think Draco would want to wait long to break the news to his mother.

"Of course," Draco repeated, and laid his hand over Harry's. The gesture seemed to increase his self-confidence, if the way his eyes widened and his face flushed hungrily was any indication.

Harry barely kept from rolling his eyes. *The idiot has his mind far too full of plans for subduing me, still, instead of living with me as an equal partner.*

Well. I'll take care of that soon enough.

Harry shook Ron's hand, and then he and Draco paraded out of the Ministry. They received plenty of stares and whispers, which Draco reveled in, if the smug tilt of his head was any indication. Harry had to conceal a smile, but he was damned if he'd show Draco that.

When they were outside, Draco turned to face him. "The wards around the Manor prevent Apparition by anyone except immediate family members, and I want to leave them intact, for the sake of Mother's safety," he said. "So you'll need to Side-Along Apparate with me."

Harry stepped unhesitatingly forwards. It was all too clear that Draco expected him to act like some kind of shy, blushing virgin, and Harry was determined to disappoint him.

Draco, though, lowered his head and used his arm to crush Harry to his side, whilst his eyes locked with Harry's. The gaze was more than hungry, it was *devouring*, and Harry shuddered with a mixture of pleasure and unease so strong that he barely noticed the sensation of the Apparition.

They arrived in the large garden that Harry had seen mostly from a distance since the war, and Draco escorted him towards the house. His arm never left Harry's shoulders; his eyes never left Harry's face, despite the danger of tripping on the gravel path in front of him and perhaps doing his pride and his face both an injury, which Harry knew he'd hate. He told himself that Draco was probably just too confident to look, given how well he knew this path, but he didn't think that was the real answer.

The doors swung open in front of them. The house-elf holding them bowed low. Draco didn't even look up. He just handed Harry carefully up the steps, and then placed his hands on his shoulders, turning him in a circle so he could see both the portraits and the lack of color in the immense entrance hall.

"Welcome to my home," Draco said into his ear, making Harry shiver and crave closer contact still.

Welcome to my home ground, he might as well have said.

Harry shivered again as Draco's hands moved, fingers playing gently up and down the nape of his neck and twining into his hair. He suspected that Draco would do his very best to get vengeance for the advantage over him Harry had obtained in the Ministry. He should be cautious.

But if he had wanted someone *safe*, there would have been plenty of other choices.

I can't wait for the game to begin.

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—What Draco Malfoy Revealed

Harry woke slowly and spent some time looking around the bedroom Draco had assigned him, shaking his head.

It was an alien place, mostly because of the coldness. Harry thought that marble walls and floors might be all very well in the estimation of Draco's ancestors, but he flinched when he walked on the second and winced when he looked at the first. He had conjured a series of red rugs and hangings last night to cover them.

The windows were as large as the bed, which was large enough that Harry felt rather absurd sleeping in it. He stood up and wandered slowly towards the windows. He hadn't had time to look out of them the evening before, since by the time Draco had finished showing him around the Manor it was dark. But now sunlight poured through them, and he thought the view looked rather promising.

I wonder if I really love Draco? he thought, as he leaned an elbow on the sill and stared out. *I thought I did. But maybe his mask fooled me all this time, and even the parts I thought I loved were only part of the mask. Maybe compassion was never one of his motivations. Maybe he tried to coexist with people only to gain revenge on them later. I simply don't know, and it does seem as if I ought to demand less from him if I was in love.*

His thoughts occupied him so much that it took a moment for him to concentrate on the view outside the windows, and then he blinked and paid attention when he realized how beautiful it was.

The windows looked out on a garden that was contained within glass walls but opened on the sky. Harry thought the weather unnaturally beautiful, but surely conjuring sunshine was a better use of pure-blood magic than enslaving house-elves. Ferns climbed the edges of those walls; tendrils twined around trellises; enormous drooping red flowers spread their petals to the light. Harry could see small paved walks winding between the plants and sheltered benches that he'd like to sit on.

He couldn't smell the plants even when he inhaled hard, but that was all right. He could *imagine* the smells, and they were all delicious.

As he went on gazing, absorbed, and noticing blue flowers and yellow ones, purple ones and silver, to complement the red, he saw a figure sitting on one of the benches. Harry frowned and peered closer. The figure was obviously a woman with long pale hair. He swallowed. Did Draco have someone living with him all this time who Harry didn't know about? He had assumed he knew everything about Draco, but he had already been proven wrong.

Then the woman raised her head, tilting her face into the sunlight, and he recognized Narcissa Malfoy. Harry let out a sharp breath and shook his head, ashamed of his jealousy. Her face was pale with the marks of long suffering, and her hands trembled as though she had that shaking disease Muggles got.

Of course. I forgot that Narcissa stayed with him after he got her out of St. Mungo's.

Then Draco appeared, walking into the garden down one of the paths that led from the house. He leaned on the back of the bench, and though his mother looked nervous, she turned her head happily, confidently, towards him. Draco started speaking to her, his hand touching her hair now and then. His face had relaxed to an extent that Harry knew he had never seen, and it didn't matter how long he'd observed Draco.

But still, he had seen traces of it. When Draco brought his mother out of hospital and protected her from the reporters, for instance. When he appeared at the trial that the Ministry had insisted on forcing Pansy Parkinson into because she'd recommended turning Harry over to Voldemort, although she'd never been a Death Eater. When he arranged a private meeting at a restaurant with a man Harry didn't know, shoved a bag of Galleons into his hands, and then stood up and abruptly left again.

He hides it. Pretty well, in fact. Harry stared in fascination as Draco straightened up, leaving his mother to lean back in the sunlight again, and headed back to the house. His mask slipped over his face so imperceptibly that Harry knew he missed some of the changes due to his blinking. *But the compassion is there. The ability to help other people. Along with the self-satisfaction and the arrogance.*

Harry stepped back slowly from the window and spent a moment pacing back and forth between it and the bed, his head lowered. New thoughts tumbled up and down, and unfortunately each one ended in a question he didn't know the answer to.

Some of what I saw in him is real. But how much?

Is it enough for me to love him as wholly as he deserves someone to love him, as I have to if I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him?

Is it enough to overcome the arrogance that's tied to his beliefs in blood?

Harry halted and rubbed his head. Making up his mind about Draco was hard work, but it always

had been. Maybe he'd had the worst delusions about Draco not during Hogwarts or when he was first following him and trying to decide what kind of character he had, but in the last two years, when he'd finally felt certain.

He deserves hard work. And no matter how long Harry waited, thinking patiently, no question followed that solid answer.

I do want to stay with him. That's certain, too. What I'll need to do, for both of us, is make an honest evaluation in the next few days. Ask questions he might not like me asking. Watch all his actions, not just the ones that he does for the sake of propping up his reputation. Show him how important Ron and Hermione are to me, and that I can't stay with someone who won't at least tolerate them.

There was no reason, Harry told himself around the twinge of panic, that he couldn't do those things. Hermione probably would have approved of them. If he couldn't display any sense when he first fell in love, then he would display it afterwards.

It's not the most comfortable thing in the world, trying to decide if you were a fool and your love has any basis at all. But I want to know. *I won't continue in the mindless vein that made me propose that letters plan, and I won't simply love Draco if the qualities that made me fall in love don't exist.*

Harry smiled when he heard footsteps in the corridor outside his room, pausing and then continuing on their way. Draco had seen the shut door, and probably assumed that meant Harry wasn't awake and ready for breakfast yet.

And in the meantime, let him try to seduce and court me if he can. The steps he adopts should tell me still more about him.

When Potter came down to breakfast that morning, Draco knew at once that something had changed. Potter often carried his head half-ducked, as if he assumed that letting his hair fall across his scar would keep anyone from recognizing it. He stared at the ground and muttered. When he was angry, yes, then he looked you in the eye, but otherwise it was rare.

Now Potter was looking him in the eye, but the glance was calm, almost meditative. He nodded in response to Draco's "Good morning," and then sat down in the seat across from him with not much more than a sidelong look or two at the wonders of the dining room—delicately carved wooden walls and a great floating golden curtain of beads to separate it from the kitchens, the curtain enchanted only to convey pleasant scents. Instead, he seemed much more interested in watching Draco.

"Did you sleep well?" Draco asked. He would play it polite and safe until he knew what had changed Potter's mind in the night and whether it was catching.

"Of course," Potter said, and then laughed in a way that made the corners of his eyes crinkle.

Draco had to fight the temptation to become fixated on his face. "I don't know how anyone couldn't, when the bed was that soft."

Draco sniffed. "Soft beds aren't the only factor in a comfortable night's sleep."

A shadow crossed Potter's face, though so lightly that Draco could see how his friends would have missed it, if they weren't in the habit of studying him closely. "What others do you think of first?" he asked, reaching for the plate of sliced fruit in the middle of the table.

Careful, Draco. Draco sat back and picked up the plate of bread and butter, pretending that he hadn't heard the question. Of course he wanted to explain right away that unpleasant company could ruin any night's sleep, and then detail that unpleasant company. But he thought he understood Potter's strange manner now, and it meant he had to be more careful. Potter would be waiting for him to say something like that, and probably to start talking about Mudbloods. Then he would feel free to stand up and walk out of the house.

Draco was not prepared to let that happen. In fact, he startled himself with just how *intent* he was on preventing Potter's departure.

He'd had a long, silent struggle during the night, thinking about Potter's ultimatum and what it would mean for his behavior. Specifically, he'd fought past the pride that drove his first reaction—his father had always said, "Pride is preservation in small doses, poison in large," and Draco thought he should have paid more attention to that advice, even if Lucius hadn't taken it himself—and tried to analyze the demand more rationally.

How much difference would it make to him? Really? He had acted in public for years as though he thought all blood differences fit to be abolished, and he had cautioned other pure-bloods he knew to do the same thing—and distanced himself from them if they wouldn't. He had enjoyed his spirited debates with the people he allowed to "persuade" him, and he valued some of their argument tactics. He used them himself, in fact.

He had lived behind a mask, he thought, and dropped the barriers in private with people he trusted. But there were so few of those, other than his mother. He had dreamed of a wife in part because he had imagined he would find someone who shared his opinions and would console him on the rest of the blinkered world.

But he didn't have a congenial wife, and with his standards he had to admit it was unlikely he would find one. Instead, he had Potter, and he had the passion he felt for him, and he had the deep desire to extend their alliance further than mere physical lust.

He had spent more time in the last few years acting the way people would expect him to act, behaving as they thought he should, than behaving the "natural" way. And that made him wonder how much of the act was an act, and how much of nature was left to him.

Brewing potions didn't require rigid beliefs about blood purity. Neither did running his healing

house for veterans of the war; Draco had never cared what kind of guest he welcomed into the place, because they would give him money and might give him some insight into speeding up his own coping process. And spending time in bed with Potter practically demanded the absence of those beliefs.

Draco had weighed what mattered most to him against what he had only *thought* mattered most, and discovered that the beliefs his father had taught him concerning blood were firmly in the latter category.

It's at least worth the effort to change. And Potter might value the willingness to change as much as he does the final results.

Draco blinked, startled by the insight contained in those last words, and then jumped as Potter snapped his fingers in front of his face.

"Did you hear my question?" Potter demanded. "You've been sitting there and staring at nothing. I think that butter's going to melt on your fingers." With an impatient jerk that made Draco curl his lip—surely Potter could mend his manners if Draco mended his—he pulled the plate of bread and butter away.

"I think many things can add to a good night's sleep," said Draco. "For example, not having nightmares."

Potter paused and shot him a keen glance. Draco weathered it, though he objected silently to the way it searched out the corners of his soul. It was no wonder that Potter was such a good interrogator of criminals; whilst Weasley intimidated them with his explosive temper, Potter would dig all their secrets out of them before they knew what had happened.

"You have them, too," Potter said, and his measured words rendered it a statement instead of a question.

Draco controlled the impulse to change the subject or snap viciously at Potter, the way he often did when he felt vulnerable. *Potter won't hurt you. Of all the people you've dined with in the last five years, only Mother is less likely to hurt you.*

"I did," Draco said. "I've made a point of controlling them with Dreamless Sleep, and of taking advantage of my own convalescent home."

And just like that, Potter smiled a little and looked down at the plate he held, and Draco knew he had passed the first test.

The feeling that rolled through his stomach didn't have a name, but it decided him on one thing. Yes, it was worth it to give up his beliefs on blood purity and strive to become the kind of man Potter could date comfortably, because Draco was not deeply invested in those beliefs anymore and so they were no great loss—

And because the prize was so far beyond anything he had ever dreamed of winning.

Harry couldn't hide his amazement and delight when Draco escorted him into what he called the instrument room, so he didn't try.

There were musical instruments of every kind in every direction. Most of them rested on pedestals of marble and silver, but for this once Harry could forgive the ancestral Malfoys, because this *was* the right way to display such precious objects. Several also had cloths of blue or settings of purple velvet, but they were never too ostentatious. Harry wandered past drums, flutes, a piano, a thing with hammers that he thought must be a dulcimer—Hermione had tried to take lessons in playing that—a long-necked instrument that resembled a guitar with spikes on the top, and a harp. He paused near the harp and ran his fingers lightly down the strings, smiling at the sound.

"That can be commanded to play by itself," Draco said softly in his ear. Harry jumped; he hadn't heard Draco come up behind him. "Would you like to hear it?"

Harry hesitated, but curiosity got the better of him. He'd never heard a Muggle harpist play, and his initial reaction, that being able to play by itself made the instrument somehow lesser, was silly. They were wizards, after all, and Harry should have known the harp would be magical. "Yes, please," he said.

Draco stepped up to the harp's frame and swept his fingers over it in a rough half-circle. Harry couldn't keep track of exactly which spots he touched, but they must have been the right ones. Lively, rippling music began to spill out of the harp, more like the tune that Harry would have expected a drum to play. His foot tapped, and he didn't try to stop it.

Then Draco turned towards him and extended a hand. His eyes were wide, the pupils grown to enormous proportions. His jaw was clenched shut, as if to keep it from falling open. His fingers tightened on air. Harry swallowed a gasp. Yes, Draco was a perfect picture of lust at the moment, but for God's sake, he didn't have to gasp.

"Dance with me?" Draco whispered.

Harry shivered, and decided at the last moment to let Draco see it. Draco's pupils got more dilated. Harry held his hand out in turn, and watched it almost creep across the air until the fingers closed over Draco's. Strangely, Draco remained motionless, and it wasn't until several beats had passed in silence that Harry understood.

"Yes," he said.

Draco yanked hard, and Harry stumbled towards him. He managed at the last moment to turn the stumble into a smooth step; he'd had much the same thing happen during Auror training, though the yank hadn't been a prelude to dancing. He lifted his head and stared into Draco's face, making

sure to keep his expression defiant. Being this close to Draco was overwhelming, yes, but if he thought he could simply overwhelm Harry's objections, he should think again.

Draco lowered his face towards Harry's. His nostrils flared, as though he were trying to memorize Harry's scent—or detect the scent of anyone else who had ever touched him. He must have liked what he found, because his mouth expanded in a lazy, predatory smile, and he moved into the dance.

Harry entertained one terrified memory of the Yule Ball before he banished it. He'd become considerably more graceful since then, and he'd learned how to follow instructions, too. He trailed Draco's movements awkwardly for a minute or so. Then he started anticipating them, and they swirled across the floor in a loose back-and-forth pattern, sliding and shuffling in a way that Harry reckoned would look formal enough to anyone watching them.

He didn't have the time to think about how it would look, because he was more occupied with Draco's face. Draco's hand had taken up residence on the small of Harry's back, and his mouth twitched every time he pressed Harry closer. His other arm was around Harry's shoulders, his fingers lightly playing with his hair. Harry could see the breath traveling through Draco's half-parted lips in rhythm with those fingers. And his eyes were lidded, like a cat staring fascinated into a fire.

Except this time, Harry was the fire.

Or perhaps the shimmering tension between them was, which built higher and higher with every turn across the floor they made, with every spark of the harp's notes. Draco didn't dance close enough that Harry could feel his body, but the tantalizing closeness was there all the same, like the feeling Harry had when he tried to grope his way through a darkened house. He *knew* he would encounter an erection if he pressed his hips forwards.

At least, I damn well better. Because he'd feel mine.

Draco danced as if the outside world had gone away, as if Harry was worthy of all that focus he usually brought to business deals or arguments. His mouth had fallen open by this time, and Harry could *hear* the breaths passing his lips now; they made a throaty sound. His hair dangled loose around his head, not disheveled, but unattended to. And Harry knew that was a first, at least for him. He'd never seen Draco so unaware of his appearance.

The harp's notes swept up a final cadence and then stopped. Draco halted them, too, standing in the middle of the instrument room and staring into Harry's eyes. Harry felt a choking sensation creep through his lungs. It was an effort to keep his own breath moving the way he should.

Draco bent down and held his lips an inch or so away from Harry's. The tension built up to the point that Harry swayed. He could tell himself he was dizzy with the dancing, when he had gone backwards and in circles as much as forwards, but he'd stopped being a fan of self-deception when he got out of Hogwarts. He shivered and resisted the temptation to initiate the kiss for long

moments.

Then he broke, because the tension was like a cord pulling him into Draco now and he wanted the kiss badly enough not to care, and made up for all Draco's hesitation with a hand around the back of his neck.

Draco uttered a surprised sound, which was even better, but better still was when Harry silenced him with his tongue. Ah, God, he'd forgotten *already* how eagerly Draco's tongue sought out his and the way that Draco's hands drifted up when he got lost in the kiss to cup the sides of Harry's face. How could he have forgotten already?

Harry twitched a leg forwards, wrapping his heel firmly around Draco's knee. Draco hopped to keep his balance. Harry pulled again, and they fell to the floor with Harry on top. Draco said something that could have been a complaint, but Harry pinned him with his hands on his shoulders and thoroughly licked behind his teeth until he moaned in surrender and opened his mouth wider.

Harry finally drew back, shutting his eyes to savor the richness of the silence between them, the feel of Draco's chest having under his hand, the foreign taste in his mouth.

Draco lay quiet, trembling. He flattened his palms on the floor and silently begged for some small part of the strength of the spinning earth beneath him. He needed it, because at the moment he simply didn't have the force of will inside himself not to flip Harry over and take him here.

But he didn't know enough about having sex with a man yet. Humping each other was one thing—he'd done that with women—but Draco hadn't studied lubrication spells in detail and he realized that he would need them. Making Harry laugh at him the first time they had proper sex was *not* a possibility.

Besides, he hadn't had enough of seduction yet. It would be worth it if he could wait and tease and tempt Harry into offering himself, the way he'd teased him into the kiss.

His body throbbed at him, telling him that nothing could be worth *this.* Especially with Harry sitting back and bringing his arse into contact with Draco's groin.

Harry seemed to understand, because he chuckled into Draco's ear and then rolled off him. Draco licked his lips. At least a sideways glance showed him that Harry was walking cautiously.

And all this from a kiss. Draco swallowed against the realization. He'd been able to excite women that much with just a kiss, but usually they wanted him already and he was gratifying their desires. He at least had to touch their breasts, or see them with their hair unbound, which always affected him, before he was so ready.

Harry didn't have long hair, which was a pity. But he had a challenge—already his eyes were direct again, his smile wry, as if he were thinking about all the changes he had asked Draco to

make yesterday—which more than made up for it.

Draco managed to stand by placing his hands flat on the floor and bringing his knees up little by little. He still bent awkwardly at the waist when he was upright, but Harry gave his groin a whip-quick glance and suddenly started walking a little more awkwardly himself. That was as it should be, Draco thought. He didn't want Harry to be too easily submissive, but neither did he want to be outdistanced.

"I reckon I'll see you later, then." Harry's voice was gratifyingly breathless.

"*Much* later," Draco said, to imply a nice, long wank, and Harry's eyes deepened in color until Draco thought they might have their roll on the floor after all. But then he caught his breath and rushed out of the room.

Draco retired slowly to his own chambers, mind already fastened on the image that he would use to bring himself off: Harry, braced against his hands in the dance, body locked in tension that felt like quivering resistance—whilst his eyes shone with a dark fire that Draco thought could immolate them both.

If you can make the changes. If you are only patient.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—What Harry Potter Saw

"I want to come along."

Draco froze in the doorway. Harry didn't mind; he'd anticipated that might happen. Instead, he folded his arms and leaned against the wall, watching his lover's back with interest. It was one thing for Draco to control his manners at table, in a private setting. What was he going to do when there was a chance that Harry would watch him in public?

Draco turned around with a tight smile on his lips. "It would be boring for you."

"Really? How do you know that?" Harry widened his eyes and blinked innocently. "When your every movement streams with so much brilliance in ordinary situations? You must be at the height of that brilliance when you debate Muggleborns."

Draco caught his lip between his teeth. He let it go immediately, but it was no use; Harry had seen. That one unguarded gesture told him more than anything else could have about how nervous Draco was.

"Harry," he said, and then stopped. "Do you know who and what I'm going to debate today, or did you only know that I'm going to debate a Muggleborn?" he asked with exaggerated care.

Harry controlled the impulse to laugh at the way he spoke, as if his words were pieces of eggshell that he was gathering from the floor. "I don't know," he replied. "But are you saying that that would make a difference to your brilliance?" He smiled up at Draco with his eyes as limpid as he could make them. Yes, he'd only known about the debate at all because he'd overheard the house-elves talking, but that didn't lessen his desire to go.

"I'm debating your friend Granger," Draco said bluntly. "And we'll be talking about inherited pure-blood privileges, house-elves among them."

Harry felt the smile drop off his face. Whilst he was sure that Ron had told Hermione about his appearing in Draco's company, that was different than her hearing it from him. And what would she feel if the first time she had seen him in a fortnight, he was next to her opponent in a debate, supporting a position that was repellent to her?

I'm not supporting his position, and if Hermione is smart, she'll know that, he told himself. *You can stand next to someone and not believe everything they believe.*

But whilst Hermione might know that intellectually, he wondered if she would know it emotionally. If she would be able to separate her feelings against Draco from her feelings for Harry. Harry half-closed his eyes and exhaled. This was about the worst situation for making his friends and Draco get along that he could imagine.

But on the other hand, he wanted to know how much of Draco was real and how many of his beliefs he was ready to give up, in the way that Harry had challenged him to do before he would date him. And no way that Hermione and Draco could meet was likely to be good, considering that Hermione hated him and thought Harry was a fool for falling in love with him.

"I still want to go," he said. "Unless you think that you want to back out of the debate because of who and what you're debating."

As he had known would happen, that taunt made Draco's eyes narrow with a mixture of fury and indignation. "Of course not," he snapped. "I agreed to this, and you're not about to turn me aside from it."

"Then neither can you do that to me," Harry said, and stood tall and straight, his eyes never leaving Draco's.

After long moments, Draco inclined his head and stretched out his arm for Harry to place his

hand on. Harry looked calmly at him and walked towards the door instead, pushing it open. He thought he'd taken on enough feminine gestures for Draco's sake. It was time that Draco really *realized* he was not a woman.

He could feel Draco staring at his back as they walked out of the Manor, and contentedly figured that was a good start.

Draco nearly messed up the Apparition into the debating arena, which would have been a bad start to the contest, since it would have given his enemies something to laugh at. He took a deep breath, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes. Those who watched him were likely to think that he was simply summing up his thoughts and marshaling his arguments. He showed signs of exasperation so little that it wouldn't be an immediate guess for anyone.

Except Harry.

Draco resisted the temptation to open one eye and glare sideways at Harry. It wouldn't gain him anything, and might stall the part of the calming process that he *had* managed to go through.

Instead, he stood there until he heard the murmuring voices rise around him, and knew that meant Granger must have arrived. Then he opened his eyes, and if he was not perfectly calm and composed, a marble statue of a debater, that was not his fault.

The arena itself was a dazzling, two-story, glass-walled garden, like his own in the Manor. The roof was enchanted to reflect the outer weather instead of actually opening to the sky, and there were other differences; for one thing, the flowers didn't have the dazzling depth and variety of color that Draco had carefully bred into his plants. The paths were also wider, and the "trunks" of several trees were meant as seats for the spectators.

Draco turned to face the center of the garden. In the place where his had a soaring tree with white branches reaching for the sky, this one had a central stage. Made of glass that faithfully reflected the greenery around it, the stage was hard to see unless one was looking closely. The chairs on it appeared to hover in midair. Everyone who regularly attended the debates knew how it was done, of course, but that was no reason not to show a suitable amount of appreciation.

The chair on the left was draped with silver and green cloth, and Draco rolled his eyes; the various Muggleborn organizations, who were in charge of arranging this particular debate, had never given up their death grip on the idea that Slytherin colors indicated a pure-blood family. He was glad they had chosen that particular chair, though. It was the more comfortable one.

Not that he would have let the discomfort enter his mind if they had given him the chair on the right, of course, he thought as he moved through the chattering spectators and the mass of reaching vines in the direction of the stage. But it was always pleasant when one's opponents handed one the advantage.

The chair on the right had Granger's trademark red cloth with the golden sunburst on it. Draco

snorted quietly. Granger's paying job was through the Ministry, and she only acted as "advisor" to the Valiant Friends, the group of Muggleborns and half-bloods who worked hard to change the basic laws of pure-blood society. But her advice controlled everything from the way they spent their money to their symbol, which Granger said represented the "new sunrise" overcoming the wizarding world.

Still, it didn't do to underestimate their influence. The Valiant Friends were mostly war heroes, mostly Gryffindors, and had an aggressive way of recruiting the best of the students who came out of Hogwarts, even Slytherins, as long as they weren't overly concerned about blood purity.

And since Harry has asked you to stop being so concerned about that, are you going to join them?

Draco shook his head with a frown. It was true that he could see surrendering that belief, and that he would not oppose some of the things the Valiant Friends had in mind for the wizarding world. But he would *not* give up his house-elves, and he would *not* assume that Granger knew better than he did, simply because she was militant.

"Malfoy."

And there is Granger now. She had come up behind him, but Draco had known she was there all along; he would have paid attention only if he had sensed her wand being drawn. He turned around with a pleasant smile. "Granger," he said. "Are you ready to try and persuade me again?" He laid a subtle emphasis on "again" that made her flush, though a moment later her face was pale.

"I want to know what you've done to Harry," she said.

Direct. I must remember to stop being thrown by that. "I found out he was sending the letters to me," Draco said. "I convinced him that it was foolishness to expect me to fall in love with Astoria, when he had revealed *his* personality in the writing, and that was what I was attracted to. We came back from Spain together, and since then he's been staying in the Manor and indulging my attempts to seduce him."

It was no more than the absolute truth, but Granger glared at him as though he had admitted to converting Harry to the service of the Dark Lord, and then called Harry over loudly. Harry had stood behind Draco, gaping at the arena, but he turned now. Draco took the chance to roll his eyes, once he could be sure that Harry wasn't looking at him. *He's surely seen more impressive things, as an Auror and a recipient of the Order of Merlin. Does he* have *to show his naiveté every time he turns around?*

But he knew that the same thing would undoubtedly keep happening. Whilst Harry had seen impressive sights, he hadn't sought them out. Draco was wise enough now to drop his old perception that Harry liked attention and tried to make others give it to him.

I can look on it as the opportunity to introduce him to new and exciting things, he thought, and stepped up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Harry as Granger glared at him.

"I didn't tell you because I thought Ron would," Harry said. "And because I wanted to talk to you both at the same time, in a few days." He shot a sideways glance at Draco. "Once I understood more about my relationship with Draco, and whether it was likely to be permanent or not."

"You still should have come to me," Granger said, her voice cold and tight. "I told you this was foolishness from the beginning, Harry. Do you really think that you'll stay with him when your political beliefs are so opposed?"

Harry flushed. "There are other reasons than being together because of compatible political beliefs," he muttered.

"Such as sexual compatibility," Draco murmured, into his ear but not so low that Granger couldn't hear it, and watched in satisfaction as she ground her teeth. Harry flushed worse, but pushed Draco lightly in the shoulder, in a way that reassured him he appreciated the tease.

"I understand Harry's infatuation." Granger spoke quietly, but the sheer force of her words made up for it, and when he saw the steely light in her eyes, Draco lost his impulse to tease. This was a woman who *would* separate them if she could. "I've been there to see it grow from the beginning. And I know that he watched you from a distance and never tried to understand you, only his idealization of you." She looked directly at Draco then, her gaze distant and disgusted at the same moment. "I would have thought that would infuriate you, Malfoy, since you've never been fooled by your own press."

Draco put a hand on Harry's shoulder and pressed down, in part because he could feel Harry trying to move away from him. "I've been infuriated by many things in the last few days," he said casually. "But most of them only made me more aware that I wanted Harry to belong to me."

Harry spun around snarling. "I *don't* belong to you!"

Draco narrowed his eyes and stepped back, lifting his hand from Harry's shoulder before Harry could force it away. *That may have been…a miscalculation.* From what he could see of Granger's face, she didn't think so, or at best thought he had betrayed his real purpose in courting Harry all along. She would move as fast as she could to take advantage of that perception.

Draco saw no reason why he should allow her to. He had made a mistake, and traditionally Malfoys recovered from their mistakes and did not allow them to hurt them, rather than permit their enemies to take advantage of them.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Harry stiffened. He had started to spin towards Granger, but halted in an awkward pose, half-turned away. "What?"

"I said I was sorry," Draco repeated, and had to work hard to keep his voice from sounding snappish. Yes, he *was* snappish at the moment, but he would lose Harry if he sounded the way. "I—I'm used to lovers who would only be too happy to be owned by me. I misspoke. I'm sorry."

Harry turned fully back towards him and considered him with skeptical eyes. Granger stepped up behind Harry, whispering something urgent, but she was of less than no concern as long as Harry was still looking at Draco. When she did something to distract his attention, then Draco could worry.

Holding Harry's gaze, he clenched his fingers into his palms and tried to remain calm. He *had* to act that way. Harry would want remorse, but too much anxiety would probably make him think that Draco was lying, and mainly anxious about losing control of him.

"I could see that happening," Harry said at last. "And I could even take it as a compliment, because you're less guarded around me than around the women you dated. I could take that as meaning that you trust me more."

Draco didn't smile yet, because Granger was plucking at Harry's arm and whispering, "Harry, no!" and because he didn't think Harry was finished.

"I don't think I'll take it as a compliment, though," Harry said in a musing tone. "I'll take it as a sign that you still have some arrogance to overcome." He shrugged, a small thing that Draco wouldn't have imagined him capable of, not after the big, expansive gestures he'd made so far whilst he stayed at the Manor. "I have my own share of it. I was arrogant to assume that I knew best what you wanted when I wrote those letters."

"*Harry*," said Granger, her voice frozen.

"It's still my choice," Harry said, turning and facing her. His voice was apologetic and his hand gentle as he touched her shoulder, which Draco hated, but he knew that he had received a second—maybe a third—chance, and he shouldn't waste it by complaining too much about something that didn't matter in the general scheme of things. "He's not exactly what I expected, but I was stupid to think he would be. And he's *trying*, Hermione. That makes a lot of difference. If he'd just assumed I would accept him no matter what and charged ahead, or not seen anything wrong with his claiming that I belonged to him, I would be more skeptical."

"How many chances is too many?" Granger demanded, leaning close to Harry. Draco dug his fingernails into his palms again.

"I don't know," Harry said, and the edge of a wicked grin came over his face, which Draco immediately wished he was standing in front of him to see fully. "How many did you give Ron?"

"That's different," Granger said at once, as if she found the comparison offensive instead of reassuring, the way that Harry had obviously intended her to take it. "I *knew* why I loved him.

And you don't know why you love Malfoy, do you?" Her eyes shifted away from Harry's face and to Draco's, bright with loathing.

"No," Harry said bluntly. "That's one of the reasons I'm trying to know him better, so I can tell whether I was deluded or not."

You weren't. The words burned on Draco's tongue, but he held them back. A moment later, he was proud of himself for doing so. After all, was this really any different than learning to coexist with other people in the wake of the war? His father might have done better during the years when Dumbledore was powerful if he had managed to hold back his words sometimes and act with more discretion.

What Harry wants from me fits in with what I want from myself, he thought slowly, wondering if the revelation would change before he reached the end of it. *That's another reason I might not mind so much. I want to be calm, aloof, controlled, and to possess a better reputation than my father. Harry would add to that reputation, yes, but that's not the main reason I want him. I want to have the public power my father had* and *the passion, even the love, that Harry implies could be there.*

And if Harry's at my side, maybe he could prevent me doing something stupid with that power when I do accumulate it. My mother couldn't prevent my father from doing that, because she agreed with him too much. Having someone who argues with you is essential.

"I think you were deluded," Granger said, and her voice sank. To his astonishment, Draco caught the glint of tears in her eyes. He wondered suddenly how much of her opposition came from frustration and the desire to protect someone who seemed to be hurling himself into danger rather than hatred. "I don't want to see you get hurt, Harry. I can't see any way for you to escape this without being hurt."

Harry gave her a slow smile. "Then I am," he said. He reached out and squeezed her hand. "It wouldn't be the first time I was mistaken about who and what I wanted, Hermione. I survived that. I can survive this."

Who else hurt him? Draco staggered with the force of his anger, his emotions changing as suddenly as Harry's had the tendency to do. *I want to know who it was.*

Granger didn't give him any clues, the way that Draco had hoped she would, by blurting out a name or sentimentally sharing a memory aloud with Potter. She squeezed his hand back and then dropped it. When she lifted her head, her eyes focused on Draco and her face had become stern and inflexible, the way that Draco was used to seeing it.

"House-elves remain slaves whether or not my friend's love life goes wrong," she said. "Are we holding this debate or aren't we, Malfoy?"

Draco had to fight to keep from flushing a little, aware for the first time of the intense, interested

gazes on him from the various people standing around the arena. It was the first time he had forgotten his audience in he didn't know how long. "We're holding it, of course," he said, and then turned and mounted up to the stage, and the chair draped in Slytherin colors.

I can't allow Harry to become my whole life, any more than I'll become his.

But he did have a single vain thought that he decided could be permitted.

I hope he thinks I do well, and that he can hear every word of the debate.

Harry settled back into one of the rows of seats provided for the audience, and ignored the curious stares he was attracting. There was a muttering about why Harry Potter would attend one of these debates, and especially why he would seem to be caught between the representatives of the two sides, when everyone knew where his sympathies lay.

As a matter of fact, I've been at debates before, Harry thought to them smugly. *Just not in any form that you could recognize.*

Hermione sat in the chair covered with the sunburst cloth of the Valiant Friends, and stared hard at Malfoy. Harry looked, but couldn't see any unusual hostility in her face, just the typical expression she wore when she was about to demolish someone she didn't care for in an argument.

"Do you," Hermione began in a soft, controlled voice that nevertheless carried to every corner of the arena thanks to the *Sonorus* Charm she'd cast, "really insist that half-bloods and Muggleborns are inferior to pure-bloods?"

"I haven't insisted such a thing for years." Draco looked bored, his arms resting casually on the arms of his chair instead of folded in his lap the way Hermione's were. "I do believe that we come from different cultures, and that there are some traditions and institutions dominated by pure-bloods that should endure. But that's a very long way from claiming that someone with my blood has more right to exist than someone with yours. I believe you're trying to connect me with those claims made during the war with the Dark Lord, yes?" He yawned in Hermione's face.

Hermione sat up straight. "His name was Voldemort," she said. "Do you still fear saying it, even after all these years?"

"Yes," Draco said, and his voice had flattened and deepened at the same time, something Harry hadn't known was possible. From the slight frown that wrinkled Hermione's forehead, she hadn't expected it, either, and this was not a usual argument tactic. "You would, too, Granger, if he haunted all your nightmares and at one time branded his mark on your skin." He touched his left arm and winced.

Harry was sure his mouth was hanging open. He worked to shut it quickly.

But, yes, this was a change of tactics. He couldn't recall Draco ever mentioning something as personal as his nightmares in public before, and he usually made efforts to distract his opponents from the Dark Mark.

Is he only doing this because he wants to gain my trust? This could be as calculated as everything else that he's done in the last few years. He could want to fool the watchers as well as me.

But then Harry shook his head. If he believed Draco valued his public reputation more than anything else, then he would have to accept that mentioning his nightmares was counterintuitive, because Draco had spent so much time avoiding any hint of weakness and covering up the ways he'd suffered from the war.

There has to be a point at which I start giving him some credit and stop suspecting him of manipulation, or I might as well walk away right here and now.

Even Hermione was taken aback, if the way she stared at Draco in silence was any indication. Then she shook her head, swallowed, and continued. "But you have made statements like that in the past. We have records of them."

"In the past," Draco said, his voice flattening again. "When I was a stupid child, oh yes. And have you never made a statement that you were ashamed of? One about Slytherins, perhaps?"

Hermione flushed. Harry blinked. *Well, yes, she said plenty of things about them. So did I. But she wasn't hunting them down and persecuting them.*

On the other hand, Hermione had accused Draco of making "statements" about Muggleborns and half-bloods, which wasn't the same thing as hunting them down and persecuting them. If one person could be distrusted because of words, the same standard should apply to the other. Harry leaned forwards, deeply interested now.

"Not ones that reflected themselves so openly in my actions," Hermione said harshly.

"In the war," Draco said, "I killed no one. I did what I could to resist the temptation to do so. I *did* torture people, but only at the direct order of the Dark Lord himself. I survived months with him living in my house. In light of that, I think any statements I made when I was a stupid adolescent should be seen as mild." He leaned back in the chair, and Harry saw a faint sheen of sweat along his brow before he said abruptly, "And house-elves, Granger? Are you not *yet* willing to accept that they're naturally servants and love serving?"

Hermione, effectively distracted, ripped into one of her blistering tirades about people who owned and used house-elves. Draco yawned frequently in her face, which only enraged her further.

Harry still listened and watched, but he knew what Draco said and did now was less important

than what he had said and done a few minutes ago.

I don't know that I can accept everything he said was due to the war and being young and stupid.

But I can give him the benefit of the doubt. I can do my best to trust him and try to find a new basis to rest my love on, now that I know he isn't perfect.

Draco raised an eyebrow and began answering coolly when Hermione finished her latest speech. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed the faint tremor to his tone. Probably not, and Draco would have had to know that other enemies would sense his weakness.

And he had thought the shift in argument tactics worth making anyway.

I can, for example, Harry thought, warmth spreading through him, *admire him for being brave.*

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen—What Draco Malfoy Owned

"You may not like the house-elves' desire to serve wizards," Draco said to Granger, and was pleasantly surprised at how calm his own voice was. After an hour of debate, he had expected his patience to wane.

Perhaps Harry being in the audience has something to do with it.

"But it exists," Draco said, and spread his hands, watching his motion with three sets of eyes all the while. Two of them, his and the eyes of his enemies who would inevitably be in the audience, were familiar. The third, Harry's, was not, and Draco knew that he would worry about that and whether he had managed to answer Harry's criticisms if he let himself. He didn't intend to let himself. Instead, he kept a firm hold on his anxiety and his temper and spoke as if he had mere matters of fact to communicate—which he did. "It exists, just as earthquakes and diseases that kill thousands exist. You cannot pretend that it isn't there or lessen its force by giving the elves clothes."

"Wizards have told themselves lies about house-elves for so long that they couldn't recognize the truth if it slapped them," Granger said, refusing to turn a hair. "You may *think* that desire exists, but tell me the truth, Malfoy. How *likely* is it that a creature perfectly bred to serve you and do everything you wish would simply come into being? No. Wizards have made house-elves what

they are through centuries of selective breeding and willful ignorance."

Draco sighed. He had hoped that Granger wouldn't drive him to this tactic, but it seemed that nothing less would satisfy her.

And only think of what Harry will believe, when he sees your courage and your dedication to the truth.

Draco crushed that hope irritably. It was as likely, at this point, that Harry would decide Draco's attempts to win the debate with Granger were manipulative emotional theater. He needed to do this because he had to win the debate, not because he wanted to impress Harry. He turned towards the far left corner of the stage and clapped his hands. He had given instructions before he left the Manor, and he knew those instructions would be reverently obeyed. "Flopsy!" he called.

One of his house-elves Apparated into sight, and bowed gracefully to him. Flopsy was a handsome elf, with neatly groomed hairs sticking out of his ears and wide eyes that held less hysteria than was normal with one of his kind. "Master Draco was calling," he said, "and Flopsy be coming." He turned and cocked his head at Granger, twitching his ears. "Mistress Granger is having a question to ask?"

"Answers given by a slave in the presence of his master are worthless," Granger said, as if she were quoting something.

She probably is. The Valiant Friendsproduced a lot of worthless rubbish in the form of essays and pamphlets that their members, as far as Draco knew, were required to recite word-perfect before they went and proselytized against house-elf slavery, or whatever Granger's new cause was this week. But he had expected this, in part because he had taken the liberty of purchasing a few of those essays and reading them himself. He nodded and rose to his feet. "I shall retire," he said. "And then you can ask Flopsy questions and get true replies."

Granger stared at him, and Draco had the sweetness of knowing he had taken her utterly by surprise. He couldn't resist the temptation to roll an eye sideways and look—

And sure enough, Harry was leaning forwards in his seat, his own eyes wide, his hands clasped on his lap as though he needed them there to keep from reaching out to Draco in his excitement. The sweetness rolled back through Draco, though this time with a sharp edge that made him shudder and thank his own foresight for wearing loose, if luxurious, robes.

Then Granger snorted at him and slammed her hand into the arm of her chair, hard enough to rouse several dull echoes. Flopsy twitched his ears, but made no comment on the rudeness of Mudbloods, the way Draco might have encouraged him to do if they were in front of a more understanding audience.

"I understand the way that the slave bond between wizards and house-elves works," said

Granger, her voice so full of condescension that Draco would have cheerfully strangled her. "Flopsy will only do what he thinks pleases *you*. You don't fear leaving him alone with me because you know that he'll still say the things he would when you were present."

Draco had not expected this tactic to work, but it did expose one of the weaknesses in Granger's argument, and he struck like a serpent before she could reconsider her ill-chosen words.

"I don't understand, Granger," he said, assuming his best "helpful idiot" expression. "You hate 'enslaving' house-elves because you see it as the chaining of intelligent beings with wills of their own. Is that right?"

Granger narrowed her eyes slightly, but replied in her usual calm, level manner. "That's right."

"Then why," Draco said, going in for the kill—but so subtly, so smoothly, that she couldn't notice and interrupt him before he said what he needed to say—"do you say on the one hand that you don't trust Flopsy in front of me, and then on the other that you don't trust him away from me? It sounds very much as if he couldn't give you any answer that would satisfy you. Even if he complained of my rough treatment and longed for freedom, you would only say that I'd told him to recite those words in pursuit of some nefarious plan. House-elves have wills of their own, but you will not trust them in the exercise of those wills."

Granger snarled soundlessly, caught in the logic trap. Draco knew she would soon fight her way free, and probably she would do some dramatic Gryffindor thing such as insisting on giving Flopsy clothes right that second.

Therefore, he decided to end the debate whilst he had the upper hand, and before he had said anything too offensive to Granger. Without Harry in the audience, he would be happy to deliver insults, but many things had changed now.

"For the next debate," Draco said, making his voice soft and piercing at the same time, "decide on some test a house-elf can make that will satisfy you. And then explain *why* that test will satisfy you." He paused, but not for long enough that Granger could catch her breath and take advantage of his silence. "Unless, of course, meeting a desire for service that simply *exists* is too hard for you."

And he turned his back and walked off the stage, towards Harry, who rose to his feet when he saw Draco coming. His eyes didn't express unqualified approval, but a thoughtful challenge was there that Draco appreciated more. He smiled at Harry, and Harry stepped towards him involuntarily, gaze fastened to his face.

Draco found himself lifting his chin without conscious volition and turning his head to the side to show off his profile. He couldn't help it. Harry brought out his vain side, the one that demanded admiration.

Maybe because you know that his admiration would be worth more than anyone else's to you,

Draco thought, and then slipped a hand over Harry's elbow and pulled him forwards. He couldn't help the satisfied little hiss that broke through his lips, either.

"What did you think?" he asked, lowering his head so that he was whispering into Harry's ear. The people staring at them might look all they liked, but he didn't want them to overhear what he was saying to Harry.

"That you have good debate tactics," Harry said. "And that you came up with an argument Hermione couldn't answer at the moment, which takes enormous skill." He smiled at Draco and then nudged an elbow into his ribs, gently, but still strongly, so that Draco had no choice but to let him go and step away. "Now, wait here a minute. I want to talk to Hermione."

And off he went, as Draco stood there blinking at his back. He smoothed his expression out when he realized people were looking, but he knew someone would have noticed that stumble.

What does he want to speak to her about? Will he congratulate her on the debate, too, and try to preserve some sort of twisted neutrality where he compliments both me and his friends equally?

Draco grimaced and rubbed his mouth absently. Then he sighed. *If he gave up his friends for me so easily, then his loyalty wouldn't be worth having.*

I will *have to learn to live with Granger and Weasley, no matter how childish or impossible I find their arguments. Harry won't abandon them, but he's likely to turn his back on me if I try to make him do so. He'll be convinced that he was completely wrong about me and I have nothing but the manipulative mask to offer him—none of the qualities that he saw in me and fell in love with.*

And anyway, it's probably not the debate that he's going to talk to Granger about.

Draco had no evidence for that last thought, but it helped him take a deep breath and settle his shoulders. He even managed a slight smile, thinking about what admiration Harry might express when they were in private and didn't have the eyes of the audience constraining them.

Harry won't do exactly as I want or expect him to. And he shouldn't. He would become another Rianna, so anxious to anticipate my wants and needs that he has no life of his own.

I don't want that. I want him.

As exasperating as Harry could be at times, Draco was certain that last thought was the truth.

"Is it true that you're dating Draco Malfoy?"

Harry smiled sweetly at the breathless woman edging towards him, her head tilted up towards him and her black hair falling artlessly around the sides of her face. He knew her. She was Patricia Morley, Skeeter's successor at the *Daily Prophet*, and even more relentless in the pursuit of a story. Her innocent air had helped her get many in her time; Harry had fallen for it several

times before he realized that she knew exactly what she was doing and was less overwhelmed by the blaze of his celebrity than he was.

But there were methods for dealing with people like Morley that she had never learned to counteract, and never would without changing the whole of her character.

"Yes," he said, and walked straight past her whilst she still gaped and fumbled for a response. Hermione had stood up next to her chair, and she'd been talking to a few witches in the red and gold of the Valiant Friends a minute ago, but now she just watched him come with an expressionless face. Harry climbed the glass stage anyway and gave her a hug. She felt stiff in his arms.

"I don't want to lose you as a friend," he murmured into her ear. "I still think house-elves should be free. I just happen to believe Draco did a better job in this debate. Can you stand us dating?"

Hermione remained stiff in his arms for a moment longer. Then she relaxed and hugged him back. "It's not about whether I can stand it," she said. "It's *your* love life, Harry. If he makes you happy, I'll put up with him, and if he hurts you, then I can disembowel him. But I don't think I'll ever like him, and I certainly won't give up the debates."

"I didn't expect you to," Harry said, and kissed her on the cheek. "But you *are* one of my best friends, and your opinion *is* important to me."

"Just not enough for you to make major changes in your life based on it," Hermione said.

Harry cocked his head to the side and smiled. Hermione had had years of trying to influence his behavior with her advice, including advice that involved him embracing his celebrity and using it to push for house-elf freedom. At least she sounded wry rather than bitter now.

"I'll bring Draco for dinner in a few days," he said.

Hermione's face changed quickly, scattering emotions like sparks, and finally she settled on incredulity. "I don't think I'm willing to go to Malfoy Manor," she said, "and I don't know if I could have him in my house."

"I was thinking about bringing him to the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse, actually," Harry said, and held his breath until she laughed.

"If he'll come, by all means." Hermione shook her head and clasped Harry's hand. "I suspect he won't, given what it would do to his reputation if someone saw him walking into the place, but it's a bold plan."

She kissed his cheek in turn. Harry smiled at her and watched with a warm feeling of contentment under his heart as she left. He knew, after all they'd been through together, that his best friends wouldn't leave him because of a silly argument, but sometimes it was nice to be

reminded.

He turned around to walk back to Draco, and blinked when he saw Draco staring at him, arms folded and deep lines of displeasure slashed around his mouth. Harry raised an eyebrow. *And to think, I haven't even told him about our dining plans yet.*

No sooner had he arrived at Draco's side than Draco grabbed his arm and they Apparated out of the arena, arriving moments later on the lawns of Malfoy Manor. Harry stumbled once, then again as Draco started hauling him towards the door.

"What is your problem?" he snapped, trying to brace his feet and resist Draco's tug. Draco spun around to face him and gripped his arms, yanking him close again. Harry stared up at him. He hated, when Draco had treated him like a puppet, that the look of determined possessiveness on Draco's face made him hard.

"She kissed you," Draco whispered.

Harry gaped at him, then shook his head. "She's *Hermione*," he said. "She's one of my oldest friends. And she's with Ron, and she knows that I'm with you. That's what we argued about, remember? How in the world can you be jealous of her kissing me?"

"You're—" Draco began. Then he stopped, his nostrils flaring, as if he were remembering how much Harry had disliked his earlier claim that Harry belonged to him. He blew out his breath and bent over Harry again, so close that Harry almost crossed his eyes trying to focus on his face.

"You're mine," Draco whispered. "You have to be. I don't want you to walk away. But I don't know how to say it so that I don't offend you."

Harry curled his fingers gently into Draco's chest, toying with a fold of his shirt. "I understand what you mean," he said, and diplomatically did not add, *What you fear.* Draco wouldn't take it well at the moment. "But treating me like a toy that someone else might pick up and play with doesn't help your case."

Draco closed his eyes and shook his head. His face was tight with stress. "Bloody hell, Potter," he said. "I'm *trying.* I've never had anyone I could say that to who wouldn't rejoice to hear it. I've never had someone I wanted so badly to own." His hand curved hard around the back of Harry's neck, and he brought their lips together with a force that cut Harry's tongue on his teeth.

Harry opened his mouth and waited a moment until Draco's tongue had moved into a good position. Then he bit it, sharply.

Draco leaped back with a cry, and clapped his hand to his lips. Harry raised his eyebrows, licked the blood away from his teeth, and said, "I'm happy to talk with you about this. I'm happy to make promises that I won't kiss anyone else, or let them kiss me, if you have a jealousy problem. I'll even admit that you being that jealous over me is flattering. I *won't* let someone own me." He

could hear his voice deepening with outrage, and decided that he'd have to explain why, because otherwise Draco would never understand. *This needs both of us to make it work.* "After the war, everyone wanted to own me. They wanted my name, my face, my good will, my autograph. I got sick of it. If you want to have me, Draco, it'll have to be for some other reason than because I make a good possession."

Draco caught his breath and prevented his rage from exploding by sheer concentration. He'd had these fights before, and because his partners had been weaker than he was, he always won.

But the harsh gleam in Harry's eyes said that wouldn't happen this time.

Draco closed his eyes for a moment and fought his way back to some semblance of calm. And the answer came to him as he thought again of the differences between Harry and those partners he had courted, as he thought of the intense disappointment that had flared within him when he stepped into Merlin's Tor and discovered Astoria waiting for him instead of his writer.

This is too important for me not to speak honestly about. And there are plenty of reasons that Harry isn't just a good possession, or a good wife.

And that thought made him catch his breath and realize that Harry wasn't a woman. He really, really wasn't. He didn't long for children and a pure-blood social circle. He longed for Draco, but he might change his mind and walk away even from that longing if he wasn't very careful. In his story about loving Draco for two years before he made any move, Draco had come to understand, even if Harry didn't realize he was revealing it, how stubborn he was.

So he lowered his voice and said, "You would make a very bad possession, actually."

Harry snorted, but cocked his head to the side, a delicate motion Draco already recognized. *I'm listening.*

"You struggle too much," Draco said. "You aren't docile. You aren't grateful to me for the favor of my interest in you." He touched his chest where Harry's fingers had crumpled the cloth. "Instead of swooning because I throw you up against the wall, you're more likely to push me away and bite my tongue."

Harry smiled faintly and lifted his head, showing off his profile much the way Draco had done earlier when Harry looked at him in the debating arena. But Draco knew this wasn't conscious. Harry appreciated compliments, but he didn't go out of his way to court them. He probably didn't know that he responded to Draco's words like someone who wanted more of those words.

That gave Draco hope. He could change his beliefs, or some of them, for Harry's sake. He could change his debating tactics. Why not the way he seduced someone? If he could become more graceful and polished, the courtier Lucius had believed himself to be and never was, then he would have even more reason to be proud of himself.

"It becomes a question of whether I can tolerate that, of course," Draco said in a slow, considering tone. "As well as a question of what my language really means. I *will* say that I don't envision chaining you and make into a slave or a house-elf when I speak of owning you. Just—having you to myself."

"Sexually? Socially? Psychologically?" Harry spoke with a spark to his words that hadn't been there before, and Draco decided that he was seeing the Auror who had undertaken hundreds of arrests in the last few years.

"Sexually," said Draco. "And psychologically, a bit. I have no illusions that I can isolate you from your job or your friends." He took a deep breath and then spoke on before he could consider how much of himself he was giving away. "I want to come first with you. I want to know your weaknesses and faults, the things you won't tell your adoring public for fear that they'd be used against you. I want you to speak up in defense of me the way you did to Granger earlier today."

Harry's forehead wrinkled, creasing the scar. "But that's not owning someone," he said. "That's part of a normal relationship."

"I've never had one of those," Draco said. It was done, the words out there, and miraculously, he felt less flayed with each passing moment, instead of more. He moved a step forwards. Harry watched him with what looked like thoughtful encouragement, so Draco dared to reach out and grip his shoulder. "That's owning someone to me. I've never had someone I can depend on that absolutely. I've never come first with anyone who wasn't my parents, who are bad candidates for this kind of relationship for obvious reasons."

Harry laughed and leaned forwards, resting his head on Draco's shoulder. Draco curled a hand around the back of his neck. Contentment and power swelled in him. *Is there anyone else who's ever had Harry Potter leaning trustingly on them like this?*

The knowledge that, probably, no one else ever had, gave him the courage to continue.

"I want you to depend on me," Draco whispered, stroking his hair. "I want you to tell me the truth when you lie to the whole world. I want you to show me the injuries that you think would make others scorn you. Do you understand?"

Harry froze. Then he shook himself and gave a soft laugh. Draco tightened his hold on him, wondering if he had decided that Draco's request was ridiculous.

"I was thinking of how vulnerable that would make me," Harry whispered back. "I was wondering if I could trust you. But then I remembered how much I'm demanding that you trust me, especially about the changes in your beliefs working out for the best and me being worth all this. The least I can do is trust you back, hmmm?" He lifted his head and caught Draco's eye, smiling. A moment later, he reached up and caressed Draco's cheek. "I agree to your version of owning me. Provided that I can own you, too."

"Of course," Draco said. He couldn't say anything else, because the dryness in his mouth had spread to overtake his throat.

And there was only one cure for that dryness.

He kissed Harry again, this time introducing his tongue more gently, his hands massaging Harry's shoulders and the nape of his neck instead of clamping down on them. And this time Harry responded with no bites, but with a slow, delicious sweep of his tongue back and forth that literally made Draco's knees tremble.

He tried to explain this, and how rare an occurrence it was, and how Harry didn't need to think it meant he was weak, but Harry's tongue stole his breath, and Harry's laughter in his ear stole his sanity, and the hands rubbing up and down his scalp, tangling into his hair, stole his resolve to speak.

In fact, after another minute of Harry sliding his leg between Draco's and rubbing deliberately up and down against Draco's erection, only one word was left to him. "Bed," he whispered, the next moment his mouth was free.

He expected a refusal, because from the moment he saw Harry in the room in Spain, Harry had resisted and confounded him.

But instead Harry laughed and said in a low voice, "Oh, *let's*," and Draco stumbled over his own feet moving them in the right direction.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—What Harry Potter Experienced

Draco could kiss like a demon, Harry discovered. All heat and force and insistence. He made it feel as though you should be somewhere else when he kissed you, as if you should be *doing* something else, because surely something this good would end with your death.

But Harry didn't want to be anywhere else. He looped his arms around Draco's shoulders and gave as good as he got. It seemed to work, because Draco shuddered twice and uttered a gasping, groaning noise, as though he were a mooncalf being gutted.

"Taste something you like?" Harry asked, pulling back at last so that he could breathe. His mouth felt tender and swollen, and he thought Draco could hardly have done more damage by punching him. He ran his tongue along his lips and looked with some satisfaction at his own handiwork, the bruising of Draco's lips and the shadows around his mouth.

Draco, though he'd pinned Harry to the wall for several minutes now, stood with his chest heaving and his head swaying slightly from side to side. His body trembled. If the kiss had consumed Harry, it had at least impacted Draco.

And then his eyes snapped up, and Harry swallowed at the burn in them.

Impacted. More than impacted. At the moment, I'm what he wants more than anything else in the world.

The thought didn't frighten him, as it would have before he understood what Draco meant by owning him. Instead, it made him press closer, his leg twitching with the urge to curl around Draco's waist.

His blood was up, and his head was hot, and the sound of their panting breaths mixed and intermingled until it seemed to also be the sound of his pushing hips and his pulsing cock.

I want him. He wants me. Why are we standing here and staring at each other?

Draco knew, from the impatient way Harry twitched against him, that he wanted Draco to get on with it. But Draco was enjoying the chance to look his fill. He certainly hadn't been able to take it when he was dueling Harry and then rutting frantically against him in a heated frenzy that might end any moment. And none of the women he had been with had ever affected him like this. They were prone to hiding their faces, blushing and turning away as if they thought their passion shameful.

Not Harry.

Oh, not Harry.

It might have taken him a long time to realize that Draco returned his desire and more than returned it, but now that he was here, it would have been anathema to him to look away. Draco was as sure of that as if he were reading the thoughts out of Harry's head with Legilimency. His eyes were brilliant, filled with a shine like the light of drowned stars, and he looked as if he rejoiced in the way his lips swelled with kisses and dark red marks glowed on his neck. Draco could have taken him out in public, and Harry would only have arranged that the bites showed for all to see—by tugging the high collar of his robes down if necessary.

He had given himself to Draco. Not surrendered, the way that some of Draco's other partners had, which was always unsatisfactory. Draco wanted the sense of conquest and ownership, yes, but in the end, a conquest lay quiescent at one's feet, instead of quivering with passion for

another go-round.

But this giving was full, and complete, and what Draco had always wished for with the ideal wife of his dreams.

No, it's better, he realized in shock as Harry made an impatient noise, leaned forwards, and pressed their lips together. *I always wondered how someone could be passionate and cold-blooded in the way our society requires at the same time. It makes sense that it takes someone outside that society to teach me how lovemaking can be.*

Harry's hand wound into his hair and yanked, and Harry grumbled something against his mouth that had a distinctly *displeased* tone, though Draco couldn't make out what it was; Harry's lips and tongue rather distracted him from understanding words at the moment. Draco chuckled under his breath and decided that someone who had taught him so much deserved to have whatever he wanted.

Even if what he wants is not exactly what he imagined.

Draco's hands curled around his waist and spine, and abruptly he lifted Harry, so that Harry didn't have any choice but to wrap his legs around Draco's waist if he didn't want to topple. He shuddered as the new position sent a ripple of friction up his cock.

I don't know how this can possibly feel better, *but it does.*

He fastened his mouth firmly on Draco's, trying to regain a little of his lost control, but Draco's hand slid its way between their bodies. Then his fingers crept inside Harry's shirt and flattened out on his skin.

Harry shuddered again, dramatically enough that he needed to pull his mouth away from Draco's and take a large gulp of air. This was the first time that Draco had touched him like *that*; they'd got off in their clothes in Madrid, and they'd stayed clothed when they danced, and they'd been sleeping in separate beds since they came to the Manor. Just like the unexpected change in position, one small touch of bare fingers to bare chest shouldn't have felt that good, but the feeling went on existing and being experienced all the same.

"I like what I taste," Draco breathed into his ear. Harry writhed. His ear was sensitive, but Draco's hot breath seemed to surround him: his tongue, his lips, his fingers, everywhere but his cock, which was where Harry most wanted it to be. "Do you like what you feel?"

Harry uttered some ruined gabble that he could only hope conveyed the same idea to Draco that it did to him, and pulled him closer.

Not only was Harry passionate, he was also responsive. Draco was delighted. With the women he had bedded, it had been a game to deny their responses to him, just as it was a game to deny their blushes. They would bite their lips to keep from gasping, drop their eyes as if their

emotions were not clearly painted across their other features, and turn away from him when he released them, arms folded across their chests with what they liked to pretend was a natural chill, rather than the chill of the sudden separation from the heat of his body.

But Harry grunted and moaned and babbled as if he never thought that Draco would think less of him for it, and if he squirmed, it was only with the need to get closer. Draco grunted as their cocks brushed. Yes, he thought he could get used to a male lover very quickly.

But nakedness would help me be sure.

He lowered Harry to the floor and undid his robes with a single smooth pull, ignoring Harry's protesting hand on the back of his neck. He was doing something he thought Harry would like, he murmured without words, and tugged his trousers down violently. Harry stood still for a moment, panting, then wriggled eagerly, trying to propel Draco's mouth to its destination.

Get the pants out of the way, and…

It had never been Draco's way to act on impulse, without taking technique into account. He had studied various books on how to pleasure girls carefully before he actually attempted to place his mouth anywhere near the crotch of a woman he was dating. He had practiced his tongue movements in front of the mirror. He had memorized a whole sequence of gestures, from the first catching of the eye, to the slight but sincere smile, and then the campaign of fleeting touches and lowered tones that he would use to catch her attention.

With Harry, everything was unorthodox, everything was unplanned, and so perhaps it wasn't a surprise that he took Harry's cock into his mouth for the first time without thinking about it at all.

Harry thrust sharply down his throat, and Draco gagged. *Maybe I* should *have thought about this,* he decided, and reared back to clear his throat and spit for a moment before he leaned forwards again.

"I'm sorry," Harry was saying in a mortified tone. "I forgot you haven't done this before. I'm sure I would have choked the same way. I'll be more careful in the future. I—"

And then his mouth froze on a noiseless scream as Draco dived back in, this time taking the precaution of pinning Harry's hips to the wall with his hands first. Harry gasped, and struggled, and staggered, and then began a noisy wail as Draco licked straight forwards and sucked from the side.

Draco smiled lazily around a mouthful of skin. He might have wanted to practice just in *case*, but he had always been a quick study.

It was wonderful giving himself up to the salty taste and Harry's ragged movements as Harry had too obviously given himself up to pleasure. When Draco thought he understood enough of the rhythm of thrusts to look up, he stared, and fireworks seemed to explode in his brain. Harry's

cheeks were flushed, his mouth hanging open and a faint line of saliva making its way down the corner of his lips, the tendons in his neck standing out as he thrust.

Draco leaned forwards and ground his cock against Harry's thigh before he thought about it. Then he took a massive breath and managed to hold back. He still had *some* modicum of dignity, and he wasn't about to come rubbing against Harry like a dog.

Especially because I already came that way in Madrid.

He splayed his hands wider, his fingers guiding Harry's plunges into his throat now instead of restraining them, and swallowed. Harry promptly yelped and cried, and his fingers scrabbled through Draco's hair, scratching his scalp. Draco leaned forwards to grind again. He didn't understand how even that could be exciting, but it was.

Dizziness surged through him from head to erection. Would it—would it be so bad if he came like this, humping Harry's foot? His body bowed as he had the thought, and his muscles tightened—

And then Harry screamed, "Draco, oh my *God! Yes!*" and came down his throat, effectively distracting him.

Draco choked for only one moment, and then began to swallow easily, because, after all, he was equal to dealing with this. He rode the thrusts Harry made into his face better than he'd expected; they were more forceful but not that different from the thrusts an excited girl would make. And when Harry gave an exhausted whimper and began to slide down the wall, Draco was there to catch him.

He hadn't come, as he noted when the head of his erection brushed the floor and he rubbed himself against it for a moment. *Sensitive.*

A different thought consumed him as he swallowed one more time and gathered Harry into his arms. Harry's eyes were closed, but the way he shook showed he was still awake—as did the way his hands had wandered into Draco's hair and down to his arse.

He'll make me come next time.

Draco imagined the many ways Harry could make him come. The warmth of his mouth, and the way his eyes would stare up at Draco before sliding shut in exquisite enjoyment. The tightness of his hand, which, though it should logically have been the first thing Draco experienced, he didn't know yet.

The squeeze of his arse.

Draco smiled down at Harry, who had opened his eyes and was sitting back on his heels with an expression of determination, and doubted that he could have made a better choice of lover.

Harry clenched his arse down on air as he noticed the way Draco was staring at him.

I want.

The verb didn't need an object the way it usually did. Harry *was* his wanting. His body shook with it, and his bones were watery with the force of his longing. He thought of pulling Draco up the stairs to bed, but he wasn't sure he would last long enough to do so. It didn't matter that he'd come. His body was still on fire, his *want* having shifted from his need to come to orgasm to make Draco do so.

Doing it here on the floor of the entrance hall sounds good to me, he thought, and started pulling Draco's shirt off.

Draco planted his hands on the floor and shook his head. His hair flew in every direction. Harry admired it helplessly, as he seemed destined to admire everything about Draco at the moment. He tried to reach up and crush their lips together again, but Draco transferred one of the hands to his chest and pressed down. Harry gasped. Maybe because his cock was sated for the moment, he felt the sensation more intensely than he had before, when it was just Draco sliding his hand under Harry's robes.

"No," Draco whispered. "I want you in a bed." He rocked forwards, a loose, swinging motion, and Harry had to close his eyes as he felt the erection poking at him. His arse clenched again, and he reached up and clutched aimlessly at Draco's arms. Draco chuckled lowly, but Harry didn't think he was mocking him.

"Inside me," he said. His mouth was swollen, overflowing. His voice stuttered and stumbled like his grip on Draco's arms.

Draco ground himself so strongly into Harry for a moment that Harry thought he'd changed his mind about the bed. But then he pulled back and whispered, "Yes. Fucking you."

Harry twisted. The hard sounds of the words were sinking inside him, hooking him, making him thrash. But he would never experience the real thing if he didn't slow down, so he crawled a few inches away from Draco and opened his eyes.

Draco was still watching him with desire like a werewolf's, desire to devour. Harry had to concentrate on each separate motion as he stood and extended his hand for Draco to grip, which Draco did without hesitation.

Once they were both upright, Harry jerked Draco close to him and bit him on the chin. Draco started in what was certainly surprise and might have been pleasure. His hand gripped Harry's neck and jerked on it in retaliation, until his head bent backwards and he was staring directly into Draco's face.

Harry smiled, unafraid of the hunger he saw there. "Can you handle it?" he whispered, including just enough of a taunt to spur Draco to action.

Draco pressed him towards the stairs, face blank, as though every other emotion that tried to show up was being crushed out by his lust. Harry laughed and let himself be pulled.

Harry Potter sprawled on his sheets, his legs spread as he worked on his own arse with fingers full of lubricant oil, was the most erotic thing Draco had ever seen.

He hadn't thought it would be. He hadn't looked forwards to this part of taking a male lover, in fact. An arse was—well, hot and tight, in theory. Draco had never made love to any of his female partners that way. But it was also full of shit and God knew what else, and when he read about the lengthy stretching process that it would take until his writer was ready for him, Draco had hesitated.

So why did this particular performance leave him helpless to do anything except lean on the wall and pull on his cock, rubbing to relieve the pressure, jerking and pinching so that he wouldn't come from the sight alone?

Maybe it had something to do with the way Harry writhed as his fingers disappeared up his arse, or the quick jabbing motions he used to force himself back on his own hand. Maybe it had to do with the thick cries he gave, his voice spasming like his arse as it clamped down. Maybe it had to do with the way his legs twitched and continually spread wider.

Or maybe—just maybe—it was the hot, clear gaze he turned on Draco, his eyes so wide that it seemed as if he had pinned back his eyelids. He clearly didn't want to blink and miss a moment of Draco's reaction.

Which he got. Draco might not be *fair*, but he wasn't stupid, either. He knew that he wouldn't see much more of Harry's amazing performance unless he shared some of his own honest feelings with him.

Besides, it was oddly thrilling letting down his defenses in front of Harry. It felt like the same risk he took when he showed a moment of genuine weakness to an enemy so that they would push too far and tumble into one of Draco's own traps.

But here there was no trap, and no enemy. Only a lover, and the assurance of pleasure.

Draco played with himself and tossed his head back, gaping and gasping, and watched the way that Harry's eyes shone as if he'd lit a fire behind them, and reveled in the contradiction.

Harry abruptly jerked himself straight up, and a combination of a groan and a hiss escaped from between his teeth. His eyes fluttered shut. When he began to move again, he rocked on his fingers, his jaw working helplessly. No sound escaped.

"What's that?" Draco whispered, greedy. He didn't want Harry to get too involved in his own pleasure and forget him. He took a step forwards, trying to ignore how silly he felt with his cock slapping against his belly and dripping on the floor. Of course they'd taken off the rest of their clothes the moment they got into his room. "What did you do?"

"My p—the s—" Harry arched his neck, and jerked his arse backwards again. His cock was making a valiant effort to revive, though Draco didn't intend for Harry to come before he was inside him. "That *spot*," he said at last, as explanation, and fell back against the pillows, his hips pumping.

Draco crawled onto the bed and grabbed Harry's wrist. Carefully, he eased his fingers out of his arse. They shone with the oil Harry had used to prepare himself, and so did his entrance. Draco narrowed his eyes in expectation and grazed Harry's knee with his cock.

Harry snapped his gaze back to him, and emerged entirely from his self-inflicted delight. He smiled lazily and spread his legs again, so wide that his heels almost fell off the bed, and shoved his arse at Draco. Draco made some sound that had no name, but which seemed to start boiling far back in his throat and tear upwards, scraping off most of the skin in his mouth on the way.

"You've been waiting," Harry whispered. "For someone who understood you. And I've been waiting. For you. For too long." His words came with more and more effort as he strained, trying to widen his legs further, and Draco hissed. But he sensed Harry had something else to say, and he wanted him to say it before he started pounding him and stole *all* his breath and his focus.

Harry caught his breath, started to speak, lost his words to another spasm, and finally gasped, "I don't—see the point—in waiting any longer."

"Neither do I," Draco said, his voice grating like a steel plate dragged across a stone floor, and then he slid forwards. Harry waved one hand; a pillow floated away from the head of the bed and tucked itself under his arse. Draco spared only a moment to wonder about the wandless magic, and only one more to wonder about the possible stains the lubricant would leave on the pillow.

Then he was lifting Harry's legs up and over his shoulders, and easing his way into Harry's slicked and shining arse.

He was kneeling above Harry, who arched beneath him, allowing Draco more intimate access to his body than any woman ever had.

Willingly allowing him access.

Draco stiffened and drove inside, and then it was a struggle not to come right away.

Harry closed his eyes as Draco thrust into him. He had known it would hurt. The oil he'd used had relaxed his muscles as well as made him slick, but *still.* The pain slid like a smoldering fire up through his chest and down into his abdomen. He bit his lip so that he wouldn't cry out. Draco

wouldn't mistake a cry of pain for one of pleasure, and he would probably insist on sliding out.

But Harry didn't think he could stand waiting one moment more for Draco to fuck him. And the soaring exaltation in his brain, which came from being in a place he'd never thought to be, made him laugh and push himself back, holding his breath and clamping down as Draco's cock drove further into him, and then making himself relax.

"The idea is to move," he said, when Draco had spent several minutes just kneeling there with his eyes shut, panting, probably focused on the warmth of Harry's arse. "For God's sake, it's like having sex with a statue, though I reckon you're a *little* less hard—"

Draco's eyes opened, and Harry lost any words in the face of his expression of sheer heat. And maybe because Draco began to thrust then, and there really wasn't much of a choice except for Harry to arch his back and yowl like a cat.

"Want to fuck you," Draco whispered, several times, almost chanting it.

"You are," Harry gasped, but he understood why Draco kept repeating it. There was no getting *used* to this, no way that he could analyze one thrust and be prepared for the next. Did you get used to being dipped in fire? Push, and shove, and push, and shove, and a stabbing thrust that went straight to Harry's guts, and a slow dragging retreat that felt as if Draco would drag his soul out of his body with it, and the urge to laugh because he couldn't remember thinking his soul was located in his arse before, and a short jab that—

That reached that spot.

Harry clenched frantically around Draco's cock, and shoved, and sobbed, and fucked himself steadily for several seconds before he realized that Draco was just sitting still and watching him smugly. Harry glared, but he couldn't stop moving. The pleasure was spreading like the pain had earlier, whirling in wisps across his body, moving like the cinders of a flying fire.

"*Draco*," he said, and tried to stare what he was feeling into Draco's eyes.

Draco plunged forwards, and then made a sharp startled sound, as if he hadn't commanded his body to move. But it was moving now, thrusting, the *force* of his body causing Harry to laugh and rejoice and sink his nails into Draco's arms, which Draco retaliated for by bending him almost in half and biting him on the lips—

And when had he got hard again, anyway, Harry wondered hazily, because so much of the pleasure burning him now was diffused throughout his body instead of centered in his cock that he hadn't noticed—

And Draco panted into his face, his body still shagging relentlessly, and then froze all over with a sob of surrender—

And Harry came hard enough to paint the pillows beside him with his release, though luckily he didn't shoot himself in the face—

And Draco whispered, "Not a single touch to the cock, you bastard. How's that for a first time?" and collapsed on top of him like a heavy leather blanket.

Harry, still shaking with pleasure, wrapped his arms around Draco's shoulders and closed his eyes.

He felt as if he lay in the heart of the sun.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—What Draco Malfoy Ate

"Hm."

Draco looked across the table at Harry, but he wasn't looking back at Draco—or, Draco thought, looking at anything in particular. Instead, he was smiling at the ceiling and munching his way contentedly through a plate of buttered toast that the house-elves had made exactly to his specifications. Whatever objections of Granger's he might share, he didn't seem to dislike benefiting from elvish services.

But the expression on his face had never come from mere food.

Draco reached across the table, mostly because it had been too long since he had a touch of Harry's skin, and grazed his fingers across Harry's wrist. At once Harry turned his hand over, clasping Draco's thumb. An expression of dissatisfaction crossed his face, as if that wasn't enough, and he leaned forwards, grabbing and caressing Draco's arm. Draco had to sit back so that Harry wouldn't haul him out of the chair.

"Happy, are you?" he asked archly.

"Of course, you great blond git," Harry remarked, and then stood up and walked around the table. Draco had only enough time for a gasp of surprise before Harry embraced him and bowed his head, nuzzling his face into the hair that lay along the nape of Draco's neck. No other lover had *ever* done this before. Indeed, in the mornings after they tended to be standoffish and coldly polite, probably because that was the attitude Draco adopted himself.

"No one has ever done as much as you have for me," Harry whispered. "I was half-convinced that I was deluding myself when I realized how good I felt. How could someone I fell in love with from afar—and whose morals I'd come to doubt these last few weeks—make me feel *that* good? But yes, you fucked me up the arse, and it was wonderful." He laughed suddenly, and Draco wondered if it was the gust of Harry's breath along his cheeks or the sound itself that made his belly and groin tighten. "I can't wait to tell Ron."

Draco pulled away with more violence than he meant to use, but the thought behind Harry's words was intolerable. "You are *not* telling the Weasel what we do in bed together."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not that part of it, you prat. Just that he argued with me a few times, when I hinted I had an interest in men, about how much it must hurt. Getting fucked up the arse, I mean. I'll hint back that this experience was particularly wonderful. It'll be worth it to watch him turn green." He grinned.

"Not just the experience," Draco whispered, and reached out to encircle Harry's neck with his arms, because he couldn't stand not to. "No one else could make you feel that way. I know it."

"*I* don't know it," said Harry, and his eyes were very wide and very bright. "Maybe I should go out and ask a few other men if they would be so kind as to oblige me, so that I can compare the experiences—"

Draco seized his mouth in a kiss, because it didn't seem worth the effort of yelling at him. Harry stiffened for a moment in his arms, and then leaned forwards and surrendered with a sigh. Draco harshly rubbed his shoulders and guided Harry onto his lap, jabbing his tongue into Harry's mouth in an imitation of what they'd done yesterday. Harry picked up on it and groaned, his hips nudging his erection forwards into Draco's belly.

"No one else is ever going to do that to you," Draco whispered, when his mouth had begun to sting and he had to pull back. He whispered the words directly into Harry's ear. The only ones present who might hear them were the house-elves, since his mother was never up this early, but he didn't care. They were private. "Your cock and your arse and all of you is *mine.*"

"I was sort of counting on never having a chance to compare experiences," Harry said, with a mournful sigh. His voice was still teasing, which Draco didn't understand, given how thorough the kiss had been. "And of course I can't compare this experience to the past, either, since you're the first man I've ever let do that."

Draco couldn't remember what he'd been doing with his hands. Had they always been on Harry's shoulders? And had his jaw always gaped open the way he could feel it doing now?

Harry smiled and reached up a finger to press against Draco's jaw and tilt it closed. Draco obeyed. He swallowed, and then swallowed again, because the dryness in his mouth didn't dissipate. He found himself unable to look away from Harry's face, which was very pink and

very pleased.

"I thought you would like that," Harry murmured.

Draco didn't understand how he was supposed to respond, other than by taking Harry over the table, so he just clasped a hand behind Harry's head, drew him forwards, and kissed him again.

Harry sat back on his heels and licked his lips with satisfaction. He'd wondered for a long time how it would feel to suck Draco off, and now he knew. It wasn't quite as *overwhelming* as having Draco's cock up his arse, but it was exciting to watch Draco fall apart and stutter and stuff his fist in his mouth as if the sounds he made were shameful. And then Harry had taken even more pleasure in taunting him into truly losing control.

He crawled up the bed, carefully, because his spine still hurt from where Draco had slammed him against the wall as they stumbled up the stairs to the bedroom. Draco reached out for him and rolled him onto his back. Harry could see the sated trembling of his muscles, as if he'd spent all morning exercising, but still he retained the strength and single-mindedness to kiss Harry until he had trouble breathing.

Harry laid his head on Draco's chest when the kiss was done and closed his eyes for a moment. The stickiness drying on his own cock and his chest and his face, the urge to gasp for breath, even the ache in his back, all made him vastly happy.

And then he remembered what he hadn't told Draco about yet, and grinned. The thought of being able to cause mischief revived him as effectually as the offer of his mouth had revived Draco's passion.

"I wanted to ask you out to dinner," he murmured lazily, so that Draco wouldn't realize right away that this was different from other requests.

"Say it's in a place where you'll do that again." Draco rubbed his legs together, but didn't open his eyes or remove his hands from Harry to gesture to his crotch. Perhaps he was too tired to do so. Harry hoped he was, because that would be enough cause for the burst of pride that traveled through him.

He's the one with the experience of dozens of lovers. I only ever had Ginny before I had him. For me to be keeping up with him and even wearing him out…I think I can be proud of that.

"Afraid not," Harry said, and his tone made Draco open one blurry eye and peer at him hard. Harry returned his gaze blandly, which sharpened Draco's stare rather than otherwise. *Already learning to recognize that tone, are you?* Harry raised his eyebrows and turned his stare challenging. "It's in the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse."

Draco lay still for so long that Harry began to think he'd deliberately suppressed his reaction. Then his hands tightened on Harry's neck and chest, and he gave a charming smile. Harry had

seen that smile work wonders on some of the Muggleborns he'd debated, when they were about to give him up for lost. Not Hermione, of course.

"I don't want to," Draco said.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and kissed him. "But I thought it would be a good thing anyway. Hermione would control the ground, and she could come to feel confident around you. And Ron would be comfortable in a way that he wouldn't if we met in a restaurant somewhere, especially a restaurant that you know better than he does."

"And what about me?" Draco pulled his hands away from Harry's body, which hurt more than it should have, and rolled over, lacing his fingers together behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, which he probably imagined kept Harry from reading his expression. But Harry had learned more in the past few days than he had in almost two years of observation, and he knew the tight lines at the corners of Draco's eyes meant more than the light tone of his voice. "I reckon my comfort didn't enter into your plans?"

"*I* reckoned," said Harry calmly, "that my life won't be what I want it to be until you and Ron and Hermione manage to make a truce. They won't come to Malfoy Manor. They won't let you enter their home. And any restaurant that we choose is likely to be more congenial to you, simply because you've probably spent more money there than they have."

"I can't help my wealth." Draco drawled the words, but Harry could read the sharp tone behind his words, too. He'd spent years trying to make up for the crime of being born with a pure-blood name and money, when the war had drained those commodities of much of their value.

"I know that," Harry said, and put a hand in the middle of Draco's chest, rubbing back and forth until Draco let out a hefty sigh. "The reason I think the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse would be best is that it would show Ron and Hermione you really *have* changed, and can compromise. They don't believe in you the way I do. They never did," he added musingly, thinking of the years when Hermione had tried to tell him that Draco's arguments with Muggleborns amounted to a ploy to keep his social status, rather than a way to show off changed ideals. He had to admit that, in that respect, she had known Draco better than he did. "I want them to see you're willing to bend a little."

"The ways in which I can truly bend are only for you to know," Draco said, lowering his voice to a tone that caused Harry's cock to twitch.

Not everything can be about sex, Harry reminded himself righteously, and dragged his mind back to the topic. "And, in return," he said, "I'll make sure Ron and Hermione are on their best behavior. And it will give us a chance to be seen in public as a couple." He leaned back, studying Draco's face to see how he would react to that suggestion.

Draco's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. And the nod was not too slow, either. Harry was satisfied. After Draco had appeared with him at the Ministry and explained how he wanted to own Harry

yesterday, Harry hadn't thought he would desire to keep their relationship secret, but it was always good to be sure.

"If you'll give assurance of Weasel's manners," Draco muttered.

"It'll improve them if you don't call him Weasel," said Harry, and rapped Draco on the skull with his knuckles, which made him yelp in what seemed to be genuine surprise. *Really. Did he think I would tolerate that?* Harry sat up and regarded Draco disapprovingly for long moments. "You thought that insult up when you were still at Hogwarts," he said. "I know you can think of better ones."

And he rose and walked across the room, naked, to fetch his robes, leaving Draco behind him with something to think about.

The worst part about this, Draco thought, stiffening his shoulders, *is the Gryffindor décor.*

It was true. He could have dealt much better with the Valiant Friends—even with Granger at their head—if they had not chosen red and gold. The walls, which from the outside looked to be made of fine marble and other stone that should not be disguised, were covered with scarlet tapestries, probably made to hide the pure blood they spilled in their arguments here. The golden sunburst theme dominated the tapestries, the chairs, the stained glass windows, and even the floor of the immense dining room they walked into.

Perhaps it's meant to give any onlookers a headache, and ensure they do less effective battle with Granger, Draco thought, and rubbed at his aching temples.

A wand touched him on the hair, and a murmured charm diminished the pain. Draco turned in surprise to find Harry smiling at him. He lifted one hand and laid it on Draco's cheek. He seemed utterly unconscious of all the watching, staring eyes around them.

"Thank you for agreeing to come," Harry murmured. "I know it's hard for you for several reasons. But you did it for me." His fingers curled, so that Draco could feel back the back of his hand and his palm at once.

Draco saw Granger standing near the head of the table, beside a chair draped with the sunburst, exactly as the chair in the debate had been. Her eyes fixed on him, and her jaw set. He knew anything he could do tonight would displease her; she might be polite to him, as Harry had insisted, but she would never like him.

So he might as well outrage her. Draco let his tongue curl around Harry's knuckles, and murmured, "My *pleasure.*"

Harry's eyes widened, and fluttered. But he recovered enough to lead Draco towards Granger and the head of the table a moment later.

Draco lifted his head and adopted the arrogant walk, flowing mostly from the shoulders, that his father had used when he went to the Ministry in the years following the Dark Lord's first defeat. He was among enemies. No disguising that. No pretending that he would be here if not for Harry, either. The reporters might think so, and the undecided, the neutral observers who made up so much of the wizarding world and whom Draco worked so hard to impress, but the Valiant Friends knew better.

So he would make the best of it. He would show them that they could not frighten him. He had endured worse than a few pointed stares in his time.

He reached Granger and bowed. Ignoring the hostile glances about, he took her hand. Ordinarily, he would have kissed it, but she would recognize the pure-blood courtesy and probably disdain him for it. And there were only so many rules he was willing to bend for Harry. Corrupting the traditions of his own culture was not an option.

"Granger," he murmured. "Thank you for inviting me."

"I hope the food will taste right to you without all the extra ingredients that your slaves no doubt add to it," Granger said, through a tight smile.

"*Hermione.*"

Harry didn't have to say much. The sharpness of his voice came from disappointment, not anger. Granger flushed and turned sideways to stare at Harry.

"You know what I feel," she said. "You know how pure-bloods treat the elves who serve them."

"My elves are treated differently," Draco said. He saw no reason not to speak the truth, either, even though he knew she wouldn't believe him. This was for Harry. "My father used them as a convenient target for his anger, true. I do not have as violent a temper as he did, and I do not undertake such…indiscretions."

"They're still slaves," said Granger, her lips barely parting. "I thought about what you said the last time we met, Malfoy, and I have the answer. They're still slaves if they didn't originally consent to the servitude, no matter how happy they might be now. People under the Imperius Curse are happy, too, as long as you don't question them too deeply. We're doing research right now that should reveal the foundations of house-elf slavery and explain why they seem so *happy* to stay captive now."

"I've always wanted to know more about house-elves," Draco lied, and bowed again. "I look forwards to the results of your research with interest."

Granger looked as if she wanted to chew rocks, but she inclined her head and sat. Draco and Harry took the seats on her left. Another member of the Valiant Friends sat down next to Draco, which made him stiffen, but only briefly. Sitting between her and Harry was still better than

sitting between Granger and Harry.

Then Weasley stepped out from behind Granger's chair and took the seat across from Harry.

Draco met his eyes as blandly as he'd given the lie about house-elves, and wondered what Weasley had been waiting for. Had he thought Draco would try to strangle Granger? He'd certainly been in the ideal spot to jump out and rescue his lady.

Or maybe it's Harry I'm supposed to publically kill in his twisted universe, Draco thought, and reached for a plate of bread. It would be interesting, as Granger proposed, to compare the taste of this food with the taste of that his elves prepared.

"I'm curious, Malfoy," Weasley said. There was something disconcerting about his voice, and it took long moments of concentration for Draco to realize what it was. He didn't speak with his mouth full, as Draco had automatically imagined he would. In fact, only a slice of meat and a small dish of berries were on his plate as yet. He had his hands folded in front of him, his elbows not even resting on the table, and a serious, thoughtful expression on his face. "Why did you stay with Harry when you found out that he was the one writing the letters to you?"

Draco wanted to hiss at Weasley, but more because of the implied insult to Harry than because of any animosity towards himself. But when he glanced sideways, Harry was eating bread and ignoring the conversation. Perhaps he expected this kind of bluntness from Weasley. Draco smothered the brushfire of his temper with difficulty and answered in a tone he had to congratulate himself on; it didn't sound too strained.

"Because I was intrigued by him," Draco said, and bit into the bread. He was displeased to realize that he could taste no difference between it and the bread that his own elves baked, bar the differences that anyone would expect from minor variations in the recipe. "Because the personality he showed me in the letters was of the sort I could imagine compatible with my own."

"*Compatible*?" Weasley stared at him, his mouth hanging slightly open, and Draco relaxed. *Ah, here is the moronic Weasel of my memories.* "You didn't hit your head very hard just before that, Malfoy?"

"Not compatible in the way that you and your wife are compatible," Draco said sweetly, though in reality he could hardly imagine two people worse-suited. "Compatible in that I wanted someone who would present a challenge to me. I'd grown tired of women who did nothing but simper and curtsey. And now I've found someone." He reached out and laced his fingers with Harry's, briefly interrupting the way Harry had reached for the cheese platter. He squeezed.

Harry turned and smiled at him, the same pleased and proud expression he'd worn when he saw Draco in his dress robes, really meaning to attend the dinner at the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse. Then he reached for the cheese again, and Draco let his hand go. At least he still had the warmth of Harry's shoulder and thigh beside him.

Weasley looked unexpectedly thoughtful. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I can see that."

Draco peered more closely at his old nemesis, eyes narrowed. He hadn't wanted to admit it before—and anyway, it was easy to overlook, given that freckled, lumpish face and the glaring red hair—but Weasley had changed. His eyes were sharper, and slower to move around a room. He ate more neatly. He seemed to have a subliminal awareness of Granger at all times, if the way he kept his head partially turned towards her was indicative, the kind of rapport that Draco had seen between his parents and hoped to achieve with Harry someday.

Harry had said, when Draco asked about Weasley earlier that afternoon, *He's a good Auror.* And Draco had dismissed the idea without even considering the words, because he had so adamantly believed it could not be true.

It might be. And you need to stop making assumptions and think a little more about what's obvious and what isn't, if you want to captivate Harry.

Draco nodded back, said something inane that was probably, "Good," and then focused on his food for a time. No matter how carefully he bit into the cheese, or sipped the wine, it refused to taste very different from the way his elves prepared the food. He wondered for the first time if Granger was right, and if common household charms, or the hands of talented cooks, could replace house-elves.

But he rejected the notion, and this time he had more solid reasons for doing so than he'd had for rejecting the notion of Weasley's competence. The house-elves were not primarily important for the services they provided, or at least not to him. They were a link to the past, to the centuries when each wizarding family had largely lived on its own, without central gathering places other than Hogwarts, and had existed grandly, self-sufficient in that self-isolation. One *needed* trained elves. One wouldn't want to risk the running of one's household on imperfect knowledge of charms.

Yes, the world had changed—most especially in the last six years. Yes, Draco knew those times were unlikely to return. Malfoy Manor would not have to sail free of the world like an island for years.

But he also knew that his life would change if he did not have elves, in more ways than simply having to take care of his own laundry and prepare his own meals. Life would be less stable, less stately, less traditional.

He did not want that to happen.

And then he paused, because it had never occurred to him to communicate that to Granger. He had assumed without thinking that she would have laughed at it, since she was one of those Muggleborns so determined to change traditions they had never lived with and could not have valued.

The same way I assumed Weasley could not be a good Auror, and would never be sitting across from me eating his dinner instead of interrogating me as to my next evil plot.

Draco found Harry's hand again and squeezed a second time. Harry rubbed his fingers gently up and down Draco's knuckles in response.

One reason I want Harry in my life is so that I can stop making assumptions, and think better, and in general not act as much like a stupid arse. And there are worse things I can do than start changing my behavior now.

Draco took a deep breath, turned to Granger, and said, "There's something about elves that you don't know, and that I'd like to tell you."

The wary astonishment on Granger's face was sweet, but far sweeter was the way Harry leaned his head on Draco's shoulder.

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Chapter: 17

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—What Harry Potter Offered

"House-elves are a guarantee of traditions and stability," Draco was telling Hermione, who listened with a curled-up lip that Harry recognized as her expression when she wanted to express disdain but felt politeness had to keep her back. "I feel connected to my ancestors because of them. And to *their* ancestors, as well, of course. The house-elves I own are mostly descendants of the ones my ancestors owned." A note of pride entered his voice. "Some families squandered their house-elves' lives due to temper or magical experiments, but we never did."

Harry squeezed Draco's thigh under the table. He doubted that Draco's new argument would change Hermione's mind, but the fact that he was making it at all—and without insulting Hermione—was amazing.

In fact, Harry thought, looking happily around the central room of the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse, this dinner was amazing altogether. No one had walked up and punched Draco in the mouth yet. Most of Hermione's supporters watched him with perplexed expressions instead, as if they knew he was up to something but couldn't imagine what it was. Ron considered him gravely some of the time, and the rest of the time gave Harry a mixture of dubious looks and lecherous winks.

Seeing that reminded Harry that he hadn't told Ron about his encounter with Draco yet. He grinned and leaned forwards. Ron raised an eyebrow back and leaned towards him, too, so that their heads met in the middle of the table.

"I've finally experienced that thing we always used to joke about," he said. Ron looked puzzled, which would make it all the better when the sense of Harry's words finally dawned on him. Harry cocked his head to the side and slowly licked his lips, and Ron's expression began to change. "It was *wonderful.*"

Ron sat there looking as if someone had slammed him in the face for a moment. Then he gave a dramatic shudder and whispered, "Malfoy didn't happen to feed you a mysterious-looking potion with potentially mind-changing substances in it just before *that*, did he, mate?"

Harry laughed, and ignored the curious glances he was attracting. Ron was resolutely straight, and he would never understand why someone would want to do what he referred to as "*that*." But Harry still had fun teasing him, and knew that behind Ron's refusal to believe him was incomprehension, rather than disgust.

He'd spent so much of his life longing for a family, for people who would love and support him against all the odds. And now he had it, though not quite the way he'd envisioned. Once, he'd thought the Weasleys all by themselves would be that family, with Ginny involved, When he realized he'd fallen in love with Draco, he'd been dismayed, not understanding how he could reconcile his best friends with someone who had tormented them so much through Hogwarts.

Not once had he realized that they might try their best to get along with each other because schoolboy insults mattered less than the happiness all of them could contribute to Harry's life right now. Harry still wasn't very good at thinking of himself.

"No potion," he said, joy blowing through him like a summer gale. "No hypnotism. No Legilimency. Just the pleasure of two bodies thrusting together—"

"I believe you," Ron said quickly.

Harry snickered again, and felt Draco's hand on his shoulder. He turned and looked up at him.

Draco's eyes were a bit wide, the skin around his nostrils a bit pinched, but he nodded to Ron, and the hand he stroked up Harry's arm was only absently possessive, rather than the tight clutch Harry knew he would have used if he were feeling threatened by Hermione. "Are you ready to leave?" he murmured. "Granger threatens a dessert course as lavish as this one, and I honestly don't think I can hold that much."

Harry held out his hand at once, smiling. Draco took it and almost simultaneously pulled him to his feet and used Harry's strength to haul himself up. Harry reveled in the movement. It was a shame that not every minute they shared together could be as perfect as that one.

He shot a glance at Ron, who was watching their joined hands with a glint of understanding in his eyes. Then he looked up and nodded, smiling. "Good on you, Harry," he said.

Harry almost floated out the door of the meetinghouse, more content than he remembered being in years. His mood wasn't even dented by Draco's arm winding around his waist and Draco's voice hissing into his ear, "Now that I've braved your social circle and shown what I can do, it's time for you to brave mine."

Draco smiled and leaned back against his chair, lifting a glass of wine in toast to himself. He'd got through a dinner with Harry's best friends and killed no one, nor insulted them mortally.

And the chocolate mousse that his own house-elves, including Flopsy, were carefully cleaning up *had* tasted better than the food the Valiant Friends had.

Feeling thoroughly smug and full, Draco turned his attention across the table. Harry was licking his lips and scraping his fork across his plate in search of more sweetness. Draco rolled his eyes—Harry's table manners would have to improve before they went out into public at a place Draco was well-known—but he smiled more widely anyway. In private, at least, Harry's thoroughness in chasing what he wanted was charming.

"I have considered," he announced. Harry looked up, licking his lips again, and contributing abruptly to Draco's growing store of fantasies concerning him. Draco cleared his throat and forged on. "I think it only appropriate to take dinner at Merlin's Tor, where you made such a point of trying to foist Astoria off on me, and in the company of my friends."

Harry nodded, seeming unsurprised, and finally put his plate and fork down so Flopsy could take care of them. "Your friends from Hogwarts?" he asked. "Political allies? Both?"

Draco blinked, and then reminded himself that his surprise was ridiculous. Harry was an Auror, had been for years, and at least touched on the circles that Draco was determined to place him in. There was no reason to believe that Harry must automatically think "friends" meant the same kind of Hogwarts-style friendships as his own. "Both," he said. "Including a selection of the people I have striven to impress since the war."

Harry's eyes took on a deep, thoughtful cast that Draco hadn't seen since Spain. "And I'm part of the program to impress them," he said.

"I didn't pursue you because of that." Draco lowered his voice to emphasize his seriousness. "But as matters stand…yes. You are my partner, and inevitably, they will evaluate you, and me in the light of my choosing you."

Harry reached across the table and laid his hand on Draco's. Draco let his breath out in a rush. He hadn't realized until then just how worried he was that Harry might take offense to his words.

"This is part of you, too," Harry said, as though in answer to his thoughts. "The political maneuverer, the thinker, the fighter to safeguard the Malfoy name. If I couldn't stand that, I should never have paid attention to you in the first place." He tossed his fringe out of his eyes and leaned closer. "And as much as I love that part of you with all the rest, *I'm* not like that. How unnatural will I have to act?"

Draco stared at Harry, his lips slightly parted. His mind had stuck on the word "love," even though this wasn't the first time that Harry had said it.

Harry rubbed his thumb over Draco's hand, and chuckled. "The first bargain between us," he said. "You don't look at me with that expression of wonder in your eyes during the dinner, or I won't be responsible for what sort of sights your guests might get treated to."

Draco half-lidded his eyes, as much to give himself time to adjust as to conceal the emotions that Harry had already seen. "Quite," he said. "And to answer your question, I believe that will depend on how much you know of pure-blood manners already. If you have a modicum of knowledge, we can scrape by without extra training."

"I know where the knives and forks go," Harry said. "Kingsley insisted that I learn to dine 'like the powerful man which you are.'" He rolled his eyes and popped his voice out of the imitation of the Minister it had sunk into. "But I'm not good at controlling my emotions, or pretending that I don't hear insults directed at me. Or at my friends, for that matter."

He looked directly at Draco again, and Draco nodded. "I can't promise that there won't be any of those," he said. "What we need to settle, before we go to the dinner, is the degree of response you're going to give."

Harry smiled. "Pure-blood social codes help me there."

"They do? How?" Draco frowned. If he, who had lived in this society all his life, couldn't think of a possible way for Harry to defend himself or his friends and still retain the important polish of impeccable discretion, it was a good sign that such a way didn't exist.

"I think I should surprise you," Harry said, and fluttered his eyelashes at Draco.

Draco drew himself up, his shoulders already so tense that he thought of calling Flopsy to give him a massage before he retired for the night. "Don't," he said sharply. "Unless you want me to make a fool of *myself* because I'm awaiting the moment when you destroy my chances to succeed in my world."

Harry blinked, then grimaced and shook his head. "Sorry. I'll tell you." He took both of Draco's hands this time and wound them around his neck, deliberately tangling Draco's fingers in his hair. Then he explained his plan.

Draco was not only calm by the end of the explanation, but hard at the thought of what would

happen should one of his friends be stupid enough to challenge Harry. He leaned across the table and hauled Harry towards him, kissing him deeply enough to make him dizzy. Or at least that was his goal, and that was the way Harry looked when Draco leaned back again.

"Bed, now," Draco whispered. "Merlin's Tor tomorrow."

"You can arrange a party that quickly?" Harry tugged Draco towards the stairs, moving so quickly that he kept Draco off-balance constantly as he tried to renew his control of the motion. "I'm impressed."

"It's amazing what one can do," Draco said, finally managing to pin Harry against the wall of the staircase for a moment, "with money and fame."

And magical power, he thought but didn't say, though the thought alone made him grind his cock into Harry's leg.

Harry broke free just then, tossed Draco a challenging wink, and ran up the stairs. Draco scrambled after him, eyes locked on his arse.

Merlin's Tor was far more impressive than Harry remembered from the time when he'd come here under his Invisibility Cloak, telepathically connected to Astoria. Of course, then he had only cared about the setting as an appropriate one for Draco and the woman who would soon become his lover. Now he knew it was going to be the place of a humiliating failure that Draco's set would never forgive him for—

Or for a triumph as great, though the triumph would have to be defended and proved again and again as the failure never would.

Like walking a bloody tightrope, he thought as he and Draco strode in side-by-side. Draco had rented the entire restaurant, and that meant there was an attendant to sonorously announce their names at the door. Heads were already turning. *All it takes is one mistake to doom you, but at every successful step people gasp and then stare eagerly, waiting to see if you fall on the next.*

And these people would be more than usually eager to see him fall. Harry didn't think he had ever performed for such a hostile audience, not even when a bribery scandal had broken out in the Auror Department right before his annual speech on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.

No matter.

It really didn't matter. Harry had been in situations like this all his life. There was always someone who hated him and wanted him to crumble. Harry had always refused to oblige them, and he didn't see why that should change now, just because a few of these people had the good luck to be Draco's friends and the rest were political contacts.

He lifted his head the moment he judged enough eyes were on him. Some people deliberately weren't looking, but then, they were trying to impress him with how small he was to them. Too bad for them that such tactics had stopped working on Harry when he was eleven years old and began to realize that, for most people, he was *bigger* than he could ever comprehend.

He folded his hands behind his back, away from his wand, to show that he thought most of the people staring at him now no threat, and gave a considered, cold glance at several parts of the room. Once he started to bow. Then he stopped himself with an almost imperceptible shake of his head and turned towards Draco, following the slight motion of hand and arm Draco gave to a chair at a central table, under the shining ceiling. He strolled over to the chair and drew it himself. He and Draco had agreed to avoid gestures such as his taking Draco's arm or having his chair pulled out for him, which might convince some stupid watchers that Harry was only a substitute for the women Draco had dated until this point.

The atmosphere swirled around him and turned more hostile yet. Harry smiled slightly and kept his eyes on the fiery letters of the intangible menu that had sprung up in front of him. The audience now thought that he considered them too inferior to bow to.

So far, so good.

"Wonderful," Draco hissed into his ear as he passed Harry to sit on the far side of the table. It was only a stray breath, but Harry could hear the truth in it—and feel the truth in the hand Draco used to brush his ribs, in the moment when his floating cloak shielded the touch from everyone's sight.

That bolstered Harry's resolve as nothing could have. He sat up straighter and turned his attention to the first person who had decided to approach them. This was Allison Crowley, as he remembered from Draco's descriptions. A tall woman, the silver of her hair shining with added glamour charms, she had hands like claws and an expression that would have done credit to a hawk at the kill.

"Mr. Malfoy," she said, and inclined her head to Draco. Then she turned to face Harry, and he heard the frost in her tone that was supposed to put him in his place. "Mr. Potter. Can I ask why you are intruding into a pure-blood sanctuary?"

"Funny," Harry said lightly. "They must have forgotten to put up the charms on the door that would sting me if I really was of dirty blood."

Crowley's face showed a massive struggle to suppress some emotion, which was as revealing in its way as full-out hatred. Harry smiled sweetly at her. There had been a great campaign after the war to create "pure-blood sanctuaries," public and private places where only those of guaranteed heritage could enter. Protective charms supposedly guarded the entrances, doors and fireplaces alike, hexing any half-blood or Muggleborn who showed up. But there was no difference in wizarding "blood" great enough for charms to recognize, and Harry had proved that by disguising himself and walking through several sanctuary doors like he owned the place.

"Allison," Draco said, his voice tempered with gentle apology, "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse Harry. He isn't used to the rarefied air on our heights yet."

Crowley turned to face Draco. She gave a little blunt nod in acceptance of his apology, and then jerked as his words caught up with her. "Harry," she said.

"Yes?" Harry leaned inquiringly towards her. He thought of fluttering his eyelashes, but caught Draco's warning glance and refrained.

Crowley ignored him with a truly heroic effort and went on speaking to Draco as though Harry wasn't there. "Do not tell me that you have taken him to your bed," she said. There was real distress in her voice. "Or worse, to your heart. Oh, Draco, the last descendant of a noble line should avoid such ignoble mingling."

Harry had to work hard to swallow his anger. Yes, there had been hostile people at the Ministry receptions, too, but at least they usually harassed him about not having done enough or having done the right thing, not about his heritage.

You knew this would be a factor, he reminded himself. *You* knew *it. You could have backed away if it disgusted you that much.*

Instead, he took an invisible deep breath—something he'd learned in Auror training, when his instructors emphasized that he must never let his enemies know they were getting to him—and settled himself. He had all the outrage Hermione could ask for when it came to judging people, and magical creatures, on what they were born with. But his tactics were different from hers. Hermione wanted to persuade people, and with some of them, she'd managed. But her own hardened mindset made it impossible for her, on this one issue, to listen to logic or concede the faults of her direct approach. Harry could, and so that meant he could support his ideals in a sneaky fashion.

Besides, it was up to Draco to answer now.

"I have taken him to my bed," Draco said. "And to my heart." It was said so lightly that Harry didn't realize, for a moment, what it implied. Then Draco's hand slid across the table and his fingers closed around Harry's wrist like a manacle, in a caressing, possessive gesture that reassured Harry at once. No matter how great the change in Draco's emotions, he still kept the basis for them that Harry understood. "Because some things matter more than blood."

"Like what?" Crowley's voice was almost a wail.

"Like beauty," Draco said, and his voice dipped, simulating the lick across the center of Harry's palm that Harry knew he would have given if they weren't in public. "And fame, and power."

He turned to Harry with a brilliant smile, which had its dark edges and no sweetness. But that

lack of sweetness hardly mattered, not next to what he'd said.

Harry gave him a heated look in return, unmistakable to anyone watching, especially someone standing as close as Crowley was. Draco's eyelids drooped, and he gave the slightest shiver of pleasure. Crowley practically stumbled as she left the table behind and went back to her own.

The meal came soon enough, the most delicately spiced soup Harry had ever tasted, followed by pies of seasoned game and huge wheels of bread and cheese. The specialty of Merlin's Tor was Dark Ages wizarding food, which, from what Harry had read, was not so different from Muggle food at the same time. He ate his way through even the bread, which was thick and sweet and *deserved* great chomping chews, with delicate nibbles, and used his cutlery correctly every time.

Now and then Draco reached out and held his wrist again, but not to restrain him. Harry understood that perfectly well. No, he wanted to claim Harry in front of the room, and express his own intense delight in owning someone who was a half-blood but a match in his manners for the highest pure-blood.

And now and then someone did come up to talk with Draco—and in staring at Harry, goggling as though he were an orangutan who had inexplicably been taught to use a fork and spoon, they gave away more than they meant to. Draco won some concessions more easily than he might otherwise have done. They'd planned on that, too. Harry gave them innocent or blank looks and hid his smile in his napkin.

And now and then he pulled his hand back whilst Draco held it in his restraining grasp, just to see how far away he could get. Each time, it brought Draco's gaze back to him without fail, bright and piercing, and Draco intensified his hold.

Not going to let you go.

The message was written openly in his eyes. Harry smiled back and lifted his glass of wine in a private toast, and then he turned and scanned the room idly, wondering where the first attack would come from.

As it turned out, it was Acheron Flint, whom Harry had tried several times to arrest on charges of smuggling dragons without success. Harry was surprised when he saw the lean wizard, impeccably attired in dark robes, rise to his feet; surely he would goad someone else into fighting for him rather than being so open. That wasn't like him at all.

But like him or not, he strode forwards now and halted in front of their table. He didn't even pretend to talk business with Draco, unlike some of the others who had used that as an excuse to gape at Harry. He simply planted his hands on his hips and stared.

Harry smiled back blandly. He knew as well as Draco—whose clasp had tightened slightly on his wrist—did that staring contests had been used as old rituals of status in pure-blood society when wizards were still using sticks as wands. He didn't intend to look away, and a time-delayed charm

he activated now with a subtle motion of his unclaimed hand kept his eyes moistened so he didn't have to blink.

Flint curled his lip when he realized that Harry had become wise to his tactic, and jerked his head a little to the side. "I'm surprised to see you without your Mudblood friend tagging at your heels, Potter," he said. "Isn't it rather uncomfortable to go without her for someone like you, who keeps his brain outside his skull?"

Harry gave him a friendly smile and stood. "Challenge given and accepted," he said clearly. "Do I await your seconds, or shall we meet now?" He raised his eyebrows.

Flint stared at him. "What?"

"The challenger gives up right of choice, then," Harry said, still speaking so that everyone in the room could hear him. "It falls to me to declare my preference, and my preference is for an immediate settlement." He stepped away from the table, Draco letting him go slowly so that his fingers could trail along and caress Harry's skin, and drew his wand. The attendants, forewarned this might happen, rushed out and began to clear the tables from the center of the room. Harry paused and courteously awaited Flint.

Flint stayed where he was, his hand lingering a few inches away from the robe pocket where Harry had seen the line of his wand. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and by dint of great effort it seemed that he was trying not to spit the words.

"A wizard's duel, of course," Harry said, and this time pitched his voice as surprised. "What else would I be talking about? It is an ancient custom, honored by all right-thinking wizards, that one can duel to settle insults." He spread his hand invitingly to the patch of floor in front of him.

Flint flushed. "An ancient custom, honored by all right-thinking wizards" was taken directly from one of his speeches.

Harry had wondered if it would be enough to make him rush into the battle. But he seemed to remember—as did most of their watching, tense audience, Harry was willing to bet—that Harry was a trained Auror, and he could feel the soft throb of Harry's magical power now that Harry had lowered the shields on his power. He would be stupid to do so.

"You withdraw the challenge?" Harry asked, never taking his eyes from Flint's.

Flint swallowed and nodded.

Harry smiled brilliantly. "Then you must also withdraw the insult."

Flint froze. Harry was correct, of course, according to pure-blood social codes, but he obviously hadn't expected Harry to know that.

Harry cocked his head. "What's the matter?" he asked, and he kept his voice soft and solicitous, rather than taunting. That would be enough of a taunt all by itself, for those in the know. "Are you confused?" He knew better than to ask if Flint was afraid. Honor would demand that he duel Harry then, no matter how bad an idea it was.

"I—apologize," said Flint in a strangled voice, and turned back to his chair. Harry waited a few moments, watching, before he put up his own wand, nodded at Flint's back, and walked back to Draco's side. The attendants started putting the tables they'd moved back into place.

Draco caught his wrist as he sat and held it up so that everyone could see his fingers in place, holding, possessing, the Auror a powerful pure-blood wizard was afraid to duel. Harry watched him, gently amused, certain that he wouldn't show everyone the erection he also had.

Then he leaned forwards for a kiss.

Harry leaned in to oblige him. It was a chaste meeting of lips, as it had to be in such a cold and judgmental place, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Draco had *done* it, and that his free hand curved around the back of Harry's neck, staking an even more undeniable claim.

And any worries that Harry had still entertained about Draco's sacrificing him to the whims of his political contacts fell away.

I love him.

He pulled back and looked into Draco's eyes, soft and brilliant with passion, satisfaction, and pride—the first time Harry had seen him display pride in someone else, rather than in his family name or himself.

It was a far more effective message than even the words would have been.

And he loves me.

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews! This is the last chapter of *Providence*, and I want to thank everyone who's come along.

Chapter Eighteen—What Draco Malfoy Became

Harry might not be able to see the humiliation lurking in Flint's eyes, and in the eyes of several

other men and women in the dining room at Merlin's Tor, but Draco could. He knew from that who had backed Flint to win, and who might be disappointed that he had not challenged Harry, suicidal though it would have been. Draco made careful note of their names. Those same people would probably oppose him on political grounds, some time soon.

Harry went on eating with the grace he'd displayed before the interruption. Draco watched him thoughtfully. He'd never heard any comments on Harry's extraordinary manners, the way he would have from someone if he'd eaten like this in public before now.

So that made Draco wonder why Harry hadn't chosen to display those manners. Perhaps he was contemptuous of people who would judge him by them? Perhaps it wasn't important enough to him to consider as part of the impression he created?

And yet, he adapted without complaint to Draco's thinking it was important, even to Draco's trying to instruct him.

Draco didn't understand it.

It was like the way Harry had argued so hard against Draco's trying to own him when he thought that owning meant control and possession, but let Draco put his hand on his wrist like a manacle in front of other people. He even smiled at Draco *indulgently* when he did that, as if this was a habit of long standing for both of them. Draco didn't demand an explanation only because it wouldn't do to reveal uncertainty like that in front of people like his friends.

But he watched Harry with a concentrated curiosity that Harry could surely feel, from all the secretive little smiles he darted at Draco and the way he lowered his eyes to his plate each time their gazes met.

Maybe it has something to do with love, Draco thought. *That's the only thing I can think of. It's the only thing that reconciled Harry to the word owned. It's the thing that made Harry seek me out in the first place, and led him to make excuses for me to his friends. And love can make sense of other contradictions where Gryffindors are concerned.*

That wasn't an answer to the question that had been implied, as his father would have said. But strangely, Draco found himself relaxing as he thought about it.

He had the rest of his life to learn about Harry's love for him and what kinds of contradictions it caused and smoothed over in Harry's life. Doubtless not all the things he learned would be pleasant. But they would be focused on himself, and on Harry.

Draco could not imagine two more pleasant subjects to spend the rest of his life thinking about.

"Mr. Potter. A word with you, if you please."

Harry turned around slowly. He'd woken up earlier that morning, on purpose, because Draco

seemed committed to decadence in his morning hours as much as anything else and because Harry had realized that he hadn't exercised in days. Spending hours in bed wasn't the way to keep in shape for Auror training.

At least not in the way that Kingsley would like me to, since I doubt that athletic sex is on the approved list of Auror techniques.

He'd risen and gone out in the gardens so he wouldn't disturb either Draco or the house-elves who would be popping up and asking him if he needed anything every few seconds if he wandered about the house. He hadn't even thought of disturbing the only other person who lived in Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa Malfoy stood watching him with her hands held straight at her sides, as if she were practicing at being a tomb statue. Now and then her nostrils flared with her breathing, but that was the only sign that made her look alive. Harry nervously scanned her face for signs of disapproval—either because he was fucking her son or because he was half-dressed and dripping sweat everywhere—but he didn't see any. Then again, he didn't see signs of any other emotion there, either.

He decided he could do worse than be polite. "Of course, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, and conjured a shirt that he tugged over his head. He grimaced as the sweat pooled under his arms. He'd have to get rid of the shirt later, probably, but right now it made him feel better than facing Narcissa in only his trousers.

Narcissa said, "I want to know how you intend to make Draco happy if you remain here."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Do you think I'm making him unhappy now?" It was the only thing he could think of to say. Maybe she knew something about Draco that he didn't. That was always possible.

And it's not the end of the world if that's true, he told himself harshly, when a spark of panic tried to flare up inside him. *You'll get things wrong no matter how much you love him. You know that's true.*

"No," Narcissa said, her voice a whisper. "But there is a difference between being able to make him happy for a few days and doing it for years." She stared directly at him, and Harry wondered if this was the mother Draco had known, the woman willing to make an Unbreakable Vow to keep him safe. "There is a difference between a love affair and marriage."

Harry blinked, but considered her words. Then he said, "I have every intention of staying with Draco for the rest of my life and making him as happy as I can. Maybe it won't work out that way, but I have the *intention.*"

Narcissa smiled coldly, as if to say that she knew what intentions were worth. She murmured, "I want to know what you have planned, how you'll content him, how make him joyful, how adapt

to his life."

"I can't give you answers I don't have."

This time, she drew herself up as if he'd insulted her. "Then you are less right for Draco than many of the women who have besieged him," she said coldly. "They at least had visions of marriage, of the children they were going to bear."

Harry snorted. "His whole circle has an obsession with planning their lives, I know, but I refuse to believe that their children would look exactly the way they wanted them to look."

Narcissa tightened her fists in her robes. They were almost a gown, really, Harry thought. He wondered if that was what pure-blood women wore in private. He hadn't seen enough to know; most of the places he'd encountered them were in public, when they were swarming around Draco like bees around a bear. "You mock our traditions, Mr. Potter," she intoned. "You mock the idea of a plan for happiness, but that is exactly what you cannot offer Draco, and that is exactly the reason that I might think it best to take him away from you."

Harry was silent for a few minutes, thinking. His first instinct was to challenge her to try, but she was important to Draco, and she might not be completely right in the head after the war.

"I want to plan," he said. "But nothing I plan ever works out the way I think it will." He shook his head ruefully, thinking of the letters. "So it's better for me to improvise, and adapt my actions to helping Draco and making him happy as they come. I'll stop doing things that hurt him. I'll increase the things that give him pleasure." He shrugged when Narcissa went on staring. "I don't know what else I can do."

"Make promises that you will fit in with his way of life," Narcissa whispered. "Say that you will not change him."

"But I already have," said Harry. "Would he be dating me if he hadn't changed? Of course, I told him that he had to change a little before the dating would start. I reckon you could say that that's all part of a cunning plan to lull me before he strikes, but I wouldn't really believe that."

Narcissa folded her arms and hunched as if she was cold, and Harry felt abruptly sorry for her. Her face said that she had endured things no one should ever have to. "My son has worked so hard to hold onto our name," she said. "I would not want him to give that up. No matter how *good* someone makes him feel." She shot Harry a sideways furious glance that said exactly what kind of pleasure she was talking about.

Harry took a deep breath, and reminded himself that he loved Draco, too. "I don't want him to give up his name or his pride," he said. "If you think he's doing that just by dating me, I'm sorry, but I don't intend to stop that, either. And I won't make plans for the future when I don't know what that future will bring."

"At some point," Narcissa said, and Harry was no longer sure that she was talking to him, "there must be an end to change. We must master it, and stop it from threatening us."

"I can't help do that," Harry said. "All I can do is try to protect you from pain. You and Draco," he added, because he wasn't sure Narcissa would understand him otherwise, and he had no intention of giving up Draco simply to please her.

Narcissa stood staring at him again until Harry had to fight to keep his hands away from his face, because she made him feel like he had food stuck between his teeth. Then she shook her head and said, "I tolerate you only because Draco loves you. In some ways, I think it would have been better if you had never come here."

She walked away, slowly and tragically, across the gardens before Harry could reply.

Harry stared after her, then shrugged. Of course he wished that Draco's mother liked him better. But he'd been through thinking that the man he loved would never acknowledge him, then thinking that he would be with Astoria, and then thinking that there was no way they could stay together because Draco would never agree to lower his barriers.

Compared to that, an unhappy mother was not enough to make him change his mind or his feelings.

"Come in."

Draco made sure to sprawl elegantly in the chair, his eyes on the book he was holding. He had the most comfortable seat, closest to the fire. The room around him was a model of refinment and sheer beauty. Any visitor would be impressed, and when he looked up from his book with a cool, remote gaze, they would start shifting from foot to foot.

At least, that was the way it would have worked with any *normal* visitor.

But Weasley was already abnormal. To enumerate the ways in which that was true would have taken Draco all day, so in the end he simply looked up and sighed as he put the book down.

"What do you want, Weasley?" he asked.

"First I wanted to see if your house-elves would let me inside when they heard my name." Weasley cocked his head to the side. Draco shuddered. Either the cool white-and-gold walls of this room were simply the worst environment for Weasley's hair possible, or he had done something to make that blazing orange even *more* offensive. "It's interesting that they did. And it's a good sign, I think. You haven't banned Harry's friends from the Manor because of their last names."

"Make it clear what you *want*, Weasley," Draco said, and he knew his voice was snapping, and he didn't care. Weasley was driving him to distraction with his inanity.

"I wanted to watch you in your own home," Weasley said, and dropped, gracelessly and without an invitation, into the chair across from Draco. Draco winced, and then tried to keep his face bland. He knew that Weasley's robes, covered with dust and germs, would stain his cushions, but he had to try not to show that. "If I can learn how you behave there, then I can get a better idea of what you're like around Harry in private."

Draco stared at him, to see if he was joking. Weasley looked serenely back. This was probably the expression that he wore when he was interrogating criminals, Draco decided; surely he couldn't have more than one of them.

"You've chosen a bad day for it, then," he said, "since Harry's gone to the Ministry to resume a regular working schedule."

"And that tells me another thing I need to know," Weasley said happily.

"What's that?"

Weasley's slow smile was even more infuriating than the serene expression. "That's for me to know and you to try and fail to guess."

Draco hissed at him. "Is this the way you repay effort, Weasley? I've been making every effort to get along with you, not to insult your wife, and to accept you as Harry's friends, part of his life that I can't change. And you show up and insult me in my home in consequence?"

"You think *that* was insults?" Weasley raised his eyebrows. "I didn't think it was possible for your skin to get thinner since Hogwarts. Shows how little logical reasoning ability I have."

Draco jumped to his feet. "Get out of my house, Weasley," he said, but his voice wouldn't attain the proper tone of growl. He was imagining what Harry would say if Weasley complained that Draco had thrown him out of the Manor, which he would have a legitimate right to complain about.

Weasley grinned at him. "No."

Draco paced in a circle, glaring at Weasley with each turn. There were no good ways to handle this situation, he thought. Yes, if he didn't care about Harry's opinion or was sure that Harry would be on his side, then he'd use his magic to throw Weasley out—but that would make it appear as if he were losing his temper, and Draco's policy was not to show sincere anger to anyone he didn't trust.

That's already failed, because Weasley knows you're angry.

But at least I don't have to disgrace myself about it, Draco thought, and eyed Weasley grimly. "You can wait until Harry gets home," he said. "But I don't think you'll be able to persuade him

to move out of the Manor or to drop me, if that's what you came for." *I don't think you'll be able to.* It hadn't escaped Draco's notice that Harry's eyes shone with brightness around Weasley and Granger that rivaled the brightness of Harry's adoration for him.

Weasley gave a secret, inwards smile, which was a degree more infuriating still than the slow one, and stood. "And *that's* what I came for," he said.

Draco wondered for a moment whether Harry's friends were all mad. He considered letting Weasley go away without asking what he'd discovered. That at least would make it seem as if he didn't care.

But Weasley watched him with eyes that were too bright and a crooked grin growing across his face, and Draco knew he hadn't fooled him. Funny how he could fool most pure-bloods and most Aurors, but not a boy he'd always considered among the dimmest he knew growing up. Perhaps it didn't help matters that Weasley was both pure-blood *and* Auror. It might give him an advantage. "What did you come for?" he asked. *At least he's honest enough that he might actually tell me.*

"I wanted to know what you would do when I irritated you," Weasley replied calmly. "And you blustered at me and you flushed, but you never reached for your wand." He nodded. "Hermione won't like hearing it, but you do mean to keep the peace with us if you can."

Draco sneered at him. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"It's not long ago that you would think it was worth anything to insult us," Weasley said. "We had to check on that. Harry promised us that you'd changed, but Harry can be—blind, sometimes. So I came to see."

"I love him," Draco said. "There's very little that I wouldn't give up or change for him." He felt obscurely insulted by Weasley's explanation, in a way he hadn't expected. He'd put on as large a display of his changed feelings as he could in the Valiant Friends' meetinghouse, and Weasley *still* doubted him?

"I know," Weasley said. "But we had to be sure that your hatred for us wasn't one of the things you'd fight to retain." He smiled at Draco, waved, and then turned and showed himself out of the library without so much as a by-your-leave.

Draco stood listening as the front door clicked shut, and then sat down and picked the book up again. But he studied the pages without seeing them.

No matter what, he decided at last, after a long time without deciding anything else, *red hair is still ugly against these walls.*

"I need to know if dating Malfoy will compromise your political inclinations at all." Kingsley spoke as if that were a perfectly normal question, his fingers steepled in front of him.

"What political inclinations?" Harry sorted through the files that Kingsley had given him, the cases that had accumulated during his time in Spain and then his holiday with Draco, and pretended that he couldn't hear the sharpness in the silence.

"The inclinations that drive you to be an Auror," Kingsley said, "dedicated to keeping the pure-bloods from gaining the foothold in the Ministry that they once had. The inclinations that make you a champion of free rights, including increased rights for house-elves and other magical beings. The inclinations that you've held all along, in other words."

"Oh, *those* inclinations," Harry said, and then started reading about a case that seemed to consist entirely of someone selling cursed medallions to fools in Diagon Alley. Harry sighed. *Regular detection charms would alert them to something wrong with things like that, but no, we can't possibly teach those charms in Hogwarts! It's so much more important to teach them how to change the color of a jumper and leave the makework for the Aurors.*

"Well?" Kingsley's voice snapped like a chicken bone now. Harry looked up and regarded him evenly.

"Would you ask anyone who started dating a pure-blood this?" he asked. "I think that Toby Trout married a pure-blood girl a few years ago. Esmeralda Greengrass, right? Did you ask him in for an interview?"

Kingsley shook his head. His eyes looked ancient, and Harry momentarily felt bad, but only until he spoke again. "It's different with you, Harry. And you know that. It's not only a man, in your case, but someone who was actually tried before the Wizengamot, which never happened to Esmeralda Greengrass. And you're the Chosen One, still the symbol of the light, and our best Auror. We need some sort of public statement."

"I'll give you one," Harry said. "I still believe in the rights of magical creatures. I still won't let anyone feed me a ton of shite about being a half-blood. I still believe in bringing Dark wizards to justice. And I'll date Draco Malfoy as long as we both want to, and fuck anyone who thinks otherwise."

"We could, perhaps, do without some of the language in the latter part," muttered Kingsley, but he looked relieved. "He hasn't tried to convert you, then?"

Harry laid down the case files fully on his lap and leaned forwards. He stared at Kingsley until Kingsley looked away. Then Harry said, "What he says to me is our own business. I've been getting along in pure-blood society for years, dealing with them for years, and none of them has ever managed to convert me."

"But in the future—"

"You'd like Narcissa Malfoy," Harry said, and enjoyed it when Kingsley stared at him in

confusion. He stood up, gathering the case files. "Listen. I've given most of my life to the wizarding world now. I have no plans to stop in the future. But some things are *mine*, private and not for anyone's peering, prying curiosity. One of them is my relationship with Draco."

Kingsley tried to say something else, but Harry turned and strode out of the office. He didn't realize until he was halfway down the corridor that he felt curiously light.

I've wanted to say something like that for years, but I never had the balls. Or the words.

He smiled and nodded to a pair of Aurors passing by, causing them to stare at him. *Thank you, Draco, for giving me both.*

"Draco."

Draco stood a moment before the platter of exotic cheeses and breads, to control and hide his surprise. The voice came from someone he had thought would never dare approach him again. He turned around with a slight nod. "Astoria," he said.

Astoria gave him a relaxed, happy smile, nothing at all like the last time he had seen her. She wore a brilliant blue gown that complemented her hair and eyes in quite amazing ways. And she had a young man on her arm, who watched Draco nervously.

Draco raised an eyebrow at the man and glanced back at Astoria. "Congratulations," he said, not bothering to explain himself. Astoria would either know what he meant and respond appropriately, or she wouldn't and therefore would mark herself as beneath contempt. Either way, that one word saved him a lot of effort.

Astoria laughed. "Thank you," she said, and patted the man's hand when he looked back and forth apprehensively between her and Draco. "Although thanks aren't what I came for. I'm here to deliver a letter." She held out a blue envelope, almost the color of her dress, solemnly.

Draco held his hands away from his body, carefully not coming anywhere near the letter. "Is this a joke?"

"No." Astoria met his eyes, and amusement quivered in hers like sunlight on metal, but Draco didn't think it was malicious amusement. "No," she repeated quietly, when Draco just went on looking at her. "I promise. Nothing that you won't like reading. I think he just asked me to serve as his delivery service because he finds it fitting. And because an owl would disrupt the dancing," she added, nodding out to the people sweeping around the Nott Manor's floor in couples and lines.

Draco gave a swift glance over his shoulder. Yes, Harry had disappeared.

He cast several spells to detect hexes and curses before he took the letter. Astoria's smile widened with each one. "You must have an interesting private life," she said, when Draco finally

stretched his hand out and she let the envelope drop into it.

Draco narrowed his eyes, warning her of the folly—the *danger*—of continuing, and Astoria laughed again and turned away, pulling her young man along. Draco watched them for a moment, and the man's eyes quickly left him and focused on Astoria, with an adoring glaze that told Draco clearly he saw her for who she was.

As he never had.

Deciding that Harry had indeed chosen the best messenger he could have, if he needed to send a letter at all, Draco tore open the envelope.

Dear thickhead,

I know what it might cost us, both of us, to be together. Ron confessed his visit to me. And Hermione still hasn't stopped talking about how she wants you to change your mind about house-elves before she really accepts you into my life.

And your mother thinks I ought to have all sorts of plans and plots and second lines of defense on how to make you happy. Oddly enough, so does Kingsley. Maybe they'd be happy together?

Draco closed his eyes and prayed for strength. Then he opened them and read on. He could feel the weight of watching eyes on him, and whilst some of those might be people at the party, he was sure one set was Harry's.

I want to tell you that I don't plan to yield to them, any of them. Of course I'm pleased that you and Ron are getting along, but if you get angry at each other, I'm not going to automatically choose his side over yours. Unless one of you is being obviously stupid, of course.

Draco smiled, and then wondered why the words made him do that. They weren't graceful, or eloquent, or witty.

And if your mother and I don't get along, I'll do whatever I can to make her comfortable, but I won't just walk out of the house in a fit of guilt and self-loathing. I'll try to smooth matters over, and then I'll spend a little more time at the Ministry, and then I'll ignore her, and then I'll reason things out.

"None of those are likely to work," Draco murmured, but he felt a swirl of contentment curl through him anyway. One thing he had been rather worried about was Harry's tendency to sacrifice himself for the sake of others, and what he might do in the case of someone he loved as much as he loved Draco.

It's going to be hard. But I'm looking forwards to it. Aren't you? Just like I'm looking forwards to getting to top tonight. You promised, and I think it would be rather like you to go back on your word now. But ungentlemanly.

Draco shifted, and hoped no one was watching *too* closely. He hated getting hard in the middle of parties, though he knew already it promised to be a regular occurrence around Harry.

Now. Come and find me. I think we've been here long enough, and I'm tired of people asking me how big your cock is. Much more of this and I'll start thinking they've all *seen it.*

Your writer.

Draco folded the letter carefully, stuck it into his pocket, and looked up. Harry was standing on the balcony that overlooked the dancing floor from one of the Notts' private rooms, his head tilted to the side in a winsome manner and an appallingly sweet smile on his face.

Draco reveled in the moment, drawing a deep breath, aware that many people were watching him, and that the expression in most eyes was one of envy. This was his natural environment, and he deserved some time to savor it.

Then he sauntered casually across the dancing floor in the direction of the stairs. He would pretend he was showing no eagerness even when it was obvious to everyone that he was.

These weren't the same kind of contradictions that Harry showed, but they were his, and like Harry's, they were smoothed over and made sense of by love.

And yes, Harry, he thought, as he stepped onto the balcony and saw the bright eyes turn towards him, *I am very much looking forwards to it.*

All of it.

End.