The World Thy Gaol

The question was posed under Veritaserum by an Auror wearing a weary expression.

"Do you feel remorse for your actions during the war?"

In the space of a heartbeat, Draco saw his mother, pale and drawn, eyes shining with terror, then relief, as she ran to him in the Great Hall; the face of a childhood friend, swallowed in an inferno; a hand reaching to grasp his, and green eyes burning in a soot-streaked face.

The potion drew the truth to his lips before he could even form the thought.

"Yes."

And he was free to go.

*

He learned later that it was the only real test Death Eaters and other suspected sympathizers of the Dark Lord were put through, the legacy of the Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived Again. Where there was remorse, all else was irrelevant. All who lacked it were sent to Azkaban.

The Malfoys returned, as a family, to the Manor.

*

Draco had never taken the time to contemplate what life would be like in a post-war world

without the Dark Lord. Somehow he'd never imagined it was something he'd see. As little as a year and a half ago, when he had thought about the future, it was to see himself sitting at the Dark Lord's right hand, a favored son, helping to sculpt the Wizarding world to the Dark Lord's specifications, to the way things ought to be—a world where Mudbloods got what they deserved, and heritage was all.

The realization that no one sat at the Dark Lord's right hand was a brutal one, as was the realization that to sit at his right hand would only have put one in harm's way anyhow. It had been a year of harsh discoveries—about himself, as he faced his headmaster on the topmost tower; about his cause, as he watched a professor suspended above him, rotating helplessly, begging for mercy; about his mistakes, and his father's, and his mother's.

In a way, he was angry as hell at the Dark Lord for being such a bloody maniac, and a bit of a fool to boot, in the end.

But mostly, he had to admit, he was relieved.

*

He quickly learned that the rest of the Wizarding world was not as forgiving as Potter. The Ministry indulged Potter's whims where Death Eaters and sympathizers were concerned because public opinion ran so hard in the man's favor. But remorse did not guarantee acceptance, he discovered the first day he set foot in Diagon Alley and found himself spat upon.

"Death Eater scum!" the woman howled. "Should have died with You-Know-Who!"

A couple of passersby restrained her, looking embarrassed at her display, but not entirely disapproving of the sentiment.

"Her son died at Hogwarts," whispered a man who'd paused next to Draco. Draco didn't know

who she was, didn't know who her son might have been. He wondered if he ought to have.

"I didn't kill him," Draco said. "I didn't kill anybody." You are not a killer, Draco.

The man looked him in the eye. "Didn't you, though?"

*

In the post-war world, nothing seemed to fit quite right anymore. Even his new wand didn't have the same feel to it as his old one—the one Potter had taken—had. Of course, it wasn't an Ollivander creation, like his old wand had been; Draco was too leery even to set foot near Ollivander's shop, so he'd been forced to seek out a less prestigious wandmaker. The new wand that had chosen him was made of dragon heartstring and holly, the same wood as Potter's famous wand. And, well, that was just salt in the wound.

Growing up, he'd always been confident about his place in the world: After a pampered childhood, he'd come of age, become an important player in politics like his father, marry Pansy or someone of similarly impressive breeding, and lead a life of elegance and connections like his parents and grandparents before him.

But now many of his social connections were dead or imprisoned. There was no room for his type in politics—or even, many seemed to feel, in the Wizarding world at large. And he found the idea of dating Pansy oddly repugnant, even aside from his complete lack of attraction to her. She belonged to a world that no longer existed.

As the weeks and months wore on, he found himself more and more isolated from the world he'd once felt so confident of ruling someday. Crabbe was dead. Goyle was awaiting sentencing for war crimes. Zabini and his mother were living somewhere on the continent. Pansy's father had been sent to Azkaban, and she and other Slytherins in similar familial situations had closed ranks and seemed to want nothing to do with the Malfoys.

It was almost funny, in a way, to realize his family's escape from prosecution had managed to

do them greater social harm than if any of them had been sent to prison.

*

His parents kept to the Manor. His father had given up politics; there was no cause to advance any longer, no officials eager to be bribed. His mother had abandoned her social whirl—or, rather, her social whirl appeared to have abandoned her. After several more unpleasant experiences in Diagon Alley, Draco found he no longer desired to venture out in public, either. There was always owl post, of course, and if the shopkeepers had a tendency to shortchange a family who'd supported the Dark Lord, well, at least it was better than being attacked in the street.

He was forced to read the Prophet to find out what was happening in the outside world. The newspaper's favorite subject, naturally, was Potter. Now that he'd saved the world again, Rita Skeeter apparently couldn't devote enough acid-green ink to his heroism, his charm, his good looks. In his photos, Draco noticed, Potter always blinked awkwardly, as if surprised and not entirely pleased to find himself there.

Draco could understand the sentiment.

*

He dreamed sometimes about the Elder Wand. He'd heard the story in his childhood, naturally, but had never suspected it might be rooted in truth until Potter's revelations during the final battle. The knowledge that he had, for a brief time, been the master of the Elder Wand had been jarring—and oddly intoxicating.

In his dreams, he was the knowing master of the wand and wielded it with great power, defeating all who dared challenge him. All, that is, except Potter, who disarmed him easily and left him wandless and vulnerable.

Draco wasn't particularly fond of that dream.

Then, too, were the dreams about Fiendfyre, and the Room of Lost Things, and of Potter's hand finally ready to take his, of Crabbe and Goyle's defiance, and the feel of a lean waist gripped by his arms, followed by terror as Potter dragged him along on one more suicide mission among many. Sometimes the dream ended differently than the real-life events had. Quite differently.

Draco was a little more fond of that dream.

*

For months following the Battle of Hogwarts and the definitive end of the war, the Prophet was filled with tributes to the dead, as well as angry remonstrances from the living on the "Owls to the Editor" page:

Minister Shacklebolt should be ashamed, allowing known Death Eaters to walk free!

Who did the Malfoys pay off to get off?

Why allow them to retain their property? We demand reparations!

Draco's father had destroyed every lingering Dark Arts artifact and tome in the Manor and now spent much of his time in his study with the door closed, or else walking the grounds, his expression blank, flinching at odd noises. He never used his wand anymore; it seemed as though he couldn't bear to touch it.

Draco's mother walked the halls of the Manor like a ghost and couldn't seem to stop herself touching Draco at every opportunity—a clasp of his hand, a light touch on his shoulder, fingers sliding through his hair, like she'd done when he'd been a child. When she sought him out and

couldn't find him immediately, she panicked, and only calmed when her shaking fingers could confirm that, yes, he was here, he was well, he hadn't disappeared.

Draco hid the Prophet from them both. Neither seemed to notice its absence. Sometimes Draco wondered if Potter's plan for freeing the remorseful hadn't been its own sort of ingenious punishment.

*

In August, Draco received an owl from Minerva McGonagall, newly reinstated as Hogwarts headmistress. The form letter bore the news that the Ministry had decided not to require N.E.W.T.s for Draco's cohort of Hogwarts students, since it was through no fault of their own that their seventh year had been cut so horrifyingly short; instead, their O.W.L. scores would suffice for any future career or educational opportunities they wished to pursue.

Draco snorted. As though any employer in the Wizarding world would consider his impressive set of O.W.L.s sufficient when paired with his name.

McGonagall's missive went on to state that, in spite of the Ministry's decision, the doors of Hogwarts were open to any student who wished to pursue seventh-year studies again (or for the first time, the headmistress added pointedly), and she, of course, encouraged all to do so.

Even notwithstanding the shunning he was certain to receive from his fellow students, Draco couldn't bear the notion of setting foot in the school again. And so his letter from McGonagall went unanswered.

He was unsurprised to read in the Prophet later that week that Potter and the Weasel had signed on for Auror training, while Granger would be returning to Hogwarts to complete her studies. Draco scowled at Weasley's proud, flushed face as it beamed its newsprint grin at him. "Never could have got in if they'd required actual qualifications," he muttered and set the paper aflame.

*

All summer long, the Prophet had run a series of retrospectives on the lives of the fallen.

By "the fallen," of course, they meant only those who'd opposed the Dark Lord. There'd been no stirring tributes to Vincent Crabbe or Peter Pettigrew or any others who'd dared exhibit misplaced loyalties.

The lone exception had been Severus Snape, revealed by Potter during the final battle to have been a double agent par excellence. Even so, the Prophet's tribute was sparse, as though they hadn't quite processed the notion that greasy, bitter Professor Snape had fooled them all, in the end.

Draco sympathized.

He couldn't help reading each of them, though, no matter how treacly and overdone some of the tributes were. Like Fred Weasley's, for instance, which cast him as some sort of boy genius, rather than the mean-spirited juvenile delinquent Draco had always known him to be. But some were truly interesting, even touching. The one describing his cousin, Nymphadora "Tonks" Lupin, had made him swallow painfully, remembering the Dark Lord's taunts on a long-ago July night. He'd never met his cousin, had not even known of her existence until he was nearly an adult and his mother had mentioned her in passing—deliberately or accidentally, he was no longer sure. He read, fascinated, of Tonks's Metamorphmagus abilities, and wished fervently that such a talent ran in his blood as well. How much easier life would be in this strange and hostile new world if he could go about wearing a face not recognizable as his own.

That was when the idea struck.

*

It had not been merely for politics' sake that Draco had been among Professor Snape's star pupils.

Draco had always enjoyed the control and precision of potions, from his earliest days watching the still-deft hands of his Grandmother Medea Malfoy as she'd stirred and decanted in the potions laboratory her husband had installed for her in the Manor upon their marriage. Following her death, when Draco was twelve, the potions laboratory had become his alone to use, albeit always under the watchful eye of one of the Manor's cadre of house-elves. He'd forged ahead in his potions texts, practicing formulations that were likely to come up in lessons, and had gone on to experiment with more advanced potions he found in dusty tomes on the laboratory shelves or scrawled in his grandmother's curling hand within the pages of her personal potions journals. He knew he had a talent, if not as natural a gift as Professor Snape was said to possess. But his interest had always made his grandmother pleased and proud, and it was an area of expertise his father encouraged, so Draco had pursued it with determination.

Now, when all the rest of the world seemingly had turned against him, the Manor's potions laboratory still extended its chill welcome.

His perusal of the room's collection of potions books turned up nothing precisely like what he sought. There was the Polyjuice Potion, which could turn him into another witch or wizard. There was an Invisibility Potion, which would make him disappear from view. There were dozens of specific potions, too—potions to lengthen hair, alter noses, enhance weight loss, enhance weight gain, even augment the size of one's "manly apparatus." But he didn't want to alter his appearance permanently, nor did he want to take on the appearance of someone else, with all the complications that entailed.

And so Draco set about to invent a Metamorphmagus Potion.

*

His first attempts were dismal—the formulations went so terribly awry that he was forced to dispose of them with great haste and greater care. By November, though, his various

experiments had resulted in something he wasn't entirely frightened to try on himself to test its efficacy.

He waited until his parents had retired for the evening, then stood in front of the long mirror in his bedroom, a flask of the experimental potion in hand. He drew and expelled a deep breath, then swallowed the concoction.

He felt a strange tingling sweep over him as the potion entered his circulatory system and coursed through his body, a faint buzz of awareness just beneath his skin. He sized up his reflection in the mirror, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

When he opened them again, his hair had turned jet black.

He sucked in a breath in surprise that it had actually worked. Grinning, he stepped closer to the mirror, watching this time as he concentrated, instead, on his nose.

Before his eyes, the straight, sharp shape that had been so familiar to him all his life widened and lengthened, hooking in a very Snape-ish way.

He threw back his head and laughed. But when he glanced at his reflection again, he saw that his hair already had transformed back to silvery blond. When he focused on darkening it once more, his nose resumed its former state. Without concentration, it seemed, the potion was no more effective than a run-of-the-mill glamour charm.

"Well, fuck," Draco muttered, tossing back the antidote he'd prepared and crawling into bed to sulk.

*

Over the course of weeks, he tinkered with the formula for the potion, drawing inspiration

from an ancient mixture here, a scrawled note of his grandmother's there. He studied and cross-referenced and even special-ordered books from Flourish and Blotts, for which he was billed a price only slightly higher than the norm, making the bookshop one of the fairer Diagon Alley businesses with which to engage if one's name happened to be Malfoy—unlike, for instance, the many potions supply houses, which charged him exorbitant premiums even for ordinary ingredients.

Lucius, however, never questioned the amount of the bills deducted from the family's Gringotts vaults. Draco almost wished he would. Sometimes he was tempted to order something truly extravagant or outrageous—his very own herd of unicorns, perhaps, or subscriptions to every gay Wizarding magazine in print around the world—just to see if he would.

For now, though, Draco had other distractions.

His next few attempts at the potion produced mildly more promising results. The changes he worked on his body stayed in place longer, without active concentration, but never for very long, as though his body were rejecting the alterations. By mid-December, his most prolonged success had lasted all of an hour.

It was something. But it wasn't enough.

In the week before Christmas, a chill swept through the region, and a light dusting of snow settled over the Manor. Draco watched through the window as the flakes glittered in the faint light of an early-risen moon and, feeling reckless, he donned his wool cloak, pulled a hat over his distinctive blond hair, and wrapped a scarf around his too-recognizable face, then Apparated to Diagon Alley.

He didn't venture into any of the shops, but there was a delicious, almost arousing sense of freedom simply in being able to walk among people without drawing suspicious gazes or hostile words. He swept past oblivious, chattering families, past harried individuals rushing into shops before closing, past couples engrossed only in each other, walking hand-in-hand through the flitting snow, which melted before it even touched the ground here in the heart of London.

He paused before the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies to admire the newest incarnation of the Firebolt, which formed the centerpiece of the shop's aggressively cheerful holiday display. Draco had no doubt he could afford it, no matter what outrageous price the shopkeepers could think of quoting him. But what would be the point?

The reminder sapped some of the excitement from the venture. Frowning, he tucked his hands deep into the warmth of his pockets and walked on, keeping his face down in an attempt to fend off the stinging chill.

*

His experience with anonymity among the crowds of London spurred him on thereafter. Desperate to taste the sweetness of freedom, he worked even harder on his experiments.

Within about two months, he'd perfected the potion to the point where it would last up to three hours or so before wearing off, without need to pay scrupulous attention to his transformation. It wasn't what he'd been aiming for—his ultimate goal was to achieve a potion that would wear off only with the consumption of the antidote or after some much more impressive stretch of time, like two weeks. But for now, he'd take what he could get.

To test the potion's effectiveness while he was distracted, he began attempting various activities while under its influence, aside from his usual prowling of the lab or his rooms late at night. He brewed other potions. He sneaked outside with his broom for a moonlit flight across the grounds. He even masturbated—several times, just to make certain. In each instance, the potion's power held.

His next challenge, though, would be maintaining the change in the presence of other people.

He didn't dare attempt to park himself for the evening in the Leaky or another Wizarding establishment. If the potion were to wear off prematurely, leaving his true identity exposed, the result could be disastrous. So, his heart pounding with nerves and excitement, he

swallowed the potion and changed his appearance, then dressed in the most Muggle-style clothes he owned, Apparated to an alley near the Leaky Cauldron, and set out to roam Muggle London.

This late into the evening, already past nine o'clock, the streets were still bustling with traffic and people. Draco adopted a purposeful stride, holding his chin high as he walked. His hair was darker, his facial features rounder, and he'd even made himself a little taller and broader in the shoulder, just to savor the sense of power it gave him as he strode undetected amongst Muggles. He began strolling along Charing Cross Road, winding in and out of side streets, walking block after block with no real idea of where he was headed. A frigid February wind whipped around him, and he tugged his hat over his ears to block the chill. He paused in front of colorful shop windows, surreptitiously observing the Muggles who streamed by him and listening in on the fragments of conversations he caught as they passed. Even after finding himself on the losing side of a war, and even after six years of tutelage at a school run by noted Muggle-lover Albus Dumbledore, he still found himself fighting unease every time a Muggle brushed past him.

His father being who he was, Draco had never been given the opportunity to explore Muggle London, and he knew very little about it aside from bits he'd heard from friends over the years, or details he'd picked up whilst reading Muggle novels during one or another of his mildly rebellious phases. But when he found himself in the center of a busy commercial area brimming with shops and pubs and restaurants, he remembered hearing Slytherins' whispers about the mysterious depravities to be found in the heart of Muggle London. Perhaps, he thought, this was where tonight's adventure had been leading him all along.

He turned a corner and began a meandering exploration of the neighborhood. There were restaurants serving myriad types of cuisine, pubs of all different stripes, bustling clubs and live music venues and, most of all, everywhere, Muggles—dining, drinking, huddling together for warmth against the winter chill. He wandered onto another narrow side street, and was startled when the door of a bar swung open and two flush-faced men spilled onto the pavement directly in front of him. One, laughing, grabbed the other to steady himself, and in a heartbeat the two were kissing, swiftly, passionately, before they broke apart and staggered past Draco.

Draco's jaw fell open. It wasn't that there hadn't been homosexual activities at Hogwarts, even among Slytherins. It was just that it was something people kept quiet about. Fucking another bloke wasn't necessarily a thing you did just because you liked fucking blokes. It was

something you did to express power, control, even ownership over the other. No Hogwarts boy ever kissed another in public, and certainly, even if he were to do, he wouldn't so clearly appear to enjoy it as those blokes had.

Draco stared at the door to the bar, hunching his shoulders against the cold as he fought an internal battle. Stifling the panic that had risen, clawing at his throat, he wrapped a gloved hand around the door handle and, before he could talk himself out of it, went inside.

The bar's interior was atmospherically dim, music and voices tumbling over and into each other in a pleasing sort of way. The room was filled mostly with men, though he spied women here and there in pockets of the crowd. The warmth of the room—Muggle ventilation and the press of bodies and the energy of drink and conversation and flirting—washed over him like a heating charm, and he stripped off his gloves and hat gratefully and tucked them in his coat pocket. He brushed his darkened hair out of his eyes as he wended his way through the throng, carving a path to the counter, realizing only once he'd reached it—and noted not a single bottle of Old Ogden's or Hair of the Crup or any other familiar brand name—that his education in Muggle spirits was sorely lacking.

Most every Wizarding child was taught a few basic survival strategies designed to help if he or she should become stranded in the Muggle world. Drawing on that long-ago training, Draco reached for his coin purse with studied casualness, focusing on the weight of his wand strapped against his forearm as he murmured the words to transfigure a handful of his galleons, sickles, and knuts into Muggle pounds and pence. He fished out some of the odd-looking coins, studying them idly. He hoped his handiwork was still passable as legal tender; it had been years since he'd seen real Muggle currency.

As he turned his attention back to the bar, hoping to bluff his way into a decent drink, the man over whose shoulder Draco was leaning moved, knocking Draco's arm and sending coins flying. "Oh, damn! Sorry, mate," the man said, sliding off his chair to help Draco root around on the ground.

"S'all right," Draco muttered, keeping his face averted to hide the color he could feel blooming across his cheeks. What the fuck was he doing here? He couldn't even manage to order himself a bloody drink in a Muggle gay bar without some sort of disaster befalling him.

And then, as he and the other man rose to their feet, he looked up and realized he'd had no notion of the disaster's sheer scale.

"Here you go," Potter said, holding out three pound coins he'd managed to scrape off the floor.

Draco accepted them automatically, the panic that had begun clawing at him rendering him mute in the face of Potter's too-familiar visage, so bafflingly out of place here in darkest Muggle London. But even as Draco stared, helpless and not a little terrified, a smile curved Potter's mouth.

The knowledge dawned with sudden brilliance. He doesn't know it's me. And with that, his paralysis was ended.

Draco swept his gaze along the length of Potter, from his tatty Muggle attire to the broad set of his shoulders to the lightning-bolt scar that peeked out from beneath Potter's shock of black hair, the mark apparent even in the bar's clinging shadows. When Draco met Potter's green eyes once more, he knew his appraisal had not gone unnoticed—Potter's smile had tripped over some invisible borderline from friendly to inviting.

The very idea made Draco's mouth water.

It wasn't that he'd ever consciously admitted to finding Potter attractive. His subconscious, though, had made protestations to the contrary moot, serving up more than the occasional dream showcasing Potter's firm muscles and rumpled hair and stubborn, tantalizing mouth. The notion that he should encounter Potter—an interested Potter, no less—in an environment like this…well, it was, to be frank, the fulfillment of at least one very memorable dream.

"The least I can do is buy you a drink, as apology for my clumsiness," Potter said, the warmth in his eyes making Draco's heart pound with anticipation.

"Oh, the very least," he replied, and Potter laughed.

"What'll you have?" Potter asked.

"Oh, I—whatever you're having is fine," Draco said.

Potter grinned and turned back toward the bar, catching the barkeep's attention and gesturing for two of something. Soon, Potter pressed a glass into his hands and wrapped his fingers around Draco's arm. "C'mon," he said, tugging Draco toward the corner of the bar. "More room over here."

Draco stuck close to Potter as they moved a brief distance through the crowd, the pressure of Potter's fingers and the heat of his nearness making Draco feel a little dazed. They stood together, a little too close for ordinary comfort, but precisely the right distance to send Draco's imagination into overdrive. Flustered, he took a sip from his drink, feeling the warmth of it wash over his tongue and down the length of his esophagus—not quite the fiery burn of Ogden's, but a satisfying heat nonetheless. "This is good," he said, and Potter smiled and stepped even closer.

"I'm James," he said.

"Oh," Draco said. "I'm—David."

"Nice to meet you, David," Potter said. "I don't remember seeing you in here before."

Draco blinked at the notion that there was a before to recall. "Do you come here often?" he asked unthinkingly, then winced at the question.

Potter laughed. "Not as often as I'd like," he admitted. He took another sip of his drink, his

gaze holding Draco's.

Half of Draco was screaming, Harry Potter wants in your pants!, while the other half whispered, Wouldn't the rest of the Wizarding world like to know what their savior's been up to in his spare time? Frazzled, he gulped his own drink, accidentally inhaled part of it, and found himself dissolving into a coughing fit.

Potter thumped him on the back as Draco doubled over, coughing hard. "All right?" Potter said as Draco straightened once more, eyes watering but coughing fit mostly finished.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Just humiliated is all."

Potter laughed again, and Draco realized his hand hadn't lifted off Draco's back. It was, in fact, rubbing slowly in a mesmerizing circle. The subtle heat and pressure of it called to mind the hard strength and tension of Potter's back against Draco's chest as they'd barreled through an all-consuming fire. Draco shivered, and Potter stepped closer, as though to ward off Draco's chill. Draco stared into Potter's eyes, which seemed bright even against the dimness, and thought, desperately, He doesn't know it's me. He doesn't know it's me. And then he closed the distance between them.

Kissing Potter was nothing like he'd imagined. In his feverish dreams, Potter's kisses had always burned like Fiendfyre—explosive, destructive, relentless. The dreams had portrayed Draco as caught in the tidal wave of Potter's lust, helpless to resist, desperately turned on by the notion that the Boy Who Lived, the bloody Chosen One, had chosen him.

But in reality, Draco nearly bumped his nose, Potter's lips were chapped, and Chosen One tasted prosaically of salt and Muggle spirits. Potter made a soft sound of pleased surprise as Draco's lips crashed into his, and he opened his mouth against Draco's, bobbling his drink in the process and spilling it all over Draco. Potter drew back immediately, leaving Draco cursing his own idiocy and Potter's.

"Shit," Potter said, looking dismayed. "I'm sorry, I—fuck, I'm useless tonight, aren't I?"

Draco glanced down at the damp patch across his chest, then looked up at Potter once more. He licked his lips, tasting Potter there still, and Potter exhaled, hard. "Not entirely," Draco said. Then Potter shoved his empty glass onto the corner of the bar, caught Draco's face between his palms, and kissed him.

This, this, was what kissing the savior of the Wizarding world was supposed to be like. Draco whimpered in a highly undignified fashion as Potter's mouth opened over his, Potter's tongue just lightly teasing while his fingers speared into Draco's dark hair. Draco's free hand curled into a fist against Potter's back, the material bunching beneath his fingers, the strong length of Potter's back irresistibly warm and solid and just as Draco remembered. He slid his hand downward to Potter's waist, pulling him even closer, and felt Potter groan against his mouth before he drew a short distance away, panting. Potter's pupils were wide, his face flushed. And if Draco wasn't mistaken, he could feel the shape of Potter's erection. "We should, ah, rinse the alcohol off your shirt," Potter managed.

Draco blinked at him.

"In the loo," Potter said, sliding one of his own hands down to the small of Draco's back, tugging them together. And, yes, that was definitely an erection he was feeling. The very thought had Draco nearly trembling.

"Yes," Draco said, draining his drink before Potter's hand tightened implacably over his own for only the second time in his life—this time, though, to pull him into the fire.

The men's was aglow with horridly bright, cold Muggle lighting, but Draco hardly noticed or cared as Potter tugged him into one of the stalls and slammed him against the metal partition, taking his mouth once more. Draco moaned, letting his hands find Potter's firm arse and pulling their hips together so he could rub shamelessly, causing Potter to gasp.

"God, yes," Potter muttered, sliding his mouth down to press kisses along Draco's jaw and down his neck while his hand insinuated itself between them, sliding inexorably down Draco's front until it pressed against the ridge of his erection.

Draco yelped, knocking his head back against the metal, and Potter laughed at the clunk and lifted his head. "Don't get too—" he started to say, then, in the space of a heartbeat, Draco saw something shift in his eyes, and the next thing he knew, a wand tip pressed against the underside of his jaw. "Who are you?" Potter growled.

Shit. Shit. Draco's breathing was labored as panic began to bleed through the mist of arousal. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it, struggling to focus on his sense of his own body. The looser fit of his clothing told him he'd lost the small amount of extra height and breadth he'd given himself before he'd left the Manor, and he closed his eyes, knowing all at once that his overconfidence tonight had led him straight into a fuckup of epic proportions. "I'm—" he managed, then swallowed and opened his eyes to find Potter gazing back at him with a sort of sick horror.

"Malfoy," he said, and Draco shut his eyes, bracing himself for the hex.

Instead, he felt Potter's fingers close tight around his upper arm, then the disorienting pull of Side-Along-Apparition. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself back in the alley near the Leaky Cauldron to which he'd Apparated earlier that night. This time, though, he had an enraged Potter holding a wand to his head.

"Arms straight out against the wall," Potter said. "Now."

Draco obliged, the bricks behind him rough and chill against his bare hands.

Potter dug his wand a little deeper into the flesh beneath Draco's chin and leaned in closer to Draco. "Tell me," he said evenly, "why I shouldn't hex you right now, Malfoy."

The cold stung his face and ears and hands as he fought for calm. He forced himself to meet Potter's gaze, frostier now than the winter air swirling around them. "Because," he said, "it would be unprovoked and therefore illegal, and as a trainee Auror, you would know the potential consequences better than most."

"How do I know you weren't planning to attack me?" Potter demanded.

Draco glared. "I'm not the one who knocked my money on the ground, spilled a drink on me, and then dragged me into the men's, Potter."

"You sought me out!"

"I didn't even know it was you, you prat!" he shouted back, realizing the lack of wisdom in this only when Potter's wand twisted, jabbing him hard enough that he gasped.

"Why should I believe you?" Potter hissed.

Draco stared into Potter's furious green eyes, realizing with a sinking feeling that it would always be thus—always Draco at the mercy of the powerful, always Potter the one holding the cards that would decide his fate.

"You shouldn't," he replied, defeated. "Except that I'm telling the truth."

Potter's eyes narrowed, searching Draco's face. Then, to Draco's shock, he took a step back, removing his wand from beneath Draco's chin, although he didn't lower it. "Why were you in disguise?"

"It was—" Draco swallowed. "I was testing something. An experimental potion. Something to change my appearance."

"And why would you need to do that?"

"Because I can't go out in public anymore without getting threatened by nutters like you," he sneered, then winced when Potter's expression darkened.

"Why a Muggle bar, then?" Potter demanded. "Did you somehow know I'd be there? Did someone tell you?"

Draco couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes. "You think very highly of yourself, don't you, Potter?"

Potter leaned in closer, his wand poking beneath Draco's chin again—not as hard as before, but an unmistakable threat. "Just answer the question."

"No, I didn't know you'd be there! How could I have known? I've had contact with hardly anyone aside from my parents for months!"

Potter once again drew back slightly, and some of the tension seemed to ease out of his shoulders. "So no one informed you I'd be there."

"Who in Merlin's name would have known in the first place?" Draco asked, exasperated.

"No one," Potter said. "And I'd like to keep it that way for now." He studied Draco in the shadows of the alleyway, and Draco could almost hear him mulling over the value of an Obliviate.

To his surprise, though, Potter said only, "Tell me about this potion of yours."

Draco blinked and started to lower his arms from where they were spread against the brick wall, but at a sharp look from Potter, he resumed the uncomfortable position. "It's—well, it's sort of a Metamorphmagus Potion. Or, at least, that's what I've been trying to create."

"You've invented a Metamorphmagus Potion," Potter said, his tone dubious.

"Sort of," Draco said. "It's not foolproof yet. Obviously."

"You've invented a Metamorphmagus Potion," Potter repeated.

Draco glared. "You needn't sound so disbelieving. You saw the effects for yourself tonight."

"All I saw," Potter replied, "was that the attractive man I'd met in the bar suddenly turned into you."

Draco shut his mouth and scowled at the filthy pavement, hating Potter more in that moment than he had at almost any other point in a lifetime spent hating Potter.

There was a long silence during which Draco heard only the city sounds of Muggle traffic and chattering passersby walking past the mouth of the alley, oblivious to the drama playing out within. Finally, Potter spoke again.

"You really did that with just a potion?"

Draco lifted his gaze to find Potter studying him with a calculating expression. "Yes," he said.

"A potion you created."

"Yes," he snapped.

"Show me," Potter said.

"What?" Draco asked.

"Show me the bloody potion," Potter said impatiently.

"But—why?"

"Because I want to see it. Isn't that enough?"

Draco glared at him. "Oh, certainly. Your wish is my command, O savior."

"Don't try me, Malfoy. Just show me the fucking potion."

"I don't have it with me," he said. "It's in my lab. At the Manor."

Potter flinched a little, no doubt remembering his lone visit to the Manor, when the Malfoy hospitality had not particularly been at its apex. "Whatever," he said. "Take me there."

"Are you going to hex me?" Draco asked.

"Not unless you deserve it."

"That's not an answer."

"You're right. It's not."

They glared at each other, Draco's chin lifting mulishly and Draco holding Potter's gaze until the other man gave an exasperated sigh. "No, I'm not going to hex you, Malfoy. Not unless you try something."

"Are you going to Obliviate me?"

Potter scowled. "Are you going to tattle to the media?"

Draco quashed the insistent thought that he should do exactly that and have his revenge against Potter for treating him like something lesser yet again. "No," he said, adding bitterly, "Besides, even if I did, do you honestly think they'd believe me?"

The corner of Potter's mouth lifted. "Now that you mention it, probably not."

Draco stared past Potter's shoulder, hating the smugness in his expression.

"Fine, then," Potter said. "As long as you promise not to rat me out to anyone, I won't Obliviate you."

"There's no one I could tell anyway," Draco muttered.

"Not good enough," Potter said.

Draco glared at him. "Yes, Potter, I promise to keep your dirty little secret."

"Good," Potter said. "Now show me this potion of yours."

"What do you care anyhow?" Draco demanded. "It's my bloody project, and you never would have known about it at all if you hadn't—interfered tonight."

"Yes, I could tell you really hated my interference," Potter mocked, taking a step closer.

Draco hated how just having Potter this close, with that mix of threat and heat in his eyes, could make Draco's breath quicken. "I hate you, Potter," he said.

"Feeling's mutual. Now, show me this potion of yours. I want to see how it works."

"Fine," Draco snapped, then sighed, resigned. "Fine."

*

At Potter's command, he Apparated them through the protective spells on the Manor and into his private potions laboratory. "Don't try anything funny," Potter warned as he traced a methodical path around the room, pointing his wand at numerous objects and murmuring indecipherable spells that set items briefly aglow in a variety of hues. When Potter seemed satisfied that nothing present in the lab was overtly Dark in nature, he turned his attention once more to Draco. "Where is this potion of yours, then?"

Potter's palpable disbelief that Draco should have invented something as intricate as a Metamorphmagus Potion made Draco almost eager to demonstrate to Potter the depths of his brilliance. He plucked out one of the neatly labeled flasks he'd prepared of his most recent batch and silently held it out to Potter.

Potter shook his head. "No," he said. "You show me how it works."

"All right," Draco said. Feeling reckless, he studied Potter for a few moments, then tossed back the contents of the flask, closed his eyes, and concentrated, hard, on the feel of his face and body.

When Potter yelped, he knew he'd been successful.

"Bloody hell," Potter swore, striding up to Draco and pressing a hand to his cheek. Potter's dry, rough palm skated over Draco's face, from the firm chin to the black brows to the emblematic lightning-bolt scar that now zigzagged across his forehead. And when Draco lifted his lids to meet Potter's dumbfounded stare, he knew it was out of eyes as brilliantly green as Potter's own.

Potter staggered back a step. "That can't possibly be legal."

"You'd know better than I would," Draco retorted, letting his lip curl in mild disgust and squaring his jaw in just the cocksure way Potter had back in the alley.

Potter frowned, his gaze still roaming across Draco, as though he were unable to believe the transformation that had occurred right in front of him. "You could achieve the same effect with Polyjuice Potion," he said.

"For this, you could," Draco agreed. "But for this—" He concentrated, turning his hair from Potter black to Weasley ginger and scattering a profusion of freckles across his face, giving himself the appearance of what he imagined as the genetically disadvantaged love child of Potter and the Weasley chit. "—not so much."

"God, that's—" Potter shook his head. "It lets you change your appearance at will?"

Draco shrugged. "Pretty much. Within reason, anyway. I haven't tried to transform myself into

a Hagrid-like beast or anything of that nature, so I'm not sure what the limits are."

Potter scowled at Draco's mention of Hagrid but didn't take the bait. "How long does it last?"

Draco shook his head, frustrated. "I'd tested this batch at about three hours, but it wore off far earlier tonight than I'd planned." He turned to fuss with his worktable, avoiding Potter's eye. "I thought I'd worked it out to the point where I didn't need to concentrate on maintaining the transformation, but I suspect my—distraction—tonight might have been more extreme than anything I'd tested for. My goal, though, is for it to last much longer, and with much less concentration required."

Potter stationed himself on the other side of Draco's worktable, wand in hand. "Why would you try to invent something like this? What's your game?"

Draco sneered at him, ignoring the clear threat of the wand. "I can hardly show my face in public anymore without provoking a riot, Potter. My family receives death threats. Everybody in the Wizarding world seems to hate us for walking free—under your plan, I might add. So if Draco Malfoy can't set foot in public in Wizarding Britain, I figured maybe someone who doesn't look like Draco Malfoy can."

Potter frowned, looking perplexed. "But—everyone knows why you went free. I mean, I know you're a great git and all, and your father's a nasty piece of work who probably ought to be in Azkaban. But your mum helped me escape from Voldemort. And you—well, you weren't as evil as I thought you might be."

"Your flattery overwhelms me," Draco muttered.

Potter ignored him. "And you all couldn't have got past those questions if you weren't truly remorseful. I won't lie and say I wasn't surprised when I heard your whole family had walked free. But—" He blinked. "Death threats?"

Draco nodded sharply.

"Have you told the Aurors?"

Draco huffed out an exasperated sigh. "What would be the point? I wouldn't be surprised if half of them came from the Aurors."

Potter glared, but Draco noticed he didn't argue.

"So you're saying," Potter went on, "that you created this potion only because you can't be seen in public."

"Yes," Draco said.

"Really."

"Yes."

"That's the only—" He paused and shook his head. "Would you please get rid of that—whatever it is you look like? It's maddening to look at."

Draco smirked, but obligingly swallowed a flask of the antidote, feeling his features smooth subtly back into his own familiar ones.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Ecstatic," Potter replied dryly. "And you're telling me you really have no ulterior motive for

creating this potion?"

"None," Draco said. "Hard as that may be for you to wrap your little Auror brain around."

"Is this the final version of the potion?"

Draco scoffed. "Hardly. If it could be overwhelmed by the likes of you, clearly it needs worlds of improvement."

Potter narrowed his eyes. "So you intend to keep working on it?"

Draco met him glare for glare. "Yes. You going to report me for it?"

"There's no law against private potions research, as long as it's not intended for illegal purposes," Potter replied.

"Then what the fuck do you care?"

"I want in."

Draco blinked, feeling his stomach twist at Potter's choice of words. "Excuse me?"

"I want some of the potion, when it's ready," Potter said. His mouth tightened. "You can hardly think it's easy for me to be out in public either. Every fucking thing I do ends up in the pages of some rubbishy publication. I can't even buy tea without fueling speculation about my social life. And God forbid I should buy anything more personal. Witch Weekly devoted an entire cover story to my choice of pants. I'm reluctant even to use public loos anymore for fear that someone will be hiding with a camera or taking notes."

"You know, if you're ashamed of your endowment, there are specialized potions for that sort of thing—"

Potter's glare shut Draco up. "For the record," he said, "I have nothing to be ashamed about where that is concerned."

Remembering the feel of Potter pressed against him at the bar, Draco swallowed and had to admit to himself that that likely was true enough.

Draco pursed his lips and lifted his chin. "I hardly need your help in developing the potion."

"Maybe not. But if someone else were to find out you're making this in secret, your research would look a whole lot more legitimate if it's known I was involved in the process."

Draco scowled. "So you'll lend your indelible aura of legitimacy in exchange for my giving you access to the potion."

"Exactly."

Draco looked down at his worktable, mind working furiously. On the one hand, he had no guarantee that Potter wouldn't immediately turn around and report him for some sort of trumped-up charge anyway. But on the other, if he said no, Potter almost certainly would find some way to exact revenge.

Not to mention, there was something disturbingly arousing about the idea of Potter watching him brew.

"All right," Draco said. "On one condition."

Potter lifted an eyebrow. "You're not exactly in an ideal bargaining position here."

"One condition," Draco repeated. "If you can't help me brew the potion, then you have to help me test it."

Potter scowled. "I won't be your guinea pig."

"You will," Draco said. He leaned forward, heels of his palms propped against the table, fingers curled around the edge, where Potter couldn't see how white Draco's knuckles had gone. "If you want access to the potion, you need to test it in its various iterations. What works fine for me won't necessarily work for you. It's part of the brewing process."

Potter glowered at him, but Draco held his gaze, refusing to back down. "And if I don't," Potter said, "you'll refuse to give me the potion, is that it?"

"I won't have you blaming me for making an ineffective potion if it should fail to work for you as well as it does for me."

"You're a right git, Malfoy."

"No," Draco said, "I'm a brewer. And I know what I'm talking about."

"How do I know you won't slip something poisonous in whatever batch you test on me?"

Draco stood straight at that. "Look, Potter, I might not like you. I might even hate you kind of a lot. But I'm not a murderer, and I'll thank you not to imply that I am."

Potter sighed. "Look, Malfoy—"

"No, you look," Draco snapped. "Much as I hate to admit it, you saved my life at least twice during the war. And even if you are a bullying, wand-stealing git, I'm not about to repay that by offing you, especially not in my own potions laboratory. I mean, what kind of bloody idiot do you take me for?"

Potter glared at him, and Draco half expected the man to expound on exactly what kind of idiot Draco was. But all he said was, "All right. I agree."

Once Potter finally Apparated away, Draco crumpled over the worktable and let his head sink into his hands, cursing himself for a thousand different types of idiot for letting himself get into this situation in the first place.

*

As a potions partner, Harry Potter was as useless and irritating as Draco had imagined he would be.

Potter had returned to the Manor the next night, following Draco's instructions on how to Apparate in through the Manor's many protections, and proceeded to sprawl in a chair and watch impatiently as Draco chopped and measured and decanted. And when he got bored with that, he prowled around the room, even leaning over Draco's shoulder as he made notes in his potions journal, the warmth of Potter's sudden nearness making Draco's hand freeze in the process of wielding his quill.

"You have girly handwriting," Potter observed, and Draco barely restrained himself from thwacking him with the notebook.

Potter also busied himself by asking annoying questions.

"Why are you stirring counterclockwise instead of clockwise?"

"Does it make a difference that you're dicing the ginger roots instead of just slicing them?"

"What effect do the Tentacula leaves have in the potion?"

Draco gritted his teeth and tried to remind himself that, in any other person, he would have attributed such questions to intellectual curiosity and been glad to show off his depth of knowledge. But somehow it was impossible for him to connect the concepts of Potter and intellectual anything, and so he was certain Potter's questions were meant merely to drive him mad.

Potter arrived only on the nights Draco owled to say he'd be working on the potion. The one night he failed to owl Potter, taking the opportunity to work in blessed silence for several golden hours, Potter noticed the next night that Draco's progress was more advanced than it had been two nights before and quickly realized Draco had been working without him.

"I want to observe every step of the process," Potter said, his expression stony. "I mean it. Don't do that again."

Draco bristled at the knowledge that Potter still didn't trust him. But, resentful though he was, he didn't try working without Potter present again.

Potter repeatedly offered to help with the brewing process. Occasionally Draco even let him contribute some of the labor, keeping a sharp eye on him as he skinned shrivelfigs or chopped valerian roots.

"I'm not entirely useless in a potions lab, you know," Potter remarked at one point, apparently having noticed how Draco's eyes were following his every move.

"That remains to be seen," Draco replied, lifting his chin.

Potter only laughed.

A month had passed before Draco had achieved a formulation of his experimental potion that he was willing to let Potter try. For all his bluster about the necessity of Potter testing the potion, Draco was terrified Potter would show some sort of terrible reaction to one or more of the potion's ingredients, and he'd end up with a dead savior on his hands and the wrath of the entire Wizarding world heaped upon him.

As Potter swallowed the brew, Draco held his breath.

A moment ticked by, then another, with no adverse reaction, and Draco finally began to breathe again. Potter, unaware of the drama playing out inside of Draco, positioned himself in front of the mirror Draco had placed in the corner of the room and narrowed his eyes in concentration.

As Draco watched, Potter's hair transformed from its black birds' nest state to a neat halo of smooth, silvery blond, very like Draco's. Potter laughed in delight, and when he turned to face Draco, he saw that Potter's eyes, too, had transformed to match Draco's own, as had the point of his chin and nose. Most significantly, the famous scar was nowhere to be seen. The resemblance wasn't exact, but it was close enough that he and Draco could have passed for brothers. "How do you like it, Malfoy?" Potter asked with a grin.

"A cheap copy of an irreplaceable original," Draco scoffed, making Potter snort.

Potter preened a little in front of the mirror, to Draco's secret amusement. "This stuff is bloody amazing," Potter said, wonder in his tone. "All I had to do was think it, and it happened. No one would recognize me like this."

"Though they might mistake you for a Malfoy," Draco drawled, "and then you'd wish you looked like Harry Potter instead."

Potter examined his reflection, adjusting the angle of his jaw, the shade of his eyebrows. "Why do you need an antidote for this, anyway? Couldn't I just think my way back to my original appearance?"

"You could if you were a real Metamorphmagus," Draco said. "Or, rather, if you were a real Metamorphmagus, you could simply end the transformation, and you'd default back to your real appearance. But the potion only approximates Metamorphmagus abilities, drawing on your thoughts to adjust your appearance. It doesn't let you simply end the transformation. If you try to revert to your original appearance, it draws, instead, on your ideas of your appearance, which tend to be slightly exaggerated or slightly more flattering versions of your actual appearance."

Potter turned to him again, quirking an eyebrow in amusement. "Know this from personal experience, do you?"

"Yes," Draco said. He waved a hand at the mirror. "But go ahead and try it, if you don't believe me."

Smirking, Potter turned back to the mirror, and Draco watched him frown in concentration as the flaxen hair shortened and darkened to an inky black, as the pointed chin squared, as the gray eyes brightened into vivid green, as the lightning-bolt scar reappeared, carving a path down Potter's forehead. Potter grimaced at his reflection. "It doesn't seem quite right," he said.

"Your hair's too dark," Draco said. "You're still too pale. The scar is too big. And, quite frankly, you're not that handsome ordinarily."

Potter lifted an eyebrow at Draco, but didn't take the bait. "Spend a lot of time studying me, do you?"

Draco scowled and looked away. "I've known you since we were eleven. I know what you bloody look like."

When he glanced back, Potter had switched back to his Draco impersonation and was studying himself critically in the mirror. "This is kind of fun," he said.

"I live to entertain you, Potter."

Potter turned and batted his eyelashes at Draco. "Tell me, do blonds really have more fun?"

"Not in my experience," Draco replied flatly.

Potter studied him for a moment, then turned back to the mirror. "It's such a different experience compared to Polyjuice Potion. There's no thinking involved with that—just an involuntary change. And everything changes, not just your face."

Draco busied himself at his worktable. "If you're trying to approximate my bits, you're just going to have to use your imagination."

"Oh, I don't entirely have to use my imagination," Potter said, and Draco scowled, feeling his face flush. When he glanced up, Potter was watching him.

"Pervert," Draco said.

Potter laughed.

*

As they waited out the transformation, Potter cajoled Draco into a succession of rounds of Exploding Snap, followed by a game of chess, at which Potter proved to be a not entirely incompetent opponent.

"I play with Ron all the time, and he's brilliant at it," Potter explained when Draco couldn't resist remarking on his shock. "He's much better than you," he added pointedly.

"I'll thank you never again to compare me to Weasley in such a fashion."

"Hey, you asked for it," Potter replied with a smirk, turning his attention back to the board.

Late into the night, about five hours after Potter had taken the potion, the blond hair and Malfoy-esque appearance faded away.

"Well," Draco said, stretching as he made his way to the worktable, "at least that's a slight improvement over the last batch." He made a few notations in his potions journal, and turned to find Potter standing directly behind him, a little too close. Their eyes met, and Draco felt his heart start to pound.

"This was fun," Potter said. "At some point, though, I want to try it outside."

"I'm sure the peacocks will appreciate the show," Draco said.

"Smart arse. You know what I meant."

Draco shrugged and turned his back to Potter again, making a show of tidying the worktable.

"We'll see. We don't want you accidentally transforming in front of Muggles."

"Who said anything about Muggles?"

Draco's hand stilled as he reached for his quill.

"I mean," Potter continued, "isn't the whole point of this process to let you mingle freely among wizards?"

"Yes," Draco said, spreading his palm flat against the table. "But not yet. The potion's not ready yet."

"Malfoy, it lasted for five bloody hours tonight. That would at least give you time to pick up a few supplies, maybe even enjoy a drink or two at the Leaky."

"I don't—" Draco frowned, swallowed. "I'm not confident enough yet in the potion's strength to mingle among wizards. The tension of knowing how they'd react if I transformed back to my real appearance in front of them—it might be too much, too distracting."

"More distracting than me trying to give you a hand job in a Muggle bar?"

Draco failed to suppress a shiver at the memory, and when he felt Potter's hand touch his back, he sprang into action, whirling away so that he was no longer trapped between Potter and the table. "Stop that," he said.

Potter frowned a little. But, "All right," he said, and somehow Draco managed to hate him even more for how easily he acquiesced.

"Besides," Draco said, seizing on their prior topic of conversation, "five hours is hardly an

improvement. This should be lasting for days, even weeks, before wearing off."

"You'll get there eventually," Potter said, and this casual affirmation of his belief in Draco's abilities momentarily floored Draco. "But you need to test the potion in the Wizarding world sometime," Potter went on. "We can go together, if you want."

Images flashed through Draco's head of him and Potter, strolling casually through Diagon Alley together, their heads bent close over drinks at the Leaky Cauldron, bickering over the merits of one broom or another at Quality Quidditch Supplies. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the thoughts, and Potter sighed.

"G'night, Malfoy," he said, and he Apparated away.

*

It amazed Draco sometimes that his parents appeared to have no clue about what was going on in their own household.

Almost every night, after Draco's parents had retired for the evening, Potter Apparated straight into Draco's laboratory, and the two of them would work together for hours—or, rather, most nights Draco worked, while Potter watched or asked his irritating questions, which had begun to focus less on the brewing and more on Draco himself, or else his family.

"Where do you get all of your potions supplies if you can't go out in public?"

"How'd you come to be at a Muggle gay bar, anyway?"

"Peacocks? Really?"

Sometimes he answered Potter's nosy questions. More often he ignored them. But every so often Potter came up with one that surprised him.

"How is your mum? Is she all right?" he'd asked one night, and Draco had been so startled, he stopped stirring and ruined an entire batch of the potion.

Kindness was one thing he'd learned never to expect from Harry Potter.

His mum wasn't doing all right, though he didn't tell Potter so. Nor was his dad, not that Potter would have given a damn. He and his parents gathered every morning for breakfast, and neither ever inquired into the shadows under Draco's eyes that came from long overnight hours in the lab, nor the wide yawns he knew he wasn't hiding terribly well behind his teacup. His mother occasionally looked distressed at his desire to nap nearly every afternoon, but she merely kissed his cheek when he excused himself.

His mother had never been overly demonstrative. It wasn't the Black way to be too affectionate. But he missed the mum who'd sent him parcels of sweets at Hogwarts, the one who'd demanded acquiescence from Severus Snape to protect him, the one who'd lied to the Dark Lord to save him.

As he stirred and chopped late into the night while the savior of the Wizarding world looked on, he hated the war and all the stupid mistakes that had brought them to this.

*

In spite of Draco's careful study and meticulous brewing, not every new batch of the potion was an improvement on the last.

There was one mixture in particular in which, Draco later figured out, he had miscalculated the proportion of ginger root to lacewing flies, and the results had been damn near fatal. As luck would have it, that batch Potter sampled first, and the gasp of his breath and the resulting cyan hue his skin took on were things that likely would haunt Draco for the rest of

his life.

He'd leapt for the supply cabinet and yanked out his grandmother's neatly labeled box of bezoars, shoving one down Potter's throat and demanding that he not die, do you hear me, Potter, don't you dare die!

As Potter had clung to Draco, sucking in one deep breath after another in the aftermath, Draco had bent his head and trembled. Merlin, what was he doing? How presumptuous was he to think he could create something so complicated without fucking it up spectacularly in one way or another?

"I'll take you to St. Mungo's," Draco said.

"No, no," Potter protested, his voice reedy. "M'all right. I'll be fine."

"You nearly died, you idiot."

Potter shrugged, still breathing slowly and deeply and letting Draco feed him sips of water. "Nearly," he said. "But didn't."

"You ought to be seen by a Healer."

"M'fine. Just need to rest for the night, s'all."

Draco scowled down at him. "Stupid Gryffindor."

"Maybe," Potter said. Then he grinned. "Least I can be certain now you're not plotting to kill me."

Draco's mouth fell open. Finally, he managed, "Maybe I just don't want you dying here. Maybe I plan to do you in somewhere outside the Manor."

Potter laughed, and though the sound was a little weak, it was genuine. "S'pose that means you're gonna come with me to test the potion out on the town some night."

Draco glared. "Just for the record, I hate you."

"I'd expect nothing less," said Potter.

*

Sometimes, Draco couldn't resist asking questions of his own.

"Doesn't anybody ever wonder where you go at night all the time?"

Potter glanced up from the leaves he was grinding. "Nah," he said. "I live alone. No one to answer to."

Draco turned his attention back to the cauldron he was stirring and tried not to seem too interested. "I would have thought you'd be roommates with Weasley."

"Oh, no, Ron's still living at home. His mum couldn't bear to part with him just yet."

Which Draco took to mean, He can't afford the rent.

When Easter had come and gone without Potter once begging off for an evening, Draco found himself asking, "Did you do anything special over Easter?"

"Spent the day with the Weasleys," Potter said. "Nothing unusual. You?"

Draco shook his head. "Usual family traditions. Was the youngest Weasley home from Hogwarts?"

He knew the answer already: The Prophet had been splashed with photos of Potter and Weasley together in Diagon Alley, he in his dark trainee Auror robes, she in a bright spring dress. They'd been spotted dining and shopping together. Rumor said they'd be engaged before the summer was out. Witch Weekly was already speculating about the wedding. (Not that Draco read Witch Weekly. Or, rather, not that he'd admit to it. The subscription was his mother's. At least, the subscription was in her name—as was the special order for the back issue devoted to Harry Potter's pants.)

"Yeah," Potter said easily. "She's a great girl, Ginny."

"Did you—have fun together?"

"Oh, sure," Potter said. "We spent some time in Diagon. She likes leading on the photographers."

Draco glanced up from the potion to find Potter grinning. "What do you mean?"

"We broke up before she left for school in the fall. I'm not sure Molly's got over it yet, to tell the truth. But Ginny and I are still friends, and she hates all the media nonsense, too. So we pretend for the cameras."

"Oh," Draco said. He added the lacewing flies to the brew, avoiding Potter's gaze. "I suppose it

throws people off the scent, too, hmm?"

Potter's voice was noticeably cooler when he replied. "The scent?"

"The men. The gay bars."

Potter was silent at that, and Draco glanced up to see that his expression had gone dark. Somehow, though, Draco couldn't stop himself talking.

"Don't you get tired of hiding it?"

Potter barked a laugh and pushed away the knife he was holding, as though to remove the temptation. "You're a fine one to talk. You hide everything. It's all you ever do."

Draco swallowed, fixing his attention on the cauldron. After a few moments' silence, he heard the scrape of a knife being picked up, followed by the rhythmic tap of the blade as Potter resumed dicing.

Another day, when the Prophet had carried a photograph of Potter and Ron Weasley in their trainee Auror robes, Draco asked, "Don't the late nights here affect your training?"

"Not really," Potter said, chopping steadily. "I keep plenty of Pepper-Up on hand in case of emergency. But for the most part, I'm fine. I take naps after training sometimes. Besides," he added with a smirk, "watching you is helping me ace the potions-related component of my training. I'm top of my class."

"Oh," Draco said.

"I told you I'm not entirely useless in the lab." He then proceeded to slice open his finger and

bleed all over the tabletop.

"Oh, no," Draco mocked later, once he'd cast a healing charm on Potter and cleaned the work area. "Certainly not useless at all."

"I was distracted," Potter protested.

"Then I'll ask you to keep the distraction to a minimum. If your blood is going to be shed in this room, it's going to be at my hands, I swear it."

"Promises, promises."

*

Having Harry Potter in his lab most nights made Draco feel both powerful and helpless.

There was something oddly satisfying about being the one with whom the savior of wizardkind spent his nights, no matter that those nights were spent watching and occasionally assisting in Draco's secret, borderline legal brewing experiments. Knowing that Potter was intrigued by Draco's extensive knowledge and clear capability appealed to him in a very primal sort of way.

But, at the same time, it was deeply unsettling to feel those eyes on him night after night. Because when Potter wasn't assisting, he seemed perfectly content to watch Draco, his gaze following the movements of Draco's hands as he stirred and decanted, eyes narrowing on Draco's face as he bent, flushed and perspiring, over his cauldron.

And even though Potter sometimes surprised him with flashes of thoughtfulness—inquiring after Draco's mum, replenishing Draco's dwindling supplies with ingredients Potter could obtain much more cheaply—most of the time, he was still the same callow, arrogant Potter

Draco had known for almost half his life.

"How long have you known you were bent?" Potter asked one night as Draco was cleaning up his table at the end of a long evening's work.

Draco turned to his supply cabinet, keeping his back to Potter and maintaining his silence.

"I asked you a question, Malfoy."

Draco shot him a withering look over his shoulder. "I heard it. And I don't have to answer."

"Are you ashamed?"

At that, Draco turned fully and gave Potter his best glare. "Me, ashamed? I'm not the one who's so terrified of the world finding out that I had to threaten an innocent bystander and bully him into silence."

Potter lifted an eyebrow. "Innocent bystander, my arse. You were just as much a participant. Maybe even more so, because I, unlike you, wasn't in disguise."

"Maybe even more—" Draco spluttered in indignation. "I wasn't the one dragging a man he didn't even know into a public loo."

"I didn't hear you protesting!"

"Is that your sole qualification for that sort of thing? 'Bloke's not protesting, must be ready to go!'"

Potter stood up, expression furious. "You really think I hear protests when I want someone? I'm not the one who had to disguise himself to pull."

Draco was breathing so hard, his vision was starting to go fuzzy at the edges. "You—you—"

Potter stepped up to the other side of the worktable, propping his arms against it and leaning toward Draco. "You know, maybe if you weren't so bloody thin-skinned, you wouldn't need to hide out in this fucking mausoleum."

"Get out," Draco said. "Get out of my house."

"Or what?"

Before Draco was even aware he'd done it, his wand had slid from its holster into his hand, and he'd lunged across the table to dig the point of it beneath Potter's chin. Potter lifted his hands slowly into the air, maintaining eye contact with Draco.

"Get. Out."

"Fine," Potter said. "All right." He stepped back to Apparate. "Coward," he said, and in an instant, he'd disappeared.

*

After Potter left, Draco barely restrained himself from slamming the door to his supply cabinet or clearing the remaining objects off his worktable with a sweep of his arm. Angry, frustrated, reckless, he snagged a vial of his most recent batch of the potion and downed it, watching his reflection in the mirror as his face transformed, leaving him looking like no one

he or anyone else would have recognized.

Past midnight, Diagon Alley was quiet, for the most part. Here and there, he passed couples kissing on corners or heard the strains of parties floating down from upper-level flats. The shops all were closed for the night, and even the Leaky was dark. The night was balmy, spring just sliding into summer, and he relished the freedom of walking openly through the Alley, nothing hiding his face but the powers of his own mind and the labors of his hands. The few witches and wizards who were out at this late hour offered cursory nods in greeting as they bustled by, none of them knowing just who it was they'd greeted with such distant politeness.

Draco paused in front of the window of Flourish and Blotts. Rita Skeeter was hawking yet another unauthorized biography of Harry Potter, it looked like. If the shop were open, I could walk in there and buy that or any other book, and no one would look twice, he thought.

He could remember the days, though, when he and his father would sweep into the shop to purchase his schoolbooks, and everyone would turn to look—not because they were the hated Malfoys who'd escaped prosecution, but because they were the Malfoys, symbolic of wealth and power and impeccable pure-blood breeding.

He touched the shopfront glass, cool against his fingertips, and wondered when he'd become so desperate to trade notoriety for nonentity.

*

The next night, Potter returned, even without having received an owl from Draco.

"I was out of line," he said, but didn't apologize.

Draco nodded in curt acknowledgment, and that was that.

He fussed over the potion, adding the final few drops of Murtlap essence and giving it a last stir, watching as the potion turned a perfect translucent blue.

"This batch is ready to try," he said as he began decanting the liquid into vials, each containing a single dose.

Potter positioned himself at his elbow, reaching for one of the vials. Draco slapped his hand away. Since that one terrible night, Draco had never allowed Potter to sample the newly brewed potion first. "You stand over there," he snapped.

Potter backed off, rolling his eyes.

When he'd finished decanting, each of a dozen vials lined up neatly next to its antidote, he plucked one for himself, closed his eyes with the ever-present hope that this wouldn't be the batch to poison him, and drank.

The magic tingled through him. Every batch was just a little bit stronger, caused just a little bit more buzzing awareness across the expanse of his flesh as the magic spread through him. He concentrated, feeling his features shift from his usual pointy, icy blondness to something rounder and more nondescript. When he opened his eyes, Potter was frowning at him.

"What?" Draco said.

Potter shook his head. "Nothing, just—you always make yourself so plain when you transform."

Draco scowled. "Better plain than my ugly Malfoy face, right?"

Potter opened his mouth, then closed it again without saying anything.

Something twinged inside of Draco at Potter's failure to argue. "Besides," he added sourly, "I'm less likely to attract anyone's attention this way."

Potter knocked against Draco's arm as he reached for his own dose and held Draco's gaze as he transformed, turning his already undeniably attractive form into something almost superhuman in its beauty, more fitting to grace the pages of a Wizarding fashion magazine than to be glaring back at Draco across this shadowy subterranean laboratory.

Draco tore his fascinated gaze away. "Subtle, Potter," he said.

"I want to test the potion in London tonight," Potter said.

Draco met Potter's eyes again and recognized the stubborn expression layered over the unfamiliar features. "Fine," Draco said, and Potter blinked in surprise. Draco lift his chin. "But I'm coming with you."

Potter eyed him for a moment. "All right," he said at last. He held out his arm and, cursing himself for a fool, Draco took hold, feeling almost instantaneously the jolt and pressure of Side-Along-Apparition. When they arrived and he stumbled away from Potter, he realized they were, once more, in the little alley near the Leaky Cauldron.

"I don't think it's a terribly good idea to go into Diagon with your face looking like that," Draco said.

Potter lifted a single dark, perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. With—that face—" He gestured. "You're going to have people gawking at you throughout the Alley. It's a small community. People will notice. And remember."

"Fine," Potter said, a grim set to his jaw. "The Muggle world it is, then." He drew his wand and

transfigured both his clothing and Draco's into something Muggle and fashionable and shockingly snug, then turned and strode out of the alley, leaving Draco scrambling in his wake.

"Idiot," Draco muttered as he caught up with Potter.

Potter scowled, not looking at him.

Potter's pace didn't slow as they carved a path through the streets of Muggle London. The evening sky still glowed with the last of the day's light, and the air was warm and heavy with the myriad scents of the city.

Draco trotted impatiently alongside Potter as the man walked without speaking, crossing streets and turning corners without bothering to check that Draco was still present. Draco was half tempted simply to stop and let Potter walk away without him. After all, what was the point of subjecting himself to such treatment? But a little ball of heat and anger smoldering inside him burned brighter and hotter the farther they walked, and Draco refused to stop until he knew where Potter was leading.

When Potter aimed straight for the door of a bustling club, Draco was almost sorry he'd insisted on following. He halted in his tracks and, without even turning around, Potter reached out a hand and latched onto Draco's arm, pulling Draco with him toward the door. A wave of Potter's hand—no doubt some combination of a wordless Confundus and the magic inherent in the unholy beauty of that transformed face—got them past the bouncer, and soon they were in the midst of a mass of bodies drinking, necking, and moving provocatively to a pulsing beat.

Draco shied back against Potter's insistent tug on his arm. He'd never been in a place quite like this, and the energy of it was overwhelming. Muggles—fit, male Muggles, in most cases—seemed to press in on all sides, the effect dizzying. Potter yanked on his arm, and Draco turned to look at him, meeting blue eyes that seemed, somehow, to have grown even colder than they'd appeared in the alley.

"Come here," he could read Potter's lips saying, though he couldn't quite make out the sound

over the noise. He found himself being pulled up to a long bar, which Potter leaned across to place an order, exchanging flirtatious smiles with the bartender, even as his fingers dug more firmly into Draco's arm. Potter shoved a shot glass into Draco's hand, and Draco watched as Potter tossed back his own shot, his long, achingly, artificially beautiful throat bobbing as he swallowed. Draco gulped, then made quick work of his own shot. Potter immediately handed him another. When Draco looked up at him, Potter's eyes-that-weren't-Potter's seemed to dare him, so he threw that one back as well, the sweetness of it lingering on his tongue even as it burned a path down his throat. He licked his lips, and Potter's gaze dropped to his mouth.

Potter frowned and handed Draco a third glass, though this time he pulled Draco away from the bar before he could drink it. Potter's hand traveled from Draco's arm to the small of his back as he guided him through the crowd to a vacant spot along the wall from which they would be able to see all the goings-on.

Draco pounded back the third shot, shuddering as the burn of it swept through him, and clenched the glass in his hand as he stared out at the sea of people moving on the dance floor. Potter was pressed along the entire length of his side, the heat of him, combined with the shock of the alcohol in Draco's system, leaving Draco flushed and uncomfortable. Potter's palm spread against the center of Draco's back. "Do you want to dance?" he shouted into Draco's ear.

Draco shook his head emphatically. He knew how to dance. This wasn't dancing. This was fornication set to music. Just watching was making him hard. And the way Potter's hand had slid to Draco's waist wasn't helping.

"Come on!" Potter shouted, and Draco felt himself propelled forward by that strong, sure hand on his back. He dropped the shot glass somewhere in the crowd as he found himself surrounded by moving bodies. Potter's broad palms radiated heat as they closed around Draco's waist, tugging him close and urging him to move.

Helplessly, Draco did.

He closed his eyes, letting the beat pound through him. Potter's hands kept Draco's hips pressed indecently to his as they moved together. Draco's hands slid up Potter's arms and

came to rest, hesitantly, on Potter's shoulders. Potter felt thick with muscle, more so than Draco would have imagined him to be. And then Draco remembered.

When he opened his eyes and looked into Potter's face, it was a stranger's gazing back at him.

Draco pushed away, elbowing his way through the crowd and toward the door. Just outside the club, Potter caught up, grabbing his arm and spinning him around so Draco collided with him. "What is wrong with you?" Potter hissed.

Draco twisted, breaking loose from Potter's grasp. "I don't know what kind of game this is to you, Potter, but I'm tired of playing."

Potter's jaw worked, and he clenched his fist. "Damn it, Malfoy. This was supposed to be fun."

"Maybe it's fun for you to play dress-up and go have—have vertical sex with Muggles—"

"I wasn't having vertical sex with Muggles."

"No, you were just—molesting me, in a room full of people!"

Potter stiffened. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Draco could feel the haze of the alcohol he'd imbibed and knew he might not entirely be making sense, but he couldn't seem to stop himself talking. "Perhaps it's your idea of fun to—to grab and rub and—and make a spectacle of someone. Maybe people got a kick out of seeing some plain bloke getting manhandled by a bloody model—"

"Stop it, Malfoy," Potter muttered.

"No!" Draco shoved him hard in the center of his artificially muscled chest. "I just—I know you probably do this all the time—you're probably a bloody regular at every bar and club like this in town, probably fucked half the gay Muggles in London—"

"Bloody hell," Potter swore, then grabbed the front of Draco's shirt and kissed him.

It wasn't like before. Potter's taste was different—the lingering trace of the potion, combined with the sickly-sweet flavor of the shots they'd both consumed. His mouth didn't feel the same. Even his teeth were straighter. And when Draco pulled away, the eyes that met his were blue.

Draco slapped him.

"I don't want this," he said.

Potter pressed a hand to the red mark on his cheek, and his mouth tightened as he looked at Draco, who couldn't seem to stop trembling with a mix of anger and humiliation.

"I can take a hint," Potter said. He closed his eyes, as though to regain his calm, and when they opened again, Draco saw that they were green once more.

He sucked in a shaky breath. "Potter—"

"It's fine," Potter said. "Clearly I shouldn't have dragged you out here tonight. Go do whatever you want. I'll be all right on my own. Like you said, I'm obviously a bloody regular." He turned and walked back toward the door to the club, his back straight, his stride easy, as though unperturbed by the entire exchange.

Draco spun around and began walking briskly in the opposite direction until he found a deserted alley safe enough from which to Apparate home.

*

Hours later, and after one very bracing Sobering Charm, Draco was still awake in his laboratory, going over and over his notes for the potion. He'd returned home to find his appearance hadn't changed in the least, in spite of his damnable intoxication and his pathetically emotional encounter with Potter on a public street. So clearly he'd done something right with this most recent formulation.

Draco had morphed his appearance immediately, though, determined to spend not a minute longer than necessary in the persona in which he'd had his fraught little confrontation with Potter. He hated that Potter could still rile him so. The man was a complete git. He was nosy and arrogant and altogether far too certain of his own appeal.

Of course, he was also bloody attractive, and when Draco wasn't thinking about the ways in which he'd like to kill Potter, he sometimes found himself not entirely hating him.

The knowledge was maddening.

Draco folded his arms on the tabletop and pressed his forehead against them. He wished he could use a Time-Turner to go back and stop himself from ever entering that bar. If he hadn't, he might still be working on his potion in solitary peace, and he surely wouldn't have developed a bloody stupid, embarrassing crush on the savior of the Wizarding world.

The small pop of Apparition made him jerk his head up, but before he could even turn to identify the source, he tensed as he found himself plunged into darkness, his eyes shielded by a pair of warm, dry palms, which—more fool he—he recognized immediately from the sensation of having them on his face before.

Hot breath wafted against the nape of Draco's neck, and he struggled to repress a shiver.

"Malfoy," Potter breathed. The strength of the alcohol fumes made Draco recoil. Underneath, he could detect other scents he hadn't smelled when he'd been pressed close to Potter earlier tonight.

Sweat. Cologne.

"Potter, you—"

"Malfoy," Potter sighed again, and Draco could feel the press of his chest—his chest, not the sculpted wonder he'd affected by virtue of the potion—against Draco's back as Potter leaned forward to murmur in Draco's ear, the movement of his lips disturbing strands of the potion-darkened hair that fell over his ear. "Tell me who you want me to be."

Draco struggled to hold himself still. "What?" he said.

The rush of Potter's breath against his neck made him tremble. "The potion," Potter said. "I can be whatever you want. Whoever you want."

Startled, Draco twisted his head, but Potter's hands remained locked over his eyes. His senses narrowed to the sickly-sweet taint of alcohol on Potter's breath, the warm, solid length of him spread along Draco's back, the sudden hot, wet touch of Potter's tongue against Draco's ear. Draco gasped. And then Potter started speaking again.

"You didn't want me at the club," he murmured as he mouthed along Draco's neck. "You don't seem to want me when I'm here, working with you. Tell me what you want."

"I—" He gasped again as Potter bit at his neck. "Merlin, Potter, let me see—"

"No," Potter said. "No, no, no. If you can't see, you can pretend I'm whoever you want me to

be."

The absurdity of the situation made Draco reach up and try to claw Potter's hands off his face. But with a murmured word from Potter, Draco found his hands immobilized, frozen to the tabletop. Potter licked a stripe up the other side of his neck, and Draco moaned.

"Potter, you are drunk and stupid," he managed.

"You wanted me before," Potter went on, as though he hadn't heard. "That first time. In the bar. But I didn't know it was you." He shifted so that only one of his hands covered Draco's eyes. Draco could see a sliver of light through the gap between his fingers. But the point became moot when the hand Potter had removed trailed down Draco's front, lingering over one of his nipples before traveling slowly downward. The sensation sent Draco's lids fluttering closed.

"Potter, stop it!" he gasped.

Potter halted his hand's progress, pressing his forehead to Draco's shoulder and curling his arm around Draco's waist, pulling Draco's body flush against his. Draco could feel him breathing hard. "Damn it," Potter said.

"Potter." Draco struggled to catch his own breath. "What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing?"

Potter drew a deep breath, his arm clutching Draco tightly before it slackened and retreated. "I'm sorry," he said. His hand dropped from across Draco's eyes.

Draco blinked at the sudden rush of light, and turned around to face Potter, who stood very close, looking like his normal Potter self, albeit drunk and tousled and miserable.

"How much have you been drinking?" Draco asked.

"A lot," Potter admitted. He stepped away, rubbing his hands across his face, and, in spite of himself, Draco regretted the loss of proximity. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I shouldn't have—"

"Why—" Draco began.

"I tried going back to the club," Potter said, not looking at Draco. "I—you know, messed around some. But—" He shook his head, staring at his own feet.

Draco folded his arms across his chest, struggling not to shiver in anger and frustration and the despair of being jerked around by this idiot yet again.

"So what you're telling me," Draco said, "is that after your potions-altered self got rejected by my potions-altered self at the club, you proceeded to take advantage of your enhanced state to 'mess around' with—how many other men, Potter?"

"Only a couple," Potter said, frowning.

"Right. You fucked around with two men—"

"Hey, I didn't fuck anybody."

"Not the bloody point, Potter!"

Potter frowned, but didn't argue again.

"You 'messed around' with two other men, then came fumbling back here, reeking of one or both of them, and decided you'd try, yet again, with my still potions-altered self?"

Potter blinked at him. "Why the hell are you shouting about potions? I took the antidote before I came here."

"Yes, but I didn't, Potter. And you have never, not once, made a real advance at me when I actually looked like myself, have you noticed?"

A look of dawning understanding began to appear as though it were breaking through Potter's haze of inebriation.

Draco gestured at himself, at his dark hair and eyes, his square chin and round nose. "This isn't me, Potter. This is a creation, a figment of my imagination made real. You're attracted to a fucking mirage."

"Draco," Potter said. "I didn't mean—"

Draco continued speaking over him. "Every. Single. Time. The bar, the club, here. You have never wanted me, Potter, so you need to stop pretending right now."

Potter took a step closer and reached out as though to touch him, but Draco stepped back and drew his wand. "I'm sick of it, Potter." Anger made him tremble. "You know, I invented that potion because I thought the worst thing possible was for people to recognize me as Draco Malfoy, so I figured it would be better for them to see me as something else. But you knew I was Draco Malfoy and chose to see me as something other, and that's somehow turned out to be even worse."

"Draco," Potter said, sounding desperate now. "You have to—"

"You have to leave," Draco said. "Now. And never come back."

Potter looked at Draco's eyes, then at his wand, which was shaking. He nodded and took a step back. "I'll go," he said.

"Now."

Potter nodded again. "I'm going." He hesitated, eyes on Draco's wand. "I wanted to return your wand, you know," he said softly. "Your original one. The Ministry took it."

"Oh, because that makes everything right, doesn't it, Potter?" He cursed the waver in his voice.

"No," Potter agreed, "it doesn't. But, just—I've never forgotten who you are. Or who you were."

"Get out, Potter."

Potter bent his head and Disapparated.

Draco hurled his potions journal at the wall.

*

The next morning, he sought his father's assistance to update the Manor's protective magical barriers. His father didn't inquire into Draco's sudden interest in security spells.

And his mother pursed her lips but remained silent when Draco's meals went all but untouched for the next several days. She merely pressed a kiss to the top of his head and touched his shoulder as she left the dining room, leaving Draco staring down at his still-full plate and fighting tears like a first year.

*

The laboratory was much quieter without Potter's bothersome questions. Draco told himself he preferred it that way. But in the weeks that followed, he found he missed the extra set of hands for chopping or grinding or dicing. And when he completed a new version of the potion, he missed the hint of awe that had always lurked in Potter's eyes at such a moment.

He timed the newest incarnation of the potion at a full twelve hours, forcing him to send his excuses to his parents via house-elf, pleading illness so they wouldn't wonder at his absence from breakfast. After he'd joined them for lunch, reassuring his mother that whatever had indisposed him that morning had been trifling indeed, he retreated to his lab, downed another vial of the potion, and, heart in his throat, Apparated to Diagon Alley.

The Alley was bustling with activity—adults rushing back to their workplaces after lunch at the Leaky or any of the other Diagon dining establishments, children and their parents making their first forays in search of Hogwarts supplies, others, like himself, merely window shopping and enjoying a temperate afternoon out.

With his hair and eyes darkened and his features transformed, none of the witches or wizards he passed appeared to suspect he was anything other than a perfectly unremarkable wizard of no consequence. He stopped for a butterbeer at the Leaky Cauldron. He checked out the new stock of brooms at Quality Quidditch Supplies. He even popped into Flourish and Blotts to flip through Skeeter's latest Harry Potter biography, which was still topping the Prophet's best-seller list. Skeeter's reference to Ginny Weasley as Potter's "one true love, surely destined to be the mother of his children—who will be named, perhaps, in tribute to the many revered fallen" made Draco laugh hard enough to draw the attention of other shoppers. He ended up buying the book, if only to encourage Skeeter to keep the hilarity coming.

There was a delicious sense of freedom in being able to walk among his own kind without the

shouts and threats of a year past. And yet—it felt hollow, too.

Coward, he could hear Potter taunting him. Maybe if you weren't so bloody thin-skinned, you wouldn't need to hide out in this fucking mausoleum.

He sat down on a bench, his face upturned to watch the clouds drift overhead, and thought. He thought of his parents, too shell-shocked and fearful to leave their cocoon of security at the Manor. He thought of himself, toiling away the better part of a year to perfect a potion that would ensure he'd never have to show his real face again, if he so desired. He thought of the shouts and taunts of witches and wizards who hadn't forgiven him for his actions in the war, emblematic, perhaps, of a Wizarding society that might never forgive him or his family. He thought of Potter, who, much as he had wronged Draco, had shown respect for Draco's talents and even, though Draco was loath to recall the scene, made the distinction between who he was and who he had been.

If Harry Potter had forgiven him, why couldn't he let himself believe that others might eventually as well?

As he walked back through the Alley, he began to formulate a plan.

*

To his shock, an owl from the Minister's office arrived within hours after Draco had made his request.

Dear Mr Malfoy,

Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt will be pleased to grant your request for a private audience on Friday, 30th July, at two o'clock in the afternoon.

Please plan to arrive at the Ministry at least one half-hour prior to your appointment to accommodate enhanced security screening procedures implemented in the wake of Recent Events.

Yours sincerely,

Helia Shrewsbury

Assistant to the Minister of Magic

On the appointed day, Draco nervously accessed the Ministry of Magic by way of the visitor's entrance, his notes and a small case of potions clutched firmly in his hands. He arrived even earlier than the Minister's assistant had advised him to, and he was glad of it when the witches and wizards working the security desk insisted on performing a complicated series of Dark-detecting spells on every vial in his possession, as well as on his person. Only when they'd grudgingly determined there was nothing for which they legitimately could detain him did they allow him to pass through.

The lift ride all the way to Level One seemed to take an eon, lengthened as it was by the many suspicious glances he received from Ministry workers as they filed on and off. At last, though, he found himself at the end of a thickly carpeted corridor, standing before the assistant's desk outside of Shacklebolt's office.

"Er, hello, I have an appointment with the Minister," he said.

A middle-aged witch with a halo of neatly coiffed blond hair glanced at the appointment book, then looked him up and down, taking in the potions case he held. "Your name?"

"Draco Malfoy."

She nodded. "Of course. Please have a seat; the Minister will be with you shortly."

And, indeed, soon enough he found himself ushered into the Minister's office, where Shacklebolt greeted him with a note of surprising warmth in his slow, resonant voice.

"Now, Mister Malfoy," he said, "you indicated you had a project you'd like to share with the Ministry."

Draco nodded, then took a deep breath and began to explain his development of the Metamorphmagus Potion. He showed the Minister his notes and swallowed a dose so he could demonstrate its properties.

"Very impressive," Shacklebolt said. "You developed this all on your own?"

"Yes," Draco said, repressing the thought of the unwanted assistant who'd interfered with his process for more time than he'd care to recall.

"You have a truly remarkable talent, young man."

Draco blinked. "I—thank you, Minister. That's very kind." He took another breath to steady himself, then said, "I'd like to license the potion exclusively for use by the Ministry, particularly the Auror corps. I think it could serve as an invaluable assist in sensitive undercover work."

"It could revolutionize the field," Shacklebolt murmured as he examined one of the vials. His sharp, intelligent gaze fixed on Draco. "Tell me, honestly—did you develop this with the Ministry in mind?"

Draco opened his mouth, wishing he could truthfully say yes and thereby remove any lingering suspicion as to his motives. But, "No," he said, unable to meet the Minister's eyes. "I came up

with the idea because I was looking for a way to avoid showing my face in public."

Shacklebolt drummed his fingers against his desktop. "I know you were set free after the war following the Veritaserum-aided questioning we performed."

"Yes," Draco said.

The Minister was quiet for so long, Draco finally looked up to find the man considering him with an inscrutable expression. "Are you so ashamed of your actions in the war that you're reluctant to be seen in public?"

"Well," Draco said, squirming a little. "No, not—it's not that I don't regret my actions. I do. Obviously. Or I'd be in Azkaban right now." He shook his head at the idiocy of his response. "I just want to pick up where I left off before the war. Or start fresh. I don't care which anymore. But—not everyone is as quick to forgive as people like you."

"Hmm," said Shacklebolt. He turned the vial around and around in his fingers, clearly thinking, then set it back in its case and looked up at Draco once again. "I'd like to submit the potion to testing to ensure its safety, as well as a trial period in which the Aurors can test its value in the field. If that meets with your agreement?"

Draco nodded. "Of course. The remaining vials of potion are for you to do with as you see fit."

"Excellent." The Minister rose to his feet, extending a hand, and Draco stood to shake it. "My office will be in touch, then, probably in no more than a few weeks."

"All right," Draco said. "Thank you, Minister."

"Thank you, Mister Malfoy. I think this idea of yours shows great promise."

And, in a daze, Draco found his way back out of the Ministry and Apparated home to await his fate.

*

The Minister's follow-up summons arrived even sooner than Draco had dared to hope, leaving him to wonder if the trial had been a complete failure. So it was with trepidation that, on a bright August morning, he once more approached the Ministry and made his way to Shacklebolt's office.

"This potion of yours is a marvel," Shacklebolt said as he beckoned Draco to take a seat, and Draco breathed a sigh of relief. "I won't lie and say there wasn't some resistance among certain members of the Auror Office once it got out who'd been the genius behind it, but even the most resistant of the Aurors in our trial had to admit it worked like a dream."

Draco couldn't stop himself beaming. "I'm very pleased to hear that, sir."

"I must say, I'm very glad you thought to bring this to us at the Ministry," Shacklebolt told us. "Not only, I think, will it prove invaluable in our continuing fight against the Dark, but it also shows you possess a remarkable faith in the Ministry and the rule of law."

Draco blinked. "I—I'm flattered, sir."

"It's not flattery, Mister Malfoy—merely an observation from one who's interacted with all manner of wizards and witches throughout a long career, and who's had a great deal of practice in identifying who among them possesses noble versus ill intent."

The Minister's direct, assessing gaze made Draco look away. "Hardly noble, sir," he muttered.

"Well, all in good time." He ran a finger along a sheet of parchment on his desk. "Now, as to the matter of licensing the potion for the Ministry's use, I'd like you to have your solicitor contact my office regarding the specifics of compensation."

Draco nodded. "Certainly."

"In addition, however, I have a proposition for you, Mister Malfoy." Shacklebolt steepled his fingers, and Draco straightened in his chair. "Your creation of this very complex and effective potion shows great talent and an impressive work ethic. As such, I would like to offer you a position with the Ministry, working in the field of new potions development."

Draco's jaw dropped. "I—sir—"

"I know, based on what you told me recently, as well as various other whisperings I've heard, that this past year hasn't been an easy one for you and your family. I'm also aware it may be easier for you to work on your own—perhaps even more lucrative, with enough licenses to your name." The Minister tapped his fingers. "However, I'd like you to think about what a Ministry position has to offer. You'd have access to modern facilities and cutting-edge research, not to mention the Ministry's wealth of archival material, much of which is very old indeed. You also would be given opportunities for training both within the Ministry and through outside sources, including, potentially, the ability to attend potions conferences throughout Britain and internationally. There is, as well," Shacklebolt added, with a lift of his eyebrow, "the profound satisfaction I would take in showing this is a government that rewards talent and initiative, and is able to look past old grievances to find ways in which we can work together for the future of the Wizarding world."

Draco shook his head in astonishment. "Sir, I—don't know what to say."

The Minister lifted a hand. "Don't say anything yet. Just think about it. If you think you might be interested, I'll have someone owl you a packet of information with more specifics on the position."

"I—yes, sir. I'm certainly interested. I'm—overwhelmed."

Shacklebolt grinned. "I'm glad to hear it." He stood and extended his hand. "We'll be in touch. It's been a pleasure, Mister Malfoy."

"Likewise, sir," Draco replied as they shook.

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As Draco stepped outside the Minister's office, he couldn't help but feel as though the world had shattered and rearranged itself around him.

But when he caught sight of a dark-haired young man in maroon Auror trainee robes seated in a chair near Shacklebolt's assistant's desk, he realized he should have known the situation was too good to be true.

Draco lifted his chin into the air and walked purposefully past Potter, who scrambled to his feet and gave chase. "Draco—Malfoy, wait!"

In the blessedly empty waiting area near the lifts, Draco rounded on Potter and hissed, "What did you have to do with this?"

Potter lifted his palms. "Nothing, I swear. I mean, I'm not even sure what 'this' is. Did Kingsley offer you a job? It sounded like he might."

Draco turned away again, incensed that this—this one good, promising thing—should be tainted somehow by Potter. "Yes, he offered me a job. Not that I'm going to take it if you are in any way involved."

"I'm not! Damn it, Draco, I swear, I didn't influence the Minister in any way, other than by giving my honest feedback during the potion trial."

Draco swept him a glare. "Why were you involved? You're just a trainee."

"He wanted all levels of age and experience, so I got picked. You can't blame me for this, Draco." Potter grasped Draco's arm, and rather than shake it off like he wanted, Draco merely stared straight ahead, pretending the hand wasn't there. Potter didn't even seem to notice. "The Aurors were impressed as hell," he prattled on, "even the ones who wanted it to fail once they found out you were the one who invented it. Kingsley was very impressed. Everyone was very impressed."

"As they should have been," Draco replied.

"Exactly! You did this all on your own. You earned it." Potter squeezed his fingers around Draco's arm, and Draco pursed his lips and lifted his chin just that little bit higher. Potter sighed. "Look, Draco, about before—"

"I believe I understood the situation perfectly before, and I think now I've proved I can accomplish things all on my own, as you say, there should be no further need for involvement by the likes of you."

"I'm not arguing that. I know you didn't need me before, and I don't think you need me now. But, well, I—" He trailed off, and the hand that had been on Draco's arm lifted as though to touch his face. Draco flinched away, and Potter dropped his hand. "All right, yes, I was an idiot before," he said, his voice hushed, "but not for the reason you think."

"I assure you, Potter, I think you are an idiot for a great many reasons."

"Of course you do," Potter said, and there was something fond in his tone that had Draco

glancing up to find the man smiling at him. Potter seized Draco's hand between both of his, not yielding when Draco attempted to tug it free. "It wasn't the potion," Potter said, and the earnestness in his voice drew Draco's eyes to his once more. "The potion might change your face, but it doesn't change you. I mean, yeah, all right, the bar that first night—I had no idea that was you. But the other times—it didn't matter what you looked like."

Draco glared. "Any port in a storm, right, Potter?"

"No! That's not—I meant it was about you, not your bloody face—which, for the record, I like just fine, pointiness and all."

Draco shook his head. "Right, it was all about me when you were back at the club, doing whatever to those two blokes—"

Potter scowled. "That never would have happened," he hissed, "if you'd given me any reason whatsoever to hope."

Draco lifted an eyebrow at him. "And I'm doing such a fine job of that now?"

Potter's brows drew together as he seemed to search for something in Draco's face. Then he frowned and let Draco's hand slip from between his. "All right. I get it. I'm sorry for bothering you. I thought maybe—" He frowned, then set his jaw and met Draco's gaze directly. "Damn it, Draco, I like you. Damned if I can figure out why. You're prickly as hell. You take pleasure in insulting me. You've reminded me countless times that you hate me. And yet—I can't stop thinking about you." He sighed. "But clearly this is a losing battle, so I'll just stop making a fool of myself now."

Draco had gone still while Potter rambled, not daring to let himself think that Potter might actually mean it. But as Potter turned away, his shoulders slumped in dejection, something deep within Draco spurred him to action.

He cleared his throat.

Potter paused, glancing over his shoulder.

"I, ah, am a hard act to follow," Draco said.

Potter frowned and turned around completely. "True."

"I—might be persuaded to take pity on you."

Potter narrowed his eyes.

"By giving you another chance," Draco clarified.

"Ah," Potter said.

"And I—I might like you, too," Draco said in a rush.

Something sparked in Potter's eyes at that.

"A little," Draco added. "Against my better judgment."

"Right," said Potter, stepping closer.

"And that doesn't mean I don't also hate you."

"Uh-huh."

"And that I'm not convinced this won't all end in fiery disaster."

Potter's hands touched Draco's face lightly, and Draco found he was holding his breath. "Well," Potter said, "we've weathered that before."

"There's also," Draco murmured as Potter's brilliant green eyes drew closer and closer, "the troublesome fact that I risk grievous bodily harm just by showing my face in public."

"Not when I'm with you, you won't," Potter vowed, and just as one of the lifts clattered to a halt and opened before them, Potter leaned in and kissed Draco—truly Draco—for the first time.

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